Opening Extract from...

WHERE WE BELONG

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Also by Anstey Harris

The Truths and Triumphs of Grace Atherton

Where We Belong

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For Wilfred, who was ready at the same time as this book,
and for Gordon, Charlie and Tom who inspire us every day
with their courage and strength

Note on the Powell-Cotton Museum

I first fell in love with the Powell-Cotton Museum, in Birchington, Kent, when I was 3-years-old. Back then it was a magical zoo, one where the animals never duck out of sight or hide in the back of their cages. I accepted Major Percy Powell-Cotton's Victorian ideas of conservation in the spirit with which they were meant and, much as he'd intended, I learnt about Africa and Asia, about wild animals, and about other lifestyles and cultures from his exhibits. Percy Powell-Cotton put his collection together with an, albeit misguided by modern standards, ecological intention. He wanted the people of Kent to see these animals in their natural habitat and to understand the importance – and the potential – of the wider world.

In 2012 I moved back to Kent, where I grew up, and my love affair with the house, museum, and gardens rekindled. I was lucky enough to meet Susan Johnson, Percy's great-granddaughter, who told me so much more of the incredible stories behind her family and their legacy and it was that deeper knowledge that made me determined to write about a fictional version of the Powell-Cotton Museum, its grounds, and its collections.

Percy Horace Gordon Powell-Cotton was born in 1866 and established his museum in 1896, adding the animal specimens and cultural objects to collections his family had begun a century before. Consequently, the collection is one of the most diverse and interesting in Europe: from Napoleon's childhood drawings, to a canon from the Mary Rose.

Percy met his wife, Hannah, when she was appointed to help him with his papers and journals at the East India Company. They embarked on a trip – part African expedition, part honeymoon and married in Nairobi Cathedral. There is a theory (and one I very much favour) that Edgar Rice-Burroughs first got the idea for Tarzan and Jane from a newspaper story about Percy and Hannah and their life in the wilds. As Andrew Joynes writes in his biography 'Tracking the Major' ... "there are a number of themes common to Hannah's tabloid account of her real-life jungle honeymoon and the setting of the Tarzan story. It is a startling coincidence that Tarzan, the jungle child, was the heir of the Greystoke family: Hannah's husband, the Major, had been the heir of Quex." and that Hannah herself had collaborated on an article headed "Keeping House in the Boundless Wilds" for the British Press.

There are so many wild and wonderful stories in the Powell-Cotton Museum: of Percy narrowly escaping death from a lion attack because of a rolled-up copy of Punch in his pocket; of his daughters – as a doctor and a nurse – accompanying him on many trips at a time when women

did nothing of the kind; or the soldiers who came to convalesce at Quex, following injuries in the First World War. As Joynes reports in his biography: "The next morning Diana and Mary found some fifty wounded Belgian soldiers laid out in rows in front of the wildlife dioramas in the African galleries. Mute with morphine, traumatised by battle, the men gazed at the elephant, and the aardvark, the rhinoceros and the forest pig."

Please do try and visit the Powell-Cotton Museum in its home on the Quex Estate in Birchington-on-Sea: although you might not find Cate and Leo, a chapel or a domed library, you will find boundless magic and wonder.

Tracking the Major, Andrew Joynes, 2016, is published by Mickle Print (Canterbury) Limited.

[Illustration to come]

Chapter One

A house absorbs happiness, it blooms into the wallpaper, the wood of the window frames, the bricks: that's how it becomes a home. The people in it are movable, exchangeable: one set of hugs and shouts and words of love easily swapped for another. I am packing up our lives into cardboard boxes, folding away that happiness, those memories. It makes me want to turn to someone, anyone, and talk about Leo's paintings, old gig tickets of Richard's, postcards sent to me by friends, but it's just me – all alone with the shriek of the tape gun as it zips up the boxes.

Everything is changing: the school term ended yesterday – my last term as a teacher, at least in the job I've been in for over twenty years. I am 'redundant': I don't know yet how far into my life that word will stretch, how many parts it will cover. I am also – much more concerning as it involves my son every bit as much as it does me – homeless.

Leo has gone swimming with our neighbour and her

daughter. The boxes and the bubble wrap have been making him feel unsettled. He'd be far worse if he'd seen the emails and the letters, but they're my responsibility – and mine alone. There is a special anger that comes with impotence; with the basic failure to provide for your family. It is worse when that failure is caused by someone else, someone who had promised to be there and to help and to share the burden, someone who hasn't upheld their side of that bargain.

Instead, I think, I'm supposed to be grateful that Richard's family have offered us a place to go.

The offer is grudging. There have been letters backwards and forwards from solicitors. There have been emails of questions that are never answered, at least, not in any straightforward way: no promises, no reassurance. I have googled and searched, I have looked on maps and at old postcards, but there's very little information to be found about 'Hatters Museum of the Wide Wide World'. Today is the day that I finally get to speak to the 'old family retainer', to inform her that we'll be joining her at the museum – or at least in the apartments above it – for the whole of this summer: until I find a new job and a new home for my son and me.

I've said I'll ring at noon. Leo and I had a late breakfast – now that my schedule isn't a daily drama of juggling school and home, and trying to get us both out of the door on time I can do that – so I'm not hungry yet. Instead, I've made a coffee and set it down on a packing box marked 'dining

room, unnecessary'. Already I've forgotten what's in that box or why I've kept it if it's 'unnecessary'. I found some biscuits at the back of a kitchen cupboard earlier: they're out of date but unopened. I test one on my teeth and they're fine so I'll have a couple with my coffee. That'll see me through till teatime when Leo gets home and I have to cook for both of us.

I arranged to call today because the landline is disconnected at midnight and then I'll only have my mobile. It's strange that I won't have the same number that I've put down on forms and contact sheets for the last ten years. As I understand it, I won't have a number of my own at all – apart from the mobile. It makes me feel unsettled: I'm not from the generation that exists solely through cell phones. What if I can't get a signal?

I have no way of knowing whether there's a signal in the house or not, or how isolated it is: Richard mostly refused to discuss his family home and I certainly can't ask him now. He hated the place and so we've never even visited: he said it's cold and draughty and miserable.

I've been curious over the years – and especially since Richard went – but one thing and another, and real life, and work and responsibility have conspired to keep me away. Almost every weekend for the last few years, I've intended to throw Leo in the car and go and look at this place, at Richard's childhood and Leo's inheritance, but it's never worked out that way. In London, we have had too many friends to see, too many things to do, too many full and

happy weekends. In my mind's eye, in a sketch drawn from his very limited descriptions, it is gothic and decrepit, overgrown and covered in clinging spidery ivy; dotted with grey panes of glass that stare like blind eyes onto rusted iron gates at the end of the drive. Where we live now, in the heart of a London that is steadily being gentrified, there are lots of strange old buildings – hospitals, schools, fire stations, that have been converted into flats – and they're all gorgeous. How bad can it be?

