

I

When the letter came I was out in the fields, binding up my last sheaf of wheat with hands that were shaking so much I could hardly tie the knot. It was my fault we'd had to do it the old-fashioned way, and I'd be damned if I was going to give up now; I had battled through the heat of the afternoon, blinking away the patches of darkness that flickered at the sides of my vision, and now it was nightfall and I was almost finished. The others had left when the sun set, calling good-byes over their shoulders, and I was glad. At least now I was alone I didn't have to pretend I could work at the same pace as them. I kept going, trying not to think about how easy it would have been with the reaping machine. I'd been too ill to check the machinery – not that I remembered much, between the flashes of lucidity, the summer was nothing but echoes and ghosts and dark aching gaps – and no one else had thought to do it, either. Every day I stumbled on some chore that hadn't been done; Pa had done his best, but he couldn't do everything. Because of me, we'd be behind all year.

I pulled the stems tight round the waist of the sheaf and stacked it against the others. Done. I could go home now . . . But there were shadows pulsing and spinning around me,

deeper than the blue-violet dusk, and my knees were trembling. I dropped into a crouch, catching my breath at the pain in my bones. Better than it had been – better than the splintery, sickening spasms that had come unpredictably for months – but still I felt as brittle as an old man. I clenched my jaw. I was so weak I wanted to cry; but I wasn't going to, I'd die first, even if the only eye on me was the full, fat harvest moon.

'Emmett? Emmett!'

It was only Alta, winding her way through the stooks towards me, but I pushed myself to my feet and tried to blink the giddiness away. Above me the sparse stars slid one way and then the other. I cleared my throat. 'Here.'

'Why didn't you get one of the others to finish? Ma was worried when they came back down the lane and you weren't with—'

'She didn't need to be worried. I'm not a child.' My thumb was bleeding where a sharp stalk had pierced the skin. The blood tasted of dust and fever.

Alta hesitated. A year ago I'd been as strong as any of them. Now she was looking at me with her head on one side, as if I was younger than she was. 'No, but—'

'I wanted to watch the moon rise.'

'Course you did.' The twilight softened her features, but I could still see the shrewdness in her gaze. 'We can't make you rest. If you don't care about getting well—'

'You sound like her. Like Ma.'

'Because she's right! You can't expect to snap back as if nothing's happened, not when you were as ill as you were.'

III. As if I'd been languishing in bed with a cough, or vomiting, or covered with pustules. Even through the haze

of nightmares I could remember more than they realised; I knew about the screaming and the hallucinations, the days when I couldn't stop crying or didn't know who anyone was, the night when I broke the window with my bare hands. I wished I *had* spent days shitting my guts helplessly into a pot; it would have been better than still having marks on my wrists where they'd had to tie me down. I turned away from her and concentrated on sucking the cut at the base of my thumb, worrying at it with my tongue until I couldn't taste blood any more.

'Please, Emmett,' Alta said, and brushed the collar of my shirt with her fingers. 'You've done as good a day's work as anyone. Now will you come home?'

'All right.' A breeze lifted the hairs on the back of my neck. Alta saw me shiver and dropped her eyes. 'What's for dinner, then?'

She flashed her gappy teeth in a grin. 'Nothing, if you don't hurry up.'

'Fine. I'll race you back.'

'Challenge me again when I'm not wearing stays.' She turned away, her dusty skirts flaring about her ankles. When she laughed she still looked like a child, but the farmhands had already started sniffing round her; in some lights now she looked like a woman.

I trudged beside her, so exhausted I felt drunk. The darkness thickened, pooling under trees and in hedges, while the moonlight bleached the stars out of the sky. I thought of cold well-water, clear as glass, with tiny green flecks gathering at the bottom – or, no, beer, grassy and bitter, the colour of amber, flavoured with Pa's special blend of herbs. It would send me straight to sleep, but that was good: all I wanted was

to go out like a candle, into dreamless unconsciousness. No nightmares, no night terrors, and to wake in the morning to clean new sunlight.

The clock in the village struck nine as we went through the gate in the yard. 'I'm famished,' Alta said, 'they sent me out to find you before I could—'

My mother's voice cut her off. She was shouting.

