

*The*  
RIVER  
HOME

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*For Will*



## PROLOGUE



In sleep, the memories rise unbidden. Trees stand as black shadows marking the way through the orchard. The acid sweetness of apples rises from the long grass, while the river below slides silently by.

In the dark, behind fluttering eyelids, she remembers the fermented fizz of cider on her tongue, light bulbs dancing like fireflies over the wooden jetty, laughter carrying across the water. The sensation of paper pressed against her face, the grip of fingers on skin, thick black mud clinging to her scratched and bloody hands, a pain like broken glass cutting skin.

Lost in slumber, all the scents, the sounds, the colours of her past rise up, and all that she has buried – the secrets, the darkness – return to her.

*What have you done? What on earth have you done?*

It's something she learned years ago – the hard way – and that she knows she will never forget: even the sweetest fruit will fall and rot into the earth, eventually. No matter how deep you bury the pain, the bones of it will rise up to haunt you, like the sickly scent of those apples, like the echoes of a summer's night, like the river flowing relentlessly on its course.



## MONDAY



Not sure if you're still on this number, but we need you at home. Lucy's getting married. This Saturday! I know. Call me. E x

Sent 18/09/18, 5:58pm ✓✓

Eve says she messaged you. Please come. I need you. Luce x

Sent 18/09/18, 8:49pm ✓✓

## TUESDAY



### I

Margot stirs at the sound of the train horn screaming through a tunnel. Her cheek is clammy where it rests against the window and a familiar scent, sweet and heavy, lingers in the air. Opening her eyes, she meets the gaze of a young girl seated across the carriage table. She wears purple headphones with pointed cat ears stuck to the headband and bites into an apple. Empty wrappers escape from a pink packed lunch box lying discarded between them.

Margot looks from the lunch box to the apple, then back to the girl's face. She is around seven or eight, she thinks, with blue eyes and hair the colour of corn hanging in two neat plaits. There is something reminiscent of Lucy in the girl's appearance, though the girl's hair is perfectly parted and the braids are tight and uniform. Her sister's childhood plaits had never been neat, usually wrestled into unruly braids at the breakfast table by Eve or their father. Lucy had always been a wild tangle of a girl – though no longer a girl, of course, but a grown woman, soon to be married.



The messages had arrived the previous night, Eve's flashing first on Margot's phone as she'd let herself into the empty flat. She'd scanned it standing in the kitchen as the kettle boiled and had to read it twice before the meaning had sunk in. Lucy was getting married, in less than a week? Their middle sister had always been impetuous – prone to spontaneous gestures or blurting whatever was on her mind, no matter the consequences – but this latest spur-of-the-moment decision surely had disaster written all over it. It was typical Eve too, her elder sister's exasperation and judgement evident even through the economy of her text message. And perhaps, Margot thinks – turning to the window and studying her reflection in the glass, regarding her bloodshot eyes and tasting the stale vodka still caught at the back of her throat – typical of her too.

The girl seated across from her crunches into the apple, brown pips now visible in the hollow chambers of its core. Margot watches, expecting her to discard it at any moment, or perhaps pass it to the woman – obviously her mother – bent over a book beside her, but the girl bites steadily into the shrinking apple until the innards, the pips and finally the thin brown stalk have all disappeared into her mouth. Yes, just like Lucy. She can picture her so clearly: denim cut-offs and long brown limbs, lying on a blanket amid the fallen fruit under the orchard trees, that wide smile and the tangle of her long blonde hair fanning out about her face.

Margot sighs. She thinks of the trolley service that had rattled by half an hour ago, and of the clinking glass miniatures holding so much promise. She wishes

she hadn't held her nerve. She wishes she'd bought even one, just to lift the veil of her hangover.

*I need you.*

The girl opposite licks her fingers then glances across at Margot, her lips twitching into a smile. Margot gives her a solemn nod, before turning away and leaning her head back against the window. Three words. It was all it had taken to undo her resolve. For Margot knows what it is to need. She couldn't ignore Lucy's plea. Against her better judgement, here she is, travelling home to Windfalls. What on earth was she thinking?