I sit on the sofa and take a sip of my coffee while the phone rings through. I bite the first half of one of the biscuits and the rhythmic tone at the end of the line continues. I dip the second half into my coffee, shake the drips over the cup and eat the biscuit. Still no answer. I wonder if there is a limit to how long a phone line will ring for and picture a tiny old lady, slightly confused and wearing pink slippers, scurrying through passageways to answer it.

I put most of the second biscuit in my mouth and bite through it. A crumb dislodges and goes the wrong way down my throat. By the time the phone is answered, my eyes are streaming and my voice sounds like something that runs on cogs.

'Hatters Museum of the Wide Wide World.' The voice does not sound elderly, or like it might wear the slippers I'd imagined the old lady hobbling through the corridors in.

'Hello.' I clear my throat. Twice. 'This is Cate Morris.'

'Cate Morris?'

This call has been booked, via communication with the

solicitor. She knows I'm due to ring at noon, and it's exactly that now. I grit my teeth. 'Richard's wife, Cate.'

'Richard Lyons-Morris?'

'We dropped the Lyons.' I say it quietly, as if I shouldn't be saying it at all, as if she's going to tell me off.

I'd known Richard for two years before I found out his surname was Lyons-Morris, not just plain old Morris. 'I hate it,' he'd said. 'Everyone says "lions" like the animal and it's "Lyons" like the city. I don't bother with it.' We compromised by calling our son Leo – Leo Morris instead of Lyons-Morris. She doesn't need to know this and I don't tell her.

'That's a great shame.' She sighs down the phone to make it clear that I've disappointed her already.

I make an effort to take back some ground. 'Is this Ms Buchan?'

'Yes.' She is utterly unapologetic.

'Ah, good. Only . . . you didn't say.' As soon as I say it, I feel pathetic. My game of one-upmanship is obvious and crude. The biscuit crumbs start to tickle my throat again and I stifle a cough.

'We had arranged this call, therefore I assumed you would expect me to answer the telephone. I am, at present, the only person here.' She has taken the high ground and pauses in triumphant silence. 'Do you need to call back later? Are you quite well?' Her voice is clipped and curt: she isn't responding to my bout of coughing out of kindness – it's just annoying her.

'I'm sorry,' I say when I can speak. 'We seem to have got off on the wrong foot. Leo and I are very much looking forward to arriving at the museum tomorrow.'

'I'm sure,' she says. 'And I wish I could say that we'll put out a spectacular welcome for you . . .' She pauses and I choose not to second-guess what she's going to say next: it is clearly a sentence that hinges around 'but'. 'But . . .'

I roll my eyes although there is no one in the room to see me. This is like dealing with a difficult pupil – or worse, a difficult pupil's difficult parent. It always gets my back up. I wish people would say what they mean without resorting to excuses.

'I am almost the only person left here. Aside from a handful of volunteers in the house and garden, I am the last person working at Hatters. We are on our knees, I'm afraid.' She clears her throat. 'As a museum, at any rate.'

'To be honest, Mrs Buchan . . .'

'It's Miss,' she says and her voice is sharp again.

'Sorry. To be honest, we're not really anything to do with the museum. We're merely making use of Leo's right to reside in the house. Because of his father. Because of Richard.'

Sometimes I find it hard to say Richard's name. Sometimes it chokes up my throat with such anger and blind injustice. Other times, it's bare self-pity and loneliness that brings the same, pointless, tears to my eyes. This time it's a mix of both: a frustrated longing to tell Richard what he's putting us through, what he's caused here in this boxed-up flat.

'That wasn't what I meant, unfortunately. My point was rather that it's the Museum Trust that keeps the entire building going. And that, I'm afraid, is at the point of collapse.'

The fear inside me is a physical pain – a stab of uncertainty. It is the pain caused by the barely stifled threat that has lived inside me every day for four years: the inability of a teacher to raise a family, without support, in the centre of a big city that is being swallowed up day-by-day by investors. Our rent has stayed almost stationary for nine years, ever since we first came here, since a friend of a friend first took pity on Richard and me and let us move in without the usual credit checks or deposits. Now, the value of the flat has escalated to a point where our landlord is doing his own family a disservice by continuing to prop up mine. He has to sell – and we have to move.

'The trustees have agreed that we can live there for the foreseeable future. I have it in writing.'

'I'm sure that is so.' Her speech is punctuated by deliberate pauses: it makes it difficult to work up to any vehement response. 'The trustees have granted you temporary residency – they have no choice but to do that – but they have neglected to inform you that they are also engaged in a committed campaign to close the whole museum and sell off the contents. Having you and Leo here will . . .' The pause again. I wonder if she is licking her lips. 'Having you and Leo here will tip the delicate balance of managing on a shoestring over into complete liquidation.'

'I'm sure you can't simply sell museums. It belongs to

Richard's great-grandfather and he's dead.' There is an ache at the side of my temple and the first flashing lights of a migraine dance into the edge of my eye. 'The family have rights.'

'They do.' This is the longest pause. 'And you have the right to live here – with Leo – until such time as the museum closes, but it is not an exaggeration to suggest that that will be within the next six weeks.'

I have applied for twenty-five jobs since my redundancy was announced. Twenty-five teaching posts, all over London and even into the Home Counties, but I've been in the business for almost thirty years: my pay-scale is much higher than someone just out of college, newly qualified. I haven't had a single interview.

I'm not about to start discussing the paralysing terror of my financial situation, of single parenthood, with this cold old woman: I am shocked into saying my goodbyes and telling her that we'll see her tomorrow. And then what?

The cardboard boxes, with their anonymous brown sides, tower around me, and the walls of the flat I have loved close in on me with a similar pressure: a low bitter wind starts to gust around the guttering glimmers of hope in mine and Leo's future.

Richard and I met at university. I was almost nineteen and halfway through my first year. He was twenty-four a worldly and debonair PhD student, far more interesting than I was.

My boyfriend, Simon, was Richard's best friend. Simon and I had only been together a few weeks: we'd been to a couple of gigs together, spent a few evenings in the pub down by my halls and I liked him – I really did. Simon was tall, funny, and incredibly kind. I really thought that he and I would work, that we had potential. But then I met Richard.

The pub was hazy and dark. People still smoked indoors then and it gave everything an ethereal glow, at least until we smelled our hair and clothes in the morning. Simon and I were at a corner table. The jukebox was playing something old, country music from decades before: the pub was too London, too achingly cool, for pop music. We were deep in conversation, hands wrapped round our pint glasses, our feet touching under the table.

'Rich!' Simon half-stood and shouted across the bar. 'All right?'

The man he'd shouted to came over. I knew straightaway. I knew before he sat down, before he spoke. It was something utterly primal.

Richard had straight dark hair, and the deepest brownest eyes I'd ever seen. I see those same eyes every day now, and the same perfect white teeth in an enormous and constant smile. Leo's hair is as poker straight, as charcoal-black.

