

# I

*Rita, Forest of Dean, 4 August 1971*

The forest looks like it'll eat them alive, thinks Rita. The light's gone a weird green and branches are thrashing against the car's windows. She tightens her grip on the steering wheel. The lane narrows further. Wondering if she's missed the turning to the house or if it's around the next corner, she takes a bend too fast, then slams her foot on the brake.

Rita sucks in her breath, her eyes widening behind the Morris Minor's insect-spattered windscreen. She's not sure what she was expecting. Something smarter. More Harrington. Not *this*.

Behind a tall, rusting gate, Foxcote Manor erupts from the undergrowth, as if a geological heave has lifted it from the woodland floor. A wrecked beauty, the old house's mullioned windows blink drunkenly in the stippled evening sunlight. Colossal trees overhang a sweep of red-tiled roof that sags in the middle, like a snapped spine, so the chimneys tilt at odd angles. Ivy suckers up the timber and brick-gabled façade, dense, bristling, alive with dozens of tiny darting birds, a billowing veil of bees. It's as far from the Harringtons'

elegant London townhouse as Rita could possibly imagine.

For a moment no one in the car speaks. Unseen, in the trees, a woodpecker drums its territorial tattoo. Sweat trickles down the back of Rita's left knee. Only now does she register her hands are shaking.

Although she's done her best to disguise it from Jeannie and the children, she's been panicky ever since they turned on to the forest road, almost five hours after leaving London. It's not just the worry she'll kill her precious passengers. Every so often her vision has actually shuddered, disoriented by all the soaring trees, the lack of sky and the knowledge of quite how hard a tree trunk is when hit at fifty miles an hour. Now they've survived the journey, she covers her mouth with her hand. Everything's still going too fast. How on earth has she ended up *here*? A forest. Of all places. She hates forests.

It was meant to be a London nannying job.

Fourteen months ago, Rita had never been to London. But she'd dreamed of it longingly, the Rita she might be there, far away from Torquay, everything that had happened. And the metropolitan family – just like the Darlings in *Peter Pan* – who'd embrace her as their own. They'd live in a tall warm house that didn't have a coin-gobbling electricity meter, like Nan's bungalow did. She'd get a bedroom of her own, with a desk and a shelf, perhaps a view of the churning, thrilling city. And the mother she worked for would be . . . well,

perfect. Someone delicate and kind and soft. Cultured. With tiny earlobes and fluttery birdlike hands. Like her own mother, whom Rita hazily remembered. Everything she'd lost in the accident. And that a bit of her kept searching for.

On the morning of the interview, she'd gazed up at the Primrose Hill house's sugar-white stucco and cascading wisteria, and immediately known this was it. Her new home. Her new family. She could feel a tingling sensation, like the first fizz of pins and needles, as she'd knocked on the smart front door, her heart scudding beneath her best blouse that didn't look best in London. Now, it's her second-best blouse, packed in the boot along with any other clothes – practical, plain, rarely long enough in the arm or leg – she could salvage after the fire that tore through that London house last weekend. Even after the long cycle at the launderette, her clothes still whiff of smoke.

Rita glances across at Jeannie in the passenger seat. Wearing a new haul from Harrods, she's defiantly dressed for London, clutching a black patent handbag, as if for dear life. She looks fragile, upset. Her recent weight loss is painfully obvious in that cream crêpe skirt, tightly belted, another hole in, a powder-blue cashmere twinset, and a white silk scarf, wound like a bandage around her stem-like neck. And she's wearing those sunglasses again, the tortoiseshell ones, with lenses big as Hartley's jam-jar lids, she always puts on after a night of crying.

Jeannie hadn't wanted to leave Claridge's. (Rita neither: she'd never stayed anywhere she hadn't had to make her own bed before. The maid wouldn't even let her help with the tricky mattress corners.) Jeannie certainly hadn't wanted to come here: 'Monstrous place. Walter's way of isolating me,' she'd whispered last night, out of the children's earshot. Peering up at Foxcote Manor now, Rita can't help but wonder if Jeannie was right.

When she'd started the job, everything was different. She remembers Jeannie reading her reference out loud on the day of the interview, her slowly spreading smile, her hands stroking the sun of her heavily pregnant belly. *'Loyal, kind and adored by my four children. Brilliant with the baby. Not so good on laundry or cooking. Very nervous driver. Would hire again in a heartbeat.'*

Walter hadn't been particularly interested. A reserved man, with a carefully curated moustache, sinewy in a slim-cut brown suit, he'd been friendly but business-like. After briskly shaking her hand he excused himself, blew some kisses in the direction of the kids, and rushed out to work, trailing the faint soapy scent of shaving foam. Back then Walter was happy to leave all of the domestic decisions to his wife. He ran the Harrington Glass headquarters in Mayfair, not the family house. And he seemed perfectly nice. If there were warning signs, Rita didn't spot them.