Alta paused, while the gate swung closed behind us. Our eyes met. A few fragments of words drifted across the yard: *How can you say . . . we can't, we simply can't . . .*

The muscles in my legs were shaking from standing still. I reached out and steadied myself against the wall, wishing my heart would slow down. A wedge of lamplight was shining through a gap in the kitchen curtains; as I watched, a shadow crossed and crossed again. My father, pacing.

'We can't stay out here all night,' Alta said, the words almost a whisper.

'It's probably nothing.' They'd quarrelled all week about the reaping machine, and why no one had checked it earlier. Neither of them mentioned that it should have been my job.

A thud: fists on the kitchen table. Pa raised his voice. 'What do you expect me to do? Say no? That bloody witch will put a curse on us quick as—'

'She already has! Look at him, Robert – what if he never gets better? It's her fault—'

'His own fault, you mean – if he—' For a second a high note rang in my ears, drowning out Pa's voice. The world slipped and righted itself, as if it had juddered on its axis. I swallowed a bubble of nausea. When I could concentrate again, there was silence.

‘We don’t know that,’ Pa said at last, just loud enough for us to hear. ‘She might help him. All those weeks she wrote to ask how he was doing.’

‘Because she wanted him! No, Robert, *no*, I won’t let it happen, his place is here with us, whatever he’s done, he’s still our son – and *her*, she gives me the creeps—’

‘You’ve never met her. It wasn’t you that had to go out there and—’

‘I don’t care! She’s done enough. She can’t have him.’

Alta glanced at me. Something changed in her face, and she took hold of my wrist and pulled me forwards. ‘We’re going inside,’ she said, in the high, self-conscious voice she used to call to the chickens. ‘It’s been a long day, you must be ravenous, I know I am. There better be some pie left, or I will kill someone. With a fork through the heart. And *eat* them.’ She paused in front of the door and added, ‘With *mustard*.’ Then she flung it open.

My parents were standing at either end of the kitchen: Pa by the window, his back turned to us, Ma at the fireplace with red blotches on her face like rouge. Between them, on the table, was a sheet of thick, creamy paper and an open envelope. Ma looked swiftly from Alta to me and took a half step towards it.

‘Dinner,’ Alta said. ‘Emmett, sit down, you look like you’re about to faint. Heavens, no one’s even laid the table. I hope the pie’s in the oven.’ She put a pile of plates down beside me. ‘Bread? Beer? Honestly, I might as well be a scullery maid . . .’ She disappeared into the pantry.

‘Emmett,’ Pa said, without turning round. ‘There’s a letter on the table. You’d better read it.’

I slid it towards me. The writing blurred into a shapeless

stain on the paper. 'My eyes are too dusty. Tell me what it says.'

Pa bowed his head, the muscles bunching in his neck as if he was dragging something heavy. 'The binder wants an apprentice.'

Ma made a sound like a bitten-off word.

I said, 'An apprentice?'

There was silence. A slice of moon shone through the gap in the curtains, covering everything in its path with silver. It made Pa's hair look greasy and grey. 'You,' he said.

Alta was standing in the pantry doorway, cradling a jar of pickles. For a second I thought she was going to drop it, but she set it down carefully on the dresser. The knock of glass on wood was louder than the smash would have been.

'I'm too old to be an apprentice.'

'Not according to her.'

'I thought . . .' My hand flattened on the table: a thin white hand that I hardly recognised. A hand that couldn't do an honest day's work. 'I'm getting better. Soon . . .' I stopped, because my voice was as unfamiliar as my fingers.

'It's not that, son.'

'I know I'm no use now—'

'Oh, sweetheart,' Ma said. 'It's not your fault— it's not because you've been ill. Soon you'll be back to your old self again. If that was all . . . You know we always thought you'd run the farm with your father. And you could have done, you still could – but . . .' Her eyes went to Pa's. 'We're not sending you away. She's asking for you.'

'I don't know who she is.'

'Binding's . . . a good craft. An honest craft. It's nothing to be afraid of.' Alta knocked against the dresser, and Ma glanced

over her shoulder as she swung her arm out swiftly to stop a plate from slipping to the floor. ‘Alta, be careful.’

