

Incorporating the Teenage Outsider

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Abstract

This practice-led PhD consists of two parts: Part One is the creative element, the YA novel *Eden Summer*; Part Two is the contextualising thesis. *Eden Summer* uses the search for a missing teenage girl to explore themes of female friendship, grief and resilience. The contextualising exegesis examines the process of writing creatively for young adults in this historical moment, exploring what characteristics might define YA literature, and how they affect the process of writing it. The thesis also takes the opportunity to examine some of the discursive activities connected with publication that can be viewed as constituting the creation of the YA author. The introduction establishes the study's focus on the intersection between CW and YA. Chapter 1.1 interrogates CW theory, placing it in a historical context, while the second part provides an overview and analysis of the contemporary YA literary landscape in which *Eden Summer* is situated. Chapter 2 introduces the creative methodology for this study, drawing on and extending existing methodologies, and relates it to the work with evidence from the creative journal (extracts from which are supplied in the appendix), blog interviews and manuscript, before going on to analyse the main structural and thematic elements of the work, including experimental first stages, chronology, landscape and literary inheritance. Chapter 3 examines the definitions of YA fiction through this particular process of writing it, including a discussion of the assumptions and limitations of this new theoretical framework. Finally, chapter 3.2 draws on narrative and discursive theory to examine the construction of the YA author. The conclusion tests the significance of these findings in the light of the original aims of the project, its extension of and contribution to current theorisation of the creative writing process and the relationship between critical and creative work. This thesis demonstrates the complex ways in which the defining characteristics of YA literature shape the writing of it at all stages. Ultimately, the process of becoming the YA author is shown to be aligned with the condition of young adulthood itself.

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Note on Page Numbers and Abbreviations:

All page references to the text of *Eden Summer* will use the published UK paperback edition supplied with the thesis, unless otherwise specified.

Throughout, YA refers to 'Young Adult', while CW refers to 'Creative Writing', following recent scholarly practice (Harbour, 2011 and Waller, 2008).

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Part One: *Eden Summer*, a Young Adult Novel

Note:

This is the original completed version of the novel, produced during the first eighteen months of this practice-led PhD. A different version was published by David Fickling Books in hardback in 2016 and in paperback in 2017, see the paperback edition submitted with the thesis. The published version of the novel is substantially different, having undergone a major structural edit for commercial publication, with later line-editing, copyediting and proofreading. There are additional scenes in the published version, and the concluding chapters are different. The published version also contains quotations from the poetry of Ted Hughes, used with permission.

Prologue

Christmas Day

11.48am

The snowfall stole colour from the valley, leaving it black and white as an old photo: dazzling fields, leaden skies, winter trees drawn in charcoal. The chapel sat squat and square on top of the hill, guarded by iron gates.

Late morning, two teenagers came trudging up the lane, their padded clothes shockingly bright against all that white, voices shattering silence.

The words froze on their lips as they reached the graveyard gate.

One pulled ahead. She ploughed awkwardly, knee-deep through the drifts to the newest grave at the end, to that headstone not yet weathered in, still bright and gleaming under its little hood of snow. The girl pulled off her hat and gloves, and bent over the grave, whispering. Her cheeks were pink with cold and shiny with tears.

‘Let’s make her a snowman,’ she said, wiping her face. ‘She always loved them.’

They both started rolling and patting and scraping. They made a little rounded figure the same height as the headstone. They gave it arms of fallen twigs. They made a face with stones and leaves.

When the teenagers left, the snowgirl stayed, keeping watch all that short day, till the shadows turned lilac, then blue, ash, then black, till the stars came out, bright and hard and pure, glittering over the valley.

Chapter One

Friday September 4th

8.00am

That morning I have no clue what's happened. No inkling. No foreboding. Not a sausage. I must be the opposite of psychic, cos I'm actually almost happy.

Mum's radar picks up on it straight away. 'Good to hear you singing again, Jess,' she says as we wait for the kettle.

I meet her eyes. Hers fill with tears. We both know how much it's cost us to fight our way back here, somewhere close to happiness.

After breakfast I hug her and tumble out into the blue-and-gold morning. Warm, but with proper cold hiding in the shadows ready to ambush you, warning you that summer's nearly done. I love September, always have. The air is crisp, with that first bittersweet scent of autumn. It smells of hope, new pencils and fresh starts, and everyone knows I'm overdue one of them.

I put in my earbuds and start my favourite playlist as I hurry down the hill. Town's all laid out in the sunshine like a tourist website inviting you to visit Yorkshire: the tall skinny houses, rows and rows of terraces, clinging to the crazy gradient.

I make myself late cos I keep stopping to take photos on my phone: backlit leaves, tangled weeds all dried and seedy, reflections in the canal. Art is the only GSCE I really care about and I'm looking for something to spark the next project.

I have to run for the bus, but I still get a window seat on the top deck, cocooned in warmth. I lean my head on the glass and half-close my eyes. The music is a ladder and my mind climbs it slowly, enjoying the view from up there. I barely see what's actually through the window – the familiar hills, flung wide like a dancer's skirts; the farms dotted high along spreading contours; the wooded cloughs; and the houses tucked into the valley bottom or ribboning along this road, this crazy overcrowded road that we're all addicted to, cos it's the quickest way out of this place.

In the next village, I step off the bus at the stop nearest school, and that's when it happens: the morning's golden bubble shatters like glass.

I see my best friend's mum. Eden's mum, Claire. Her car is pulling out of the side road, barely three metres away. Her face is grey, and her ponytail is coming loose. I've never seen her without make-up before.

Claire should not be driving cos she can hardly see: her face is crumpled, dripping with tears as she grips the wheel. I've seen Claire cry before, but this shocks me into a standstill.

Someone bumps into my back, and barges round me. I clutch at the brick wall to my left for balance because the world is tipping sideways.

What's happening? What is Claire doing here? Before I can dart into the road and knock on her window, she's moved out into the main road and driven off.

I didn't see any of them during the dark days after Eden's sister died, but I saw Claire at Iona's funeral, brittle with grief.

This is worse.

But ...

... what could possibly be worse than that?

My heart clenches coldly.

Pain starts building in my temples. Shit. It's been a migraine-free week till now. First in ages. I yank out my earbuds and stab at my phone to silence the music.

One missed call. From Eden's landline. No message. How did I miss it? Must've been boarding the bus.

I call her mobile, breathless. 'E, it's Jess. What's up? I saw your mum, just now, at school. Where are you? I'll come find you.'

I hurry up the side road towards school, joining the flow of kids all heading that way. As we get near the sprawling brick and glass buildings, I realise something's up. Everyone's staring. Whispering behind hands. Even the lads. Even the oldest ones.

I'm not being paranoid, for once. I glare back, hating them all, hating that it takes me straight back to the worst months of my life. The rest of the school talking *about* me, not *to* me. Eyes shifting sideways before they meet mine, like disaster might be contagious.

I even flick my eyes down just to check I haven't tucked my skirt into my knickers or something. Nope, all present and correct: paint-spattered boots

loosely tied with red laces, only slightly torn leggings, black hoodie with sleeves pulled down over my tattoos, skirt twisted sideways and the crappy green school shirt that makes everyone – ‘cept Eden – look sick as a dog.

Fear rises. It battles with my need to know what the hell is going on. Fear wins.

Head down, I hurry towards the left of the buildings. I need somewhere to think, before I can face it. I need to escape all these people staring at me.

I hear snippets of speculation that no one is even trying to keep quiet.

‘She must know!’

‘Do you think the police will want to talk to her?’

‘Jess Mayfield and Liam Caffrey. Definitely.’

Liam is Eden’s boyfriend. Hearing our names linked like that is not good. I feel my cheeks burning. But what’ve the police got to do with anything? I’ll find out. I will. I just need a minute.

On autopilot, I navigate the main driveway, and duck to miss a football. I’m heading for the back route, round the portakabins, so I can slink into the side yard and hide till Eden rings me back.

I take the corner too fast and slam straight into Josh Clarkson, Eden’s ex-boyfriend from last year. Josh’s arrogance reaches you two metres before he does, just like his aftershave. I never got what Eden saw in Josh, except they matched in a tall, golden, pretty kind of way. Till he opened his mouth.

‘Look, lads. If it in’t Mayfield the miserable mosher,’ Josh flicks his cigarette away. ‘No wonder she looks so beat up.’

He tosses the long hair out of his eyes and sneers at me, ‘You’re some shit magnet, you know that, Scarface?’ He takes a step closer. ‘You’re a freak, your mum’s a lezzar, and now your best mate’s missing.’

And that is how I find out that Eden’s vanished overnight.

Chapter Two

Friday 4th September

8.25am

I'm surrounded. The circle tightens like a net. Josh and the three mates he keeps to make him look good. They all look the same: weird posture and overstyled hair, like they're expecting to be kidnapped into some low-rent boyband any day now.

Maybe it was a mistake coming this way. There's no one to see what happens. To my right, the wooden wall of the portakabin. To my left, an overgrown hedge and the fence behind. It's like a corridor – with escape up ahead, too far away.

They start crowding me. The pain in my head ratchets up. The four lads are blocking my light and taking my air.

It's like last year. The circle. Cold laughter. Darkness rises. Shadows tug at me.

I battle it. I look down. I use deep, slow breathing to keep control. I concentrate on the feel of a small stone on the tarmac pressing into the base of my boot. I cling to what I know, and the in-out, in-out that tells me *I'm alive, I'm OK, I'm right here*, even as the darkness threatens to close over my head.

'What's up with the emo chick? Maybe you're a lezzer then, too, just like your ma?' Josh jeers and his brainless little chorus joins in.

'Lost your better half? Eden Holby's not so perfect now, is she?'

Tick, tick, tick. Precious seconds slip by. If this is true, Eden will need me. I need to find out what's happening. I need to move.

'She was asking for it, Eden Holby. On self-destruct.' Josh Clarkson smiles, slow and wide, trying to seem wolfish or something. 'No way *she's* gay, you won't turn that one. Always liked it dirty, know what I mean?'

The hyena boys start baying. He leans in and I think I might black out.

I have to handle this. I have to stay strong.

I take a deeper breath and turn my fear into anger, 'What do you want, Clarkson?' My voice hardly wobbles at all.

'If Eden's missing, Liam Caffrey did it, no question. Is that what you'll tell the police?'

This is going too fast for me. I can't take it in. Eden's missing and they think someone's *hurt* her?

Not Liam, never Liam. I can see why Josh hates him though. Liam's got Eden now. Plus he's everything Josh will never be.

I start to push past Josh. I try to disconnect from the feel of his weight as I shove through. It takes all my strength to bear him so close to me.

'Get lost.' I screw my eyes closed and hold my breath and march forwards. Maybe I look weird enough to win some space, cos when I open them again, the side gate is closer, and my way is clear.

'Ask Caffrey where he hid the body!' Clarkson bawls after me, so loud the whole school can hear him. 'Go on, ask him, why don't you?'

Liam wouldn't hurt Eden. The idea is so ridiculous I could laugh. Except that I remember Liam could hurt Eden, has hurt Eden. And I'm the only one who knows.

I hear a distant buzzing in my ears. As I scuttle towards the safety of school, I can't help noticing stupid details all around me: an empty crisp packet blowing past; the smell of the freshly mown grass; the way the sky is reflected in the school windows, a lovely deep blue with fluffy clouds; some bird singing in the hedge and the distant growl of traffic down on the main road.

Everything looks entirely normal but I feel like my world is ending. The mad thing is, I didn't see it coming. I should've done. All summer, I should've seen this coming. This is all my fault.

Hadn't I promised to be there for Eden? Instead, I betrayed her.

Chapter Three

Friday 4th September

8.35am

'E, it's me again! Please... Listen, I don't care where you are. I'll come find you. Just call me back, OK?'

Eden is missing. Eden is missing. That's what everyone's saying. It runs through my head on repeat, like emergency news headlines on the TV screen, cutting across everything I see.

Somehow I make it into registration, but our form teacher, Mr Barwell, isn't there. There's some nervy stand-in who can't keep control. This makes it worse. The chaos in our form room mirrors the panic rising inside me.

I gulp down headache pills, hoping I'm in time to stop it turning blinding. Today is too important to be eaten away by a migraine. I need to stay alert.

I know everyone's still talking and staring as we take our seats, but it reaches me distantly.

'Where's Eden Holby?'

'Hey goth girl, where's yer mate?'

I feel like I'm underwater. Everything's muffled. I think a few of them – Ebonie, Danny, Sam - try to be kind. I watch their mouths moving but I can't work out what they expect me to say.

I sit stiffly, clutching my bag and my phone, ready to bolt. It takes too long. The seconds slouch by. My eyes flick from the clock on the wall to the display on my phone and the supply teacher doesn't dare tell me off for using it in class.

'Sir, excuse me, sir? Jess Mayfield has to go to Trent's, I mean, Mrs Trent's office, sir.' The Year 7 kid disappears almost before he's finished the message, and I'm out of there without waiting for the nod.

I throw myself down the empty corridor. Out into light. Speed across the yard. Concrete stairs. Two at a time. Back inside. Main doors. I'm there.

In the corridor outside Trent's office, I find Imogen and Charlotte heading the same way. Eden's other friends. The ones from the top sets. The ones who match her in swagger and style.

Imo has black hair extensions down her back, huge brown eyes and perfect dark skin. Charlotte has a glossy little bob that swings as she moves. Her

eyebrows are plucked so high that she always looks vaguely surprised, but I think she actually means it right now.

They don't speak to me anymore. I can still remember the casual insults from the time when they did. Today, the rules have changed.

'Hey, Jess.' Imo says, 'Isn't it awful? I couldn't believe it when Eden's mum called me before school.' She manages to make this all about her, as usual, letting us know that she was the one Claire turned to first. 'Do you think she's run away?'

'I mean, we knew she was depressed...'. Charlotte chips in, watching to see how I react.

Did they? First I'd heard. I was the one who'd been with Eden nearly every day this summer. She was grieving for the sister who'd loved her once and hated her lately. Screwed up by it. Angry. Guilty. Manic, maybe. But not depressed.

Could I even recall Eden before all this? What was she like, before?

Saturday 20th April

12.20pm

I'd been planning it for weeks. I'd re-done the artwork twenty times to get it right. Me and Mum had the row again one last time the night before.

'What about hepatitis?'

'I told you. That's old news. Get with the twenty-first century, Mum. They use gloves and a new needle each time. Sterile, vacuum-sealed, look!' I spun the laptop round so she could read the FAQs that filled the screen.

'Are you really sure, Jess? It's such a big step. I know people have removals, but it's basically forever. How do you know how you're going to feel? What if you change your mind when you're twenty, or forty? Or sixty?'

'Mum. I'm sure. That's the point. That it's forever, and that I'm sure. That's why it means something. Why can't you see? And it's my body.' I used that line a lot.

'Yes, it's your body. And after everything your body's been through, I don't understand why you'd give it more pain.' She was shouting now, her eyes shining.

‘But that’s my choice to make. It’s *mine!*’ I yelled back. ‘It’s the opposite of what they did to me. That’s exactly why I’m doing it, honest. I promise you, it’s important to me. It’s not some whim.’ I was speaking more earnestly now. I didn’t want to upset her. I just needed her to see. ‘It’s going to help me - more than all those counselling sessions put together - you have to believe me.’ Sometimes I didn’t even know I believed something till I found myself arguing it through with Mum. ‘This is not another problem. This is me getting better.’

‘How do you know?’ she snapped.

I stared her out.

She sighed, ‘I’m sorry, sweetheart.’ She gave a little sob and grabbed my hand. ‘OK! OK! You win. If you really want it, you do it. I don’t even know why I’m fighting it. I’m so glad to have you here in one piece, I shouldn’t mind if you tattoo every inch of your precious skin. Come here, love.’

After our hug she pulled back and looked at me. ‘But if it’s really you getting better, no more skipping school. Deal?’

I recognised that jut of her chin. Yep, she cared, but nope, she’d never be a pushover.

I told Eden all of this as she walked with me down to the tattoo studio, down the quiet end of the longest street in town, next to the yoga place and the art workshop.

‘So she gave you the full Sarah Mayfield?’ Eden teased lightly. She knew all about my mum.

‘Yep, the full Sarah. Talked her round, but she bargains hard. Full attendance from now on.’

Eden gave me one of her sideways glances, checking I was OK. ‘Sounds like a fair deal.’

‘Oi,’ I elbowed her gently. ‘Whose side are you on?’

‘Yours! Always. Thing is, I want you back at school too. I missed you,’ and she smiled to soften her words. ‘Here it is.’

My legs unhelpfully turned to cheese strings as we arrived at the studio. It had a clear glass front, with some of their designs worked into the window frosting. I stopped, staring at it.

‘Ready?’ Eden asked. ‘We can still walk away, any time you like, you know.’

‘I’m not changing my mind,’ I glared at her.

‘Knew you’d say that. Just checking.’

I shook my head and pushed the door open. Inside it smelt strange: like ink and something strong and chemical.

The woman leaning on the counter watched us without speaking. She had her hair in one of those old-fashioned rolls at the front, wrapped in a spotted scarf, and her eyes were thickly ringed in liquid eyeliner. I made a mental note of the way she’d done that. She wore a bright pink floral dress, 50s-style, and her arms were covered in old-school tattoo work: large roses and leaves.

A man came out from a back room to join her: slightly taller, bald, with a goatee, and his ears pierced with those round discs that look like rubber coins. His bright blue eyes checked us out.

They waited, not hostile, but not welcoming either.

I held it together, knowing both of us had passed for eighteen before, even without the fake ID I was clutching in my sweaty palm.

‘I made an appointment for 12.30. I’ve brought a picture of what I want,’ I pulled out the artwork to show them. ‘Can you do this? Down my arm?’ I’d worked on it for ages – red poppy heads and falling petals, lush and bright.

‘Who did this?’ the man asked.

‘Me.’ I stared back.

‘It’s good.’

‘Thanks.’

I felt the atmosphere change. ‘So can you? I mean, will it work?’

‘Yeah, that red though... It’ll have to be one I mix myself. Come in, I’ll show you what I mean...’ and he held a curtain aside.

I wobbled through, and I was in. My heart was beating so fast I had to concentrate hard to think round it.

‘Here’s what I mean about the red – this one’s closest. Right?’

I nodded, mouth too dry to speak. He was right. I knew he was good. I’d read the reviews.

‘You doing Art at college, is it?’ And with that, it was like a cloud moved from the sun: he didn’t exactly smile, but his eyes were warm and they focused on me. ‘I’m Mo.’

‘Jess.’

We talked a bit and I made up stories about my life, as I wanted it to be three years from now, hoping I wasn't jinxing it with the lies.

The back room had a huge frosted window, so the light was good and that reassured me. Then I saw the chair – a massive black leather job, like a cross between the dentist and Mastermind – and I almost ran for it.

