

One

SEVERE WEATHER WARNING

The Met Office has issued a severe weather warning for much of south-west England from noon today. Storms will affect the whole region. There will be torrential rain and high winds, reaching gale force at times, with gusts reaching 80 miles per hour in exposed places. There is a risk of flash flooding in many areas and drivers are warned to take extra care. Flood alerts are now in place for the following rivers in the south and south-western region . . .

The rain had been steady all afternoon as Simon Serrailer drove home from Wales and the wedding of an old friend. Now, as he poured himself a whisky, it was lashing against the tall windows of his flat and the gale was roaring up between the houses of the Cathedral Close. The frames rattled.

He had spread out some of his recent drawings on the long table, to begin the careful business of selection for his next exhibition. The living room was a serene, secure refuge, the lamps casting soft shadows onto the walls and elm floor. Simon was no lover of weddings but he had known Harry Blades since university, after which their paths had diverged, Harry to go into the army, Simon to Hendon, but they had kept in touch, tried to meet every year, and he had been happy to play best man on the previous day. He was even happier to be home in his own calm space, sketchbooks open, drink in hand. For his last birthday his stepmother had bought him the Everyman hardback of Evelyn Waugh's *Sword of Honour* trilogy and later, after making an omelette, he was going to settle down on the sofa with it, plus a second whisky.

The storm blew louder and a couple of times made him jump as a burst of hail spattered against the glass and a razor blade of lightning sliced down the sky at the same time as thunder crashed directly overhead.

'Spare a thought for those who have to be out in it,' his mother would have said. He spared one, for police on patrol, the fire and rescue services, the rough sleepers.

It was not a night to let a cat out.

In the Deerbon farmhouse, the cat Mephisto slept on the kitchen sofa, head to tail-tip and deep in the cushion, with no intention of venturing out of his flap into the howling night.

Cat pulled back the curtain but it was impossible to see anything beyond the water coursing down the

window. Sam was in bed reading, Hannah was writing her secret diary, Felix asleep. It was not her children but her lodger Cat was worried about. Molly Lucas, final-year medical student at Bevham General, had come to live with them five months ago and slotted straight into their lives so easily that it was hard to imagine the place without her. She was out during the day but always glad to look after the children any evening, was tidy, quiet, cheerful and anxious to learn as much from Cat as she could in the run-up to her exams. She relaxed by baking bread and cakes so that there was usually a warm loaf on the table and the tins were full. The children had taken to Molly from the start. She played chess with Sam and shared a mystifying taste in pop music with Hannah. Felix was in love with her. It had taken Cat a while to feel happy about inviting someone into the house. Even just having a lodger felt like too big a change. She knew she was afraid that somehow it would move her on yet another step from the old life with Chris. But once Molly had arrived she realised, not for the first time, that when something new came about, the old was not therefore obliterated. Less importantly, she no longer had to rely on her father and Judith to look after the children if she was on call or at choir practice. Once or twice recently, she had also accepted invitations to supper with old friends. Going out was not only good for her spirits but a different kind of freedom for the children – she had clung to them and it had been a long time after Chris’s death before she had stopped waking in terror that one of them was going to die too.

It was after nine and she was worried. Molly had

been working in the med. school library. She biked to and from the hospital, a well-equipped, fast and efficient cyclist, but this was no storm to be out in on two wheels and the severe weather warning had gone up a grade since the last time Cat had tuned in to Radio Bevham. She had rung Molly's mobile but it was switched off, tried the hospital but the library closed at six on Sundays.

She went upstairs. Hannah was asleep, her diary with its little gilt lock put away in the top drawer of her chest, its key on a chain round her neck. Cat remembered the need of an eleven-year-old to keep a diary private, and the fury she had felt when her father had mocked her about her own. How much it had mattered.

The wind sent something crashing. Rain was coming in through the cracks around two of the bedroom window frames and the ledges were full of water.

The storm seemed to be trapped in the roof space and roaring to be let out. Thunder cracked, startling Felix, who shouted out but barely woke and was easily settled again.

'This is how the world will end,' Sam said casually, looking up from *Journey to the Centre of the Earth* as she went past.

'Possibly, but not tonight.' Cat did not wait for him to ask how she knew that, nor did she tell him to put his light out. He would debate until dawn if she let him and she had no need to worry about the reading – when he was tired, he simply fell asleep, lamp on, book in hand, and either she or Molly sorted him out when they went upstairs.

Molly.

Cat picked up the phone again.

* * *

Just after midnight the river burst its banks. The car park of the supermarket on the Bevham Road was underwater within minutes, the streets and the lanes around the cathedral filled up, and in the grid of roads known as the Apostles water roared up through back gardens and pushed its way under doors into the terraced houses. The fire services were out but could do little in the dark, and it was too dangerous to try installing floodlights in the high wind. The storm washed a ton of debris down from the Moor onto the road below, causing a lorry to overturn. The road that skirted the Hill was impassable and the houses nearby now at risk.

‘Si, were you asleep?’

‘You’re joking. Are you OK?’

‘We are, but Molly isn’t back and she’s not answering her phone.’

‘Which way does she usually come?’

‘Depends . . . at this time of night probably the bypass – it’s quiet and it’s quicker. What should I do? I rang the hospital but they don’t think she’s there.’

‘Could she have gone home with a friend rather than risk it on her bike?’

‘She’d have rung me.’

‘Right, I’ll put in a call . . . there’s a red alert now and there’ll be plenty of people around. If she’s had an accident they’ll find her.’

‘Thanks, I’d be grateful. Molly’s so reliable, she’d always let me know. How was the wedding?’

‘Fine.’

‘How did she look?’

'Who?'

'The *bride*, duh.'

'Oh God, I don't know . . . fine, I guess, beautiful, all that sort of thing.'

'Not going to ask what she was wearing.'

'No, no, I can tell you that. It was white. Now go to bed – I'll ring if I hear anything.'

But she would lie awake until she had news. She made tea and settled down next to Mephisto, who had not stirred for several hours. The rain was still drumming on the roof. She had been reading a book about the lives of women in oppressive regimes, but after a couple of pages set it aside and got a battered paperback of a favourite Nancy Mitford novel from the shelf. Reading that was like eating porridge and cream, and slipped down in a similarly comforting way.

Ten minutes later, Molly fell through the door, soaked and exhausted, having waded through flooded roads and then been blown off her bike. She had a badly cut hand and was shaken, but Cat gathered from her usual grin that it would take more even than this to crush her spirit.

Jocelyn Forbes turned on her radio hoping to find some light music but it had given way to alarming weather updates, and she only needed to listen to the storm to know all she needed. She clicked on the bedside lamp and reached over to turn the dial. She tried for several minutes before giving up in frustration. It had happened again. Yesterday she could not twist open a bottle top, now this. Arthritis, like her mother, like her aunt. Age brings arthritis.