She'd never wanted a job so much. Carefully lowering herself to the sofa, she'd laced her hands together, tightly, so they couldn't fidget, and crossed her untidy

legs at the ankle, tucking them in, as Nan had instructed ('It'll make you look smaller, love. More feminine'). She tried very hard not to smile too much, to appear a serious professional, older than her twenty years. Worthy of such a plum post.

Jeannie had called the then five-year-old Teddy into the drawing room. 'He's delicious,' she said. And he was. Rita had to fight the urge to ruffle his curls. Then twelve-year-old Hera appeared, less obviously delicious and, as if to compensate for this, offering a slice of cake – Jeannie called it 'patisserie' – on a bone-china plate with a minuscule silver fork. As Hera shyly explained how to pronounce her posh name – '*Here-rah*' – Rita took the plate. It tipped and the cake, in horrifying slow motion, slid off and landed in the deep-pile carpet next to the potted aspidistra. Hera giggled. Rita caught her eye, then disastrously, giggled too, and tried to disguise it as a coughing fit. Obviously she'd blown it spectacularly, and would be sent packing back to Nan's bungalow, cloying small-town life – and her own ugly secret. But that giggle, Jeannie told her afterwards, had won her the job. She wanted the baby to have a fun young nanny, not some cross old boot.

But the baby never heard Rita's giggle. Or anyone else's. She's a tiny ghost doll, stiff, white, frozen in time, a presence constantly felt but never, God forbid, mentioned. And Rita . . . well, what is *she* now? Not just the fun young nanny. And she's got more than what they'll eat for tea weighing on her mind.

Even the trees seem to peer down at her accusingly, shaking their leafy heads. ‘Our little arrangement,’ Walter calls it. When he suggested it two days ago, Rita didn’t want any part. She felt such disquiet about his motives. ‘You want to *think* about it?’ He’d snorted. ‘This is a job, not a pudding menu, Rita.’ The choice was stark: agree or leave (‘immediately, without a reference’), and he’d hire someone more compliant.

‘I have to remain in London, what with the business, so you must make notes on my wife’s state of mind.’ Walter smoothed his rapidly retreating hair. ‘Keep me informed of her moods. Appetite. Quality of mothering. I’ll expect your absolute discretion, of course. My wife mustn’t find out.’

Rita’s mind had raced. First, if she left, where would she go? How would she live? Nan had died a few months earlier – not a bad case of indigestion, after all – and the council had reclaimed her bungalow. She’d been determined to give Nan a proper send-off, and a gravestone. The cost had wiped out her savings.

And she couldn’t bear the thought of walking away from Jeannie, Hera and Teddy when they needed her most. It’d be like giving up on them. Or saying, ‘I can’t help you any more,’ even though she’s sure she *can* – she knows about grief, the way it scars you, not on the skin but the soft suede of the soul inside. (And how it is to grow up different, like Hera, the one who doesn’t fit.) So, yes, surely better she ‘report’ on Jeannie this summer, fudging whenever necessary, than some strict

new hire, she reasoned. Even this morning it felt like the right decision. But now that they're here, enclosed by these sombre, looming trees, in a spot so remote it feels like they're the last survivors on the planet, she's no longer sure. Her mouth is dry and metallic. It tastes of betrayal.

'Rita?' Jeannie touches her lightly on the arm, interrupting her spiralling thoughts. Jeannie's voice is thick with the morning's medication, the reason Rita's driving. ('Funny. I see halos,' Jeannie observed, over Claridge's flawless poached eggs at breakfast.) 'Are you ready?'

'Oh, yes! Sorry.' Rita's cheeks blaze. Her conscience lies too close to the surface.

'Well, let's get this bloody awful thing over with, shall we?' Jeannie whispers grimly. Rita nods and grapples with the gear stick. Forcing a smile for the children, Jeannie says, in a loud, bright voice, 'Well, hello, Foxcote! This *is* exciting. Come on, Big Rita. Drive in.'

## 2

*Sylvie, Kensal Town, London, now*

I heave the last cardboard box from the house to the car, hands on the bulging base so bits of me don't fall out into the street and cause a scene. I glance back at the house, my eyes stinging. Is this it? My family home, like the marriage I've stuck with for so long, finally excavated of me?

My married life has been bookended by removals boxes. Arrivals and exits. Whoops and sobs. When we first moved in, nineteen years ago, I was five months pregnant, a busy make-up artist with a carry-on case always packed, ready to easyJet off for a shoot abroad at short notice. I didn't own a salad spinner. I'd never changed a nappy. My engagement ring – antique gold, pea-green emerald – had belonged to Steve's great-aunt and made me smile every time I looked at it. The wedding would happen after I'd lost the baby weight (not all of it). I'd wear an ivory lace vintage dress and T-bar shoes, just the right side of Courtney Love. We'd dance to Pulp's 'Common People'. We'd be married for ever.