My heart skipped and drummed. ‘But . . . you hate books. They’re wrong. You’ve always told me – when I brought that book home from Wakening Fair—’

A look passed between them, too quick to interpret. Pa said, ‘Never mind about that now.’

‘But . . .’ I turned back to Ma. I couldn’t put it into words: the swift change of subject if someone even mentioned a book, the shiver of distaste at the word, the look on their faces . . . The way she’d dragged me grimly past a sordid shopfront – *A. Fogatini, Pawnbroker and Licens’d Bookseller* – one day when I was small and we got lost in Castleford. ‘What do you mean, it’s a *good craft*?’

‘It’s not . . .’ Ma drew in her breath. ‘Maybe it’s not what I would have wanted, before—’

‘Hilda.’ Pa dug his fingers into the side of his neck, kneading the muscle as though it ached. ‘You don’t have a choice, lad. It’ll be a steady life. It’s a long way from anywhere, but that’s not a bad thing. Quiet. No hard labour, no one to tempt you off the straight and narrow . . .’ He cleared his throat. ‘And they’re not all like her. You settle down and learn the trade, and then . . . Well. There’re binders in town who have their own carriages.’

A tiny silence. Alta tapped the top of a jar with her fingernail and glanced at me.

‘But I don’t – I’ve never – what makes her think that I—?’ Now none of them would meet my eyes. ‘What do you mean, I’ve got no choice?’

No one answered. Finally Alta strode across the room and picked up the letter. “‘As soon as he is able to travel’”, she read

out. “The bindery can be very cold in winter. Please make sure he has warm clothes.” Why did she write to you and not Emmett? Doesn’t she know he can read?’

‘It’s the way they all do it,’ Pa said. ‘You ask the parents for an apprentice, that’s how it works.’

It didn’t matter. My hands on the table were all tendons and bones. A year ago they’d been brown and muscled, almost a man’s hands; now they were no one’s. Fit for nothing but a craft my parents despised. But why would she have chosen me, unless they’d asked her to? I spread my fingers and pressed, as if I could absorb the strength of the wood through the skin of my palms.

‘What if I say no?’

Pa clumped across to the cupboard, bent down and pulled out a bottle of blackberry gin. It was fierce, sweet stuff that Ma doled out for festivals or medicinal purposes, but he poured himself half a mug of it and she didn’t say a word. ‘There’s no place for you here. Maybe you should be grateful. This’ll be something you can do.’ He tossed half the gin down his throat and coughed.

I drew in my breath, determined not to let my voice crack. ‘When I’m better, I’ll be just as strong as—’

‘Make the best of it,’ he said.

‘But I don’t—’

‘Emmett,’ Ma said, ‘please . . . It’s the right thing. She’ll know what to do with you.’

‘What to *do* with me?’

‘I only mean – if you get ill again, she’ll—’

‘Like in a lunatic asylum? Is that it? You’re packing me off to somewhere miles from anywhere because I might lose my wits again at any moment?’

‘She *wants* you,’ Ma said, clutching her skirts as if she was trying to squeeze water out of them. ‘I wish you didn’t have to go.’

‘Then I won’t go!’

‘You’ll go, boy,’ Pa said. ‘Heaven knows you’ve brought enough trouble on this house.’

‘Robert, don’t—’

‘You’ll go. If I have to truss you up and leave you on her doorstep, you’ll go. Be ready tomorrow.’

‘Tomorrow?’ Alta spun round so fast her plait swung out like a rope. ‘He can’t go tomorrow, he’ll need time to pack – and there’s the harvest, the harvest supper . . . Please, Pa.’

‘Shut *up!*’

Silence.

‘Tomorrow?’ The blotches on Ma’s cheeks had spread into a flush of scarlet. ‘We never said . . .’ Her voice trailed off. My father finished his gin, swallowing with a grimace as if his mouth was full of stones.

I opened my mouth to tell her it was all right, I’d go, they wouldn’t have to worry about me any more; but my throat was too dry from the reaping.

‘A few more days. Robert, the other apprentices don’t go until after the harvest – and he’s still not well, a couple of days . . .’

