

THE HIDING PLACES

Katherine Webb



First published in Great Britain in 2017 by Orion Books,
an imprint of The Orion Publishing Group Ltd
Carmelite House, 50 Victoria Embankment,
London EC4Y 0DZ

An Hachette UK company

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

Copyright © Katherine Webb 2017

The moral right of Katherine Webb to be identified as
the author of this work has been asserted in accordance with
the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act of 1988.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be
reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted
in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical,
photocopying, recording, or otherwise, without the
prior permission of both the copyright owner and the
above publisher of this book.

All the characters in this book are fictitious, and any resemblance to
actual persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental.

A CIP catalogue record for this book is
available from the British Library.

ISBN (Hardback) 978 1 4091 4856 2
ISBN (Export Trade Paperback) 978 1 4091 4857 9
ISBN (eBook) 978 1 4091 4859 3

The Orion Publishing Group's policy is to use papers that are natural,
renewable and recyclable products and made from wood grown in sustainable
forests. The logging and manufacturing processes are expected to conform to the
environmental regulations of the country of origin.

www.orionbooks.co.uk

THE HIDING PLACES

Firstly

On the day of the killing the sky above Slaughterford dropped down – almost to the treetops – and it poured with rain. Lavish, drenching, summer rain, the first in weeks. The villagers all claimed, on having woken to such weather, to have known that something was very much amiss. They were superstitious people, prone to seeing signs and portents everywhere, and to suspecting the worst of every one. Sid Hancock, out at Honeybrook Farm, swore he saw the By Brook run red. Heads were nodded, ruefully, though the murder hadn't happened anywhere near enough to the riverbank for blood to have reached the water. Woolly Tom, who kept a flock of sheep on a small-holding up on the ridge, said he'd known a death was coming ever since one of his ewes had given birth to a two-headed lamb back in the spring. He'd been carrying a desiccated rabbit's foot everywhere with him since then, in case the shadow tried to fall on him. Death was common enough, in Slaughterford. But not this kind of death.

What troubled people most was the sheer *blamelessness* of the victim. Nobody could think of a single bad thing to say of them, or recall a single cruel or shameful thing they'd done. There was a *wrongness* about it that shook them. Grave illness could happen at any time, as could a fatal accident. Only the year before, six-year-old Ann Gibbs had climbed over the cock-up stones designed to prevent exactly that, and had fallen into the well at the top of the lane to Ford. She'd drowned because her brother had told her the fairy folk lived inside. Fits, flu and seizures took their annual tithe of loved ones, but if your time was up you could hardly argue with that. Tragedy and ill-luck abounded, but for one of their own to be cut down with such savagery, for no reason at all... It simply wasn't natural. They were people of the land, and struggled with anything that wasn't natural. Each one of them became a lightening rod for the shock of the murder, and passed it right down into the rocks beneath their feet. And they all wondered whether one such act of violence could help but lead to another.

1

Three Girls

The morning before it all began, Pudding paused by the little window at the top of the stairs and saw her mother outside on the lawn. Louise Cartwright was near the back wall, looking out over the drenched tussocks of the paddock that sloped away down the valley, and fiddling with something in her hands that Pudding couldn't see. It was early, the sun not yet clear of the horizon; the sky had an immaculate, pale clarity, and it looked like being another hot day. Pudding felt the little thump of dread she was coming to know so well. She waited for a while, but when her mother didn't turn or move, she carried on down the stairs, more slowly now. A gentle snore came from the darkness of her parents' room, where her father was still asleep. In earlier days he'd been the first to rise every morning. In earlier days he'd have fed the stove and put the kettle on, and been shaved and buttoned into his waistcoat before Pudding and Donald stumbled down to the kitchen, rubbing the sleep from their eyes. Now Pudding usually had to go in and wake him, feeling guilty every time she did. His sleep was like a stupor.