I couldn't have imagined this street changing either. Cheap for Zone Two, it was home to a kebab shop, a



resident loon, who shouted abuse at lampposts, and a thriving drugs den. The front doors were painted a council rust-red. Now those doors are mostly sludgy shades of charcoal-grey. The kebab shop is a much-Instagrammed florist, selling dragon-red dahlias. There are five Sophies living on the street. Probably fifty juicers. If we had to buy our house now, we wouldn't be able to afford it. We? That mental slip again. Keeps happening.

I say, 'Goodbye,' under my breath. I've been moving boxes out of the house into my tiny apartment for the last month, tentatively, while Steve's at work. Now it's done, I feel elated. But my heart aches. I can't shut it as easily as the front door. So many memories remain in that house, stored like sunlight in a jar: Annie's ascending height marks pencilled on the bathroom wall; the baby-pink rose we planted to mark the grave of Lettuce, Annie's rabbit; folders of tear sheets, editorial magazine work I did when starting out, well over twenty years ago, happy to be cool rather than properly paid. I've no storage space now. No garden either. And way too many bills to settle on my own.

A trial separation, Steve still calls it. He didn't believe me when I first told him six weeks ago either. We were eating prawn linguine in a chippy silence. I'd been away that week, working on a countrywear catalogue shoot in the Highlands, involving lots of corduroy, shivering models and driving rain. Steve had forgotten the bin day – crime A – so we'd be stuck with the recycling for another two weeks, and the bin was stuffed full already.

But really it was about something else. Other layers of rubbish built up in our marriage. (Crimes B–Z).

I watched Steve decapitate a prawn with his fingers, humming under his breath. His face – the angular dark brows, the childhood BMX scar on his chin – was so familiar it was like I couldn't see him. 'What have I done now?' he said, not looking up at me.

I put down my fork. The words just tumbled out. 'Steve, I can't do this . . . us . . . any more.' A moment passed. Steve blinked rapidly. He waited for me to apologize or blame my hormones. The music shuffled on to Lou Reed's 'Perfect Day'. Normally we'd quip about the irony. We didn't. It felt like nothing would be funny again.

'But I love you,' Steve stuttered, floored. And at that moment – 8.11 p.m., 19 June – I knew he meant it, he really did, but also that he couldn't imagine life without me, which is not quite the same. Then I thought about our eighteen-year-old daughter Annie, out in Camden celebrating finishing her last A-level exam, sweetly oblivious, and I burst into tears. What was I *doing*?

Love. Stability. An unbroken home. The moment Annie slid into the world, unfathomably precious, I'd promised her all of this. I didn't mourn my lost freedoms, even though my career soon shrank like cashmere in a hot wash. I could no longer travel or work late into the night. I was exhausted. Even my feet were fat. But there was no getting around it, I was also deeply, shockingly happy, maybe for the first time in

my life. My magnetic north had flipped. So, yes, I'd get motherhood right. That was all that mattered. I'd give Annie absolutely everything I had.

To this end, I've done my very best to forget about Lisa from HR – early thirties, balayage-blonde, spilled her negroni on my best Isabel Marant dress at Steve's office Christmas party – and, I'm 55 per cent sure, the woman he plays doubles with at the tennis club – and other encounters I've sensed but not been able to prove these last few years.

If you learn as a kid how to bury painful things – for me, everything that happened in a forest long ago, the sort of questions that'll stop my mother dead in her tracks, with a coronary grimace – you get pretty bloody good at blocking things out. And keeping secrets. Only secrets don't go away completely, it turns out. Like moths in a wardrobe, they nibble away, hidden, before you notice the hole.

As Annie's schooldays drew to a close earlier this summer, I felt an internal shift, one I hadn't expected. Like a gear change on my bike, a strange freewheeling feeling, then a clunking into place. A little voice in my head started to whisper: You're forty-six years old, if you don't leave now, *when?* What sort of example are you setting for Annie anyway? She'd want you to be happy.

Annie didn't quite see it like that. 'So you've been living a lie all this time? *Pretending?*' she stuttered, when I broke the news, desperately trying to make our separation sound like a Gwyneth-style conscious uncoupling

(admittedly, a stretch). I couldn't bear to tell her about Steve's affair since that's an adult mess, and my own humiliating business, a symptom of our break-up as much as its cause. Also, despite everything, he's always been a brilliant father. So I said, 'We're united in our love for you, Annie. That's the most important thing.' Which is true. But when I tried to hug her, she pushed me away.

'Why didn't you warn me? You know what, Mum? It's been like this all my life, you going, la, la, la, everything's great, just don't ask too many questions.'