‘They’re younger than he is. And he’s well enough to travel, if he did a day in the fields.’

‘Yes, but . . .’ She moved towards him and caught his arm so that he couldn’t turn away. ‘A little more time.’

‘For pity’s sake, Hilda!’ He made a choking sound and tried to wrench himself away. ‘Don’t make this any harder. You think I want to let him go? You think that after we tried

so hard – fought to keep a pure house – you think I’m proud of it, when my own father lost an eye marching in the Crusade?’

Ma glanced at Alta and me. ‘Not in front of—’

‘What does it matter now?’ He wiped his forearm across his face; then with a helpless gesture he flung the mug to the floor. It didn’t break. Alta watched it roll towards her and stop. Pa turned his back on us and bent over the dresser as if he was trying to catch his breath. There was a silence.

‘I’ll go,’ I said, ‘I’ll go tomorrow.’ I couldn’t look at any of them. I got up, hitting my knee against the corner of the table as I pushed back my chair. I struggled to the door. The latch seemed smaller and stiffer than it usually was, and the clunk as it opened echoed off the walls.

Outside, the moon divided the world into deep blue and silver. The air was warm and as soft as cream, scented with hay and summer dust. An owl chuckled in the near field.

I reeled across to the far side of the yard and leant against the wall. It was hard to breathe. Ma’s voice hung in my ears: *That bloody witch will put a curse on us.* And Pa, answering: *She already has.*

They were right; I was good for nothing. Misery rose inside me, as strong as the stabbing pains in my legs. Before this, I’d never been ill in my life. I never knew that my body could betray me, that my mind could go out like a lamp and leave nothing but darkness. I couldn’t remember getting sick; if I tried, all I saw was a mess of nightmare-scorched fragments. Even my memories of my life before that – last spring, last winter – were tinged with the same gangrenous shadow, as if nothing was healthy any more. I knew that I’d collapsed after midsummer, because

Ma had told me so, and that I'd been on the way home from Castleford; but no one had explained where I'd been, or what had happened. I must have been driving the cart – without a hat, under a hot sun, probably – but when I tried to think back there was nothing but a rippling mirage, a last vertiginous glimpse of sunlight before the blackness swallowed me. For weeks afterwards, I'd only surfaced to scream and struggle and beg them to untie me. No wonder they wanted to get rid of me.

I closed my eyes. I could still see the three of them, their arms round one another. Something whispered behind me, scratching in the wall like dry claws. It wasn't real, but it drowned out the owl and the rustle of trees. I rested my head on my arms and pretended I couldn't hear it.

I must have drawn back instinctively into the deepest corner of darkness, because when I opened my eyes Alta was in the middle of the yard, calling my name without looking in my direction. The moon had moved; now it was over the gable of the farmhouse and all the shadows were short and squat.

'Emmett?'

'Yes,' I said. Alta jumped and took a step forward to peer at me.

'What are you doing there? Were you asleep?'

'No.'

She hesitated. Behind her the light from a lamp crossed the upper window as someone went to bed. I started to pull myself to my feet and paused, wincing, as pain stabbed into my joints.

She watched me get up, without offering to help. 'Did you mean it? That you'd go? Tomorrow?'

'Pa meant it when he said I didn't have any choice.'

I waited for her to disagree. Alta was clever like that, finding new paths or different ways of doing things, picking locks. But she only tilted her face upward as if she wanted the moonlight to bleach her skin. I swallowed. The stupid dizziness had come back – suddenly, dragging me one way and then another – and I swayed against the wall and tried to catch my breath.

‘Emmett? Are you all right?’ She bit her lip. ‘No, of course not. Sit down.’

I didn’t want to obey her but my knees folded of their own accord. I closed my eyes and inhaled the night smells of hay and cooling earth, the overripe sweetness of crushed weeds and a rank hint of manure. Alta’s skirts billowed and rustled as she sank down beside me.

‘I wish you didn’t have to go.’

I raised one shoulder without looking at her and let it drop again.

‘But . . . maybe it’s the best thing . . .’

‘How can it be?’ I swallowed, trying to fill the crack in my voice. ‘All right, I understand. I’m no use here. You’ll all be better off when I’m – wherever she is, this binder.’