The kitchen at Spring Cottage was more chaotic than it had used to be – the bowls on the shelves were no longer stacked in exact order of size; the hop garland looked dusty; crumbs in the cracks and splashes of grease made the smell of stale cooking hang about. Donald was waiting at the kitchen table. Not reading, or mending anything, or jotting a list. Just sitting, waiting. He'd stay like that all day if nobody roused him up and sent him on his way. Pudding squeezed his shoulder as she passed behind him, and saw him swim up from the unfathomable depths inside himself to smile at her. She loved to see that smile – it was one of the things about him that hadn't changed at all. She kept a tally in her head: things about Donald that were just the same; things about him that had changed

forever. It was the *forever* part she struggled with. She kept expecting him to shake it off, get up from the table with his old abruptness, quick with energy, and say something like, *Don't you want some toast with your jam, Pudding?* They'd spent the first two years after he'd come home watching, waiting to see what would return to him. A few things did, in the first year: his love of music; his love of Aoife Moore; his fascination with machinery; his appetite – though he sometimes struggled to swallow, and ended up coughing. But during the past year, nothing else had come back. His dark hair was just the same – soft, shiny, unruly. So very lovely. And that ironical curve to his mouth, though irony was one of the things he'd lost.

'Morning, Donny,' said Pudding. 'I'll just see what Mum's up to, then we'll have some breakfast, shall we?' She patted his shoulder, and was already by the back door by the time he managed to reply.

'Good morning, Puddy.' He sounded so normal, so like her big brother, that Pudding had to take a deep breath, right down into her gut, to stay steady.

She pulled the door to behind her, then looked up for Louise with that stubborn optimism she couldn't suppress. She hoped her mother would have moved, hoped she'd only been picking parsley for the scrambled eggs, hoped she'd been on her way back from the privy and had stopped to watch hares boxing in the field. But her mother hadn't moved, so Pudding distracted herself by noticing other things instead. That her breeches were getting too small again already, the waistband dragging down at the back, making her braces dig into her shoulders; that one of her socks was already sagging, bunching infuriatingly in the toe of her shoe; that her shirt was pinching under her arms because her chest seemed to get bigger every day, however much she willed it not to. It felt like her clothes were at war with her – delivering a constant, unnecessary commentary on her unwelcome expansion, upwards and outwards. The air was glassy-cool, fresh and green. Louise's footsteps through the dew showed up dark green against the silver. Pudding stepped into them exactly and had to shorten her stride. Her mother's gait seemed to be shrinking, and losing its purpose.

‘Mum?’ she said. She’d planned to say something jovial, to brush off the oddness of the scene, but it wouldn’t come. Louise turned her head sharply, startled. For a moment, there was no recognition in her face. That blank look, tinged with trepidation, was becoming the thing Pudding feared most. She found she couldn’t quite breathe. But then Louise smiled, and her smile was only slightly vague, slightly hollow.

‘Pudding! There you are, love. I’ve been looking for you,’ she said, and in her eyes was that struggle to catch up, to guess at the truth of her statement. There was nothing in her hands, Pudding saw. The constant fiddling had been with the bottom button of her yellow cardigan. She always started at the bottom, but she’d got no further with doing them up that morning.

‘Have you, Mum?’ said Pudding, forcing her clenched throat to swallow.

‘Yes. Where have you been?’

‘Nowhere, just up in my room. I can’t have heard you calling. Come on.’ Pudding rushed on, before this fiction had time to bewilder her mother. ‘Let’s go in and get the kettle on, shall we? Make a nice pot of tea?’

‘Yes. That’s what we need.’ Louise sighed slightly as she turned to walk back beside her daughter. They obliterated their original footsteps; the dew flicked up and soaked through Pudding’s socks around her ankles. Still, she felt an irresistible surge of cheeriness as a phalanx of swifts shot across the sky above them, screeching out their joy, and the Manor Farm dairy herd, on the other side of the valley, lowed as they were let out from milking.

‘Did you see hares in the field, Mum?’ she asked, recklessly.

‘What? When?’ said Louise, and Pudding rushed to retract the question.

‘Oh, nothing. Never mind.’ She took her mother’s arm and squeezed it, and Louise patted her hand.

Dandelions were crowding the back step, and the ash pail needed emptying; the blackcurrants were going over, unpicked except by blackbirds, which then left purple droppings on the path and down the windows. But when they got back into the kitchen Pudding’s father, Dr

Cartwright, was there, stoking up the stove, and the kettle was hissing on the hot plate, and he'd combed his hair and dressed, even if he hadn't shaved yet and his eyes were still a little sleepy.

'Two roses, fresh with dew from the garden,' he greeted them.

'Morning, Dad. Did you have a good sleep?' Pudding put the butter dish on the table; rattled open a drawer for knives; fetched yesterday's loaf from the crock.

'Far too good! You should have woken me sooner.' The doctor rubbed his wife's upper arms, smiling down at her. He pushed some of her unbrushed hair back from her forehead, and kissed her there, and Pudding looked away, embarrassed, happy.