I managed to sit down and wriggle my left arm out of my T-shirt, pushing bra and cami straps aside, telling myself the guy saw naked skin every working day of his life. 'Here?' I traced the line from my shoulder to my elbow.

'That works,' Mo agreed.

I climbed in the chair, sitting tense and upright.

He drew it on first, in biro. I made him do it three times till I was happy. Mo wasn't touching me. Just the pen. Or the needle. I tricked my brain into accepting that I was the canvas, so it was OK, it didn't count as human contact.

Even so, when the needle touched my skin for the first time, I gasped.

Without asking, Eden held out her hand for me to grab, and kept talking. 'D'y think it'll get addictive. Y' know, you'll come back each year, till you look like you're dressed with nowt on?'

'Dunno. Start small, I reckon. Now I know how much it hurts...' I talked through my teeth, breathing the sting away.

The needle burred away, spattering ink. The pain was hot and small. A five out of ten. I knew what ten felt like, and this was nothing.

'What do you want, J? I can talk, or I can shut up. Your call. I've downloaded all sorts – film, last night's TV. I've got quality gossip, been saving it all week.'

My gratitude swelled, almost broke into tears. 'Beyond the call of duty, E.' She'd been like this all year. Eden gave me what I needed, before I even knew what it was. Brought my schoolwork round every single night, when I was still off.

'Yeah, well. What are friends for?'

I squeezed her hand so hard that her knuckles were bruised by the time we finished.

Afterwards we went to the riverside café. It was nearly warm enough to sit out. The water rushed past, a comforting background constant, like white noise. I

could see ducks paddling across the weir and the metal sculpture on the overgrown island turned silver-gold in the cool spring sunshine.

‘Cheers for coming with me,’ I told her as we sipped our juices. My whole arm buzzed, hot and tender, but the joy rose up, pure and clear, every time I thought of the half-finished design hidden under the gauze. I wanted to whip out my ice cubes and press them on my arm. ‘I did it, E! I finally did it.’

‘Yeah, you did good,’ she said. And after a pause, ‘I’m kinda jealous.’

‘I knew it, you do want one!’ I crowed, though it wouldn’t really go with her look.

‘Not that.’ She was serious now, looking down her straw and playing with her drink.

‘Eden, what?’ I looked over at her, feeling my smile slipping away.

My best friend, the one who had it all: looks, brains and confidence. We didn’t match, me and Eden. We started the same and grew up different: Eden was tall and blonde and model-perfect. I was short and skinny and pale, with added colour and piercing. My mum thought I was a goth. I’d been called worse.

It didn’t matter that me and Eden were mismatched: we just got each other. We knew each other so well: the big stuff and the small. I knew her favourite food (sticky toffee pudding, but always with ice-cream and never custard) and why she didn’t like spiders (haunted by an incident at Charlotte’s party when we were ten) and what she’d choose from the sale rail (anything blue, to match her eyes). We understood each other; we made each other laugh. That was all. That was everything.

Till now.

Now I had no idea what she meant. ‘*You?* Jealous?’

‘Yeah, of you. Marching in there with a picture you drew, knowing you’ll never regret it.’ She still didn’t meet my eye. ‘You’re so brave. And strong. Even after what happened. Especially then. Knowing what you want and who you are.’

I stared at her, astonished. ‘So do you!’

‘No. That’s where you’re wrong. I only have negatives. Minus wishes.’

‘E, what are you on about?’ I asked gently, leaning in and wincing as my shirt caught on the dressing.

‘I only know what I *don't* want. I want Iona to get off my case and stop being a bitch. I don't want to mess up the exams. I don't want to disappoint Mum and Dad any more. I want them to stop looking at me like I'm a freak who ate their perfect little girl... But if you ask me what I actually want, I haven't got a clue.’

‘That's not true...’ I started, but she hadn't finished.

‘You've got your mum who loves you, *a lot*. Your running that you love, *a lot*. You want to go to art school, *a lot*. You will, because you're talented: *a lot*. You worked at getting better: *a lot*. You wanted this tattoo: *a lot*. I bet you know exactly what your next hair colour will be too, because you've thought about it, *a lot*.’

I sat back, feeling got at, smoothing away a dyed red tendril of hair. ‘So what are you saying, E? Is my hair colour a big deal now?’

‘Not just that, no. But if you add it all up, it's a life. I'm drifting along, trying to please people, but it's like I'm a shadow, Jess. You're a proper person, and I'm just ... nothing.’

I stared at her, shocked. Then I got up and went round the table and pulled her up, made her stand. I grabbed her and hugged her hard. ‘Don't you say that, Eden Holby. You're not nothing. No one thinks that and you shouldn't neither. You're my best friend and you seem pretty proper to me, all right? Ouch!’

She hugged me back and it banged my tattoo, and then we were both laughing, even though I could see her eyes shining.

Chapter Four

Friday 4th September

8.55am

Remembering that, I think: if Eden felt so bad back then, before her world turned upside down, then what is she feeling now, three months after her sister died? Because no matter what anyone says, I know she still blames herself for Iona's death.

'Did Eden say anything to you about wanting to ...' Imo takes a quick furtive look around us. 'You know... *hurt* herself?' she whispers it confidentially, as if she's giving me something precious, and I resist the urge to slap her.

The school trip – five days in July – surfaces in my mind, and I squash it down again. They'd been there, Imogen and Charlotte, but they didn't have a clue. We'd kept it quiet, me, Eden, Mr Barwell, although I know he had to tell Eden's parents afterwards.

'No,' I say firmly, because she hasn't. Not lately.

'It's just... just this weird thing, probably nothing. Just, we were working together on a science project, me and Eden? We had to hand it in today, but she didn't bother emailing me her section.' Imo's eyes are wide, lashes thick with mascara. There's something theatrical in her babbling delivery. She's committing to the part of Concerned Friend, but I can see the cracks in her act. 'But Eden's always on it, with handing stuff in. Even in July. Even when...'

I stare past her. Imogen's right. It's in Eden's DNA to be organised. She's one of those girls that teachers love. She's so clever and hardworking that they can blank out her sarky comments. Even the term her sister died and she missed half the exams, Eden's coursework landed her in the top few percent, freewheeling past her lost month.

'She means, it sounds like Eden knew she wouldn't be here today,' Charlotte spells it out for the dim goth girl. 'Do you think we should tell Trent?'

We all turn to face Trent's door.

I focus on it: smooth, dull grey, with a neat little sign printed 'Head Teacher, Mrs C Trent' and a panel of fireproof glass. Right now it's holding back something terrible and I don't want to open it.

I imagine the bad news trapped inside, like a fire. I picture myself opening the door...

Whoomph! The air is devoured. The smoke pours out, hot and choking. Flames erupt, faster than thought, tearing up the walls.

I blink.

I reach forwards to knock.

Before I can make contact, it opens from the inside and I stumble forwards. My hands land on Liam Caffrey's chest. Warm cotton. I swear I can feel his heart.

I pull back as if I'm scalded.

It's the first time I've seen him close up all week. I think he's been avoiding me. My body reacts, even now, betraying me. My legs turn unsteady. My palms are sweating and my heart goes mad.

He doesn't look like Liam. Nothing gorgeous about him now. Hulking in that doorway, he seems to fill more space. His short fair hair is tufted up, like horns. His face is scrunched up so tightly I can hardly see his eyes. His eyebrows are knotted tight, telling me to back off. I can feel the anger coming off him in hot waves, and I flatten myself against the wall instinctively. For a split second I am afraid of him.

Then the questions crowd in, and I choose the two at the front. 'Liam, what's going on? What did they say?'

But Liam stalks past us in silence. He grabs the outer door handle and wrenches it open so hard it bites into the wall, sending little white crumbs of plaster flying.

I've never seen him so angry. What have they said to him?

'Jess? Is that Jess Mayfield?' Trent appears, and I can see she's rattled. She tugs at her navy suit jacket, pats her cropped grey hair, then fumbles for the glasses resting on her formidable chest. She puts the glasses on and peers at a sheaf of papers in her hand.

It shocks me to notice the whole lot is trembling.

'Jess? Come in. Charlotte, Imogen, wait there. I won't be long, girls.'

I don't move. I can feel the other two staring at me.

'Jess? *I said*, come on in.'

To try and get a grip, I use an old trick of Mum's. She says, 'However bad things are, make a list of three things you can do about it. Doesn't matter how small.'

Right now it's:

1. *Get in there*
2. *Find out the facts*
3. *Ring Eden again, soon as*

'It's all right, Jess, it's only me and Mr Barwell.' Trent beckons me forward.

I peer inside.

Barwell's OK. As well as taking register each morning, he is *personally responsible for my pastoral care and wellbeing*, if you believe the glossy prospectus they give out to the anxious parents who've heard our school's just out of a rough patch.

'Morning, Jess,' Barwell sighs his words out, and nods at me. He looks terrible, and I'm strangely grateful he's not hiding it.

I go in. It's warm, too warm, with sunlight pouring through the glass sides of the room. It feels like a goldfish bowl. Don't goldfish die if they get too hot? This feels suffocating.

I flop onto one of the empty chairs on this side of the desk – I can feel the coarse padded weave of it through my leggings. I know this place well. I've been here a lot this past year, just out of a rough patch all of my own.

Barwell clears his throat and says the words I've been dreading and waiting to hear, 'Jess, I'm really sorry to have to tell you this, but Eden didn't come home last night.'

Chapter Five

Friday 4th September

9.32am

‘No!’ I shake my head. Even after seeing Claire this morning, I still don’t want to believe it. I see it in the teachers’ faces too: the unbelievable cruelty of it. If this was a TV soap, they’d’ve laughed it off for being too grim – *No, not the same family. No one will believe that. It’s too much.*

And it is too much for me. In the heat and light of Trent’s office, everything shimmers. I wonder if I’m going to pass out.

I must look stunned because Barwell asks me gently, ‘Jess, do you understand?’

Trent takes over, living up to her nickname: The Tank. Barging in, crushing any last shreds of hope. ‘Mr and Mrs Holby have reported Eden as missing. It seems she didn’t come home last night. The police have launched an investigation.’

I stare at her, trying to read the truth here. Trent is sitting as straight as the blue ringbinders in a stiff row edging her desk. She’s as composed as her neat pile of papers. Do they have training in this? How to keep control of yourself and everyone else when one of your students is bloody missing?

I imagine grabbing her by her suit shoulders and shaking her till that tortoise neck wobbles. I want to scream, ‘Tell me! Tell me what the hell the police said about Eden?’ I want her to admit what’s going on.

It’s weird, even sitting here in this horrible moment, none of it is constant. It’s too much to take in, so my mind loops round, hitting patches of unthinkable pain, and then chasing itself onwards, wondering where Eden really is, and what she’s doing now.

‘But I saw her. I left her at the bus stop. Last night, same as always.’ I remember Eden’s plans. ‘Ask Liam! Didn’t he tell you? She was out with him last night – he’ll put you right.’ This is daft. They must have made a mistake. We can sort this out if we all just talk to each other.

‘She didn’t come home last night, although Mrs Holby did receive a text message this morning,’ Barwell says, earning a glare from Mrs Trent as if he wasn’t supposed to tell me that.

‘So she’s not missing?’ I blurt. ‘If she texted, she’s not missing. What’s everyone panicking for?’

Why didn’t she text me? A squirm of guilt spirals through my guts.

‘I don’t get it,’ I shake my head. ‘What does that even mean? She didn’t come home? So she might’ve stayed out. It’s not a crime, is it?’

Eden’s next to me, laughing at the misunderstanding, tilting her head sideways and rolling her eyes. She flicks her hair back and extends one hand to me.

I blink. Eden vanishes.

I look sideways at Barwell. He’s edgy, can’t sit still. He ruffles his short dark hair with one hand and I see the silver in it gleaming like wire. He’s taken it worse. His panic tells me this is real. It’s right to be scared.

‘Jess, I know, this is awful. It’s a complete nightmare, for the Holbys, for you, for the school, for us.’ Barwell speaks with a southern accent, Essex or somewhere. He’s one of the rare ones – tough but funny, and you can tell that he cares, deep down. In the past, he’s proved he’s human and I can trust him. ‘But we’re here for you. The school wants to offer you support.’

‘Oh my God,’ I put my hands to my forehead, where the pain is tightening like a snare, trapping me.

‘We’re all desperately worried about Eden,’ Trent butts in over us both, sounding not very worried at all, just a bit pissed off at the inconvenience, actually. ‘But there are systems in place here. We all need to stay calm.’

So much for offering me support. Her eyes move to my left wrist, where the fabric has risen, showing the newest tattoo. I bring my hands down again, tugging my sleeve low, twisting it in my palm, as I squirm on the seat.

‘The police investigation has already begun. As you can imagine, it’s top priority, after all the Holbys have endured...’ Trent coughs. ‘The thing is, Jess, the police will need to speak to you.’

I grip the chair so hard that one fingernail snaps.

‘I’ve just spoken to your mother. She’s expecting you. You need to go home and wait for the officers to call round.’

‘Now?’ I whisper.

Barwell nods.

‘It won’t take long,’ Trent tells me briskly. ‘You can slot back into lessons when you’re done.’

A faint whine starts up in my ears, like my own personal mosquito. My vision changes: the contrast goes crazy so Trent’s suit is saturated, dark as an inkspill. The windows are a dazzling blur.

‘You can help,’ Barwell’s voice reaches me as though he’s shouting across a river, through the rushing in my head. ‘What you tell the police – that’s going to help them find Eden as quickly as possible. OK?’

No. Not OK. Not OK at all.

‘Listen, Jess, you’re in a special position. More than anyone here, you know Eden. You know how she was. This summer. This week. The last time you saw her.’

Chapter Six

‘The *last* time...?’ It sounds too final.

I think about the last time I saw Eden, praying with everything I’ve got that it’s not the actual *last* time. It was far too ordinary for that. Ordinary, but not normal. And certainly not happy.

Last night after school, we waited in the overcrowded bus bay – the sheep pens, we call them - trying to ignore the racket of the younger kids. It was always easier, being there with Eden. She’s got this thing, like a forcefield, but good, so that when you’re with her, you’re inside a golden circle and you’re safe.

We filed onto the bus, choosing the usual seats halfway down on the left of the top deck. I got the window seat and I couldn’t stop myself squinting out against the sunshine, searching the faces as the bus pulled away. Then I turned to Eden.

‘So, Thursday night...’ I said, watching her face carefully. What happened last weekend had come between us like a pane of glass. I peered through it at my best friend, wondering how to reach her. ‘Got anything lined up?’

We live in the next town, two miles down the valley, so the bus journey is only ten minutes, if that.

Mostly, I like living there, in our little town, the one they call quirky, the one everyone’s heard of, with the artists and the lesbians and the eco-mums and the art festival. The one where the last mills standing became little boutique shops the tourists adore, or cafes or galleries – so at least there’s somewhere to work. That’s not why I like it. I like the hills. The moor. The rivers. How you can be up on the tops in fifteen minutes and only see two other people during the whole run.

Eden lived in a massive stone farmhouse on the hill. ‘Farm, my arse,’ she said when they first moved there. ‘No chance of us getting a cat, never mind any proper farm animals. They like the idea of a farm. They want to buy designer wellies and a four-wheel drive. Then they’ll pay someone else to do the garden.’

Last night...

We sat there, limp in the heat, drenched in sunlight through the bus window.

Eden shrugged, ‘Dunno. Usual. Home first. Out wi’ Liam later. The delights of town await,’ she ended sarcastically. She tossed her long blonde hair over one shoulder, somehow managing to keep it smooth, shiny and apple-scented, while mine frizzed in red clumps around my hot damp neck.

‘Wait, you don’t mean: hanging in the skatepark? How can you bear the excitement? Not a real game of pool?’

Our town has just the one club. That’s where Liam’s sister Nicci works. She serves us drinks, discreetly, and we sit in the bar playing cliché-bingo: one point each for a crossbreed dog, a white man with dreadlocks and a woman in tie-dye on the dancefloor. It has some good nights each month, with bands or DJs, but that night wasn’t one of them.

‘If Nicci’s working, you’ll get drinks, too. How could anyone resist?’ I played along, ignoring the flutter of something in my chest, using a silly voice to match hers.

‘You?’ she did that head tilt, looking at me sideways.

‘Usual... running night, remember?’ I murmured back, closing my eyes against the light, so she couldn’t see what I was trying to hide.

When had this happened, batting each other away with cover stories? This wasn’t a conversation, it was a game of alibis.

I remembered the first time I told her I’d joined the running club, last February, when I started back at school. Running hurt. Everything still hurt, back then, but at least it gave me something to focus on. Something to make progress with.

‘Fell running? Since when? That’s so not your look!’ She’d yelped with laughter, till she saw my face.

‘Oi, you know I’m good at running – it’s not a fashion statement.’

‘But once a week – really? Bor-*ing*! All that effort, just to sit around afterwards boasting about your times. Not my idea of fun.’

‘E, if I’m fast, I can get away,’ I spelt it out for her. ‘I need to be the fastest. It’s all I’ve got. After what happened, I need options: fight or run. And I’m not doing martial arts.’ That shut her up.

She even came to watch me race a few times.

‘Yep, Thursday equals self-inflicted pain as I try to keep up with the good ones,’ I mumbled now. I felt too hot. My skirt was sticking damply to my legs. I

blew my fringe upwards and lifted my hair off my neck. ‘Probably do a route up the moor.’

‘And who says we don’t know how to live? You’ll be getting hot and sweaty with a dozen lads.’ She wrinkled her nose. ‘I wouldn’t go for those ones though – they’re like greyhounds, no meat on ‘em...’

‘I don’t go for the lads. I go for the running. It’s a fell running club, Eden,’ I spelt it out for her but it came out more harshly than I meant.

She looked at me in surprise, perfect eyebrows arched.

‘Look, we’re here,’ I said abruptly, eager to change the subject. The bus was slowing and I rose and grabbed the handrail so she had to get up.

This was where we usually went our separate ways, at the park gates. I just had to walk through the park and up the steps to our corner of town where the houses are tightly packed together: terraces, semis, low-rise flats. On our street you know your neighbours’ names and what they yell when they row. I like it: it makes me feel safe, hearing doors slam, the faint miaow of next door’s baby through the wall, kids kicking a ball outside the garages.

Eden had to wait for one of the little minibuses that went up the steeper hills.

‘I’ll wait with you,’ I said, feeling like I’d snubbed her. I was supposed to be looking out for her, not getting snappy. I was Eden’s best friend and she’d had the year from hell. Eden and me both.

It’s like we were on a seesaw, up or down, never even but somehow balanced. Right now she was further down, while I was on the up. So it was my turn to be there for her, and that meant taking any kind of crap. I hadn’t been much fun either, last winter.

‘You don’t have to.’