‘Out on the marshes, on the Castleford road.’

‘Right.’ What would the marshes smell of? Stagnant water, rotting reeds. Mud. Mud that swallowed you alive if you went too far from the road, and never spat you back . . . ‘How do you know so much about it?’

‘Ma and Pa are only thinking about you. After everything that’s happened . . . You’ll be safe there.’

‘That’s what Ma said.’

A pause. She began to gnaw at her thumbnail. In the orchard below the stables a sedge warbler chattered and then gave up.

‘You don’t know what it’s been like for them, Emmett. Always afraid. You owe them some peace.’

‘It’s not my fault I was ill!’

‘It’s your fault you—’ She huffed out her breath. ‘No, I know, I didn’t mean . . . just that we all need . . . please don’t be angry. It’s a good thing. You’ll learn a trade.’

‘Yes. Making books.’

She flinched. ‘She chose you. That must mean—’

‘What does it mean? How can she have chosen me, when she’s never even seen me?’ I thought Alta started to speak, but when I turned my head she was staring up at the moon, her face expressionless. Her cheeks were thinner than they had been before I got ill, and the skin under her eyes looked as if it had been smudged with ash. She was a stranger, out of reach.

She said, as if it was an answer, ‘I’ll come and see you whenever I can . . .’

I let my head roll back until I felt the stone wall against my skull. ‘They talked you round, didn’t they?’

‘I’ve never seen Pa like that,’ she said. ‘So angry.’

‘I have,’ I said. ‘He hit me, once.’

‘Yes,’ she said, ‘well, I suppose you—’ She stopped.

‘When I was small,’ I said. ‘You weren’t old enough to remember. It was the day of Wakening Fair.’

‘Oh.’ When I glanced up, her eyes flickered away. ‘No. I don’t remember that.’

‘I bought . . . there was a man, selling books.’ I could recall the clink of my errand-money in my pocket that day – sixpence in farthings, so bulky they bulged through my trousers – and the heady, carefree feeling of going to Wakening Fair and slipping away from the others, wondering what I’d buy. I’d wandered

past the meat and chickens, the fish from Coldwater and the patterned cottons from Castleford, paused at the sweetmeat stall and then turned towards another a little further away, where I'd caught a glimpse of gold and rich colours. It was hardly a stall at all, only a trestle table guarded by a man with restless eyes, but it was piled high with books. 'It was the first time I'd seen them. I didn't know what they were.'

That curious, wary expression was on Alta's face again. 'You mean . . .?'

'Forget it.' I didn't know why I was telling her; I didn't want to remember. But now I couldn't stop the memory unfolding. I'd thought they were boxes, small gilt-and-leather chests to hold things like Ma's best silver or Pa's chessmen. I'd sauntered over, jingling my money, and the man had glanced over both shoulders before he grinned at me. 'Ah, what a golden-haired little prince! Come for a story, young sir? A tale of murder or incest, shame or glory, a love so piercing it was best forgotten, or a deed of darkness? You've come to the right man, young sir, these are the *crème de la crème*, these will tell you true and harrowing tales, violent and passionate and exciting – or if it's comedy you're after, I have some of those too, rarest of all, the things people get rid of! Have a look, young sir, cast your eyes over this one . . . Bound by a master in Castleford, years ago.'

I hated the way he called me *young sir*, but the book fell open as he passed it to me and I couldn't give it back. As soon as I saw the writing on the pages I understood: this was lots of pages all squashed together – like letters, lots of letters, only in a better box – and a story that went on and on. 'How much is it?'

'Ah, that one, young sir. You have wonderful taste for a

young 'un, that's a special one, a real adventure story, sweeps you off your feet like a cavalry charge. Ninepence for it. Or two for a shilling.'

I wanted it. I didn't know why, except that my fingertips were prickling. 'I only have sixpence.'

'I'll take that,' he said, clicking his fingers at me. The wide smile had gone; when I followed his darting gaze I saw a knot of men gathering a little way off, muttering.

'Here.' I emptied my pocketful of farthings into his palm. He let one drop, but he was still staring at the men and didn't stoop to pick it up. 'Thank you.'