'Toast, Donny?' said Louise. She'd done up her cardigan, Pudding noticed – every button in the right hole.

'Yes please, Mum,' said Donald. And they moved around each other as breakfast was assembled, perhaps not quite as they always had, but in a version of old habit that felt blissfully familiar. Her family strayed in the night, Pudding thought. They scattered like thistle seeds, carried here and there by currents she couldn't feel, and didn't understand. But she understood that it was up to her to gather them together again in the morning. As she sliced the bread she sang a snatch of 'Morning Has Broken' in her worst possible singing voice, to make them smile.

*

When Irene heard the rattle of Keith Glover's bicycle her heart gave a lurch, walloping into her ribs, and she was careful not to look up or twitch – so careful not to react at all, in fact, that she wondered whether her extreme stillness would give her away instead. She felt as though her guilt were written all over her face in bright red letters for Nancy to read; Nancy with her eagle eyes, her disbelief in everything Irene said and did worn quite openly. She was sitting opposite Irene at the breakfast table, putting the merest scraping of butter on her toast and frowning at any overly large pieces of peel in the marmalade. The sun glanced as brightly from her silver hair, combed back into its usual bun, as it did from the rosewood tabletop. She was small, slim, hard as iron, and sat with her

tiny feet crossed at the ankle. She flapped the page of the newspaper to straighten it, read for a moment and then grunted in derision at something. Irene had already stopped expecting her to elucidate, but Alistair glanced up, expectantly. He glanced up every time, with half a smile on his face, ready and waiting. His optimism appeared fathomless, and Irene marvelled at it. It made his eyes sparkle above the soft pouches in which they sat, and made him look younger than his middle years – younger than Irene’s twenty-four even, though she was almost fifteen years his junior. She felt she’d aged a decade in the six weeks she’d been in Slaughterford.

Boot heels sounded on the yard; the brass flap on the letter box squeaked. Irene stared at her fingers on the handle of her coffee cup, and forced them not to tremble. The diamond in her engagement ring and the yellow gold of her wedding band stared back at her. As usual, after the guilt came the anger – at herself, at Fin, at blameless Alistair. A rush of bright, hot anger at the situation she was in, and at those who had put her there – herself most of all. She rejected her new role completely, even as she played it as best she could. The anger burnt out as quickly as it flared, and despair came hard on its heels. Despair like a pit she could drown in, without something to save her, something to cling to. The lifebuoy of a word, a sign, a token. Some proof that, even if her misery couldn’t end, she was not, at least, alone in it. What she would do if she actually saw Fin’s writing on an envelope, she had no idea. She wouldn’t be able to keep still then – she’d probably fly to pieces. Her stomach writhed, tying itself in knots. She remained perfectly still.

‘Well, it looks like being another beautiful day,’ said Alistair, suddenly. Irene glanced at him, startled, and found him smiling at her. She tried to make her own face respond and couldn’t tell if it moved or not.

‘Yes,’ she said. Flick, flick, flick went Nancy’s eyes – from Alistair to Irene, back to Alistair.

‘What are your plans, darling?’ Alistair asked Irene. He put his hand over hers on the table, and her coffee cup rattled as her stiff fingers fell away from it.

‘Oh, I ... I hadn’t thought.’ Irene heard Florence coming along the hall to the breakfast room – her light, apologetic tread on the boards. The girl had the beady eyes and pointed nose of a mouse, which matched her personality well. Irene’s heart escaped her control, and went bounding up into her throat.

Florence knocked softly, came in with the letters on a tray and put them on the table by Alistair’s elbow, bobbing awkwardly before she went again. Alistair flicked through them – four envelopes. Irene couldn’t breathe. Then he picked them up, straightened them, and slipped them into his jacket pocket as he got to his feet.

‘Well, enjoy the day, anyway, both of you. I’ll be back for lunch – if it’s as fine as yesterday, we should have it out on the terrace.’ He pushed his chair away tidily and smiled at Irene again. His smiles seemed in endless supply, like his optimism, when Irene felt like she’d run out of both. His whole face was geared for it – that softness to his eyes, and the upward curve of his lips and cheeks. Without his smile, his face looked bereft. ‘You might visit Mrs Cartwright, and see how she is.’

‘Mrs Cartwright?’

‘Yes – the doctor’s wife. You know. Pudding and Donald’s mother.’