I remember moving my foot away from Simon's: an unconscious gesture. I wasn't that girl. I was young – new to this city, to being a grown-up. What I knew I was about to do was so out of character, so unlike me.

'Rich, this is Cate, my girlfriend.'

Rich put his hand out and shook mine. I looked into his eyes and knew that he felt exactly the same way.

I've always believed in honesty – there are a few, unusual and unfortunate, exceptions but I've lived most of my life by the principle that it's easier to tell the truth than lie – whatever the situation. I told Simon that night, as soon as we got in. I told him gently, and I told him long before Rich and I ever kissed, ever spoke about spending the rest of our lives together, about bringing another, much-wanted, tiny human into the world.

Simon and Richard stayed best friends: they widened their closeness to include me, and Simon has been an amazing godfather to Leo – going far beyond the reach of duty, especially in the final, traumatic, years with Richard, years I couldn't have navigated without him.

All of that is four years behind us now. Simon is in New Zealand, doing research. Leo and I are headed out into the Great Unknown, whatever that might bring.

I don't know where Richard is. And that, more than anything, is the hardest part.

My thoughts of Richard are so complicated, so impossible to separate out from one another. I try not to be bitter – my mother used to say that bitterness is like drinking poison and waiting for your enemy to die – and I try not to dwell between the twin despairs of 'why me?' and 'it's not fair'. No one set out for any of this to happen: not me; not Richard; and most of all, not Leo. And Leo has to stay the most

important thing. I'm strict about wallowing and I'm strict about remaining positive – but sometimes I struggle.

All through our marriage, Richard was my best friend, and an amazing father. He knocked himself out trying to provide for us, trying to make us the perfect family: but so much of the time, he just couldn't make that work.

I was overwhelmed by the shuddering loneliness of living with someone with chronic depression. It's hard to stay sympathetic and sad and angry all at the same time, torn between meeting the needs of both the people you love. I held my breath for so long trying not to let Richard's illness impact on Leo, trying not to let Leo's day-to-day demands take too much of a strain on Richard. I once imagined there was nothing worse than being in charge all the time, the press-ganged pilot who navigated Richard's anxieties and worries and got him back onto even ground.

But then Richard killed himself and the sheer joy of being with him, the summer warmth of caring for someone, the human softness of his body, it all came flooding back. A spotlight of pain projected my loss in vivid relief: still does. I live with a Richard-sized hole in my life: almost a physical thing in the room we slept in; in the places we took Leo to; in the kitchen every day when I finish work. He isn't here and I don't know where he is.

All I know is how much I loved him.

Chapter Two

The gravel drive crunches a song of despair under the wheels of my car, each pop a painful reminder that we're inching towards this life we didn't ask for, and away from everything we ever had.

In the passenger seat, Leo has kept up a steady stream of 'Are we there yet?' punctuated only by a dirge of his friends' names repeated over and over to the tune of a horrible television advert. I'm trying not to shout at him, trying not to be an even worse parent than I already am. The strain of keeping quiet shows in my knuckles, wrapped tight white around the wheel.

'Are we there yet?' asks Leo, one more time.

This time, with my heart in my mouth, I have to answer, 'Yes.'

'Eric? And Sadie? And Ollie? And Dean?' He's being deliberately obnoxious, believing that he can winkle a promise out of me if he's sufficiently irritating; a chafing

grain of sand that could grow, if Leo tries long enough, into, 'Yes, all your friends are here, they're going to jump out and shout surprise and we'll both go back to our real lives.' Lives we both, in most ways, loved. And that's the most bitter thing about love; you can't understand it, measure it – not all its edges and intricacies – until it's gone and the clear print of its negative self is left behind.

Evidence of the house is everywhere, though the house itself is still out of sight: a faded sign on the main road pointed us down a lane that became a gated tunnel of green leaves – hopeful spatters of lime-coloured light landing on the bonnet of the car. There were stone pillars either side of what must have once been a magnificent gateway, bridges in the classical Greek style that have long since lost the fountains that played over them or the ponds they led into. A quarter of a mile or so down the lane, it peters out into this long tree-lined drive, the sound of gravel, and the uneasy feeling of regret.

Each side of the drive, aspen trees wave us on. They are so overgrown that their tops mingle with each other, forming a hedge high in the air. Their trunks are straight and bleak.

'Are we there yet?' says Leo.

'I said we are.' I want to stop the car – delay the inevitable – but the removal men in the van behind us are paid by the hour.

'There's no house.' Leo is sinking further down in his seat, scrunching his shoulders up and his head down, working up to full a meltdown.

I know how he feels. We've been driving for seven hours,

stuck in traffic for five of those, inching south down the M25 and grudgingly moving forward on the M20. I'm a Londoner. I belong in a place full of chattering people, of smells, sounds and tastes of multiculture, of dozens of nosy, self-absorbed villages strung together into one huge city. Leo had everything he needed in London. A club for every afternoon of the week while I finished work, sports teams and music lessons, art group and dancing. I had neighbours to step in and take him swimming if I was stuck, friends who could watch him at the drop of a hat if I wanted to go to the pictures or lie in a park and watch the clouds overhead by myself.

When people move, they say they're swapping something for something else: the bustle of the city for the bucolic countryside, the chill winter breezes of the seaside for the shores of southern Spain. Leo and I don't have the luxury of a swap. What we had has gone.

'I want to see Dean.'

'Dean's in London. Can you see the house yet?'

'I want to see Dean.'

There is nothing I can say. Leo doesn't like change, and he doesn't have the life experience to know that people move around, float by, stay sometimes or are gone: that there will be more people. I have that experience but my faith in it has disappeared.

There is a flash in the road, an amber streak across my peripheral vision at the bottom right-hand edge of the windscreen. The bump, when it comes, is more a noise than a feeling.

I stop the car and get out. I know I have hit something, I know it is an animal: a small soft creature versus the metal of my car bumper. Behind me, the removal van pulls over too.

The fox is lying by the side of the drive. It looks perfect except for the one angry gash on its pointed head, almost hidden by the way its tail curls around the small body, for all the world as if it is sleeping.

'Did the fox get run over, Mummy?' Leo has got out of the car. He is looking at the sad little corpse.

'It ran straight out in front of me,' I say and my voice cracks slightly. 'Poor thing.'

The fox doesn't look like foxes did in London. The foxes we're used to are coloured by the grey landscape, infected by the soot and the brick and the car fumes. This one is vivid orange, glossy and plump. We are used to mangy foxes with scratched-up fur, living out of bins: this one has had an altogether more organic diet.

'Oh, dear.' The oldest of the three removal men has climbed down from his van. 'Poor little bugger. Let's move him to the hedge.' He grabs a piece of old fabric from the cab of the van and uses it to protect his hands from the fur. 'There you go.'

I feel like I should say some words, stroke the still small ribs. I have never killed anything before.