I rolled my eyes.

‘I mean, thanks.’

We leant on the wall next to the bus shelter, looking at our phones in easy silence. The stone was warm through my shirt. We got black looks from two old dears with shopping bags who glared at Eden’s minuscule skirt and sandals, my makeup and hair as if it offended them just to see us. These days I was rocking Poppy Red again, though I was stuck on Sky Blue for a bit last year and when it

faded there was a weird washed-out stage when I looked like I'd gone prematurely grey.

Eden grinned widely then, happy as a cat in sunshine, looking at whatever had just pinged into her inbox.

I didn't ask. In my head I was busy burying something, piling soil, filling a hole, packing it down. It was hard work but soon I'd be done.

All around us people stirred into life, picking up bags, moving towards the kerb. Sure enough, the little bus was trundling down the main street. It stopped with a wheeze of warm air and people started climbing aboard.

'Have fun later,' I smiled back at her, 'see you.' I did a funny wave to show everything was OK between us. A wave that lied. A wave that wished it was true.

Eden laughed and got on the bus, all shining blonde hair and long tanned legs. The double doors closed and swallowed her up.

Chapter Seven

Friday 4th September

9.55am

Trent stands up, signalling she's finished with me. 'Go home, Jess. Don't worry. I fully expect Eden to be home soon.'

Her tone doesn't fill me with hope.

'She's had a hard time, that's all. Since Iona...' she leaves it hanging and her hard face melts a little, into the 'sympathy' pose.

I've noticed how hard it is for people to say words like: death. Died. Killed. Dead. I've stood next to Eden and listened to people pussyfooting around it with 'Passed away'. Or 'your loss'. Or 'about your sister'.

If she's got to live with it, surely the least they can do is face the truth of it. It's like they are dirty words.

'Yes, it *has* been hard for Eden since her sister *died*.' Understatement of the year. I sound out each word so clearly it comes out a bit unhinged, but I'm sick of it. They know exactly what happened.

'You say that,' I snap, impatient with their useless concern, 'but what have you done to help, I mean, really? Not you, Mr Barwell.'

Trent bristles.

I plough on, using my anger. 'You're no good in a crisis – not you, Mr Barwell. You're so busy worrying how the school appears, what the parents think, what the exam results say. A really good school cares when things go wrong. Doesn't make you feel like a problem. To be fixed.'

I didn't mean to say that, but it feels better now it's out.

Barwell sighs. 'This isn't about Eden now, is it? Jess, I'm sorry if you feel that the school has let you down.'

It is about Eden. Today is all about Eden. But now I've started... 'You know what, while we're all being so honest? Yeah, I did feel let down. But it's not about me. It's about anyone who's a bit different, or having a tough time. You let them all down, and you need to sort it out.'

'Why didn't you say?' Barwell silences Trent with a gesture.

'Why didn't you see? Why do you think I skipped school?' I think I'm about to burst into tears, and I can't do that, not here, not now. I curl my hands into fists so the broken nail digs into my palm and it helps. 'I wasn't in a fit state

to *articulate my needs*.' I say the last bit in a tight voice, channelling Mum. 'Why is it my job to tell you that the anti-bullying policy is crap? That you need to think about what it's like, coming back to school after something bad. You better get it right for Eden next week.'

Trent sits back down, opening and closing her mouth, more like a tortoise chewing lettuce now.

I've had enough of them both. There isn't time for this stuff now. The heat in the room has got suffocating and I can't stand it a second longer.

'I need to go. It's too hot.' I stand up in a rush and push the chair so hard it tumbles backwards. I yank the door open and run through it, past Imogen and Charlotte's question-mark faces.

Trent starts shouting after me, 'Jessica Mayfield, don't you-'

'No, it's all right, Celia. I'm Jess's form teacher. Let me see her out?' I hear him asking permission, but he's coming after me anyway.

Barwell catches me up by the outside door and puts his weight against it, holding it closed. 'Jess, wait. Are you OK?'

Stupid question. I try to settle my breathing and think round my fear. Because it's him, I stop and I wait and I speak to him patiently. 'I'll be all right in a minute,' I manage to gasp.

'Don't worry, Jess. The police will find her. I wish I could help, and I will, next week, all right? When Eden's back and it's all calmed down. We're going to talk about what you just said. And the school will help, I give you my word. You *and* Eden. OK?'

I nod, to make him feel better. I can't bear to think about how hideous Monday might be if Eden doesn't turn up any time soon. Scratch that: let Monday take care of Monday. Today needs all my attention.

'Good luck with the police.' Barwell reaches out as if he plans to squeeze my shoulder, and maybe that would be OK with someone else, but not me. Never me. He remembers, pulls back, and opens the door for me with a sigh. 'It shouldn't take too long. I'll see you at registration this afternoon? Come to the staff room if you need me before then, I mean it.'

'OK. Thanks, Sir.' I stumble outside, blinking fast, straight into the chaos of break time. I feel the weight of Barwell's gaze on my back, like an itch I can't

scratch. I check my phone. Its blankness makes me want to scream and hurl it across the yard.

Eden, where are you? Eden, what did you do?

I feel as though I can hear a clock ticking in my head, counting out the seconds we have left to find her safe and well.

Has she run away? Has she hurt herself? Or has someone done it for her? They're the only three possibilities I can see here. The grimness of each one hits me like a kick in the face.

Today is a new low, and that's saying something. I count them off in my head: the black days, the worst days, the days that show you just how far down you can go.

Saturday 9th June

9.07am.

I heard the news the day after.

A Saturday morning in June. A slice of blue sky split the curtains. Mum brought me a cup of tea and put it carefully on my bedside table.

'What's up?' She usually lets me sleep. 'Mum, what's wrong?'

She was sitting sideways, awkward, on the edge of my bed. She stared at her hands, not looking at me. I read the angle of her neck, the tension in her shoulders. This was horribly familiar. I sat up. 'Mum!' My heart started to race, chasing away my sleepiness. 'What's happened?'

She took a deep breath as if she was getting ready to dive. 'Oh, Jess, I'm so sorry. I've got bad news.' She reached out and grabbed one of my hands, and said it in a long rush, 'There's been an accident. It's Eden's sister, Iona. She was killed last night in a car crash.'

'What? No!' A hand sealed my mouth, and I spat it off again. 'Where's Eden? God. No, was she-?'

'Eden's all right, Jess. I mean, she's not, she won't be. But she wasn't in the car. Oh God, her poor mother...'

She hugged me so tightly that I could hardly breathe, and we cried on and off all that day, damp-faced, red-eyed and shaky. We cried for Iona. We cried for Eden and her parents. And we cried for us, and for our own near-miss last year. I needed not to be far from Mum, and she must've felt the same about me,

so we shuffled round the house, making food we couldn't eat, and then we sat on the sofa watching old films that made us cry again, with the curtains still closed, letting the perfect day go to waste.

I kept getting my phone out to start a text to Eden. I deleted each attempt savagely. What could I say? What was the point of words today? But some words were better than no words, so I eventually sent:

So sorry, E. I can be there in 5, just let me know? Love you. Jx

Then chucked the stupid phone down and sobbed for being so inadequate.

But Eden didn't reply. Death closed around Eden's family like a big black fence with 'Keep Out' notices.

I missed Eden at school. I kept walking past conversations that were shushed into silence as I got near, and suddenly I had courage to face the gossips, cos it wasn't for me, it was for Eden.

'Yes, it's true.'

'No, she wasn't drink driving.'

'Have a bit of respect.'

In the middle of the second week, Mr Barwell read out a letter to our form group, from Eden's parents, Claire and Simon, that began, 'We are devastated at the loss of our beautiful daughter Iona. We invite her friends to celebrate her life with us...' and ended with the time and date of the funeral.

So there we were, a ragged knot of kids, parents, teachers, milling around by the iron gates of the chapel on the hill. Not sure if we should be there. Wishing we didn't have to be there, not for this. So tense and nervous we hardly dared speak. Katie Sutcliffe was at the front, Iona's best friend, her face already swollen and blotchy with tears. Everyone sweltering in black on the hottest day of the year. My heart was like a helium balloon, bumping and rising inside me. My senses were muddled, working overtime. The blue June sky stretched tight from hill to hill, pressing down on us like a lid. Everything was too bright, too sharp; HD unreality.

I felt the change as the black cars pulled up: everyone bracing for this.

A white coffin hoisted into view. It wobbled forwards on the shoulders of Simon, Eden's dad, and five other men I didn't know, all wearing the same expression of desperate concentration. Eden and Claire came next. I hardly

recognised them. Death had done this to them, made them distant as celebrities, flat as two cut-out paper dolls. They clutched each other, tissues like crumpled white flags in their free hands, and I couldn't tell who was holding up who.

This had to be wrong. Surely this was where I woke up? *Eden, Eden, I had the strangest dream.*

We blundered into the chapel in their wake.

'I've got you,' Mum said, gripping my elbow, as she steered me into a row at the back. I couldn't look at the coffin, or I'd have to realise what it held. The service passed in a blur of heat and tears. I focused on the worn wood of the pew in front of me, counting all its little knots and scars. My chest ached, iron lungs. Katie managed to read a poem. They played Iona's favourite song. That's what undid me. Me and Mum filled tissue after tissue, trying not to make any noise.

Afterwards, the coffin left first, then the mourners followed row by row, in a strict hierarchy of grief.

We beetled after them, a black stain spreading over the churchyard, towards the place they'd prepared. I wobbled, clutching Mum, my head full of snot and cobwebs. I wanted sunglasses, but it felt disrespectful. The brightness hurt my eyes. Buttercups like broken glass, glinting on the grass. Bees groaned past in the hot still air, the noise grating on my nerves.

'OK, love?' Mum whispered and I nodded, lying, feeling the pressure build.

We huddled round the deep grave, where they'd spread fake grass to hide the mud. They started to lower the coffin on fabric straps. Eden, Claire and Simon stared, eyes wide, mouths open, faces rigid with horror.

I had to concentrate on something, or I was going to lose it, and it wasn't my place to do that. I named the colours of the earth's rainbow layers as the white box descended: emerald, loam, rust, cream, ochre, jet.

Someone was reading prayers.

Claire flung a handful of earth. It clattered on the bone-white lid. On the plaque reflecting light and sky. It looked wrong to dirty it up. Iona wouldn't like that: her room was always so neat.

Eden froze, soil in her hand, staring down. People started to murmur.

The look on her face was an electric shock, zapping me back to life. This was what I was for. This was real. I crossed to her and took one side. Liam

appeared at the other. I hadn't even seen him till now. He looked older in his black tie.

We each passed a hand around Eden's waist, tinier than ever in this black dress. I felt her sag against us. Her fingers sprang open, scattering dry little clods of soil over our feet. She gazed down at our shoes in a row: my boots, polished up for today; Eden's low slingbacks; Liam's shiny new shoes, neatly laced.

'It's OK... Come with us, it's all right,' Liam whispered. 'Hold on.'

Moving as one, we manoeuvred Eden backwards. The sea of black parted for us. We stumbled down the slope and found a place near the long grass at the edge of the graveyard. We sank down, looking out over the summer valley, at the farms and the distant hills beyond.

Nobody spoke. We held her. I could feel Liam's arm below mine, the warm fabric of his white shirt.

I would get her through this. I would save Eden's life, like she saved mine. Nothing else mattered. Not school, not exams, not parents, not work. This would be Eden's summer. I would do anything to get her through.

I looked out at the patchwork of green fields, at Stoodley Pike pointing to heaven in the far distance, at the kestrel hovering above us like a witness, and I swore my vow.

Chapter Eight

Friday 4th September

10.20am

I leave school in a daze and go home, finding the next three steps in my head along the way. In the end I decide:

1. *Talk to Mum*
2. *Talk to the police*
3. *Talk to Eden's folks*

It keeps me together till my key's in the door. Then here, in my hallway, I feel safe. Everything looks as it should: worn wooden floor, yellow walls, my running coat hanging limply on the hooks next to Mum's smart jacket. I peek into the kitchen and through to the living room. It's calm and tidy. I hear the kitchen clock ticking and notice a curl of steam above the kettle. Fluff is curled up in a patch of sunshine, and only one ear twitches when I shout, 'Hello? Mum?' I hate to admit it but my cat is getting old: twelve years since I chose that stupid name for him.

'Mum?'

I can hear the burble of Mum's voice in her office above me. Either she's got a client in there or she's on the phone.

Can I interrupt?

Too many times I've heard her explain about the *confidential, sensitive* nature of her work. She used to cut hair and listen. Then she retrained, and now the listening pays better, I think.

She's a *coach, not a counsellor* she always says, even though no one else knows the difference. People pay to talk to her. To have her listen. It must help cos they usually come back. Half her work is corporate, coaching business people to greater success, or maybe just helping them accept there's no escape from their boring dead-end jobs. The other half is for charities, like down at the women's shelter. I can tell which kind of day it is by what she's wearing: lipstick and a dark suit, power jewellery; or faded jeans, no makeup and an unthreatening cardie.

I don't mind: it seems like an OK job to do. It pays the bills, along with what Dad sends. I just hate it when we're talking and she forgets I'm her

daughter, not a client, keeps asking those positive questions, ‘How do you want it to be? What do you want to achieve?’ as if everything can be solved through wishful bloody thinking.

She and I both know that’s not always true.

On the plus side, she listens well. It’s what she’s trained to do. Also, she’s never minded about the ever-changing hair colour. She made me explain myself, and then told me which hair dye would hold best.

And maybe it’s easier, just me and her. She split up from Dad when I was three, came out as a lesbian not long after. That’s so not a big deal in our town. Anyway, I don’t remember anything else.

I go see Dad most half terms and two weeks each summer. He married Rachel ages ago and they’ve got the twins. Hope and Esther are five years old and never stop talking or moving unless they’re actually asleep. I love them. I love being someone’s big sister, even though I suspect they see me more like a cousin. Remembering Eden and Iona’s fights, maybe that’s not such a bad thing.

I love Dad and Rachel’s cramped London flat – dark red brick with white plasterwork like icing round the door and windows - full of life and colour and mess and noise. I love the streets near their house, full of people no matter what time of day it is. I love that you could do almost anything and no one would bat an eyelid. If I ran naked down a street in London, it’d be like chucking a pebble into the Thames: gone in a second. If I did that here, the rumours would be round school in five minutes and they’d stick till the day I died.

But I also love leaving London. Coming home. Here, to my house, to my room, where everything stays where I leave it. To Mum. To Fluff. To my painting. To the running club. To Eden.

I go upstairs. I can hear Mum’s voice speaking softly now, so I can’t make out the words. I tiptoe closer to Mum’s door. Her voice gets clearer. It’s not a work call. She’s talking about Eden.

‘... Yes, since last night. The police are on their way here right now. We’re next on the list. Yes... Claire rang here just after Jess left. God knows what she’s thinking. Going through hell again: the police, the waiting. That poor woman. It beggars belief. Why do these things happen...?’

There’s a pause. Who’s at the other end? Must be Steph, her girlfriend.

‘I know, I know. You’re right... Yes, please. I’m going to need the company. Just let me check with Jess first.’

I hear the warmth in her voice. I know I’m the reason Steph hasn’t moved in yet, when they’ve been together four years. So far I’ve not done anything about it. One day soon I will. I like Steph: it’s not that. I just didn’t want to give up me and Mum, together. Not this year.

‘No, you’re right. Thanks. Poor Jess. It just brings it all back... *Jess.*’

I freeze. I shouldn’t be listening, but I can’t seem to move.

‘... Still feel so bad. It’s just...’ Her voice is thick with held-back tears. It moves to a higher pitch: ‘I know I couldn’t have stopped it. That it’s not my fault. Everyone tells me that. But I’m her Mum. She’s still only fifteen: I should be able to keep her safe.’

I can’t hear this. I creep back to my room and yell, ‘Mum!’ even louder and slam my bedroom door really hard.

She comes out and I meet her at the top of the stairs. It’s a cardigan and jeans day, and her hair’s in a loose knot with a pencil stuck through it, streaked blonde-ish strands round her face. She looks tired and her eyes are watery. She opens her arms to me and I throw myself into them.

‘Oh, Jess.’ She strokes my hair. ‘Was it awful?’

I nod into the softness of her grey cardigan, breathing in the comfort of her.

‘I’m so sorry, sweetheart. I can’t believe it either. And you just saw her last night, right? You know the police need to talk to you? They’re on their way here right now.’

‘I know. Oh, Mum.’

She pulls back and wipes my cheek with her thumb. ‘It’s going to be OK. You can do this. I’ll be here with you the whole time.’

I nod.

‘What did school say? Let’s go down, I’ll make us some tea.’

‘Dunno,’ I tell her, as we go downstairs. ‘They’re being weird about it.’

‘What do you mean, love?’ she presses the button and the kettle starts boiling, steaming away and fidgeting on its base. She lifts down the teapot, takes off its lid.

‘Like they know something I don’t. There was some text that Eden sent her mum last night, and no one will talk about it.’ I sit down at the kitchen table and

put my head in my hands. The pills are working: the headache's faded to a dull throb.

'You've tried ringing her?' She goes to the fridge and gets out a bottle of milk.

'All the time. And texting. I think something's happened.'

I look up in time to see Mum tense up. She's reaching the mugs down from the shelf and she pauses halfway. 'What about that boy? Liam. Has anyone talked to him?' She busies herself with the boxes of tea – about ten different kinds jammed on top of the microwave – and I can see the tension in her jaw, clenching tight when the words are bitten out. 'I know something happened last weekend. You weren't yourself, last Sunday, Monday. What happened, Jess? What did he do?'

'Mum!' I don't believe it. 'He's my *friend*.' That word does nothing to sum up what he is to me, but my anger saves me from the awkwardness. I use it to counterattack. 'You know Liam. You let him sleep here, under your roof. You weren't jumping to conclusions then!'

Those nights in the summer when Eden didn't want to go home and I knew that for her sake Mum would be cool with the three of us all crashed in a big pile of sleeping bags on my bedroom floor.

'Maybe I shouldn't have let him stay. Maybe we don't know enough about him.'

'That's bollocks. You've known Sharon for years. She's like, four streets away.' I like Liam's mum. You know where you are with Sharon. You can knock on her door any time. 'What's changed?'

This isn't like Mum, and it starts ice crystals growing inside me. Mum's the kind who bends over backwards to believe the best of anyone. 'Have you heard something?' Is it the parent grapevine, whispering rumours? 'If you have, you better tell me!'

She gives up on the tea and turns round, 'I'm worried sick, Jess. For Eden and for you. Isn't that enough?'

'Here we go again,' I sigh. It had taken ages for her to get back to normal, after the attack last November. She went into mother-wolf mode, über-protective. She still didn't like me walking back alone after dark. Running was

OK: she let me do that, after the doctor said it was good therapy. Otherwise it was chaperones and taxis all the way.