‘Yes, of course.’ Irene knew she should be learning all these names, and matching them to faces — the wheelwright, the smith, the vicar’s wife, the woman who ran the shop and her son who brought the post. She knew that in a village as small as Slaughterford it was unforgivable not to know. She seemed to have done much that was unforgivable of late, but, just then, she couldn’t face paying a call to the doctor’s wife – a complete stranger and an invalid, she vaguely remembered being told. She hadn’t the first clue what she should say to her. But then Alistair left, and Irene was alone with Nancy again. The long day yawned ahead of her, a void to be filled. She looked up at her husband’s aunt, knowing that Nancy would be watching her, judging her openly without Alistair to moderate her. Sure enough, there was the knowing look, the arched brows, the mocking half-smile. Nancy seemed a particularly cruel part of Irene’s penance. She was in her seventies but lean and well-preserved; the lines on her face were thin, faint, refined. When Alistair had told Irene his aunt lived with him at Manor Farm she’d imagined a separate cottage and a

pleasant old bat filling her time arranging flowers for the church, and holding charity luncheons. A separate wing of the house at least. Not this constant sharp edge, everywhere Irene went, waiting to cut her. When she remarked on it – on her – to Alistair, he'd looked hurt.

'My mother died the day I was born, Irene. Nancy has raised me as her own – she's the closest thing to a mother I have. I don't know how my father would have coped, if she hadn't been here with him. Well, he wouldn't have.'

Irene took hold of her coffee cup again, though she had no intention of drinking the contents. It was stone cold, and filmy on top. Eventually Nancy folded the newspaper away and stood.

'Really, Irene, my dear, you must eat something,' she said, offhandedly. 'It may be all the rage in London to look at death's door, but you'll stand out like a sore thumb down here. Anyone would think you weren't happy – unthinkable for a new bride, of course.' Nancy kept her pinned for a moment longer, but Irene knew that she wasn't expected to reply. Unthinkable, unforgivable. All these new words for Irene to describe herself, and for others to describe her. 'You're a Hadleigh now, young lady. And Hadleighs set the standard around here,' said Nancy, as she turned to go. Only when she'd shut the door behind her did Irene let her chin drop, and her hands fall lifelessly into her lap. The silence in the breakfast room rang.

*

Kingfisher, wagtail, great tit, bunting. Clemmie kept a list in her head that almost became a chant as she walked, keeping rhythm with her steps and her breath puffing in and out as she climbed. *Kingfisher, wagtail, great tit, bunting*. The early sun was a glorious flare in her eyes, and sweat prickled under her hair – her mad, pale curls, so like her mother's, which defied any attempt at order. She was climbing the narrow path that cut between the field hedges from Weavern Farm to the lane that led down to Slaughterford. The path was tolerable then, early in the morning. By the afternoon it trapped the sun, and hummed with gnats and horseflies, so she came back along the river's edge instead – the longer

way, and winding, but cooler. The hedges were full of dog roses now, laden with flowers and baby birds. Her father's cattle tore up the grass to either side of them; she could hear them, and smelt their sweet, green stink. *Kingfisher, wagtail, great tit, bunting*. The bottles of milk and rounds of cheese in the baskets yoked across her shoulders clanked as they swung. The yoke was almost too wide for the path; cow parsley flicked her arms, and foxgloves, nodding with bees, and wild clematis.

Her parents no longer bothered urging Clemmie to come straight back from her errands; she got back when she got back, sooner or later, depending on how long she spent with Alistair Hadleigh, or watching the river, or caught, suspended in a daydream. She usually tried to hurry – she knew there was always work to be done. But even if she set off fast she tended to slow down by the water, or in the woods. Sometimes she saw things that stopped her, and absorbed her, and she didn't even realise it – didn't even realise time had passed until she noticed where the sun was in the sky, or the way her sisters rolled their eyes when she finally did get home, greeting her with varying degrees of resentment, depending on the hour, saying, *Here's our pretty ninny*, if she hadn't been needed, or *Look what the cat dragged in*, if she had. But Clemmie would wander. She had to wander. So they set her to delivering the milk to the mill canteen, though they knew they might not see her for hours. Like the other, larger, dairy herds in the area, Manor Farm, which also owned the mill, sold its milk by the gallon to the butter and condensed milk factories, which left the local deliveries to the smaller Weavern herd.

'At least she gets that one errand run,' her father said, ruefully. He set off in the cart at dawn, twice weekly, to take the bulk of their milk, cheese, butter and eggs to Chippenham market.