'We do need to get on, Cate.' The removal man taps his watch. 'I've got to get that lot home for tonight.' He gestures towards his colleagues.

'Sorry, little fox,' I whisper. I am near to tears. I look in

the rear-view mirror as I drive away but his body is hidden by the green hedgerow.

One last curve in this dilapidated drive and the left-hand edge of the house breaks out of the trees. And then it keeps going. Across and across, window after window.

'Where's our house?' asks Leo.

This place looks like a hospital, or a boarding school, or – exactly what it is – a museum. 'This is our house,' I tell Leo.

'Daddy's house?' This is as much as Leo has grasped of where we are going – and to some extent it's true.

Richard's family have owned this house for two hundred years, since they built it. My blood runs cold when I think what might have happened if it wasn't here, if there wasn't a trust still running it. I knew all along that the heir to the estate is entitled to live on the premises, although I never imagined a scenario where that might need to happen. Now, with every other avenue closed, we are here at the door.

I reach in my handbag for the solicitor's letter and the keys. The letter explains that Leo and I will have our own apartment but we will share the building and garden with the museum and its visitors. It's not ideal, but none of this is. We're supposed to be greeted by Mrs Buchan – although greeted seems unlikely to be the right word – but we're five hours late and she's probably gone home.

I dig into my bag a bit deeper. The keys aren't there. I'm not the sort of person to lose things, unless you count jobs, husbands, and homes. I don't lose keys or letters or small,

ineffectual everyday details. I get out of the car so that I can tip my handbag onto the seat, but I know they're not there. Tissues and envelopes, Leo's asthma pump, my purse, the keys aren't there. They really aren't. And I checked at least ten times before we left, I checked once we were in the actual car.

'Leo?'

He's got out too, he's standing on the drive looking up at his ancestors' achievement.

'Leo, where are the keys? Did you take them out of my bag?'

Leo looks at his feet. 'Nope.'

And then I remember the new keyring, the shiny silver abacus that one of my work colleagues gave me as a leaving present and the way its tiny perfect beads slid from one end of the frame to the other. I remember how much Leo wanted to play with it and how I said he couldn't. And that's when I know that the keyring, and the keys, are in a lavatory stall at the M20 services.

It's one of those parenting moments, one where every fibre of you wants to shout, scream, even run away. But another part of you – almost always the dominant one – remembers that you can't. You're the grown-up. You can do this the easy way or the hard way. You can suck it up and deal with what you have or you can waste hours of your life on an exercise that will simply result in two of you crying instead of one. An inner part of me, one I ban and hide and silence, asks me whether Richard's version of parenting was

the same and, it whispers in a voice I hate admitting to, 'Isn't that why we are where we are now?'

'Very impressive, Cate.' The oldest of the three removal men walks towards my car. 'Your furniture's going to rattle a bit in there.' Behind him, the others have pushed up the back of the van and are standing around – stretching out tense muscles, rolling cigarettes, waiting to unpack.

'It's a flat, two bedrooms. The rest is mostly empty. And I've lost the keys.' My angry inner voice adds, *I haven't lost the keys, Leo has*, but that's not going to help us right now. I smile at him, trying to disarm the fact that he thinks I'm an idiot.

'Are they in your bag?'

I'm still smiling, my face rigid with tension. 'I looked.'

'The car?'

Leo stops me from explicitly outlining my frustrations by throwing up on the gravel drive. Spatters of vomit moisten the dust on the removal man's boots.

When I've cleaned Leo up – and apologised profusely – things seem to have reached a new entente cordiale. The removal men are prepared to excuse my stupidity in the light of Leo's car sickness and the entire plaintive horror of the situation. They have started stacking boxes near the front door while I sink myself in the task of opening it.

The traffic jam has meant that the solicitor's office is closed. All the numbers I have for the museum and the estate office ring out and there don't appear to be any neighbours.

Leo is being entertained by the removal men – they are lovely with him. He's been allowed to sit in the cab although, since he confided in the youngest one, Frank, that it was him who lost the keys, they've turned the radio off and taken the keys out of the ignition. 'Just in case, mate,' they told him when he said he'd like to work the windscreen wipers a bit more.

'I reckon I can get in there.' Frank points to an upstairs window that's slightly ajar. The front door of the house is porticoed, two sandstone pillars flank the wide door, and a tumble of tangled vegetation grows round them. Here and there a wide purple flower turns its face to the sinking sun.

'Are you sure?' It's a long way up and seeing Frank break his neck would really finish the day off. 'And I don't know which window is which; you might end up in the actual museum.'

'We haven't got that much choice,' Philip, the oldest removal man says. 'It wouldn't be the first time we've had to take an alternative route in.'

'And there's an alarm,' I add, 'because of the museum. The instructions are here but the keypad is inside the front door. I doubt you'd get there in time.'

'The only certain thing,' Philip says, 'is that we can't stay here all night.'

'My tent is in one of the boxes,' Leo offers, both helpfully and hopefully.

'We won't get all these boxes in your tent, mate,' says Frank. 'Even if we could find it.'

The wide grounds in front of the house are edged with

railings rusted with age and weather. Once upon a time, they would have been painted an elegant white, now they are bent brown rails running around the edge of an overgrown field. I try to imagine the field full of carriage horses, resting their soft muzzles over the top rail, keeping the grass neat and clipped with their slow snuffled chewing. It's a million miles away from the reality. I don't know what I was thinking of, coming here, how I thought this could possibly be the answer to our homelessness, me losing my job. And now we are here, we can't even get in.

'Well?' says Frank, looking up at the window, two floors above us.

'I don't think you ought to.' I don't know what my alternative suggestion is. 'What about Health and Safety?' Years of school-teaching have left their mark on me.

'Beauty of working for yourself,' says Phil. 'And no witnesses.' He nods towards Frank, who starts to climb onto the wide green windowsill.

Leo spins round and round on the spot, his arms above his head. 'Frank's a superhero,' he shouts. 'Can I go up too?'

I can see Leo won't even be able to heave himself up to the windowsill that Frank now stands on, body flat against the window, arms splayed like a tightrope walker, so at least that's not one of my worries.

Frank reaches above him. There is a wisteria clinging to the front of the house, its twisted trunks long-dead and past flowering; twigs and wizened leaves drop down as Frank tries to get purchase over the window frame. The noise he

makes as he heaves himself from the windowsill to the flat porch roof of the portico is loud in the silence of the drive. This really is the countryside; the absence of cars, people, sirens, all remarkable on the still air.

'Go on!' shouts Leo as Frank bicycles his legs for momentum, his top half lying flat on the portico.

'You're nearly there, lad,' Phil says, and we both will Frank's upper body to weigh more than his legs or he's going to crash back down onto the drive in a way that he'd be lucky to survive in one piece.

Below Frank's white trainers waving in mid-air, the door opens. It doesn't open wide, like someone is welcoming us with expansive gestures or enthusiasm. It opens slightly, with suspicion and unease.