Eve stands in the lower orchard, one hand pressed to her chest, the other shading her eyes from the sun as the man from the marquee hire company paces between the trees, tutting audibly. She doesn't like his frown, nor the way he keeps bending down and shaking his head, as if to assess the angle of the hill or the quality of the ground. 'It's pretty boggy,' he says, coming to join her. 'And the slope isn't ideal, but I think we can do it. There's enough space between those trees to put up a thirty- by forty-foot tent, which should give you plenty of room for your guests. Around fifty you said?'

'It's a little over sixty now.'

The man sucks air through his teeth and refers to his clipboard. 'We could do it on Thursday morning. That would give you time to decorate.'

'Great. You're sure it'll be OK down here?' The ground feels ominously soft beneath her boots. It's hard to imagine how the pegs to anchor the marquee will hold. As she pictures a vast white tent lifting up and flying off across the valley she tries, simultaneously, to ignore the tightening sensation in her chest. It's as if a cold fist reaches inside her ribcage and squeezes her heart.

‘Don’t worry,’ he says, reading her expression. ‘We’ll see you right. Lovely spot you’ve got here,’ he adds, genuine appreciation in his voice.

Eve turns to survey the scene. The fruit trees hang heavy with ripe apples. Birds chatter through the lush green boughs while the sun, just past its pinnacle, drenches the hillside in golden, autumnal light. Below the sloping orchard, a strip of river glints like a mirror, visible through the trees as they move in the breeze. Behind her, the honey-coloured stone chimneys of Windfalls jut into a blue sky. Standing there in the soft September light, the old seventeenth-century farmhouse, with its wide, painted sash windows, grey slate roof and tangled wisteria clinging to its facade, has never looked prettier.

But Eve can’t focus on the beauty of her childhood home; she is too caught up in thoughts of untethered marquees, and catering, and what to do if it rains between now and Saturday and the orchard turns into a vast, boggy mudslide. Though all these are mere organisational logistics – jobs to cross off a list. When she considers them alongside the more worrying thought of her family coming back together for the first time in eight years, no wonder she feels panicked.

Hay, she thinks, wishing she had brought a pen and paper with her. A few bales from one of the local farms should do it. It could double-up as a rustic decoration . . . seating, even . . . but it would also be useful should the weather turn against them and the ground becomes too muddy. There is also the matter of a power supply to arrange. A generator of some sort, or cables connecting back to the house. They’ll need a dance floor and lights.

Lanterns would be nice, but she's not sure if they'd be allowed to light candles inside the marquee. These are all things to run past the man from the tent company.

She glances round for him and sees he has wandered off among the trees with his tape measure, while appearing along the garden path from the house is her mother, grey-streaked hair spilling from a loose bun, a colourful silk kimono flapping behind her, afternoon sun caught in the white cotton of the long nightdress she is still wearing.

As a teenager, Eve used to crawl with embarrassment at her mother's alternative approach to clothes. She used to wonder if it was because Kit spent so long inside her fictional worlds that she was oblivious to fashion codes or clothing conventions. She'd pondered whether she did it to embarrass her daughters, or shock them out of what she might think their more prudish ways. But, after years of mortification, Eve has come to the conclusion that Kit just doesn't care much about appearances. Buried in her books, she would notice what she dressed in each day no more than she would notice that the fridge was empty or the house was filthy. Fashion choices were no more considered than what lay draped over the armchair in her bedroom and came closest to hand. It is simply the way her mother is made. The man from the marquee company does a double-take at the sight of her, but Eve barely blinks.

'I saw the truck in the drive,' Kit says as she draws closer.

'It's all under control.'

'Is Lucy here with you?'

'No,' says Eve. 'I don't know where she's got to.'

'They'll put it here in the orchard, will they?' she asks, watching the man with his tape measure.

'Yes, it's the best place.'

Kit turns her face to the sky and closes her eyes. 'It's lovely out here.'

'I was thinking we could hang bunting and fairy lights to mark the route down from the house. It would look lovely at nightfall. But of course, all of that will take more work and more time,' Eve adds. At this stage, she isn't sure how they're going to achieve even the basics of this organisational nightmare before Saturday.

'Whatever you think, darling. I'm sure it will look wonderful.'