Flies circled in the shade of Germain's Lane, despite the early hour, the air hung heavy with the garlicky stink of the ramsons gone over and the fox-musk foliage of wood anemones. The white dust lane ran down the wooded north-west slope of the hill that Clemmie had just climbed, out of the sunken pocket of land that cradled Weavern Farm, bypassing several large loops of the By Brook river. Clemmie tipped back her head to watch the torn fragments of sky, painfully blue, beyond the branches. A dark shape circled there; she added buzzard to the morning's list, and

then squirrel, as one leapt between trees overhead – an agile flash of bright red fur. Beech and oak and elm; a thick, new canopy that had caused the spring flowers to die back. Only honeysuckle remained, scaling a young elm and blooming among the high branches. When she walked on, imprinted scraps of the bright sky stayed in her eyes and half-blinded her.

Clemmie had walked this route, and carried this aching yoke across her shoulders, more times than she could count, but when Slaughterford Mill appeared at the bottom of the slope, it always made her stop to look. An array of buildings and sheds, hunkered on the river; the tall, steaming chimney; the thrum of noise from the paper-making machine, thudding down into the ground and then up through her feet. As she crossed the little footbridge over the river she heard the roar of the overshot waterwheel, hidden in its pit below ground. The sudden smell of metal and steam and grease, of men and brick and labour, so unlike anything else in the world. And there was a new reason, too, that the mill made her senses prickle. The boy. She might walk around a corner and catch sight of him, and knew her thoughts would both scatter and narrow in, onto him, to the exclusion of everything else. She couldn't forget what she'd seen him do, and wanted to see him exactly as much as she did not, so, in confusion, she stopped to listen to the wheel for a moment, tipping her forehead against the wall to feel its constant beat, and the crash of the water, vibrating into her skull. She was still there when the foreman happened to pass, and roused her.

'Up you get, lass, and take that milk out of the sun.' He smiled kindly beneath his thick moustaches, which were redder than the rest of his hair, and bushy like a fox's tail. Clemmie trusted this man. He never came too close, nor tried to touch her.

She did as he said, walking on into the mill yard, but it troubled her, this looking out. This watching; this hoping to find. She had never done it before; she liked to simply see, not to look. Only a few women worked at the mill, in the canteen and in the bag room, a long, low building close to the water's edge. It was immaculate inside, but freezing in winter – swept elm floorboards and polished walnut benches, not a drop of machine oil or ink anywhere to spoil the finished paper as it was stitched and glued

into strong bags for sugar, flour, suet. In summer it smelled deliciously of beeswax, cotton and wood, but Clemmie wasn't really allowed inside – not with her filthy feet and her muddy hem. A couple of the female workers were on their way to clock in as she passed, and one waved to her – dark-haired Delilah Cooper, who was in Clemmie's memories of long hours spent at the dame school in Slaughterford, when they were barely old enough to walk. Watched for a fee by an old woman with a sour face, in her cottage; kept out from under foot during the working day and eventually taught the bare basics of the alphabet, some songs and prayers. Delilah's face conjured up the smell of ten small children, kept all day in one room; of watery porridge and smuts and the cold stone floor. The other woman eyed her flatly, suspiciously, but Clemmie didn't mind. She liked the scrape and clatter of the women's pattens on the yard, and the clonk as they kicked them off at the door, carrying on in their boots and shoes. She shut her eyes to listen.

'Not right in the head, that one,' said the scowling woman.

Clemmie took the milk to the canteen, then went across to the old farmhouse, a substantial stone house around which the mill had grown up and taken over like unchallenged nettles. Few now remembered Chapps Farm before the mill, and the farmhouse, in which Clemmie's great-aunt Susan had been born – suddenly one morning, on a straw mat in front of the range – now housed the mill's offices, where the foreman and his clerk had their desks, and Alistair Hadleigh too, from Manor Farm, who owned it all. He was a kind man; Clemmie liked his face, which was always ready to smile, and the way he nodded and spoke to the men when he inspected their work. As though he respected them, even though, to Clemmie, his wealth made him seem another order of being altogether. The clean glow of his skin fascinated her; he seemed to breathe different air. Sometimes she carried on walking, through the yard and out the other side. That morning, she went up the old farmhouse's stairs and knocked at the door to Alistair's office. He looked up from his desk, his forehead laddered with parallel worry lines.