The worst thing is, I know it's not her style. She used to be laid back, before. I hate that they've done this to her.

The doorbell goes.

Chapter Nine

Friday 4th September

10.35am

Mum turns, tense and pale. 'Be strong. We can do this.' She drops a careful kiss on the top of my head and goes to open the door.

I sit there. I feel the blood pounding in my temples. I hear Mum greeting the police, their formal introductions, their steps in our hallway, getting louder.

'Jess? These officers have come to ask you some questions, OK love?' Mum's using a bright, fake voice, so I know she's freaked out too. This brings back bad memories for us both: police in our kitchen.

I'm staring at my white knuckles but somehow I pull my gaze up and towards them. It's not the same ones as back then.

Two women. One mum's age: with light brown hair tied back and glasses that make her look like an owl. One younger, Asian, pretty, with a sleek black bob. They're both wearing suits, not uniforms, and I know from the TV police shows that it's not a good sign.

The women officers flash their IDs and say their names and ranks but I'm not taking it in.

Meanwhile Mum puts a mug of tea in front of each of us on the kitchen table. They pour milk. They don't take sugar.

I decide I need two sugars right now and stir it in slowly.

They bring out notebooks. They give me smiles that seem carefully calculated to be reassuring. The smiles tell me they're safe. I'm safe. I wonder if the smiles are why they've been chosen for this task.

Mum sits down and the atmosphere changes. It's the start of something.

'So, Jess, you know why we're here?' Owl-lady asks.

I can't speak. My throat has closed up.

'Your friend Eden didn't come home last night. We're working very hard to find her as soon as possible. I know you want her home safe, Jess, and so do we. So, we'd like to ask you some questions. Your answers could help us find her. Is that all right with you?'

It's a script and she's doing it well. You can tell she's good at her job, but the rehearsed flavour of it spins me out. The clock ticks. This feels like one of

those slowed-down nightmares that unfold, inevitably, towards horror, and you wake up screaming just before the end...

‘Jess?’ Mum prompts with raised eyebrows.

‘Sorry,’ I manage in a strangled voice. I cough out, ‘Yeah, but are you sure? Are you sure she’s missing? You know she texted her mum? Mr Barwell said.’

The women exchange a quick glance and it sends a cold shiver right through me.

‘And you? Has Eden been in touch with you?’

‘No. Not since yesterday,’ I say, feeling like a failure of a best friend. ‘Have you spoken to Liam?’ I ask. ‘He’ll tell it straight.’

‘Liam Caffrey? Eden’s boyfriend? We’re talking to all of Eden’s close friends.’ Owl-lady is good at deflecting. She’s well in control. ‘Now Jess,’ she says firmly, ‘tell us, please, as much information as you can, even if it seems like a small detail to you. Did anything seem wrong or different with Eden yesterday?’

I shake my head.

‘Tell me when you saw Eden last, and how she seemed to you.’

I can do that part. I tell them every last detail I can think of.

‘And you’re sure she was meeting Liam?’

I nod, but then I remember the way she smiled at her phone when it buzzed with something new, and suddenly I’m not quite sure.

‘Where would they go?’

‘Skatepark. Club. Liam’s sister works there. Then he’d walk her home. He did walk her home, right?’ I ask.

There’s a long beat.

Owl lady sighs. ‘OK, Jess, let’s get some background. How has Eden seemed lately? Anything unusual in her behaviour? Any problems she told you about?’

I stare at them. ‘You do know her sister just died in June? I’d class that as a problem.’

‘We know about Iona’s death, of course.’

They nod patiently.

‘Has she been finding it harder to cope with that recently?’ Sleek-lady takes over, and they alternate smoothly, like a double-act.

‘Not really,’ I say. ‘I mean, yeah, it’s been hard. But nothing’s changed all of a sudden.’ I’m horrified to find my cheeks getting hotter when I say that.

‘Was she depressed?’

‘No.’

‘School? GCSE year? Was she feeling the pressure?’

‘Nah. She’s great with that stuff.’ Not like me. ‘She’s got an extra subject, even.’

‘Did she talk to you about how she felt?’

‘Yes. No. A bit.’ As I say it, I realise it’s been a long time since I knew exactly what was in Eden’s head.

They do that glance thing again.

‘Eden and Liam, what’s that like? How long have they been together?’

Owl lady asks it so lightly and gently that it makes me look at her, surprised.

Why is she being careful now? It seems like an easy question. Is this one of those questions like on the TV police dramas? They know the answer: they’re just testing, to see if I can be trusted. Like the first questions on the lie-detector tests to establish a base level.

‘We’ve known Liam for ages, but they met again properly in May.’

Chapter Ten

May Day Bank Holiday

1.10pm

Shock, horror, it was actually hot, kicking off the summer in style. I went up to Eden's to hang out before I started work at the café properly the next weekend. We dragged damp-smelling loungers out of Eden's dad's shed, covered them with beach towels to hide the mouldy bits and made ourselves comfy on the patio in our bikinis. Up there in Eden's garden, you couldn't even see the town, tucked away in the valley. It was just us, sheep and lambs baa-ing madly to each other in the fields, and the whole valley doing its crazy super-green spring thing. I started to feel as if things might just be on the up.

'Factor fifty for you – catch!' Eden threw a bottle of sun cream at me.

'All right, all right, so I'm white as a ghost. You don't have to rub it in!'

'Who else is going to do your back then? *Ta-da!*' she winced at her own crap joke. 'S'all right, you have inner class, you can carry off pale and interesting. Hey, that tattoo is all healed up fine, in't it?'

'Yup. I've already planned the next one too.'

She came and sat next to me, and even though it was just Eden, just my best friend, I turned to stone.

You can do this, you can do this.

She slopped a cool slick of sun cream onto my shoulder.

I jumped away like it was acid. On my feet, flinching like a kicked mutt.

'Shit, Jess, I forgot.' Eden looked horrified.

'It's OK. It's not your fault.' I felt stupid. I was sweating and cold at the same time. Mortified. Months now, and I still couldn't handle it. I'd hoped it was the end of winter for me on the inside too, but this just showed I was still all frozen up inside.

'Yeah, and it's bloody well not yours, either, and don't you forget it.'

'Why don't I do you instead? That should be OK.' Somehow it was acceptable to my broken brain for me to touch someone else; I just couldn't handle being touched. Not yet.

'So I did some training at the café yesterday,' I told Eden, desperate to change the subject, as she turned her back to me. 'Guess who works there?'

'No way, I'm not listing our entire school. Just spit it out...'

‘Liam Caffrey. He’s back.’ I covered her shoulders in the thick white cream and started to rub it in.

‘Liam who?’

‘You know. You’ve known him since juniors. Thought he’d vanished off the face of the earth. Well he’s back and he’s my new colleague.’

‘And?’ Eden didn’t look round.

‘He’s all right, y’know? I think you’d like him. He actually smiles when he hands the plates over, instead of just grunting.’

‘Sounds like *you* like him.’

‘Not like that. But it matters, the small stuff, when you’ve got a long shift.’

‘You haven’t even started yet.’

But I was looking forward to it. Now that Liam would be there. I tried to describe what made him different. ‘He talks to me like I’m...’ Like what, exactly? I chased down the words: ‘Like a person. Not a girl. Not a waitress. Not someone from his English group. Do you know what I mean?’

‘Not a clue, J.’

‘Like I’m someone with options. Like he hasn’t made up his mind about me yet.’

‘Well you’ve only known him two minutes.’

‘Ten years. I’m just saying. There’s not many lads like that. So comfy with who they are that they can handle whoever you are. You know?’

‘Are you sure you don’t fancy him?’

‘Nope. Missing the point, E... There! You’re done.’ I tapped her lightly and moved over to my chair to slather myself in the stuff. ‘No sunburn for you today.’

‘What the hell is this then, delusional duo?’ Iona slouched through the open patio doors, wearing a vest and tight jeans, sunglasses on, carrying a jug in one hand, stacked beakers in the other. ‘Think you’re in Beverley Hills? What a joke.’

If her words were mean, it was her delivery that spiked them. Little word bombs exploding with hate.

‘Mum made me bring you this: she thought you might need to cool down.’ She plonked the jug down on the metal table next to us, making the juice slop

over the edge. She reached into the jug and grabbed a handful of the ice cubes Claire had put in there.

‘So kind of you to think of us, dearest sister.’ Eden was sprawled over her sunlounger, eyes closed, arms spread to catch the light.

‘Eden...!’ I warned, but Iona was too fast.

‘Mum was right, you’re definitely not cool enough,’ Iona smirked and slammed the ice cubes onto Eden’s back before darting back inside.

‘Argh!’ Eden’s shriek echoed down the valley. ‘Can’t she give me a day off?’ She sat up, furious, dripping. ‘Oof... Actually, it’s quite nice. Definitely cooling. Probably even good for you, you know, like one of them spa treatments after a sauna? You should try it...’ She got a mischievous glint in her eye.

‘Don’t even go there!’ But it was too late. She grabbed a handful of ice and chased me round the garden with it.

‘Oi! Unprovoked!’ Then of course I had to get revenge. By the time we’d finished, there was nothing left in the jug and we were sticky and damp and bent double, giggling.

‘Right, there’s only one thing for it. We need to swim.’

‘The dam? Hell, yeah. It’ll be freezing. Let’s do it!’

We grabbed our stuff and headed for the hill behind her house. I always forgot how hard the climb was. Just before the summit, surrounded by boulders and sheep poo, it felt like we’d never get there. Then suddenly, like a mirage, a flight of stone steps appeared ahead of us, looking as if they led up into the sky...

‘Race you!’ We ran up them, laughing, and then there it was: a huge rectangular basin of water reflecting blue sky, built of stones, with a tiny golden beach in one corner. Our own local miracle, a beach on the high moors. And all around us in every direction, the view was amazing. Panoramic perfection, 360 degrees.

Hot and sweaty, we dumped our things and waded in, flinching.

‘Flippin’ freezing!’ Eden yelled, then turned and watched me following.

I recognised the look in her eyes.

‘Don’t you dare splash me, Eden Holby.’ By August the water would be properly warm, heated by the stones all summer long, but it was hard to believe that now. ‘Oi! Two can do that, goosebump girl!’ I splashed her back and we

stumbled slowly forwards in the soft sandy murk, till we were deep enough to plunge.

For the first few strokes it felt as though we'd never be warm again. Gasping, we swam to the middle.

I pedalled my legs underwater, looking all around us, at the light on the water and the perfect blue above. I laughed, suddenly fizzy with happiness, dipped my head back, and regretted it. The water was a vice around my skull, cold rising from the deeps at the dead centre of the reservoir.

When I tilted back upright, Eden had a strange look on her face.

'E, what's up?' I asked her. 'Don't tell me: you're peeing, ew!'

She didn't even smile. 'Jess, can I tell you something?'

'Course, E. What?' I nearly asked if we could go back to the beach first, but something in her face stopped me. We stayed right there.

I gave her time.

She bobbed down for a moment, then came up and spat out water. 'Last night, I found something. I don't get it yet, but I think it's important. Promise me you won't tell anyone?'

'Promise,' I kept my eyes on her face.

'Iona lost her passport, and she's got to get a new one really quick, before the holiday.'

I nodded. Eden's dad was French and I knew they were off to see Eden's gran in France at half term, like always. 'In three weeks, right?'

'Normally Mum would make us fix it ourselves, something like that. Y'know, drag us all the way to the passport office to make a point, to teach us responsibility or summat...'

'Yeah, mine's like that too: they can't help it. It's a Mum thing.'

'But this time she was dead cagey. Wouldn't discuss it, just said she'd go herself. And I know I shouldn't have done it, but Iona's been such a shit this week. When we're not at school, she's on at me the whole time. I know she hates me, but it's worse lately.'

'I know.' I'd seen it too. Sometimes I caught the edge of Iona's hate, just from being with Eden. It hurt.

'So, I wanted to see why Mum was being weird. I guess I wanted to use it against Iona. So I looked in Mum's desk, the locked one. I know where she

keeps the keys. She's so obvious, with her totally guessable passwords, and her secret keys hanging right next to the lock.'

She stopped and clamped a hand over her mouth, making her sink again.

'What was it, E? What did you find?' I put one hand under her shoulder and raised her up.

'Three passports. My birth certificate. And something else... Papers.'

I could see it was serious. Her hair was wet, down her back, dark gold, streaky and shining in the sunshine. Her eyes were that astonishing blue, like the sky. Squinting against the light, her eyes were like chips of blue glass, full of pain and something unfamiliar. She looked guilty.

She opened her mouth to tell me, but before she could speak a bright yellow tennis ball slammed into the back of her head.

'What the f-?'

'Are you all right?' My hand shot out and grabbed her arm, holding her up, and we both spun round.

'Oi, what the hell? Who did that?' Eden's angry voice carried easily across the water, to the sloping wall of the reservoir where a handful of lads stood, guiltily, not looking over.

Except one.

He raised his hand. 'Me! Sorry. It was an accident...' Liam Caffrey: the resurfaced mystery man, all grown up and gorgeous. Tall now, with that tuft of fair hair at the front. His face, all triangular with those killer cheekbones, and his eyebrows, dark and mobile – telling you stuff he hasn't said yet. I'd know him anywhere, even if I hadn't seen him yesterday.

But Eden wasn't listening. She grabbed the ball and tucked it under the wide front strap of her bikini, and then started hammering through the water towards him: front crawl, powered by fury, her elbows rising behind her and chopping through the water.

I bobbed after her more slowly, using my crap breaststroke, old-lady-style, head above water so I saw exactly what happened next.

Liam's mates started jeering and pointing. 'You're in fer it now, mate!'

'Watch out for this one – that's Eden Holby.'

Eden hauled herself to her feet, streaming water, and marched towards him, hardly slowed by the uneven rocks, chin jutting, pulling the ball out, 'Your

ball? How do you like it?’ And she pulled her arm back and threw it straight at his head, from barely a metre away.

Liam didn’t duck. He dodged the ball and caught it, then froze, keeping it lifted. He was wearing just a pair of long baggy blue shorts, nothing else, and he didn’t flinch in the face of her fury.

‘Good shot. Fair point. We quits now, or what?’

I could see the rise and fall of his chest muscles. His shoulders were starting to tan already.

They stood there, glaring at each other, head to head, without speaking.

All Liam’s mates waited, not daring to crack another joke till they saw which way it went.

Finally Eden moved and pulled her glance away, scanning their stuff. ‘See them packets of salt and vinegar? Give me one. *Then* we’re quits.’

The tension broke up and rippled away to nothing. By the time I got out, Eden was sitting in the middle of the lads, passing a packet of crisps around and laughing so hard at something Liam said that she sprayed herself with salty crumbs.

‘Jess, where’ve you been? Hey, this is Liam Caffrey – remember him?’

I smiled and waved and went to sit down, trying to work out why I felt as if something had been snatched away from me.

Chapter Eleven

Friday 4th September

11.00am

‘Eden and Liam. They were good together, till June. Then, after the funeral,’ I pause. It’s hard, putting it into words. ‘Well, it’s like, me and Liam have been looking after Eden all summer.’

The police officers write this down. I see Owl-lady notice Mum nodding along, backing me up.

‘Do you get on with Liam?’

Flush. Burn. I nod, then lift my cup, taking scalding sips of tea so I don’t have to meet their eyes.

‘What’s he like, Liam Caffrey?’ Sleek-lady asks this one, casually.

I take a moment to consider all the different Liams, trying to bring them into one focused image.

Liam at work: steady, calm, capable. Him and the head chef, Dev, are a proper team, chopping, flipping, stirring, testing, building it all high and fancy on the plates like they do on the telly, and laughing at themselves for the effort.

Liam this summer: with me and Eden. Funny. Relaxed. Loving her so well, until... It hurts too much to go there, so I move on.

Liam at school: sullen. Hunched. Sweary.

‘He’s sound. Really.’ It sounds pathetic, but how do you sum anyone up in three words?

‘You know he attacked someone?’ Sleek-lady gets her claws out. Miaow.

‘I know he did something.’ I turn defensive. Liam was missing from school for weeks, and I never found out which of the rumours were true. ‘But I bet he had a good reason. That Harry Clarkson is a nightmare. Bet he deserved it.’

‘Jess!’ Mum’s shocked – nothing ever deserves violence in her book, but she hasn’t met Harry Clarkson. Josh’s brother. And if you think Josh is a spoilt, arrogant, nasty piece of work, Harry equals Josh squared. Make it Josh to the power of ten.

‘So you’re saying that you trust Liam Caffrey, despite his history?’ Sleek-lady sounds like she thinks that is an unwise thing to do.

Liam. Trust. Two things that have been bothering me non-stop since last Saturday night. And yet I am sure. In spite of everything, I believe that I could trust him with my life, or Eden's.

'Totally.'

Sleek-lady scribbles something, then smiles again and chucks in a hand grenade. 'We know about the party.'

Tea. Gulping. 'So?'

Mum's frowning. I know she wants me to cooperate. The police did right by me last year. I didn't even have to enter the courtroom. Evidence by video link. They looked after me back then. So why am I resisting them now?

This just feels so wrong. What if Eden's about to walk back in, and I've told all her secrets to the police? But what if she's really in trouble and the police don't figure it out in time, cos of something I hid?

'OK. There was a party. Mum, you know that. When her folks were called away to Eden's nan, the one who lives down south. They let her stay behind cos they didn't realise how poorly her grandma was. When they phoned to say they'd be away overnight, Eden took the chance to party. That's all! You can hardly blame her for wanting a good time, after everything she's been through!'

I know my tone's gone what Mum calls *belligerent*, but it is starting to feel like we're on trial here: me, Eden, Liam.

'Did Eden drink or take drugs?' Owl-lady asks casually.

Ouch.

'We're trying to build a picture of Eden's state of mind in the days leading up to her disappearance.'

Her disappearance. I feel sick then. It's sinking in deeper. I feel like every minute that passes there is less chance of this script having a happy ending. This isn't a cliff-hanger episode on a soap after all. This might be a darker story, one of those after-9pm crime shows. This might not come good.

Decision time. Truth or fudge?

I picture Eden: frightened, alone. Or worse: not alone.

'OK.' I finish the sweet grainy tea at the bottom of my mug and launch into the story of last weekend. Edited.

Sat 29th August

5.45pm

After work me and Liam went to find Eden in the park. It was our last shift of the summer.

‘Bank holiday weekend starts here,’ I said, stealing a glance up at his face. He reminded me of a cat or a fox. Yes, a fox, that was it, with those slanting cheekbones, angled towards me.

He’d changed - jeans and a faded red T-shirt - with his chef’s whites in his backpack to wash. I only had to switch my work shirt for my favourite T, shake my hair down and put my studs back in.