'Can I help you?' The welcome isn't gracious but I'm overwhelmed with relief that there's someone here.

'Miss Buchan?'

The sunshine is thrown onto her face in the gap of the doorway. Her eyes wrinkle up against it. Her hair is short and steel grey, her face unlined and powder soft. She is small, thin, and angular.

'How nice to meet you properly,' I say, recognising one of the moments when one must tell slight untruths.

'How do you do, Mrs Lyons-Morris.' She has the tone of someone who is being inconvenienced.

Above her, Frank's legs have stopped flapping, his trainers are peaceful, side by side, to the left of her head. It is not a good start.

I'm sure Frank and Phil are hoping as hard as me that she hasn't noticed the legs, or the man on the porch roof.

'We dropped the Lyons,' I remind her. 'And this is Leo, Leo Morris.'

'Hello, Leo,' says Miss Buchan and steps out of the doorway. 'You look just like your daddy.'

I try to put an exact age on her but it's difficult: her clothes are tight and tweed, a short necklace of pearls sits neatly on her neck. She holds her slim hand out towards me, ready to shake my hand. She is somewhere between forty-five and seventy-five but then, so am I.

Her hand looks tiny in mine. My fingers wrap round hers and I feel like an oaf. I compensate by shaking her hand vigorously and she looks at me as if she'd rather I let go.

'You may call me Araminta,' she says in a cold flat voice and nods her head to show that she means both of us. 'I take care of the house and museum.' She says that mainly to Leo.

'I live here,' shouts Leo. 'And Frank. And Phil.'

As he says it, Frank lets go of the porch roof and half-slithers, half-falls into the drive next to Araminta.

'We couldn't get in,' Phil and I say at the same time, leaving a gaping void of silence afterwards.

'I lost the . . .'

'We were unloading . . .'

We sound like children and both stop trying to explain.

'Well, you're here now,' says Araminta, in a voice that shows how much that displeases her. 'Shall I show you to the apartment?'

'Are we going in my house?' asks Leo, and Araminta breaks the straight line of her grimace for the first time.

'Yes. This is your house. And it was your daddy's house too. He lived here when he was a little boy.'

I open my mouth to argue, to say that, no, Richard never lived here. His grandparents lived here but he hated the place and seldom came near it, but something in her face makes me stop. There's a sudden softness – directed at Leo, definitely, but more than that, beyond that. I wonder if she is old enough for it to be a memory of Richard.

I look at Leo standing by the door and imagine Richard on the same steps, his hair sticking up in the summer breeze, like Leo's does. I picture a boy-Richard running through the paddock opposite, climbing the iron-railed fences, swinging up the huge oak tree that spreads its green branches wide over the field. And, if he did come here often, will he have left any of himself behind?

Chapter Three

Inside, the house is grand. A staircase leads the eye away from the front door and breaks into two galleries running away from each other and around the top of the hallway. Hallway isn't really the right word – our whole flat in London would have fitted in this space, upstairs and downstairs – perhaps it won't be so bad after all. Maybe it has improved since Richard last came here.

The galleries that run out from the stairs like twin branches are – Araminta says as she rushes us through – open to the public. She didn't have to tell me: you couldn't possibly mistake this for a home, there are 'exit' and 'fire door' signs everywhere, red rope cordons hang on bronze pillars either side of the stair carpet. Nothing about it is homely but it's certainly grand. I can see portraits and antique furniture, display cases and statues. This is the worst of all environments for Leo: Leo who dances with his headphones on; Leo who runs headlong everywhere; Leo who loves football.

A door on the landing is marked 'private', it leads into a far narrower corridor. We pass door after door, but Araminta does not pause until we see a smaller staircase going up to the next floor. I can only assume this would have been the servants' quarters, once upon a time. The first two floors, or what I've seen of them so far at any rate, have oak-panelling along the lower halves of the walls and patterned paper above that. These walls are dark, mostly painted and, here and there, sections of some sort of hessian or sacking stuck up instead of wallpaper. Phil, following with the first box, whistles through his teeth.

Araminta doesn't turn to look back at me once as we go up to the rooms, just leads the way with an irritated energy and assumes we are following.

And they are 'rooms', like something you'd expect to find if you took an academic residency in the oldest university in the country, or the matron's job at an expensive, but ancient, private school. It's a long way from the 'apartment' described by the solicitor. 'Apartment' implies modern and well-proportioned, airy and clean. This place hasn't been lived in for years, unless you count spiders and woodlice and earwigs. The solicitor failed to say that the wallpaper was peeling in the corners and the windows grey with years of winter rain and summer dust. She didn't mention the bathroom: a chipped enamel bath with taps white with limescale and – next door to that – a loo with a cistern up above it and a long rusty chain to pull to flush it. The solicitor forgot to say that the only thing that marks our rooms out as separate

to the rest of the building is a green baize door that doesn't quite shut. Most of all, she kept the absence of a kitchen right out of every single piece of correspondence.

'There isn't a kitchen, Mrs Buchan,' I say as Araminta goes to leave, her whirlwind tour completed.

'It's "Miss",' she says. 'But, as I said, you may call me Araminta. And we do have a kitchen, it's downstairs. Do you need it tonight?'

I thought about the burger we'd had at the Services when Leo felt sick, remembered the crisps, apples, and chocolate biscuits in the car. 'I'm sure we'll be all right for tonight.'

'You might, Cate,' Phil says, 'but we won't. We've got at least ten boxes marked "kitchen".'

'The kitchen is fully stocked. There will be very little you could need that you won't find down there already.' Araminta stands in the hallway. 'And there is no spare cupboard space.'

I realise that we can't stay here, this was a mistake and this place isn't for us. A second later, I remember that we have absolutely nowhere else to go.

It is late by the time Frank, Phil, and the removal man whose name I could never quite catch have carried all the boxes upstairs.

They put Leo's room together first to try and bring some semblance of order. Now they've finished, I'm relieved that we have this oasis of our past to hide in. Leo's room looks much as it always did. Frank even helped him get some

posters on the wall until Phil and the other man realised he wasn't helping them carry boxes up three flights of stairs.

I've convinced Leo that a bedroom picnic is exciting and we're sitting on his bed with apples and chocolate biscuits pretending, like we did when he was little, that the bed is a boat and all around us is water. He still thinks this will be an adventure.

I lie back on his pillows and listen to the empty house. I imagine that I'm in London, that I can hear the Pearsons next door – their television always too loud for us but not quite high enough for them to hear. Or Delores and Alfie upstairs, art students that Leo has counted amongst his best friends for the last couple of years. Instead, there's us: Leo and me.

I don't know where Araminta went. She said a very firm goodnight and told me that she'd be back at 9 a.m. to show me how things work and where the kitchen is. I sip warm water from a plastic bottle we had in the car and think about when I lived in a city, when I could get a mocha chai latte with almond milk at midnight if I ever felt like it; I never did, but that doesn't stop me adding the rural isolation to my list of woes.