'Ah, Clemmie. You've caught me quite unawares. Had we arranged for a lesson?' he said, in a vaguely distracted manner. Clemmie turned to go. 'No, no – do come in. Fifteen minutes won't make or break a thing

today.’ He got up to shut the door behind her. She caught a whiff of his hair oil, and the very masculine scent that hung about his jacket. No one else in Slaughterford had hands as clean as his. The surface of his enormous desk was hidden beneath piles and piles of paper – some samples that the mill had made, some finer than that, and typed upon. Clemmie couldn’t have read the words even had she been inclined to try. She went to her usual place by the window and turned her back to the glass. She liked to stand in silhouette, knowing that her face was partly obscured. ‘Now,’ said Alistair, perching on the edge of the desk. ‘Have you been practising?’ Unabashed, Clemmie hitched one shoulder to tell him that she had not. Alistair didn’t turn a hair. ‘Well, never mind. Shall we start with the breathing exercises I showed you?’

The lesson did not go well. Clemmie swayed her weight from foot to foot, and wished she hadn’t bothered. The time was not right; she couldn’t concentrate, and tired easily. Looking defeated, Alistair patted her shoulder as she left. ‘Never mind,’ he said. ‘We shall get there in due course, Clemmie. I’m certain of it.’ Nancy Hadleigh was climbing the stairs as Clemmie went down. Instinctively, Clemmie turned her body away slightly, clamping her arms to her sides, and avoided her gaze. Nancy was difficult, and hard. Nancy had a stare like iron nails, and only ever spoke past Clemmie, never to her.

‘Really, Alistair, what do you hope to achieve?’ said Nancy, at the office door.

‘There’s no earthly reason why that girl shouldn’t talk,’ said Alistair, quietly. ‘She only needs to be taught.’

‘I don’t understand why you must take it upon yourself to be the one to do so.’

‘Because nobody else cares to, Nancy.’

‘Well, you must realise that speech is not all people say you’re teaching her, shut away in your office together? It’s hardly wise, to make yourself the subject of such rumours. Least of all now.’

‘Really, Nancy. I’m sure nobody thinks any such thing.’

‘I doubt your hothouse flower would approve, if she knew.’

‘You make it sound like something seedy, Nancy, when it’s nothing of the sort.’

‘Well, I just hope you’re not giving the girl ideas, that’s all.’ Their voices faded as the door closed, and Clemmie carried on down the stairs, unconcerned.

She went over to the shop to collect any letters for Weavern Farm – there were generally precious few. The shopkeeper gave her something small – sweets or cheese or an apple – for saving her son the long walk out to Weavern to deliver them, and that day Clemmie chewed a toffee as she carried on her way. But the boy. The boy. His name was Eli, and his family were bad – the Tanners. The worst on God’s green Earth, her father, William Matlock, had once said, as he forbade any of his girls to fool about with any of their boys. They’d had a Tanner in to help cut the hay one year. He’d made several attempts to corner Clemmie’s sister, Josie, who’d been twelve at the time, and in the end left her with a cut lip; and when he was told to go he’d gone with two of their hens. Now William’s face curdled dangerously at any mention of a Tanner. But Clemmie couldn’t help thinking about the thing she’d seen the boy do – the thing he’d done for her. She couldn’t help but picture his face, so at odds with itself that she hadn’t quite worked it out yet – her instincts, normally good enough at guiding her, went blind and were no help. There’d been blood beneath his fingernails, and deep scratches on his hands. He’d smelt of beer and sweat, of something hard and mineral, but, underneath that, of something better. He’d told her his name – defiantly, as if she’d challenged him: *I’m Eli*. And then not another word. The silence had been painfully loud.

But he was nowhere around; if he was working at the mill that day, then he was already inside. Sometimes he worked at Rag Mill, the smaller mill, just a little way upriver, which pulped rags for the paper mill. Clemmie remembered seeing him leading the shaggy pony that pulled the cart of sloppy stuff between the two. Tugging at its bridle as it twisted its head in protest, his face screwed up in anger. So much anger in him – so at odds with what he’d done for her. She gazed towards Rag Mill, but had no call to go further upriver. The malty smell of Little & Sons brewery – one of her favourites – drifted down to her, but she left the mill yard troubled. She would go back along the western side of the river, through the trees. There was no path but she knew the way. She felt

watched as she went; she was used to the feeling and knew it at once: the weight of eyes. This time, though, she looked around and tried to see who it was – tried to see if it was the boy. *Eli*.