‘Yep. Don’t even think about Tuesday. Deal?’ he offered me his fist. His eyebrows were telling me it was time to play.

‘Deal.’ I tapped his knuckles with mine, and it didn’t even cause a ripple. Maybe I was getting better.

My body felt tired from the work, but high with it too. I was buzzing from the dance of waitressing. I didn’t mind the talking and the smiling. I didn’t mind the heavy plates or the heat of the kitchen. I liked that it was straightforward, and I was good at it. I liked that I’d earned the envelope of cash folded into the back pocket of my black jeans.

I crossed the street with Liam. It was still too warm. We sank into being off-duty, like sliding into a deep bath. It was one of those long hot summer Saturdays when the concrete soaked up the heat and served it back to you at dusk like a bonus. Sergei in the ice-cream van still had a long queue. That idiot Jack Greenwood from Year Eight had just dive-bombed into the canal in his jeans, his daft mates cheering. We dodged past aimless tourists, still drifting like clouds of midges, through the park gates.

Eden was perched on the back of a bench at the edge of the skate park where it met the kids’ playground. The dividing line was one thin red railing. Eden was picking idly at the peeling paint, flicking off the dry flakes like giant scabs. She saw us and uncurled herself slowly, then came over to hug us both in turn, Liam first. She was wearing cut-off denim shorts that my mum would say were too short, and a blue daisy-print vest, blood-red lipstick and black sunglasses. She looked stunning.

I ran one hand over my face and hair, feeling suddenly greasy and stale from the café. I followed Eden's gaze. She was watching some strangers through the iron bars.

'What's up?' I asked.

'Idiots,' Liam dismissed them.

The new lads were about our age, a handful of them, but not from round here. They'd broken the rules. They were sitting in the playground before all the little kids and parents left for the night. They'd brought loud music and cans of cider in plastic bags, and they were skinning up at a picnic table with no effort to hide it.

You didn't do that. Not in a town this small. The news would get home before I did.

'Good day at work, dears?' Eden turned her attention back to us, her voice sneering and sarcastic.

My heart sank. You never knew which Eden you were going to get, since Iona. It'd been that way all summer. Mum sat me down and explained it, so I knew it was normal, that grief meant anger and denial. All I could see in Eden was that stuff festering into bitterness. Me and Liam were all about cutting her some slack, but today a little voice in my head wondered how long we'd have to keep doing that.

I braced myself, shields up, 'Yeah, not bad. Bit busy. Good tips, at least. I'm done now.'

'Your last day. Free till school on Tuesday. You're all mine now!' Eden joked, but with an edge that made me wonder how much she'd minded us working together, without her.

'Shh. No one mention the 'S' word. Me and Jess already struck that deal,' Liam stretched out on the bench. Even though he was still growing so fast - his shoulders and his feet too big for his body - he always seemed easy in his skin.

I envied him that. I sat awkwardly on one side, while Eden threw herself down on the other and cosied into Liam's chest.

'I'm in. We're free! *Free-eee... to feel good!*' she sang, from an old song they'd been playing in the café that summer. 'Come on, let's do something. It's our last Saturday of freedom. And guess what? My parents aren't coming home tonight after all.'

I sat up and looked at them. Liam rolled his eyes in my direction, eyebrows raised in alert: not unkind, just putting us both on standby. We'd had to develop a kind of shorthand for looking after Eden this summer. It was clearly going to be one of *those* days.

Eden jumped up. Ignoring their pointed tips, she started climbing over the iron railings.

'Bloody hell, Eden, can't you just go round like a normal person?' But Liam vaulted over after her anyway.

I sighed and took the long way round. When I walked through the gates, Eden was in the centre of the new gang. They orbited her, fascinated. She flipped her hair over her shoulder, delivering a punchline that made them all laugh.

I smothered a flare of anger, wondering whether I should just walk away now and head home. New people made me edgy. Eden knew that, but this summer she was selfish. With good reason. I hated myself for even thinking it.

I looked at the new lot more closely. The leader seemed to be a tall lad, very cool, in his designer vest, baggy shorts and gold jewellery standing out against his dark skin. He looked like a film star – huge brown eyes and close-cropped hair - moving with a slow easy grace.

Eden was ignoring Liam, who waited at the edge like a patient golden Labrador. She was laughing and flirting with this new guy.

'Hey, this is Tyler. He's just moved here,' she called out to us. 'Tyler, meet Liam n' Jess.' The way she said it made us sound like we were a unit, and I wondered if she'd done that on purpose, to free her up.

'Hi,' I muttered, keeping a wary distance too.

'So. What is there to do after dark in this little town?' Tyler was saying. His voice was deep and his city-boy accent strange and choppy, which made the question sound a bit less cheesy.

I snorted. See how she coped with that one. There were old men's pubs, a gay women's bar, the one club.

'All back to mine?' Eden offered. 'Folks are away. Eden will play. Liam can bring the tunes,' she sang.

‘Eden, no!’ I didn’t like it. I hated this mood. It was one thing with me or Liam, pushing us, winding us up, to distract her from the darkness in her own head, but not with these strangers. They wouldn’t know to be careful with her.

And she was too far gone to think of me. To remember that I’m not good with big groups or strangers, and why...

‘Sounds good,’ Tyler’s eyes lit up in a way I didn’t like, as he passed over something hidden inside his cupped hand.

‘Why not?’ she narrowed her eyes and blew out smoke – I inhaled the sweet, rich, herbal scent of skunk. There’d be no stopping her now.

I bit my lip. I had to be careful how I played it. If she barred me, I couldn’t look out for her.

‘Whatever.’ I shrugged. ‘When are they back? Monday? Got two days to clean up...’ I kept my tone as light as hers, not passing judgement.

Liam sauntered closer, listening.

She got her phone out and her thumb flitted over its surface. She pressed hard, one last time, and looked up, grinning. ‘Done. It’s live. Don’t worry, I invited you, Jess. Liam, you get the lead slot on the decks. Now help me out, will you? We’ve got an hour and a half to prepare the party of our lives.’

Chapter Twelve

Saturday 29th August

6.15pm

And she did it too. We got a taxi up to Eden's place, leaving the others to follow on later, calling at Liam's for the decks and speakers, scooping up his mate Aziz along the way.

'Where's your mum and dad?' I asked as we barged in, carrying boxes of records. The house was very quiet, but it didn't stay that way for long. Liam and Az followed on our heels, lugging a massive speaker between them.

'Nan's been taken ill again. She's in hospital.'

'Really sorry, E.'

Eden blanked the sympathy. No change there.

'I got a pass out, 's long as I eat dinner with Mrs Coates next door. But I just texted her to say I can't make it.'

'She'll hear the music,' I pointed out.

'Yeah, but you know what? I'm still playing the dead sister card. Gets me out of all kinds of crap. Come on!'

I felt a gathering sense of dread, storm clouds rolling in. This wasn't right. Eden wasn't right. I knew she loved her nan. Could the real Eden Holby please come back? It seemed like a faint possibility.

I joined Eden in her manic party prep, while Liam and Az got set up with the music. To be fair, Eden managed to lock most of the nickable stuff in her dad's office. Then we pushed back the furniture in the huge living room, hiding it beneath old bedsheets, and moved the table and chairs in the dining room opposite.

Liam set up his DJ booth in the hall that joined them, and this became the dancefloor, spilling off left to right into each room.

We filled the sink with ice, and Eden packed it with bottles of beer and spirits stolen from the cellar. She found a ball of string in one of the kitchen drawers and tied it across the wide staircase like a giant spider web to stop people from exploring upstairs.

'See! All thought through. It's going to be fine,' she told me, triumphantly. Her eyes were already glassy, her pupils massive and inky. 'Now, our turn!' she pulled me up the staircase and we had to crawl under the string web, giggling.

‘You know the only good thing about having a dead sister?’ Eden called over her shoulder, once we were through.

I flinched at her words, glad she wasn’t looking my way.

‘Two wardrobes are better than one!’ she marched into Iona’s room. I leant on the doorframe, watching as she flung Iona’s wardrobe doors wide and started flicking through her stuff.

I remembered Iona’s room had always been tidy, but now it was a museum piece, with everything frozen in time. It gave me a weird feeling, seeing all her stuff waiting for her – her posters and photos pinned up on the walls, her hairbrush and jars of nail varnish on the window ledge, her necklaces and scarves draped over the mirror, the bright red throw and cushions on her bed. I glanced behind me in the corridor, half-expecting her to come charging in, cursing us.

Iona wasn’t coming. She was never coming back to her room. The finality of it made the four walls spin around me. ‘Eden, are you sure ‘bout this?’ I asked, rubbing a sweaty palm across my forehead.

‘Yeah, course. What’s she going to do, haunt me?’ she kept on flicking through the hangers without turning round. ‘I should tell the world, shouldn’t I? Tell them I’ve got proof that ghosts don’t exist. You can bet your last fiver, if she could, Iona would haunt me twenty-four-seven!’

When had Eden turned into this? It was like the grief got pushed down, under the pressure of everything unresolved, and it changed into something hard and cold, deep down inside her.

I imagined this unbreakable core, spreading out inside Eden - like a story from one of those old Marvel comics - replacing her flesh and bones, till she wasn’t human any more, she was Titanium Girl, hard and brittle and cruel.

‘This!’ Eden spun round, triumphant, holding up a black dress on a hanger. ‘Come on, Jess. Let’s get changed.’

I was glad to leave Iona’s room. We went next door into Eden’s. It had those little old-fashioned windows built under the eaves and I could see out, across the wide sunlit valley. The sunset caught the distant windows of the houses opposite, tiny squares of burning gold.

Eden put on the radio and started singing as she stripped down to her underwear. ‘Come on, Jess, people will be here soon. You can’t wear that old thing. Borrow whatever you like...’

We didn’t usually do this: our styles and sizes were too different. It felt weird, pawing through her things, as if choosing some of Eden’s clothes might turn me into her. Once, not so long ago, I’d’ve jumped at the chance. Right now, it wasn’t somewhere I wanted to go. Being Eden looked far too complicated and painful. Right now, I’d honestly rather be me, and that was saying something.

I settled for a red lace top I hadn’t seen her wear in months. It came down over my hips, but it would do.

‘There! Perfect, J!’ Eden took my shoulders and turned me to the mirror.

She looked amazing, as usual. Iona’s dress was short and tight, making her long tanned legs look endless. She’d retouched her make-up and done her hair so it tumbled down her back in thick curls. It was Iona’s red lipstick, and Iona’s style.

If any of Iona’s friends turned up, they’d get a shock. Maybe that was the point: Eden was being the bad sister, now that the job was vacant.

And me? Even I looked all right. I lined my eyes, thick and black, taking dark shadow right up to the browline. I painted my lips a deeper shade than Eden’s. The red top matched my hair and made it glow.

‘Red suits you, J. You look fab.’

I spoke into the mirror, watching our faces. ‘You don’t have to do this. You can change your mind, take down the invite.’

‘And why would I want to do that?’ she asked, turning icy.

That trick never worked on me. ‘E, listen up: I’m worried about you,’ I dropped the pretence of keeping cool. I turned and looked up at the real Eden, not the reflection of a girl dressed up as someone else, because being herself hurt too much right now. ‘Where’s it going to stop, E? When are you gonna stop running?’ I looked into her dark blue eyes and said, ‘You know I’ve got your back, but maybe you should slow down and admit—’

‘Lighten up, Jess.’ She interrupted me in a voice that was hoarse with something close to tears. ‘Don’t do this now, I mean it...’

Just then the music started downstairs, so loud it made the window frames vibrate.

Eden's laughter was high-pitched hysteria. 'Here we go!' She spun away from me, running down the corridor.

I followed more slowly, ducking under that stupid string. I felt self-conscious on the grand staircase, like I was making a Cinderella-style entrance, even though there were only four of us in the building.

Az looked up from fiddling with an extension lead, saw me and whistled.

Liam, flicking through a box of records, glanced up and paused. His face changed, just for a moment. The next look that blew across his face was the usual one, warm and friendly, but I'd seen something else for a split second and I held it in my heart, a tiny glimmer of hope and fear, as fragile and dangerous as a real spark.

Then the front door burst open and people poured in, clutching clinking bags of booze and shrieking with excitement. Eden hugged Imo and Charlotte, from her top set lessons, jumping up and down on the spot. She'd even asked Sam from my art class as my consolation prize.

I just hid. I found a spot near the door, a kind of alcove with a window seat behind a creamy-gold curtain, where I felt safe, where I could keep an eye on Eden. I had a tall glass of whisky and coke for company.

An hour later, cars were jamming the lane outside. By the time Tyler and his mates arrived, things were definitely out of hand. Strangers were arriving from Manchester. Some lad I didn't know was puking in the flowerbeds. The bodies were so tightly packed on the dance floor that Ed Foster from the year above me started crowd-surfing between rooms. Az yelled at a tall dark-haired lad in a Burnley FC shirt for sliding down the banister and making the decks shake on the dismount. By midnight, Eden was dancing on the dining table in her perfectly co-ordinated underwear, while Liam played her favourite tunes. Tyler was right there, drinking it all in.

I stayed behind my curtain, watching, watching, watching. My drink warmed me up. I could stick my head out of the window and take gulps of cooler air if the shakes got too bad.

So I had the perfect view when Tyler passed Eden something, small, round and pale. Eden tipped her head back and swallowed it, took his drink – a shot of gold liquid - and then kissed him on the lips. Soon afterwards he followed her upstairs, ducking under the string barrier.

My eyes found Liam. His hands were clenched fists, frozen above the decks. The track wanted mixing, and he fluffed it. The house fell into sudden silence. People started heckling.

‘Hey mate, if it was my turn, you only needed to holler,’ Az nudged Liam over. ‘Come on, man, you’re making me look bad.’ He flicked the fader up and the room erupted again.

For Liam’s sake, I managed to crush my fear so small that I could cross the sea of people dancing. I even managed not to scream when they slammed up against me, with their hands and their shoulders and the warm weight of their bodies. I managed to reach Liam. I managed to take his hand.

But I must have been white and shaking, cos he only had to look at me once. Then it was Liam leading me outside into the cool night air.

Chapter Thirteen

Monday August 31st

11am

Sunday was a lost day.

When I woke up the morning after the party it was the afternoon already. I had a text from Eden. She was OK. Liam was there. She'd see me for our shopping trip on Monday. Kisses.

That sent me fumbling for my running shorts, blinded by tears. I almost pushed Mum down the stairs in my hurry to get out of the door. I took the longest route I could, all the way up to Stoodley Pike – that old monument stuck like a needle into the highest flattest point of the moor. By the time I got back, my pain and my hangover were both gone.

It was a good job I'd run so far or I couldn't have slept on Sunday night. As it was, I woke at six and lay there tormenting myself for hours. Would I have a friend left by the end of the day? I'd risked everything. I'd ruined everything. And for what?

When the text from Eden came through – *see you at the station at 11?* – it was a relief and a death sentence all at once. By 11.10 I'd know if she knew.

It didn't work like that. She was late, of course. I got the tickets and stood outside the station feeling sick with dread. The weather seemed to understand. It was grey, not even wet, just damp and still, like we were all suspended in a cloud. Or a nightmare.

The Leeds train pulled in. People got off and filed out of the station past me. Then, at the last possible moment, Eden appeared in a taxi. She tumbled out, calling over her shoulder, and we just had time to run for it before the train doors hissed behind us, and the guard muttered something grumpily about cutting it fine.

My heart felt like it might jump right out of my chest. I wondered about hiding in the loo, but they always smelt so bad I'd be guaranteed to throw up. The only two free seats were at a table, and we flopped into them opposite two women plugged in to their phones.

I hid my panic by babbling on about the train tickets and passing Eden's over with sweaty fingers.

I glanced at her sideways. Did she know? What had Liam said? Was she waiting for the right moment to lay into me?

Eden settled back and stared out of the window. She did look like crap: pale beneath her tan, with massive purple-blue shadows under her eyes that the most expensive concealer in the world couldn't hide. Had she been crying? I remembered the pill she'd taken. I was no expert, but I'd heard that a comedown could feel like flu.

'You OK?' I asked, hating myself. I was a hypocrite. 'House get cleared all right?'

She shrugged. 'Found a website. Be good as new when I get back.'

That was the thing about being rich. It could sort the small stuff. In the unlikely event I ever threw a party, no doubt I'd spend the next two days on my hands and knees scrubbing away the puke.

She didn't mention Saturday night again and neither did I. We compared shopping lists. Polite. Subdued. I could feel the presence of everything we didn't say. It felt like some invisible creature sitting between us – like one of the storylines from *Doctor Who*. This monster would grow bigger and bigger the more we ignored it, till finally it would destroy us both. We talked like complete strangers, every bland word I said sticking in my throat, and all the while the little silent monster grew, guzzling away on my guilt and paranoia.

In Leeds, I trailed after Eden in near-silence as she went round her favourite shops, buying ankle boots, a jacket, tinted lipgloss, same as the last. Then she humoured me in Paperchase – she knew I loved that shop. But even colour-coordinated piles of stationery couldn't cheer me up today. I only got two sketchpads, three pens and a new block of stickies.

Instead of lunch, she bought us overpriced coffees laden with sweet syrup and frothy milk. As we were finishing the dregs, I couldn't bear it any more. I watched my best friend looking miserable, and I'd had enough. I'd just blurt it all out, beg for her forgiveness, and then at least this waiting would be over. I felt like I was on Death Row.

'Can we talk?' I asked, looking down at my knotted fingers, palms suddenly damp. I dared one quick glance.

‘Yeah. Course,’ she looked surprised. ‘But can we do it on the train back? Just, it’s time. We have to go now or I’ll be late.’ She picked up her phone and stood up, expectantly.

‘Late for what?’

She flicked a quick glance at me, but said only, ‘Come on.’

I shrugged and stood up, feeling my heart slowing again: confrontation postponed.

She used the app on her phone to navigate through the city centre, walking fast, taking sudden turns, leaving the main shopping zone. Finally we ducked into a cobbled alleyway and she stopped so abruptly that I crashed into the sheaf of oversize boutique bags she’d slung on her left wrist.

‘Number 54, right?’ she mumbled, peering up.

‘What is it, E? What are we doing here?’ In my sleep-deprived state, the day took on an eerie dreamlike feel. I had no idea what we were doing. Why wouldn’t Eden tell me anything? It wasn’t my paranoia: Eden was definitely being weird, and the day seemed to reflect her strangeness.

We were standing outside a dingy arcade in an old Victorian building that had seen better times. Sure enough, the number 54 was worked into the fancy stained glass above the double doors. The ornate metalwork had once been white, and was now stained with specks of rust like dried blood.

‘Will you stay with me?’ Eden asked, one hand on the door. She looked at me through half-closed eyes. In the dimness of the doorway she was deathly pale.