I took the book and hurried away, triumphant and uneasy. When I reached the bustle of the main market I stopped and turned to look: the group of men was advancing on the man's stall, as he threw the books frantically into the battered little cart behind him.

Something warned me not to stare. I ran home, holding the book through my shirt-cuff so that I didn't stain the cover with my sweaty fingers. I sat on the barn steps in the sun – no one would see me, they were still at the fair – and examined it. It wasn't like anything I'd ever seen. It was a deep, heavy red, patterned with gold, and it was as soft to the touch as skin. When I opened the cover, the scent of must and wood rose up as though it hadn't been touched for years.

It sucked me in.

It was set in an army camp in a foreign country, and at first it was confusing: full of captains and majors and colonels, arguments about military tactics and a threat of court martial. But something made me go on reading: I could see it, every detail, I could hear the horses and the snap of wind against the canvas, feel my own heart quicken at the smell of gunpowder

. . . I stumbled on, absorbed in spite of myself, and slowly I understood that they were on the eve of a battle, that the man in the book was a hero. When the sun rose, he was going to lead them to a glorious victory – and I could feel his excitement, his anticipation, I felt it myself—

‘What in hell’s name are you doing?’

It broke the spell. I clambered instinctively to my feet, blinking through the haze. Pa – and the others behind him, Ma with Alta on her hip, everyone back from the fair already. Already . . . but it was getting dark.

‘Emmett, I asked what you were doing!’ But he didn’t wait for an answer before he plucked the book away from me. When he saw what it was his face hardened. ‘Where did you get this?’

A man, I wanted to say, just a man at the fair, he had dozens and they looked like boxes of jewels, in leather and gold . . . But when I saw Pa’s expression something shrivelled in my voice box and I couldn’t speak.

‘Robert? What . . .?’ Ma reached for it and then pulled away as if it had bitten her.

‘I’ll burn it.’

‘No!’ Ma let Alta slip staggering to the ground, and stumbled forward to catch Pa’s arm. ‘No, how could you? Bury it!’

‘It’s old, Hilda. They’d all be dead, years ago.’

‘You mustn’t. Just in case. Get rid of it. Throw it away.’

‘For someone else to find?’

‘You know you can’t burn it.’ For a moment they stared at each other, their faces strained. ‘Bury it. Somewhere safe.’

At last Pa gave a brief, curt nod. Alta gave a hiccup and started to whimper. Pa shoved the book at one of the farmhands. ‘Here. Package this up. I’ll give it to the gravedigger.’

Then he turned back to me. ‘Emmett,’ he said, ‘don’t ever let me see you with a book again. You understand?’

I didn’t. What had happened? I’d bought it, I hadn’t stolen it, but somehow I had done something unforgivable. I nodded, still reeling from the visions I’d seen. I’d been somewhere else, in another world.

‘Good. You remember that,’ Pa said.

Then he hit me.

Don’t ever let me see you with a book again.

But now they were sending me to the binder; as though whatever danger Pa had warned me against had been replaced by something worse. As though now I *was* the danger.

I looked sideways. Alta was staring down at her feet. No, she didn’t remember that day. No one had ever spoken about it again. No one had ever explained why books were shameful. Once, at school, someone had muttered something about old Lord Kent having a library; but when everyone snickered and rolled their eyes I didn’t ask why that was so bad. *I’d* read a book: whatever was wrong with him, I was the same. Under everything, deep inside me, the shame was still there.

And I was afraid. It was a creeping, formless fear, like the mist that came off the river. It slid chilly tendrils round me and into my lungs. I didn’t want to go anywhere near the binder; but I had to.

‘Alta—’

‘I have to go in,’ she said, leaping to her feet. ‘You’d better go up too, Em, you have to pack and it’s a long way to go tomorrow, isn’t it? Good night.’ She scampered away across the yard, fiddling with her plait all the way so I couldn’t glimpse her face. By the door she called again, ‘See you tomorrow,’

without looking round. Maybe it was the echo off the stable wall that made it sound so false.

Tomorrow.

I watched the moon until the fear grew too big for me. Then I went to my room and packed my things.