Leo is scrolling through music on his iPad, displaying an impressive line in choices for someone whose literacy skills aren't that hot. He puts his big headphones on and lies back on the pillow. Every now and then he bursts into song. Leo inherited his father's voice, poor Leo. If he'd had mine he might have been able to roughly carry a tune, maybe even do a reasonable karaoke. Instead he sings like Richard, like

a cinder under a door, but that doesn't harm his love of singing loudly and often.

The music makes Leo smile, his fingers tap out a rhythm on the duvet and his feet jiggle. I envy him his ease and his confidence. Leo feels like this because he has me, because he has every trust in me. I don't have anyone to lean on right now, unless you count Simon – inexorably linked to us by shared history and by the fact that he's Leo's godfather – but he's 12,000 miles away researching fish that walk along the bottom of the sea.

I leave Leo to it and go into my own room, before he can see the tears that are welling up in my eyes. I lie back on the bed and breathe deeply. The mattress is solid and lumpy: we are not going to get on well. With each breath I take in more of the musty smell, the creased old curtains, I become more and more aware of the utter hopelessness of our surroundings. I think I had visions of moulded ceilings, patterns of white plaster edging every room. Instead, this low ceiling is cracked at the edges, with a tiny gap all the way round for insects to come and go through. A spider clings to a dusty web in the off-white corner as if to prove to me that he was here first.

I pick up my phone – I just want to share my wretchedness, my deflating hopes as they ebb into the threadbare old rug. I scroll through my recent calls, through my friend list. The trouble with being a teacher for so long is that all my friends are teachers too. They have escaped to warmer climes, as I used to, on the first day of the holidays

and – apart from texts and postcards – none of them will really be in touch again until the grind of the September term starts anew. It's going to be a long summer.

Simon and I signed up for an online grieving course, after the first months of incredulity had worn off – when it had been long enough for me to realise I'd never love anyone as much as I'd loved Richard, and for Simon to learn that you only have one lifelong best friend. Some of our other old friends find it hard to talk about suicide: they're embarrassed and sorry for me in equal measure. Others can't deal with my anger. Simon knows exactly what I'm going through: the sadness, the regret, the pulsing guilt that has pounded in my ears every day for the last four years. And the utter negativity of helpless powerless fury. Simon knows first-hand that people are able to support you in sadness, but not so comfortable with despair.

There was never a moment where Simon wasn't Richard's best friend, wasn't utterly devoted to him – even when things became so complicated, when those relationships were blurred and stretched and hard to focus on.

My first problem when I met Richard wasn't how to finish with Simon but how to tell Richard why I'd done it. I let Simon down gently and without too much anguish, then spent two nights tossing and turning, wide awake: nights that would have been far less troubled had Richard and I had mobile phones or emails.

On the third day, I slunk into work for an afternoon shift,

exhausted and tense. I was working in the uni bar: the floor was sticky with spilt beer and the customers were mostly a nightmare, but it was near my halls and it fitted round my course.

I'd had my back to the bar when Richard approached and I heard his voice before I saw him.

'Si said I'd find you here.'

I blushed to the roots of my hair. Warm lager splashed onto my hand as I turned. My hand was shaking so much I had to put the plastic cup down on the bar. My throat was dry and all my words lost somewhere deep in my belly.

'Can you talk? Do you have a break any time soon?' His fringe was slightly spiky at the front; it made him look vulnerable and it quivered nervously when he spoke.

'I finished with Simon,' I told him, instead of answering his question.

Even at twenty-four his boyishness caught up with him. 'I know,' he whispered, and his voice trembled.

I made my excuses to the other bar staff and led him outside to a bench in the university plaza. Students wandered past us like safari animals ranging the plains: they were all a blur, all background. The sun was low in the sky and the afternoon still warm, still brightly lit.

'I have to know that you feel the same.' He just said it, no preamble, no explanation. 'I need to talk to Si about him and me and you, and I need to know that – that you feel the same – before I do it.'

'I do,' I said, for the first time.

'He'll bevery upset, betrayed.'

I nodded, looked at the floor, the detritus of sweet wrappers, leaves, and cigarette ends.

'But there's no point in not telling him, in not doing it.' He reached out for my hand and his skin against mine was like fire. 'I'm going to tell him today.'

'Thanks.' I dared look up at him, at his earnest face, his worried eyes. 'It's the right thing.'

'This is it, you know.' He leaned in towards me. In the distance someone played a radio through a window, people called out to one another across the quad. Our world was just the tiny space between the two of us. 'I mean this is really it,' he said – before we had so much as kissed for the first time. 'Till death do us part.'

Now, as part of our therapy, Simon and I are supposed to email each other every day with memories of Richard – things that touch us and make the past a warm day or a Christmas morning, or things that are less happy, even painful. Over time we've got lazy, we either don't write for days or we send one line at best. More often than not, it ends up being a brief history of what we've had to eat.

Tonight, I wait until Leo is engrossed in his music, dancing around his new bedroom without a care in the world and go into my own room. I close the curtains, although there's T nothing and no one outside: an overhanging roof or something obscures my view and I can't see the stars. It is truly dark in a way I doubt Leo has ever seen. I sit down on

my bed and write an email on my phone; at least now I have something to write about.

From: Cate Morris

To: Simon Henderson

Subject: We've arrived

Mail: It's so much worse than I ever thought it could be: I don't know what I was actually expecting. Not this, anyway. At work we've all been telling ourselves that these things are new beginnings, that when one door closes etc, we've said it so much we've all started believing it. Not that anyone else who took the redundancy is in a cartoon spooky castle in the middle of nowhere.

Not even any food to report today, your godson and I mainly lived on burgers and chocolate biscuits.

Seriously though, I wish you were here. Or Richard. One of you. Anyone really (if that doesn't make you feel unimportant).

C xxx

PS Did Richard ever mention living here to you?

If there was a time when Simon resented Richard and me, he has never said so. He has been charm and elegance itself from the first time Richard and I met him as a couple.

It didn't take him long to meet someone new: a succession

of someone-news as it turned out. Simon was always the more handsome one, the more outgoing: he'd always found it easier to charm the girls than Richard had.

The three of us got on and pretended it hadn't happened; that I had never known Simon before Richard and that they were, equally, my two best friends. Girlfriends of mine queued up for years to have a go at being the fourth wheel of our strange little friendship but it never quite-worked out.

One of my best friends tried harder than most. It would have worked for me and I encouraged it at every opportunity. It was going well: we had some good laughs together. And then, one day, we were on the way home from a seaside funfair. We went together in Richard's car: he drove and I rode shotgun – Simon and Emily were in the back. The boys had won huge teddy bears in displays of uncharacteristic machismo at the sideshows and Emily and I were still laughing at how easily they'd turned into totally different sorts of men once they'd started competing.