I bit down more questions. ‘Course I will, E. Always.’ I felt a rush of protectiveness for her, so warm and strong that I could forget for a whole minute what I’d done.

We went inside. It couldn’t have been more different from the sleek gold-and-glass arcade up the road, full of designer boutiques. This place was shabby and half the shops were boarded up. There was a second-hand clothes shop, a vinyl record store and a shopfront full of dog-eared posters listing the benefits of Traditional Chinese Medicine. My attention was snagged by a graphic novel store displaying some new Japanese imports.

But Eden was already heading up a wooden staircase in the centre of the building, the kind that folded round one of those lift shafts, like you see in old

films, with the cables and all that mechanical stuff I'd rather not think about when I get in a lift.

The upper floor was even quieter, echoey and full of shadows. It smelt damp and cold. The dreamlike atmosphere deepened.

'Where are we going?' I asked. 'Are you sure this is right? It doesn't look-

'Here.'

To our left, a sign announced 'The Angel's Gift', framed with gaudy red-and-black faux Gothic artwork that put my teeth right on edge. In the window there were ornaments, clusters of crystals, candles and other things I couldn't name.

'This is it,' Eden said, putting her phone away. She pushed the glass door open and a loud clang of windchimes announced us.

'Welcome, welcome!' A middle-aged woman rose from a stool behind the till to greet us, beaming.

I stared at the woman, baffled by Eden's choice. This was so not her kind of place. It smelled sweet and faintly smoky.

The woman wore a green dress under a long woolly waistcoat thing. She had frizzy grey hair escaping from a bun, and her eyes twinkled at us over little half-moon glasses. 'What can I help you with, dears?'

She suited the rest of the shop so perfectly that it was hard not to snigger.

'I'm here for a reading,' Eden replied.

A *reading*? I looked for evidence of books and found a few. Not the kind Eden read.

'Ellie Caffrey. Three o'clock.'

I searched Eden's face. She wouldn't meet my eye. Stung, I muttered under my breath. 'Nice false name, E.'

The woman opened a large diary and ran a finger down to the appointment, ticking it off in green ink.

'What?' I whispered to Eden. 'What the hell's going on?' I nudged her, trying to break the spell and re-enter reality.

But Eden didn't reply, all still and stiff and pale next to me.

'Just settle up with me first, dear, and then you're free to focus. Twenty pounds, please.'

Eden handed over a crumpled note and the woman took it. She froze mid-air while a thought occurred to her. ‘You did say you were over eighteen, dear?’

‘Of course,’ Eden snapped.

Liar.

‘Right. You’re just through the red curtain at the back, with Debs. I’ll put the kettle on for after, all right? Good luck, dear.’ Frizzy Lady seemed undisturbed by Eden’s rudeness.

We walked hesitantly over to the other side of the shop, circling round a display cabinet labelled ‘birthstone jewellery’.

‘What? Here?’ Eden pointed, and Frizzy Lady nodded vigorously. Eden pulled the curtain back and we entered a different space.

There was a huge round window on the exterior wall, flooding the little cubbyhole with greenish-grey light, filtered through the old glass. We could be underwater, looking out through a porthole at submerged city streets.

‘What is this?’ I tried again. ‘Why are we here?’ I made my voice gentle, sensing how wound up she was.

She didn’t answer, scanning the room with wide eyes.

It was neat and clean in there, with a round wooden table and four matching chairs. There were some lilies on the shelf in a gold pot and a stack of blue glasses and a blue water jug. It seemed more like the expensive salon where Eden had her hair cut, and I felt her relax, just a little.

‘Hi there,’ a younger woman appeared from behind another curtain and came to sit down facing us. ‘I’m Debs Green, welcome.’

We stared.

She smiled. ‘I know, I get that a lot. Don’t tell me: I don’t look like a Tarot reader. You expected someone like Irene out there, didn’t you?’

Tarot? Eden? Now I was sure I was dreaming. Eden didn’t go for that stuff. She always said, if you can’t taste it, it’s not real.

Debs wore a tight-fitting wraparound dress in a spiralling blue print. She was in her thirties, I guessed, with long, shiny, honey-coloured hair in a low ponytail. She wore a necklace of interlocking gold rings and her smile was very white and shiny. If you’d made me guess, I’d pin her as a dental nurse on a night out.

‘Which of you is Ellie?’ Debs asked.

Eden jumped at the fake name, a beat too late. 'Me. I am.'

'Take a seat. Do you want your friend to stay? Or wait out there with Irene?'

'Stay. Please.' Eden gave me a pleading look and I saw that she was scared.

'Sit down, both of you,' she gestured at the chairs. 'Would you like a drink of water?'

We shook our heads, sitting on the edge of the seats. Neither of us took our coats off. Eden was gripping the handles of her shopping bags so tightly that her knuckles were white.

'So. There are a few ways we could approach this, Ellie,' Debs began. 'Would you like to tell me something of what's on your mind? The question that brings you today?'

I stared at Eden, willing her to meet my eyes, to give me something here. What the hell was she playing at? Was this an elaborate way to catch me out?

Eden's eyes remained firmly fixed on Debs. 'Do I have to?'

'No. OK. That's fine. You don't have to.' Her smile faded as she fixed her gaze on Eden. The atmosphere in the room changed. Debbie examined her intensely, like she was listening to something no one else could hear. Was this part of the act?

Eden gazed back. Her cheeks flushed slightly, but she didn't break eye contact.

Debs reached for an ornate box on the shelf and took out a stack of cards. There were about as many as in a pack of playing cards, but these were longer and larger.

'Take the deck, Ellie. Give it a shuffle, OK?'

Eden nodded and when she reached for them, I noticed her fingers were trembling.

'Have you had your cards read before?' Debs paused.

Headshake.

When someone brought a deck into school and everyone crowded round, Eden was the one who'd laughed and walked away. But that was the old Eden, the one from before.

‘When you see the cards, try not to judge them, OK? Some of the images can be pretty dramatic, but the meanings are more subtle. You need to let me interpret them, OK?’ Her smile was warm and reassuring. ‘That’s what you paid me for, isn’t it?’

Eden fumbled and dropped a card.

I started to feel too hot in the enclosed space. I wished I’d never followed Eden here. It came to me in a sudden rush what a mistake I’d made. What if the cards told her about me? What if it was all about betrayal? Or the lovers? Wasn’t that a card?

My breathing came fast and shallow, as I watched Eden struggle to shuffle the pack.

‘Is that enough?’ Eden whispered.

‘Sure. When you’re ready, put the pack down. Then cut it three times.’ Debs demonstrated the movement in the air, her manicured fingernails glinting palely in the watery light.

‘As you prefer to keep your intentions private – and that’s fine, I respect that – I’m going to start with a very short reading, OK? Just three cards, symbolising the past, present and future, with reference to your question. Then I’ll read them for you.’

What was Eden really here for? The mention of the past sent me spiralling. My past. Eden’s past. There were shadows there.

Eden nodded. A hand flew up and played with a loose bit of hair round her face. Then she leaned over to cut the cards. One card stuck to her fingers and she had to shake it off.

Finally the pack just sat there. We looked at it, as if we expected it to start doing tricks all on its own.

Then Debs slid the top three cards onto the smooth wooden tabletop and turned them over one by one.

The first card read ‘Death’ and had a medieval-looking illustration of a grim reaper.

Shit. As if Eden needed a reminder.

The second had a load of swords stabbing into a bleeding heart.

I glared at Debs. What was she trying to do?

The third was a bright gold star, like a kid’s drawing.

Eden choked out, 'No!' She stood up so fast that her chair toppled back with a loud crash. She grabbed her bags and pushed through the curtains. I heard the door chimes jangle and the sound of Eden's running feet on the stairs outside.

'Ellie, wait!'

'I-I-I I need to go after her. Sorry!' I blurted, halfway out of my chair too.

'Wait.' Debs was fierce suddenly. 'Listen to me. This is important. She needs to know what the cards mean. It's not what she thinks.'

Something in her eyes made me sit back down to listen.

'Ellie's having a tough time, I can see that. Please? Promise me you'll tell her this?'

'Yeah, sure, whatever, I promise.'

She spoke urgently, seeing I was itching to be out of there.

'The death card doesn't mean death. It can be change, endings, but it's really a kind of rebirth, OK? This one, the nine of swords: that's where she is now, and she's suffering. She's in pain. But look, the star here? That's her future and it means healing, OK? So tell her, these cards are not bad. They are positive. They show that there's hope ahead.'

I flick my eyes over the cards again, trying to memorise them. 'OK, so it's change, suffering, hope ahead. Got it, thanks. I have to run.'

The arcade was empty. And the alleyway outside. I ran as fast as I could back towards the station, getting snarled in the bank holiday crowds. I was scanning at every step, left to right, up the streets and down them, searching for Eden's denim jacket, for a flash of long blonde hair.

The anxiety built as I retraced our steps, faster, faster, faster. I looked for her everywhere. I grew frantic. I made people tut and stare as I pushed past them. Three times I rang her phone. Three times it went straight to voicemail. I started sprinting.

I hurried through the ticket barriers at Leeds station, and stood under the announcement screens, bouncing with impatience till I found the right train.

'Shit! Platform 11B.' I had one minute, or less. Sure enough, I looked across the tracks to my left and saw the train pulling slowly away.

My phone buzzed in my hand.

Sorry. Need time on my own. See you at school in morning? E xxx

I went up the escalator in a daze and found a seat at the top, by the coffee kiosk. I tapped out a long message to Eden, telling her everything Debs had said about the cards. Then I sat there staring into space, feeling more tired than I'd ever felt in my life, while the coffee machine gasped and shrieked in my ear.

How could I have thought she was getting better? Yes, she put on a good act, but I should've seen through it. Seen through her swagger on Saturday. Seen the truth: that she was desperate enough to seek out stuff she'd never normally touch. If Eden was ready to pay for a Tarot reading, I prayed she'd believe in the cards' message of hope. But a familiar niggling fear was back, and it started growing, in the darkest corner of my mind.

Chapter Fourteen

Friday 4th September

11.20am

I finish telling them about the Tarot cards. Out of the corner of my eye I can sense Mum about to explode at me for not mentioning this before.

‘I know it all sounds bad, today... but I didn’t know...’ That’s not true. I’ve known for ages that Eden’s a mess. All summer I’ve been her bodyguard, her bloody sheepdog, for all the good it’s done. ‘She seemed OK at school this week...’ I conclude lamely.

They’ve been making notes all along without interrupting. Now, Owl-lady quizzes me about Tyler.

‘What’s his surname?’

‘I don’t know.’

‘Where does he live?’

I shrug.

‘Has Eden been in touch with him?’

‘I don’t think so.’

Eyebrows.

‘I don’t know.’

‘Where do you think Eden is?’ She asks it without missing a beat in our relay, as if to catch me out, but the focus has changed, gone steely. ‘Did she have a favourite place? Somewhere she might be?’

‘I don’t *know!*’ For the first time I raise my voice. ‘I’ve told you *everything.*’ Apart from minor incriminating details that don’t affect their search, because Eden will always be my priority. Before she can hit back with the next question, I get in there first. ‘So what are you going to do? What’s next? Where are you going to look for her now?’

‘Our colleagues have conducted a first search of the premises and the immediate vicinity. Other options will be explored as the investigation progresses.’

Premises. Vicinity. Progresses. I hate her careful neutral language. She means Eden’s home. She means round here. She means if Eden doesn’t turn up. I can feel my breathing speeding up. I clutch my warm empty mug so hard that I think it might shatter.

‘I can assure you, we’ll do everything in our power to ensure Eden is found as soon as possible. The investigatory team is highly experienced.’

How can they be? It’s not as if this happens every week around here. But I don’t say that. A plan starts forming in my head. Their questions have shown me the way. There *are* places Eden could be. There’s a whole load of them: all our favourite ones, from the dam to the waterfall and everywhere in between.

The police might have paperwork and procedure, but I don’t. I’m free, or I soon can be. And I’m fast. I’ve been training for a half-marathon. I can cover miles in a day. I’m going to do what they won’t do. I’m going to get out there and retrace all our steps this summer. I’ve given the police the information, but I can’t wait for them to act on it. The investigation might not crank up for days. I need to act now.

Sleek-lady is saying, ‘Can I confirm your mobile number?’

Confirm? That means they have it already. I reel it off, obediently.

‘We’ll be in touch if we have any further questions. And if you hear from Eden, we need you to let us know immediately.’

They gather their notes.

‘Thank you, Jess.’ Owl-lady is the senior one, wrapping things up now: ‘I know it can’t be easy, talking to us today.’

I look at her sharply. Does she mean because of my history? Or because of Eden’s?

‘Now the best you can do is get back to school. If Eden rings you, or if you think of anything else that might help the investigation, call me on this number.’ She passes me a card with the West Yorkshire Police logo and her number and email printed on it.

I take it, embarrassed that my fingers are damp and trembling.

They stand. ‘Thank you for the tea. And your time, Jess, and you, Ms Mayfield.’

I manage to mutter goodbye, as Mum shows them out.

When Mum comes back in, she seems smaller somehow. ‘I can’t believe I’m saying this, but why don’t you take the rest of the day off, Jess? I don’t care what the police said. I want you here, safe, under my roof, till all this is over.’ She sits back down on the chair next to me and grabs my hand tightly.

Has someone nicked Mum and replaced her with an alien?

‘I mean, what if there’s someone out there who’s hurt Eden? What if they hurt you too?’ Her voice starts wobbling. ‘I can’t let that happen again, Jess. I will not. Do you hear me?’

‘Mum. Stop it!’ I shout to jolt her out of this reaction and pull my hand back. ‘It’s not the same. We don’t know if someone’s hurt Eden. But I know she’s out there somewhere.’ I brace myself to tell her my plan. ‘I’m going to go and find her. I have to bring her back.’

‘Jess, no!’ She is as shocked as if I’ve slapped her. She grabs my wrists, as if she’s going to physically keep me here. ‘No! I won’t let you.’

‘Mum!’ She can’t mean this. ‘Do you really think I can sit inside and do nothing? *Mum!*’

She looks at me and I can see that’s exactly what she wants. For me to be safe at any cost.

‘Mum, no.’ I try to get through to her coaching brain, the sorted bit that’s not in maternal meltdown. ‘I have to do this. Don’t you see?’ I take a breath and say the worst thing I’ve thought today so far. ‘And if it all goes wrong...’ *If Eden is dead*, I mean, ‘at least I know I tried. I didn’t hide, or sit it out. I got out there and did everything in my control. *Please?*’

I don’t care if I’m begging her. I need to get out there and *do* something.

She lets go of my arms, and I can see there’s a battle raging inside her.

Tick, tick, tick.

‘Jess, I’m sorry, but no.’ That’s her final voice. Her serious don’t-mess-with-me voice. The big guns. It usually works cos she doesn’t bring it out much. ‘I’ve made my decision. You can’t just wander round, alone, hoping you stumble upon Eden. Leave it to the police. They’re the professionals. You can do some homework here today. You are not going out there till we know Eden’s safe. Or...’ she changes tack quickly but I know she’s just thought of that worst thing too.

‘I’ve got one more client in - damn! - two minutes, and then I’m clear. Today was admin day, but it’s all yours, OK? Just, sit tight. I’ll be down soon. There’s still tea in the pot.’

She grabs the old teapot and sets it, slopping, on the table. I stare at it so she can't see my eyes. She can do this mind-reading telepathy, given eye contact.

She's hurrying now, which helps. 'It's only cos I love you. Cos of what you've been through. You know that, right? We'll talk at lunch, OK?' She kisses the top of my head hard, as if I'm still eight, and hurries up the stairs.

I wait till I hear her professional spiel kick in on the phone, 'Sarah Mayfield speaking, good morning?'

I nip into my room and get changed, fingers clumsy and hurrying.

Tick, tick, tick...

In less than a minute, I'm out of there, in a compromise outfit of short-sleeved purple tunic dress over running leggings – it'll pass for normal, but I can still run fast in it.

I creep downstairs and sit on the bottom step to pull my trainers on. Lacing them up, I feel stronger. Putting on my running things always does that. It's like a superhero outfit, that Lycra, and I need it more than ever today. I grab an empty backpack and tiptoe back in the kitchen. I feel like a thief, shoving my hoodie, some energy bars and a water bottle in there.

I grab a pen and peel a sheet of notepaper off Mum's block of stickies. I scrawl 'Sorry. I had to. I've got my phone.'

I hate sneaking out but I've got no choice. Holding my breath, I open the latch slowly and slip through, closing it carefully, noiselessly, behind me. Someone's on my side, cos it doesn't squeak or slam. Mum's office is on the back of the house, so she won't see me run down the street and take the track up through the woods to Eden's.

Part Two

Chapter Fifteen

Friday 4th September

12.05pm

Sorry Mum, sorry Mum. My feet beat out the apology, sending loose stones skittering, till I'm halfway up the hill and I can let it go. Trees curve over the road, creating cool, green shade that smells of earth and fallen leaves. Even today, running helps. It makes my fear the second thing, because first there is this:

Each breath, pulled hot from my chest

My stride, feet pounding earth

I lose myself in the effort of it, breath, muscle, eye, foot, falling forwards and pushing on, on, on. I leave the trees behind and hit the last steep bit. It's hotter here and I have to work at it with piston arms.

When I'm nearly there, I stop to catch my breath, so I don't burst in all sweaty and gasping. I take a minute to lean on the nearest wall, finding a patch of warm stone not smothered in brambles all heavy with ripening blackberries. I push back, stretching my calf muscles while my breathing slows.

As soon as I stop moving, the thoughts crowd in: will Claire and Simon let me in? Will they be angry? Do they know what I did? Do they think it's my fault?

I sigh and trudge forwards, dreading what I'll see at Eden's house. I feel like I'm wearing some kind of iron corset made of fear, tightening round my ribs with every step. I look around me, hoping I'll see something Eden dropped, anything to give me a clue, but the lane and the fields are empty. Up here the sky feels bigger, out of the hemmed-in valley. The hills sprawl away to the moors at the distant horizon, where tiny pale windmills spin in a row, like beach toys. The fields and woods are deep green, clinging to summer, and the warmth rises off them, bringing a scent of baked earth and heather.

I reach the top of the hill. There's a row of wind-bent trees and a line of stone buildings along the ridge: four farmhouses, hundreds of years old. Eden's house is the third one along. The stone is worn, all the hard edges smoothed away by lifetimes of wind and rain. As I get near, the dogs in the neighbour's yard go crazy, barking and throwing themselves at the gate.

Claire opens her door at the noise and comes out. I see the strained hope in her face as she scans the lane in each direction. 'Eden? Eden?' Her voice sounds thin and high.

'No, sorry. It's only me,' I call when I get near. Seeing her face collapse with disappointment nearly makes me turn round.

'Oh Jess. I thought... Has she...? Have you...?'