The fist clenches more tightly in her chest. It's all very well Lucy springing this last-minute wedding on them all, saying she wants to keep the celebrations 'low key . . . a private register office ceremony followed by a "bit of a party" at Windfalls . . . everyone back together . . . no big deal', and while a part of Eve admires her sister's desire to avoid the wedding machine and all the paraphernalia and pressure that comes with it, there is no getting around the fact that these kinds of events don't 'just happen'. No matter how spontaneous Lucy might want to be, no matter how laid-back their mother might seem, there's a reason couples plan their nuptials months in advance. Say the word 'wedding', even at the last minute, and guests will arrive with certain expectations. Food. Wine. Music. Dancing. It's the way it is.

She and Andrew had done it properly. They had allowed a respectable twelve months to organise their day. The venue had been meticulously researched. Monogrammed save-the-date cards had been sent out months

in advance. The catering, dress fittings, disco hire, wedding cake, flowers and photographer had all been arranged with Eve's trademark precision, and despite one broken heel on a pair of bridesmaid's shoes, the day had run like clockwork.

Lucy, on the other hand, seems to expect the music, the decorations, the food and drinks to simply 'happen'. Little wedding fairies sweeping in to take care of everything. Eve sighs. It might have been possible to wing it if the guest list was small, but Lucy, in typical Lucy fashion, had announced her bonkers wedding plan a few days ago, then glibly sent out a blanket email invitation to her friends. 'Don't worry,' she'd said, 'it's such short notice only a few of them will be able to make it. Only the important ones.' But what had started out a couple of days ago as *a simple little party* had since snowballed spectacularly. Sixty-five acceptances at the last count. Five vegetarians. Two vegans. One gluten-free. One dairy intolerant. What was wrong with these people? Didn't they have lives, holidays, calendars hanging on their fridges full of scribbled plans and juggled appointments? It's all *so* Lucy, all so ridiculously naïve and chaotic.

It isn't as if Eve doesn't have enough on her plate, with her own household to run and her part-time job managing the office of a small recruitment agency, Andrew working all the hours at his IT consultancy, and the girls with their ballet classes, piano lessons, science projects and invitations to birthday parties. Throw in organising a wedding in a week and her head feels fit to burst.

'Eve, darling . . . what do you think about fireworks? Or maybe a bonfire?' Kit's voice breaks through her train of thought. 'It would be rather fun, don't you think?'

Eve regards her mother with an even stare. Bonfires and fireworks? Add a load of actual pyrotechnics to the explosive emotional landscape they already have to navigate on Saturday? Great idea.

‘Perhaps Andrew or your father could take charge?’ adds Kit, failing to read Eve’s mood.

Eve doesn’t answer. She can imagine Andrew’s face when she tells him he’s been nominated to manage an impromptu firework display on Saturday night.

‘Has anyone heard from Margot?’

‘Lucy and I have sent messages, but we’ve heard nothing.’

Her mother’s mouth forms a thin line. ‘Well, it’s sad, but perhaps it’s for the best.’

‘Lucy will be disappointed. Though if Margot does show up, we’re *all* going to have to find a way to smooth things over.’ She throws her mother a pointed look. ‘It’s Lucy’s day, after all,’ she adds.

Kit frowns and turns away to face the valley.

Thinking of her volatile little sister and what she might be capable of in the pressure-cooker situation of a family wedding, Eve feels another surge of panic. It had been bad enough two years ago when Margot had come home to celebrate their father’s sixtieth, though of course on that occasion their mother hadn’t received an invite.

Kit throws her hands up. ‘I know, I know. I wouldn’t stop Margot from coming and being a part of Lucy’s day, but until she offers some kind of apology or explanation, I can’t forgive her.’ She turns back to Eve. ‘Could you, in my shoes?’

Eve frowns. She wonders if she’s the only one to have noticed how similar Kit and Margot are, both of them



hot and unpredictable, like fire. What Margot did was inexplicable and yes, perhaps unforgiveable. 'Probably not, no,' she admits.

Kit nods, seemingly satisfied. 'I doubt she'll come.'

Maybe it would be for the best if Margot stayed away. Perhaps the last thing any of them need is Margot showing up and raising tensions even higher. Eve returns her hand to her chest and feels the thundering of her heart. Take a deep breath, she tells herself. Everything is going to be OK.