The light was fading into dusk, the scent of wheat fields and wild flowers was drifting through the car windows on the warm breeze. It was a balmy dream end to a beautiful day.

Simon saw it at the same time as Richard and me – I don't know how. The tiny baby rabbit lolloping on soft grey paws across the road.

The moment of brakes and shouts lasted only a second and then we saw the oyster-coloured ball of fur bounce away behind us before lying still in the middle of the lane.

Richard ran from the car, leaving the door open in the road. He crouched by the tiny rabbit, his head in his hands. 'No, no,' he kept repeating. I put my hand on his shoulder.

'Rich, mate, it's a rabbit. It's only a rabbit.' Simon was standing over the two of us and the little dead body. He picked it up by its ears and swung it into the field beside the road. 'At least another animal can take it.'

'I killed it.' Richard was whispering, still squatting in the road. 'I killed it.'

'Are you all right, Richard?' I got him to his feet.

He shook his head, his face was wet with tears.

'Do you want me to drive?' I asked. I'd never driven his car before and it seemed intimate somehow.

He nodded and we all got back in the car. Behind us a red Mini beeped to get us to move.

Richard didn't speak again until we got back to the flat he shared with Simon. 'Can you stay?' he asked me. 'I don't want to be on my own.'

I didn't say, 'It's just a rabbit.' Not then or when he woke up screaming in the night. Instead I held him tight, my arms around his muscular back, and murmured, 'It's okay, Richard,' until he went back to sleep.

I think of today's little fox, a bigger mammal than the rabbit and on a more sensitive day. Not for the first time I am thankful that I have never felt the weight of world as heavily as Richard did. Not for the first time, a diamond dust of resentment grinds in my silent inner self; in the part that

always copes, in the part that bears the whole weight of the boy who was once Richard's world.

It takes a second to remember where I am when I wake up. Some things are normal. The duvet cover is mine and instantly recognisable, but the view at the end of its straight blue stripes is completely new. The furniture isn't mine. The heavy old oak drawers were too solid to move when we tried yesterday; it wasn't even worth trying the wardrobe. The wardrobe is antique and enormous; it would easily hold any number of children looking for adventures and it will easily hold far more clothes than I have ever owned. The wardrobe smelled the same as the rest of the room when I looked inside – a strange smell, not mothballs and not damp, but a smell of neglect and emptiness, nonetheless. Leo wakes early.

'And we can go in the garden.' He is excited and I haven't been listening or, for that matter, awake. 'It's a really big garden. Look.' Leo pulls the dark velvet curtain away from the window.

The sunlight streams in uninvited; the day insistent upon me, demanding my attention. In the morning light, I can see that the overhanging roof that obscured my view of the sky last night is so much more than that. Wooden panels, as intricate as lace, line the guttering of the roof above my window. They drip down like icicles, roughened by peeling paint that would be impossible to reach to redo. At the top of each eave, I can see the underbelly and chin of a gargoyle, both with

their tongues poking out in front of them. 'Gog and Magog,' Richard used to say every time he met a pair of anythings – puppies, infants, artwork – that could be described as ugly. I wonder if these two stone monsters are the reason why.

We are three storeys up and the view of the garden is breathtaking. Then I realise that's the wrong phrase. This isn't a garden, these are 'gardens': wild and sprawling, overgrown and unkempt, but 'gardens', in the same way that this apartment is 'rooms'. I wonder if every aspect of this place will require new vocabulary. The lawn spreads away from the house – it isn't as overgrown as I would have expected. Someone mows this vast expanse of grass, clipping the edges where the trees have been so carefully planted around it, ancient enormous trees with trunks you could never fit your arms round.

Beyond the lawns – they are large enough to be plural too – I can see what I assume is the outside edge of a walled garden. I can see shrubs and vines growing over the red brick wall and back towards the house. I can only imagine what else might be in there

To the left of the walled garden and gesturing up to the back of the house, two gold statues gleam. They are so incongruous in all the disorder, as if they have a daily maintenance routine that involves scrubbing and brushing and polishing. The two life-sized figures look like skaters, moving across the surface of a large pond but stuck, for now, in the middle. Each balances on one leg, the opposite arm outstretched and their heads turned slightly to look at one another.

'Who are they?' asks Leo and something in his voice says that he's not sure whether they're real people or not.

'They're statues,' I say. 'But I don't know who of. Aren't they beautiful?'

'Are we allowed to touch them?'

'Probably. I would have thought so. But we can't because of the pond. The pond's too big.'

'I can swim.' Leo has a twinkle in his eye.

'I know you can but that pond is probably heaving with slime and diseases. Seriously, you must be very careful near the water. Really.' I pat the bed beside me so he can hop on. 'What time is it?'

We're not in any rush so we spend the next few minutes figuring out the time on the big face of Leo's watch. It's not quite 7 a.m. At home we would be listening to a familiar soundtrack now. There would be movement from the flat upstairs – nothing from the Pearsons next door yet – it would be far too early for them. Below us, cars would be starting to choke the main road by our block, a popular rat-run for commuters. There would be shouts, and buses, and the wail of sirens.

I expected this place to be as silent as it was last night but it isn't. Birds fly in and out of the eaves above my window, screeching like insistent and unanswered phones. They're a blur but I don't think I'd know what sort they were even if they sat still long enough. I know a pigeon from a chicken, and a sparrow from a starling, but I'm very much a city girl. There are other noises too, the trees rustle

gently in the wind and bird song pours in from every angle. On the warm air, the burr of a tractor engine reaches the window, someone out and at work early. Someone with work to go to.

Leo and I are going to have to fill the days of this long still summer. Before I was made redundant, the six-week break was an urgent rush of everything we needed to get done ahead of the new term. This autumn will be different but I have no idea how, or where. I had thought that perhaps they'd need some help in the museum – I could see myself as a tour guide, knowledgeable and bossy, a bit funny – but according to Araminta there will be no museum.

'I'm hungry.' Leo always wakes up hungry.

'Shall we go and find the kitchen? Then you can make some cereal.' I had the foresight to bring a carton of UHT milk – I knew we were coming beyond civilisation. Leo won't notice the difference if I let him have a special occasion cereal, drenched in sugar coating. The kitchen boxes are stacked up in my bedroom, the one with the bowls, cereal and spoons in is clearly marked.

'Is the kitchen in the house?' Leo asks.

'I bloody hope so.' I swing my feet out of bed.

I pull on the same clothes as yesterday, jeans and a T-shirt. Leo has already dressed himself with one of the flamboyant outfits he packed in his overnight bag. His shirt is orange and floral, underneath a waistcoat with a plaid silk front.

'Nice Thursday kind of clothes,' I say.

'Thank you.' Leo has lovely manners; everyone says so. And a complete disregard for sarcasm.

I let Leo lead the way along the corridor. He's excited and slaps his palms on his thighs in anticipation: I wish I felt the same way.