'No.' I shake my head, hating to see the last trace of hope erased. 'I'm sorry, Claire. I needed to come... I wanted to say...' What exactly? What could I possibly have to say to her when she's living her worst nightmare? Only the need to find Eden stops me running back down the hill.

Claire's looking at me with a desperate hunger in her pale blue eyes as if I'm the one who's going to conjure her daughter back, right here. She looks thin and older than before, in her loose green jumper and jeans. I can tell with half a glance that she hasn't heard any news, good or bad. She's still waiting, every nerve strung tight. 'What do you know, Jess? What did she tell you?' One bony white wrist shoots out, and her fingers are cold where they grip my arm.

'Nothing. I mean, nothing new. She seemed all right yesterday.' I blush, feeling like a complete letdown, over-riding my reaction to her touch. Claire's fingers release. I make myself ask the question that's been buzzing round my mind like a wasp trapped up against a windowpane. 'Mr Barwell said you had a text from Eden. What did she say?'

Claire's face slams shut now. 'You shouldn't be here, Jess. But now you are, you'd better come in.' Her tone is sharper. She turns and disappears in the dark shadow of the doorway.

I follow.

Inside, the house looks the same – same bright living room with its huge arched window, same massive squashy sofas where me and Eden lie and watch DVDs, curled together like two kittens. It even smells the same – flowers in a vase on the piano, fresh coffee drifting in from the kitchen. But the wrongness of it all overwhelms me. Eden's new absence and Iona's older absence are the biggest things in the room, pushing out all the air. I wrap my arms round my ribcage, ignoring the iron corset, and try to breathe normally.

Simon walks in holding a piece of paper. 'Jess?' He's tall, and I always thought you could see he was Eden's dad, in spite of his darker colouring. For a

moment I think he's taking it better, that he's not as crushed as Claire. Then I meet his eyes and see how wrong I am.

'I want to help,' I blurt. I feel stupid. 'I mean, I've just spoken to the police. I know they're doing everything...'

'They're sending a Family Liaison Officer. Should be back any moment,' Simon tells Claire.

She doesn't react. She crosses to the mantelpiece and picks up her phone to check the display. I wonder how many times she's done that today.

'Jess, where would she go?' Simon halts, folding forwards and grabbing the back of a chair. 'We've been over and o—,' he gasps as if he's been punched.

'I wish I knew. I want to look though, I mean, that's what I'll do today. I'm going to look for her.'

Simon nods and straightens up. His skin is grey against the white of his crumpled shirt, yesterday's work clothes, by the look of it. 'What do you know about Liam Caffrey? He says he brought her home,' His voice is tight and bitter, forcing out the last few words as if they tasted bad. 'Seems upset. Puts on a good act.'

'It's not Liam,' I tell them both, as gently as I can. 'Please, you can't think that. Whatever's happened, it's not him.'

'Well, who the hell is it then? Because someone out there knows where our daughter is.' Claire's voice is unrecognisable.

I flinch beneath her rage. It was a mistake to come here. They don't want to see me. Their grief is too big: it's a tsunami, overwhelming. I can't help them, unless I can find Eden. I need to stop talking and just do something.

'The police said they'll need a photo,' Simon sounds utterly exhausted. I guess neither of them slept last night. 'Something about a media strategy.'

'What about the one from her online profile? She likes that one.' I chew my lip.

'We don't even know what she was wearing, but that Caffrey boy gave us a list. You might as well check it, Jess. Does that look about right?' Simon puts one hand to his eyes, as if he can press back tears, and holds out a bit of paper with the other.

I scan it. 'Yeah, think so.' But there's something wrong. My brain is trying to tell me something, but I can't hear it in here, with all the deafening absence.

The silence grows between us. Three little islands of pain in this big room. I've no idea how to speak to them today. Not so long ago, Claire and Simon were like anyone's folks: making polite conversation when I came for tea. Simon making crap dad-jokes. Claire bringing us snacks. June changed that forever, but this is beyond worse. What happens to them now? Who will they be, without Iona and Eden?

I can't bear the way they're looking at me. 'Why don't I take a look in her room? I might notice if anything's missing. I mean, if she packed a bag or something.'

'Will you? I've tried, the police have searched, but you might see something different. Just don't touch anything, the police said...' Claire's already turned away to pick up her phone again.

I go up the stairs and along the corridor, past Iona's room, and then I pause outside Eden's. There's a glass frame of childhood pictures hanging on the wall between the two doors. It's like they're mocking us. Eden and Iona, pot-bellied blonde toddlers in matching yellow sunsuits on a foreign beach. In their old garden, the house before this one: Iona giving Eden a piggyback aged ten, laughing and squinting against the sun, all skinny brown legs and knobbly grazed knees. Eden and Iona, frozen in time.

The photos dislodge a memory: one of the bad nights. Eden was taking it out on me and Liam. She was using that awful tone I hated, the dry, cold one that denied her pain.

'You measure your age against your family's, don't you? Everyone does it.'

'Yeah,' Liam nodded, he got it, with his massive family.

'Same with me and Iona. She's been my age plus two all our lives. Not any more. Her clock stopped ticking at seventeen. So I'm going to catch up slowly, and overtake her. Now *I* get to be the oldest. She'd bloody hate that, if she knew...'

She actually laughed, and that worried me more than anything. Something inside her was going sour and wrong. I begged her to talk to someone – a counsellor, her parents, maybe even my mum - but she didn't listen. She just wound tighter and tighter and I got more and more tense waiting for the explosion.

I remember asking Mum, ‘Would it be easier if they were going through a good patch?’

Mum only shook her head and said there were no rules for grieving.

When was the last good patch? I remember Iona and Katie showing me and Eden round the high school when we came to visit for Year Six Transition Day. They were extravagantly kind with us, only slightly showing off, very aware of their status as the big girls. Iona linked arms with Eden, smiling proudly.

So how did it happen that just a few years later, Iona stopped acknowledging her sister completely? Wouldn’t walk with her up the hill. Locked her bedroom door when Eden pounded to be let in.

‘If I knew what I’d done to make her hate me,’ Eden said once, near the start, ‘then I could fix it.’

Eden stopped trying. She grew spiky and defensive in return, then worse. She’d had years of watching Iona, and she was always a quick learner. Soon it was war: cold and silent in public, with escalating hostilities at home. Eden told me everything the next day at school, making it funny, shrugging it off. But I knew how much it hurt. And I knew they’d fought the night Iona died.

I go into Eden’s room. Inside, it’s bright and still. The curtains are open. The bed hasn’t been slept in. The whole room looks unnaturally clear – you can’t usually see this much carpet. Claire must’ve tidied as she searched. But it’s still shocking, like Eden’s been neatened away already.

I look around me, trying to work out if anything else is different.

The walls are covered with posters – three of her favourite bands, two vintage film posters – and over her bed, the vast pinboard covered in photos, postcards, notes.

‘Like Pinterest,’ she’d said, ‘only, y’know, with real pins...’ There were photos ripped out of travel magazines: Machu Picchu, New Zealand, Cambodia – places we were going to go together one day. There’s the card I got her last birthday because the girl on the front looked like her. It’s hanging open and I can see the sign-off and the cake I drew, ‘Big love with cherries on top, Jess xxxx’.

My heart clenches again, and I push down the panic. I need to stay focused. What would she take, if she were running away? Her tablet sits dark

and blank on her desk, on top of a pile of school textbooks. Her ipod is in the speaker dock. I sit on her bed and feel under the pillow: the T-shirt she sleeps in is there.

Eden hasn't run away. She would have told me. Whatever might be happening with her folks, she couldn't leave me, not now.

'E, where'd you go?' I whisper to the empty room. 'Is it cos of Iona? You know it's not your fault. Thought we'd done that one. Come on. Come back. We need you.'

And maybe it's just my lonely synapses firing crazily, but for a moment I'm sure she can hear me. Eden's right there.

Folded arms, that stormy blue-grey light in her eyes, the jut of her hip, frowning at me, warning me.

I blink. I have an idea. I know I'm not supposed to touch anything, so I wrap the fabric of my tunic awkwardly over my hand and tug open her bedside drawer where I know she keeps her diary. It's not there. As I'm looking down, I see a flash of silver catching the light, something small at the edge of her bed. I reach down and my fingers close on something hard and cool.

I lift it for a closer look: in my palm is the small twisted lock from Eden's diary. Someone broke it open. I dive onto my hands and knees and check under the bed, but there is no sign of the diary.

Who broke the lock? And when?

At the same moment, I hear the sound of a car coming up the lane, and a footstep in the hall squeaking on a loose floorboard. I manage to get up just as Claire comes in the room, hoping my face isn't flushed. I wrap my fingers round the broken lock.

'You know what?' she says. 'I even heard her come in. I'm sure I did. I never go to sleep till she's back. Unless I'm going mad... I was waiting up, dozing, till she was home. I heard the door, heard her move a chair in the kitchen, so I let myself fall asleep.'

She moves and sits on the bed, smoothing Eden's pillow. 'Till this morning. I found her room like this...' a small gasping sob escapes. 'No one knows what that's like. Not unless they've been there...'

I'm mute. I have no words for this. Tears fill my eyes, making Claire a pale shimmering blur.

‘It’s our fault,’ she says. ‘We shouldn’t have left her last weekend. We should’ve insisted she came too. But she said she was fine. She’s stayed on her own before...’

My heart lurches at the mention of last weekend. If we’re doing guilt and last weekend, I’m going to win. ‘No,’ I tell her softly. ‘It’s not your fault...’ I rub my eyes to get rid of the tears.

‘We’ve been so wrapped up in our loss, we haven’t been there for her.’ Claire’s speaking almost absently, staring at the bed. She looks up and seems to focus with difficulty on me, ‘Did she ever say that, to you?’

‘Nothing like that, no. I promise.’ I look into Claire’s eyes, even though it hurts to see the raw pain there, willing her to believe me. And the last thing I want is to make it worse, but I’ve got to know. I need to understand. ‘But can you tell me: what happened with Eden and Iona? I know Eden found something out, but she didn’t tell me what it was. Something about Iona...?’

She springs up as if the bed is burning hot. I see her lips turn white as she draws them tight. ‘Get out,’ Claire says quietly.

It’s worse than if she hit me. Biting back fresh tears, I hurry down the hall and back downstairs. ‘I’m sorry. I don’t want to stick my nose in. I’m just trying to help,’ I babble, but it’s no good.

Claire herds me towards the door, her face all pale skin, empty eyes and her mouth pulled in a tight line. ‘Jess was just leaving,’ she tells Simon, but he doesn’t raise his head as we pass him.

Through my tears I focus on my feet, stumbling towards the front door. The sight of Eden’s sandals, lined up next to her new boots, nearly finishes me.

Claire opens the door and there’s a police car pulled up outside. Two officers are climbing out, a man and a woman – not the ones I saw this morning. Their neon jackets seem very bright. A radio crackles at the woman’s belt, but she ignores it. Then another man gets out from the back seat. He’s wearing a suit.

I hear Claire’s sharp cry next to me, before she collapses slowly, sinking against the doorframe.

Chapter Sixteen

They haven't found her. They send me away. Claire and the police watch me leave, faces closed tight: locked, barred and shuttered with suspicion. I blunder down the hill, taking the other, rougher route, stumbling over potholes and tripping on rocks as big as my fist. The tears won't stop. I fall downhill through a tunnel of trees, on the dark side of the valley, where the sun doesn't reach.

This hillside is bleaker, half-covered with straggly trees and burnt-orange bracken. There's a ripple of movement in the deepest dappled shade and I dart towards it. '*Eden? Eden?*' It comes out a broken screech.

The answer explodes in my face, battering golden wings. I guard my face with my hands, crouching low to dodge the mad clattering panic of a pheasant. It flaps past, squawking its alarm call loudly, and roosts in a small hawthorn to escape me.

The adrenalin surge gives me wings too. I turn and take the corner too fast. I slip on loose scree, heel jutting in a long forward slide. I land on my back in a mess of gravel and dead leaves, skinning the back of my arm.

For a long moment I just lie here, listening to the blood pound in my ears, staring up through shivering beech leaves at the blue sky that seems so far away. I'm still clutching the tiny metal lock from Eden's diary.

And I realize that if we don't find her, I will never, ever forgive myself for what happened last Saturday night.

Sunday 30th August

00.20am

Liam led me, hyperventilating, away from the surge of bodies on the dance floor. My mind clutched at three things, keeping it small:

1. *Keep breathing*
2. *Don't faint*
3. *Follow Liam*

I focused on the back of his head, noticing how his hair was cropped in a very straight line above the deep golden tan of his neck. We jostled through the open doorway and I ate the cooler air gratefully.

In. Out. In. Out. One foot in front of the other. He was still holding my hand and my world shrunk to that as I tried to make it a positive. His hand was bigger than mine. His palm was warm. His fingertips were slightly rough.

We passed a blur of people, lights, laughter in the darkness. We walked deeper into the gloom, along a crooked paved path. Liam took a left, down steps to the secret garden. Eden must've shown him this. It was a circle of lawn with a plum tree right in the middle, heavy with fruit. All around grew dense rhododendron bushes, so it was completely hidden from all angles, but you could see out over the moonlit valley below.

'Here.' He let go of my hand. 'Take it easy, Jess. We're safe here. OK?'

I collapsed back, crushing the long grass, cool and damp under my fingers. I stared up at the stars. The sky was blue, not black, and there was a moon rising over the opposite hill, three-quarter full and very bright. The moonlight made wisps of cloud glow like pale party streamers in the sky. Stalks of grass and round silvered dandelion clocks hung over my face.

In. Out. In. Out.

'Breathe,' Liam said, like he could read my mind. Apparently satisfied I wasn't going to stop, he lay down next to me, a safe distance away and folded his arms under his head. 'Can you name them?'

'What?' I said when I could speak again.

'The stars. Do you know them?'

I knew he was trying to distract me from the panic attack. 'Only the same as kids know. Plough. Orion.'

'Always liked Orion. Ready for action. Dude with the sword.'

'Dunno the rest,' I tried to play along, even though my speech was hoarse and halting. 'I know they're supposed to look like animals and gods and stuff, but it's just a big swirl. 'Cept that one there. That looks like my cat. Constellation of Fluff.'

Liam laughed. The sound of it was like a safety rope for me to follow back to earth. 'What about that one?'

'Yeah, it's a bus.'

We carried on. He told me the real names and I'd tell him they looked like a kettle or a sausage or something dead ordinary.

We ran out of ideas eventually. An owl hooted somewhere near us. I was feeling nearly normal now. Distractions worked for me. I hoped the distraction Eden chose was giving her a break too: it had to be worth something.

‘She doesn’t mean to hurt you,’ I said into the silence. I heard him fidgeting, ripping up grass and twisting it in his hands.

‘Maybe.’

‘Definitely. It’s not even about you, is it? Just distraction. Stuff to blot out the bad.’

‘Yeah, well. Tonight was different. With that lad - Tyler. Who the hell is Tyler anyway? And in front of everyone. Maybe it’s time to call it quits.’

‘No. She needs you.’ I roll on my side, leaning my head on my arm, trying to see his expression in the darkness.

‘Not really,’ he said. ‘She needs you more.’

‘Well, it’s easier for me. I’m her best friend, now and always. But don’t you leave her cos of tonight.’

‘I dunno Jess. I’ve put up wi’ it for months. Maybe I’ve had enough. Maybe I want summat else. Maybe she does too - tonight is proof of that.’

My heart leapt with hope, but I kicked it savagely down again.

He ran his hands over his face. ‘God, what kind of twat does that make me, if I walk now? Don’t you see? It has to be her. It has to be Eden who calls it, not me.’

What could I say that had the ring of truth? ‘People know you didn’t sign up for this.’

‘Neither did she!’ he hit back, on the next beat. ‘It’s just what happened. It’s not her fault, and I should stick it out.’ He balled up the shredded bits of grass and chucked it away as if it was a hand grenade. ‘What about you?’

We didn’t do this. We talked about Eden and how she was. We didn’t talk about us.

‘You OK? I mean, really? Back there, that was cos of... Y’know, what happened to you?’

I was glad it was dark and he couldn’t see the rush of blood to my face. I braced for the familiar flood of memory that followed, hot with shame. I knew to breathe through it, ‘Yeah. Not good with crowds and stuff.’ The only people I’d

talked about it with were Mum, Eden, and the psychologist I saw afterwards. But I knew that everyone knew. It had been in the papers with the court case.

‘Bastards. I’m sorry, Jess. It shouldn’t have happened to you. Shouldn’t’ve happened to anyone.’

My eyes had adjusted to the darkness. I could see his face in the dim light. He looked angry. I could tell the weather of his face from his eyebrows, currently pulled together.

‘Wrong place. Wrong time. Wrong hair. Wrong clothes.’ I grated out the words cos they were what I’d learnt to say.

‘Nah, don’t. C’mon, it’s me. *Cut to the truth*, remember?’ his hand reached out and stopped in mid-air, dark against the star-filled luminous sky.

I got the reference, from late one night earlier in the summer, after we’d been drinking and Eden had basically passed out, back at mine. I couldn’t have managed without Liam.

We got her up our stairs without waking Mum. We put her in what we thought was the recovery position, a sick bowl near her head, and covered her with a sleeping bag. We sat, one either side of her head, watching over her like slightly tipsy guardian angels. Though there was nothing like seeing your best friend vomit an entire evening’s hard drinking to make you sober up fast.

‘Did she drink this much, before?’ Liam asked.

‘No. Some, at parties, but not like this,’ I whispered. The room was dim – just the glow from the blue glass lamp on my desk – and I could hardly see him, just the outline of his long legs tucked up and his head leaning on his knees.

‘Maybe it takes the edge off it all?’

‘Yeah, and who’s gonna argue with that? As long as we’re with her, she’ll be OK.’

‘You better take my number,’ Liam said, pulling out his phone. ‘Use it, any time, OK? If she needs us, we cut to the truth, right? No mucking about.’

In whispers we made a pact to work together, to tell it straight, so we could be there for Eden.

It had worked, too. We grew close, a united front. He was Eden’s boyfriend, so I felt safe with him. I let my guard down. I let go of my shield, shrugged off the armour. I didn’t have to hide with Liam. It didn’t matter if he saw me, because he was spoken for, his eyes fixed firmly on Eden.

I'd had too much to drink tonight too. My body felt warm and heavy. The earth below me felt strong and safe. It held me and I relaxed into it. I exhaled long and slow, finally letting go of the tension I'd held all evening. 'OK then, Liam Caffrey, you want to cut to the truth?' I flopped back on the grass and told it to the stars. The truth tasted hot and powerful as the whisky in my glass tonight. Too strong to take neat. I organised my pain into a neat, edited list.

'One: Bad things happen for no reason. It's shit and unfair.

Two: I don't know when I'll be over it.

