

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

Anstey Harris

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 faded 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

Where We Belong

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

Anstey Harris

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

Where We Belong

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.

Anstey Harris

‘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.

Where We Belong

‘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

Anstey Harris

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 four years of single parenthood and its consequences, 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.

Where We Belong

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.

Anstey Harris

‘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

Where We Belong

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.