We find our way out of the flat easily enough and we're back in the long corridor that leads to our little set of rooms. If claustrophobia had a smell, the unstirred damp of this passageway is the one it would choose.

'It's this way.' Leo starts off down the corridor at a pace and I might as well trust him – he's got as much idea of where the kitchen is as I have.

'Hold on,' I say. I put the breakfast things down on the floor while I check my jeans pockets. 'I need to find the number for the alarm. We might set it off.' The scrap of paper is still there and I chant the numbers under my breath in case I need them in a hurry. There were times in my life when remembering a four-digit code wouldn't have been a challenge: this isn't one of them.

'I could dive under the alarm.' Leo waves his arms about, an adventurer warding off any dangers. 'I can stop it.'

'And you'll knock the paintings off the wall if you carry on like that. You've got to be careful. We can go mad when we get outside.' I give him the cereal box and the milk carton to keep his hands busy and close to his body. 'You take these and I'll carry the cups and bowls.'

'It's a long way.' Leo doesn't want to carry anything.

'It is, but when we get there you can have breakfast. I hope

we haven't missed it.' We go down the same staircases we came up last night and back into the hallway. There must have been plenty of balls and weddings in this room once upon a time, with brides and debutantes coming down these stairs in cascades of satin and silk. Leo and I make a rather poor apology, although he's done his best to dress for an occasion.

Several doors lead from the hall. There is the huge heavy door we came in through last night, even more impressive from the back with its iron bolts and long black hinges. The key is noticeably missing and the idea of being locked in makes me uncomfortable.

'Let's see if we can find another door and get into the garden.' I keep my voice light but it is trapped in this huge hall, stifled by the fact we couldn't get out if we wanted to. The door I pick opens on to another little corridor. At the end I can see the outside world clearly visible and still real on the other side of the back door. It is the ordinary half-glazed back door of any house, a three-bed suburban semi somewhere. It looks as out of place as we are.

We creep down the half-lit corridor; Leo is silent now and I feel like a burglar.

The door on my right is ajar and I peer in. It's a kitchen of sorts but I think it might be part of the museum. The room is enormous and work surfaces run all the way round apart from under the window where a gleaming white porcelain sink straddles two scrubbed wooden draining boards, and in the middle of the far wall where an impressive old range squats, immovable and ancient.

I gesture for Leo to follow me in. Whether it's part of the museum or not, there's a big kitchen table in the middle and we can sit there to eat our cereal.

The work surfaces are all white enamel, scratched with age and the elbow grease that years of cooks must have used to clean it. The edges are blue where they curl over onto the wooden cupboards below. It must be the best part of a hundred years old – I've never seen anything like it. I knock lightly on the surface to check it's really made of metal. It is.

Pots and pans hang on the wall and from the clothes airer on the ceiling: there are jelly moulds and vast copper tureens, shined and buffed ready to feed a hundred hungry dinner guests. Huge spoons and ladles hang from a row of hooks by the cooker like something from a fairy tale. These are the very tools you'd use to cook Hansel and Gretel.

'Can I help you?'

'Oh, Araminta, good morning. I didn't expect to see you this early.'

She looks at the cereal box I've just taken from Leo; the very worst of pink marshmallow and tooth rot, and I swear her lip curls. 'So I see.'

'I'm making the breakfast.' Leo beams at her with his disarming smile. 'This is birthday cereal.'

'He usually has to have a healthy breakfast unless it's his birthday.' I'm talking too fast because Araminta makes me nervous. It's like I'm back at school, being reprimanded by the headmistress.

'It looks very . . .' She swallows. '. . . tasty.'

'Have you got a bowl, Mrs Minta? Would you like some? There is nearly a whole boxful.' Leo offers her the box and I want the kitchen to open up and swallow me.

'I've had my breakfast, thank you, Leo.'

I attempt to lighten the mood. 'This kitchen is amazing. How old is it?'

'It was all completely refurbished in 1918,' says Araminta. 'When Colonel Hugo married.'

'So it's part of the museum?' It starts to make sense. I run my fingers along the work surface. The whole thing is in incredible condition. The nicks of knife cuts and the odd missing flake of enamel are testament to the work that must have gone on in here back in its heyday.

'Not at all, it's the kitchen. The public have no access.' She gives me a look which shows that she thinks 'public' ought to include me. 'All Colonel and Lady Lyons-Morris's meals were made in here right up until they passed away.'

'I'm sorry,' I say, though I didn't know Richard's grandparents and have no idea how Araminta may have felt about them.

'The range was replaced in the 1950s.' Araminta says it as casually as if she were telling me that the wallpaper was done last week. That still makes it seventy years old.

'Does it work?' I ask.

'Perfectly.' She walks across the room and opens the door of the tall fridge. 'The fridge didn't arrive until the 1970s. They used the larder and the garden ice house until then.'

Araminta clearly knows a lot about the place. She's also clearly in charge.

'Can I have more?' Leo has finished his first bowl of cereal. He's managed to keep the milk in the bowl and any extra bits that have fallen on the table have been scooped up and into his mouth.

'Half a one,' I say. 'Is this the kitchen Leo and I will use?'

'Yes,' says Araminta, and I'm sure she and I are both aware that she doesn't bother to add, 'Make yourself at home.'

I wonder how on earth I'm ever going to work the cooker but, for now, I'm not going to show any fear. 'Smashing. Is there some cupboard space for our things?'

'I've cleared this one for you.' She bends down and opens one small cupboard on the side of a wooden dresser. It will just about fit four tins of beans and a packet of pasta.

I nod. 'And our plates? Cups and stuff?'

'Everything you will need is here.' 'Here' is a dresser full of exquisite china. Every plate faces forward with a little bowl, saucer and teacup arrangement in front of it. The pattern is pale green and intricate. 'This service was made for your husband's great grandfather.'

'It's lovely.' I feel like laughing at the absurdity of it. 'It's lovely but it's not really suitable for us to use.' By 'us', I mean Leo.

'Every generation of Lyons-Morris has used it since then.' Araminta bows her head at the gravity of it. The gravity I imagine when I think of Leo and her precious plates is a different sort.

Araminta has been arranging dainty pieces of cheese and ham on one of the china side plates. She takes it out into the corridor and opens the back door. I can hear her calling a cat or something.

'You feed your cat cheese?' I try to make light conversation, talk about something that might make her happy.

Even before she answers, I know. I think of the shiny red fur, the healthy plump softness with the life knocked out of it.

'I feed a little fox.'

I scramble to change the subject before Leo loses interest in the cereal. I feel physically sick. 'Do you have far to come to the museum?' I ask her, praying that the answer will be yes.

'I live here,' Araminta says and smiles without moving her cheeks. 'My apartment is down the hall from yours. Now, if you will excuse me, I have a museum to open.'

We have navigated away from the fox, from the accident, from what – effectively – is a lie.

Leo, clearly sensing that I'm on the back foot, pours himself another bowl of cereal.