I flinched, sensing I'd tapped into something else, more subcutaneous, a vein of resentment that went beyond Steve's and my split.

'And it's *bullshit*.'

The next day Annie decamped to my mother's cottage in Devon for the summer, where Granny's sympathetic shoulder was waiting. 'Right now she's lying on the sofa, eating a tub of my homemade caramel ice-cream, watching reruns of *Girls*,' my mother reported back reassuringly, on the phone later that evening. 'Of course she doesn't hate you! No, stop it, Sylvie. You're a wonderful mother. But it's a bit of a shock. She feels duped. She needs time to digest it. We all do,' she added, which I took as a small dig.

I hadn't warned Mum either. We both share difficult news on a need-to-know basis. Like mother. Like daughter.

'Let her have a carefree summer by the sea. I'll take

good care of her, don't you worry. But who'll look after you?'

I laughed and said I was quite able to look after myself. Yes, really. But after many years of wifedom, I needed to find out who I was.

'Who you are?' she said quietly, after a beat or two of fully loaded silence, then swiftly changed the subject.

Annie quickly sorted herself out with a waitressing job and a boyfriend. On the phone she'll often claim, not wholly convincingly, the signal's dodgy and promise to phone back later, then doesn't. If I ask about the new boyfriend – 'Dotty about him,' Mum says – Annie immediately shuts down the conversation, as if I've lost the right to her confidence. Can I meet him? Silence. When will she come back to London and see my new apartment? 'Soon,' she says, often with a muffled giggle, as if the boyfriend is there in the background, nuzzling her neck. 'Gotta go. Love you. Yeah, miss you too, Mum.'

At least she's having fun, I reason, as I park the car on my new street that's not nearly as nice as my old one and grab the cardboard box out of the boot. I can hear the building's summer pulse already. Out of its open windows, the competing sounds of cooped-up children, hip-hop, radio commentary – '*Goal!*' – and the opera singer on the second floor, throat open, practising her scales. A group of hooded teenage boys watch me idly, leaning back against a graffiti-spattered wall, smoking weed. I smile brightly at them, refusing to be intimidated, and climb determinedly up four flights of

stairs, the last bit of my married life weighty in my arms.

The block is what estate agents call ‘industrial cool’, a mix of council and private with concrete communal walkways and balconies overlooking the Grand Union Canal. Slightly edgy. My apartment – two small bedrooms, the nicest one ready for Annie, yet to be used – is owned by an understanding old friend, Val, and usually rented as an Airbnb. It’s an immaculate vision of pink gallery-picture walls, whitewashed Scandi floorboards, Berber rugs and enormous, hard-to-kill waxy-leafed houseplants. More importantly, it’s only a couple of tube stops from the old house, so Annie can move between me and Steve easily, as she pleases. Or not.

I drop the box to the floor and wish there was someone I could shout to ‘Put the kettle on.’

Silence chases me around, like a cat. I flick on the radio and open the balcony’s glass doors, arms outstretched, head thrown back, pretending I’m in an old French movie. The city rumbles in, smelling of canal, diesel and beer-soaked late-July heat. I lift my face to the sunshine and smile. I can do this.

Even after a month, the view from the balcony is a novelty, as though big grey London’s cleaved open its hidden green heart and let me in. The colour of matcha tea, it’s an urban highway for dragonflies, butterflies and birds. Other interesting wildlife: a thirtysomething, who likes hats, plays guitar and sings – weirdly

unselfconscious, not in tune – on his canal-boat deck in the evenings. A resident heron. Displaced from my old home, I've felt a funny kinship with that tatty urban heron – awkward yet stoic, no spring chicken – and can't help but see it as a symbol of my strange new freedom. No sign of her yet this morning.

I rest my arms on the balustrade, my dark curls starting to frizz, and my mind restlessly twitches forward, like the hand of a clock, to work, the earliest acceptable time to drink a glass of wine, then Annie. Images bloom in my mind. Mum yomping across a beach, toddler Annie on her shoulders; Annie curled up on the sofa, like a silky mammal, in a nest of cushions with a hoard of electronic devices; her freckles, persimmon stars, impossible for a make-up artist's brush to replicate. I miss those freckles. I miss her. And I can still recall, as if it happened hours ago, the precise sensation of running my fingertip over her first tooth, hidden under the sore scarlet gum, intent on surfacing.

Out of the corner of my eye, the heron, my freedom bird, swoops down and turns into a statue on the bank. I smile at her. My mobile rings. Not recognizing the number, suspecting spam, I flick it to voicemail. It rings again. 'Hello . . . Sorry? . . . Yes, Sylvie. Sylvie Broom . . . What?' My breath catches. The heron's huge wings hinge open and she holds them there, still, open, frozen at the first intention of flight. Time slows. The words 'an accident' snag the baked London afternoon. And, with a clap of feathers and air, my heron's gone.