Three: I won't bloody forgive them. Don't see why I should.'

'Fair enough,' he said, calm and even, like we were talking about the weather.

'Really? You don't think I'm bitter and twisted and in need of professional help?'

'Nah, Jess. I think you're brave. The rest, it's normal, in't it? You get hurt: you bruise, you bleed. It's what happens. This is the same. It's no different.'

I sat up so I could check his expression again. 'Thanks. Most people want to keep their distance, in case it rubs off on them, my bad luck.' I wrapped my arms around my knees, hugging them in.

'Yeah, well. Not me.' He sat up too. 'But it'll get better, like a bruise does.'

The clouds shifted from the moon, giving us more light. His eyes held mine. They seemed very big and dark and shining.

My breath caught in my throat and I swallowed hard.

Liam's hand reached out again, but didn't stop this time. He tugged gently at one of my hands to release it. Then one finger touched the inside of my left wrist, light as a dandelion clock, on the tattooed skin where my pulse was racing.

I gasped. Nerve endings exploded. I didn't move. What was he doing? Was he playing with me? Testing my limits?

The thing was, I couldn't be honest with Liam Caffrey. I couldn't cut straight to the truth. Because the truth was this: I'd loved him since we were ten years old. All summer long, I'd worked at burying this truth. I'd nearly managed it too.

He ducked his head, closer, lower. His cropped hair was white gold in the moonlight. He paused.

This time I lifted my wrist to meet his mouth. He kissed me, soft and warm, on the exposed skin.

Chapter Seventeen

Friday 4th September

1.25pm

I don't know how long I lie there, playing it back. A call from Mum jolts me out of it. I hit reject, then dust myself off and limp down the hill into town, ignoring the voicemail alert that follows. I look down at the jumble of terraced houses, the zigzag roof of a warehouse, the shops, churches, cinema, park. All basking in the sunshine, all looking unbelievably normal.

I see Liam's sister Nicci from right across the canal as I take the shortcut down a flight of stone steps. She's sitting on the fire escape of the club where she works, smoking a cigarette. The sun stripes the side of the tall brick building and she's got her eyes closed against it. Her hair is piled up in a high do – strawberry blonde, same as Liam's. She's in a short purple dress that looks vintage, tight around the waist, with short sleeves and a loose swinging skirt, way shorter than I'd wear, shot through with glitter thread. She looks like something from a music video. She's twenty-two and always seemed glamorous just from being older, being in the world, making choices.

'Nicci!' I shout and wave, and she raises her cigarette in a lazy salute.

Liam was lucky with his family. He was the baby, with that gang of older siblings all looking out for him. He told me and Eden once, 'Most of them have gone off the rails somewhere along the way, so there's nothing I can do will shock mum now.' I liked that Sharon wasn't shockable. I remember her piercing two-finger wolf whistle from the back of the school hall when we left Year Six. How the uptight parents flinched.

Then I see Liam.

He's coming down the middle of the street, also heading for Nic. I brake and watch, ignoring my heart.

He's changed into jeans and a blue T-shirt, but it still doesn't look like him. Liam usually walks all loose and easy, but today he's hunched up, like he's carrying something heavy on his broad shoulders. I want to shout to him, but my mouth is sandpaper.

I speed up, rushing over the bridge and round the corner into the short, dead-end street, with our old junior school filling nearly one whole side. Gothic and Victorian, its windows are plastered with art, filtering the high-pitched

twittering of kids on a Friday afternoon. People dart across the quiet street like swallows, diving into the post office, clutching packets for the post.

Liam sees me and slows. ‘Hey.’ Something crosses his face, but it’s written in a foreign language and I can’t translate.

‘Hi. You bunked off too?’

‘Course. Police came round.’

‘Same here. Did they come to your house, too?’

‘Yep. I took off after Trent’s session first thing. She called it in. Police took my story. Good job Nic saw me come in last night or I’d be stuffed.’ He sighs and closes his eyes against the light, leaving his eyebrows to tell me the truth. He looks terrible. His face is pale, in spite of the tan, and his eyes are circled with shadows that look more like bruises. The freckles across his nose and cheekbones stand out against the pallor. Light catches on the soft golden stubble on his cheeks and top lip.

Seeing him hurts more than I expected. Of all the people in all the world, we must be feeling the same today but it doesn’t help.

I want to hug him, but there’s a forcefield pushing us apart. He’s awkward, hands in pockets, shifting his weight from one leg to the other.

Eden’s there, laughing at us. ‘You should see yourselves,’ she taunts. ‘Honestly, the pair of you! If there’s a job to do, just do it! Don’t tangle yourself up in knots.’

He opens his eyes, ridiculously blue, under those thick brows, darker than his hair. It’s like he can’t bear to see me, without Eden. He covers his face with both hands and rubs his face and head, making his short hair stand up in little tufts.

I have no idea what to say next. Words turn to soggy crumbs in my mouth.

Nicci walks down the fire escape to join us, her heels clanging on the metal stairs, and we both focus on her with relief.

She glances at her phone, lights another cigarette and says briskly, ‘I’ve only got ten minutes, so we need to be quick. Right. How did it end with the police?’

She seems focused and practical. It calms me, but works the opposite effect on Liam. His lips wobble and pull downwards. His eyes fill with tears.

‘Hey, come here. It’ll be all right. We’ll find her.’ Nicci does what I can’t do: she pulls Liam into a hug right there in the shadow of the fire escape. I watch her hands with their long aubergine nails, deft and capable: one holds her cigarette out of the way, while the other pats Liam’s heaving shoulders.

Nic lets him go and passes him a fag. ‘Here,’ she lights it for him and they both lean back on the brick wall.

‘How was it then?’ I move closer, wafting away their smoke.

‘It was awful,’ Liam squints at me, shielding his face with his free hand. ‘They thought I’d done something to Eden.’ He takes a hard drag on the cigarette. ‘Fucking feds, jumped to the worst conclusion. Cos of y’know, Clarkson.’

Nicci swears. ‘I’m so sorry, Liam.’

‘It wasn’t your fault! It’s Clarkson’s. No one does that, ‘specially not to my sister.’

Nic smiles at him and ruffles his hair.

I join the dots, wondering if I’m seeing this picture right. ‘What, did Clarkson hurt you, Nic?’

‘Nah, but he tried.’

My mind works fast, trying not to jump to conclusions, but if one Clarkson brother works like that, what about the other? What if Josh Clarkson got to Eden somehow, took out his jealousy?

‘Mum gave the police a right bollocking again today,’ Liam is saying, with a shadow of a smile that vanishes instantly. ‘As if me laying out Harry Clarkson’s got anything to do with this. As if I’d hurt anyone. As if!’ He exhales hard, sending out a long stream of smoke.

‘I know that.’ I can’t imagine what he’s feeling. This is bad enough without anyone thinking I might have hurt Eden. I mean, physically. ‘So will you tell me about last night? What did happen?’

‘I swear, Jess, I dropped her at the top of the lane. She didn’t want me coming to the door. The farm dogs make a right racket. Didn’t want to wake ‘em all up. But I stayed and I watched her walk away and she waved when she got to the door. I told them. I told them everything – that we’d been in the park, then here in the club after. Stayed here while half eleven. Didn’t believe me till they got the alibi from you, Nic.’

I tell them what Claire said, about hearing Eden come home.

‘OK, so tell me the timings again?’ Nic asks. ‘You got in at half twelve, so you must’ve left her, what, midnight-ish?’

‘Midnight, just after... something like that. I left her. I came home. Had a smoke with you, crashed. End of. That’s it, Nic, I swear!’

‘I know, I know,’ she soothes.

‘But what was she like? How was she?’ I blurt. What had changed between me leaving her at the park gates and midnight?

‘Same, y’ know,’ Liam shrugs. ‘I suppose she was up, not down. Not as bad as Saturday...’

We both flinch.

‘I mean, she wanted to do stuff, to stay busy. After the park, we had a few drinks, we played pool, we mucked about. She wasn’t bloody suicidal, if that’s what you mean.’

Me and Nic are silent, waiting for the ripples of that one to disappear.

‘So what do we do?’ he demands. ‘What the hell do we do now?’

‘We’ve got to get it on social media. I’ve seen it work,’ Nic says. ‘You post her picture and the facts, ask people to share it. Come on, come up wi’ me now. You can use the club wifi and get it done.’ She stubs out her cigarette and kicks it into the gutter.

We follow her through the weathered red double doors and up the winding stair. The back bar is empty except for a bearded bloke reading a newspaper and he doesn’t look up when we come in. There’s sunlight streaming through the high windows and soft folky music on the sound system. I’ve never seen it so quiet.

‘The boss is in the office through there, so make it quick, OK?’ Nic goes behind the bar and starts putting away the clean glasses.

Me and Liam take the nearest table. We pull out our phones and face each other. You could cut the tension with a giant chainsaw.

Tick, tick, tick.

I know we should hurry, but I’ve got to say something. We’ve got to get past it. Surely it’s like pulling off a plaster: do it quick and it’ll hurt less: ‘Did you tell Eden about Saturday?’

‘No!’ his reply is so loud that Nic looks over in surprise and the clinking of the glasses halts. Beardy man frowns over his paper at us.

‘No! Did you?’ he hisses at me, leaning in. I see the rising flush in his cheeks and I know I’ve got one to match.

‘Course not.’ I burn up under his gaze. ‘Look, let’s try and forget it happened, right? Let’s just put it behind us.’

It’s not what I want to say. It’s not what I dreamed of saying. My mind’s already designed a dozen fantasy scenarios for me and Liam, but since not one of them involved Eden going missing, they’re all just hot air and wishful thinking, and I stab at them so they pop and shrivel like little balloons.

‘We’ve got to focus on finding Eden. Deal?’

She didn’t know! So it’s not my fault that’s she’s gone! But I’m still scanning my memory, wondering if there’s any other way she could’ve found out.

‘Deal,’ he mumbles, glancing over at Nic to see if she’s listening.

The awkward tension shoots off the scale.

‘OK,’ I say, ordering myself to get a grip, ‘let’s do this. So I’ll save her profile pic.’ I flick through apps on my phone and talk through what I’m doing, ‘and share it saying: Missing, Eden Holby. Last seen just after midnight Thursday, early hours of Friday?’ I check and he nods. ‘Please phone West Yorkshire Police—’

‘Wait. I’ve got a number. Police gave me this,’ Liam fishes out a crumpled business card, same as the one I’ve got, and reads it off to me.

‘OK, tagging you...’ - His phone beeps to show it’s come through –
‘Done. You do one.’

While we’re busy, Nic brings over cokes and packets of crisps, and I realize I’m starving. Breakfast seems like it happened a lifetime ago, to a different person.

We work at it for a bit, clicking and forwarding. When I’m done, I look down at my phone, at Eden’s face smiling up at me. She didn’t know when that photo was taken, that one day it’d be used for this. I shiver, feeling cold suddenly.

‘Jess,’ Liam calls me back to reality. ‘You’re right, we can do this. If we work together, we can find her, OK?’

I swallow down the worst thoughts. ‘OK. Right.’ But the panic won’t leave me. I’ve wasted time today. I haven’t found out one useful thing. And all this time, Eden could be lying somewhere, hurt. She could be lost, she could be...

‘Look what I found?’ I tell Liam, digging the little metal lock out from my pocket. ‘I think it’s from her diary. Someone must’ve broken it open.’

‘Guess you can’t blame her mum for doing that today. But it might’ve happened anytime. Iona could’ve done that, months ago. It doesn’t have to mean anything.’

‘Everyone’s acting like she might’ve hurt herself. What if her mum read stuff in her diary to make her think that? We should’ve seen it. We should’ve-’

‘Jess! Enough. Let’s get out there. Let’s start looking. At least we’ll be doing something,’ he is looking at me with a strange expression on his face. ‘Let’s start at the waterfall. Last Friday she said it was her favourite place.’

Last Friday. So long ago, I must’ve aged five years since then.

‘And there’s tonight. It’s that full moon party, up the valley. We can walk back that way. I was supposed to be DJing. Forget that. But we need to be there, to ask around.’

‘Yeah, that makes sense,’ I say, trying not to dwell on how Mum is going to react when she finds out. We’d always wanted to go, me and Eden, only we were never allowed: too late, too remote.

At the full moon or solstice, a hardcore of party people would drag a sound system up to a clearing in the beech woods. They’d rig up decks and speakers in the ruins of an old mill, and hundreds’d come to dance: all sorts, Liam’d told us, balding ravers next to teenage kids and everyone in between.

‘Absolutely not,’ Mum said, first time I’d asked, a year ago. ‘I’m not having you wandering the woods in the middle of the night with a load of drugged-up strangers.’ She was uncharacteristically final. I could see it wasn’t worth trying to negotiate this one, so I parked it till I had a better angle. Or a worse one, as it turned out.

‘She really wanted to come tonight,’ Liam’s saying. ‘She was gonna sneak out. We had plans.’

‘Where is she?’ I burst out, unable to hold it in any longer. ‘Liam, what the hell is going on?’

‘You know what I think?’ he says slowly, ‘I think someone knows. She must’ve gone out again. She must’ve met someone. She was moving on from me. I wasn’t enough any more.’

I sit there, wondering what that means.

Chapter Eighteen

Friday 4th September

2.02pm

We walk to the bus stop together in silence. The forcefield pushing us apart gets stronger. I'm feeling paranoid and exposed, like I've lost a layer of skin. We have to wait for the bus and every second is agony. I am sure the whole town is watching us and judging. People pass, doing ordinary Friday afternoon things: going to shops, bank, library, taxi rank. I watch and judge them right back. How can they carry on, when Eden is missing?

Mum rings again and I ignore it.

Tick, tick, tick.

Liam slouches next to me against the grimy graffitied plastic, looking at his phone and fidgeting on the spot till I want to scream at him.

What were we thinking, last Saturday, to take our eyes off Eden? To do anything that might hurt her? Why hadn't I seen how fragile she was? The Tarot reading on Monday should've been my wake-up call. But she fooled me on Tuesday morning, all bright and breezy, and I was happy to let her, if it meant she didn't know about me and Liam. I'd acted along with her, all bloody week.

This isn't an ordinary mistake. This might be the biggest fail of my life. I slump there, miserably accusing myself, spinning out into a dark and hopeless pit. When the bus finally comes, I barely look up. Liam gets on. I hear him paying for us both, so I have to follow.

The bus is empty apart from an old couple and a woman with two little kids and a pushchair. Liam slides onto the back row and I sit down next to him, regretting it instantly. My leg touches the edge of his jeans and I jerk away, but I'm too uptight to move seats. The bus heads up out of town. It's one of those local roads that was never meant for the twenty-first century and the bus driver has to play chicken, dodging in and out of parked cars, breaking hard and zooming suddenly if there's a gap, scraping through the narrow bits with barely room to spare.

I'm thrown against Liam with every swerve. I peek sideways. He's looking straight ahead, his arm straight and rigid, gripping the seat in front. Being so close to me is clearly an ordeal for him too.

Finally the bus leaves town and heads for the moors where the road is wider. I run through everything I've learnt so far, revising the gathered facts. Eden went home, got changed and went out with Liam last night. They were at the skatepark and the club. People must have seen them there. Around midnight, he took her home. Claire heard her come in. And then something happened. This morning she was gone. So far, so nothing. What else?

Once, Liam hit Harry Clarkson for threatening his sister Nicci. What did that say about Clarkson?

What about Josh and his jealousy? How far would he go to punish Eden for leaving him?

What about the new lad, Tyler? He was Eden's choice last Saturday.

I make one of my lists, only it's not positive, it's negative. It's the worst list in the world – all those who could've hurt Eden:

1. Josh Clarkson
2. Tyler from the party
3. Some random stranger
4. Eden Holby
5. Liam Caffrey.

Could Liam hurt Eden? I look at him and right now it's not so hard to believe. With that scowl, he looks furious. I can see the tension in his forearms, the outline of his bicep through his T-shirt in my line of sight. If he wanted it, those arms could hurt someone. But Nicci said he came home. What am I left with? It feels like nothing.

I remember something.

'Liam! Liam!' I tap his arm, awkwardness forgotten. 'What was Eden wearing on her feet?'

He looks at me like I've gone mad. 'I dunno. I did the list for Eden's dad – jeans, top, hoodie...'

'Yeah, I know, but what about her *shoes*?'

'What about her shoes?'

'It's important. I saw something at Eden's today.' I don't want to give him options in case he just grabs one to shut me up.

'What's wrong with you Jess? Of course she was wearing shoes – but it's not the kind of thing I notice, girls' shoes.'

I tut. ‘Oh, come on, drop that crap. Just think!’

‘All right, if I have to, it was probably her sandal things.’

‘Colour?’

‘Maybe red?’

‘That’s it. That’s what she was wearing at school, too. But they’re at her house. So either she was barefoot, or she changed into something else. What’s she got?’ I ran through the list: she had slingbacks, flipflops, trainers... Why did she change her shoes at midnight? Or was she barefoot when something happened? That hurts to think about.

Liam’s ignoring me. He’s gone somewhere inside himself, staring out of the window.

I notice with a jolt where we are, press the bell and jump to my feet. ‘It’s our stop.’

We get off and start down the little side lane that leads to the waterfall. I’m so lost in thought, I just drift after him.

When I come to, Liam has pulled way ahead of me. He’s striding fast, and his shoulders are still stooped under all that weight. Soon he’s just a little stick man on a narrow road to nowhere. I let him go.

Either side of us, the moorland is broad and sloping. You can see for ever up here. You can see where glaciers carved out the valleys and smoothed the hills. The fields flow down like breaking waves. We’re so high, it’s all sky, plunging fields and lonely moor, just that ruined barn on the opposite hill. It’s the kind of landscape you either love or hate. It’s majestic or it’s oppressive. It could drive you mad – all the miles and miles of emptiness reminding you how small we are.

The track loops round the shoulder of the next hill and Liam vanishes. I remember what happened last time we were here.

Friday 28th August, 2.18pm

Eden ran down to the cafe while I was working the lunch shift. She was ‘up’: I could hear the giddy breathlessness in her voice, ‘Jess! You know what today is?’

‘Last Friday of the holidays, maybe?’ I said, teasing. She’d said that for every day of the week so far.

‘Come on, let’s get in there first before it hits us.’

‘What, exactly? The unbearable pointlessness of GCSE year?’ I smiled at her, glad to see her smile back. I flicked a quick glance round the café, but I wasn’t needed by any of the tables right now. I leant on the counter by the till.

‘What’s the plan?’

‘We’ll go to the waterfall. Might be our last chance this summer? I brought towels, spare bikini, come on!’ She knew how to tempt me.

‘I’m in,’ a voice said behind me. ‘But you can keep your bikini, ta. I’ve got shorts.’

I spun, surprised to see Liam emerging from the kitchen. ‘Thought it was your day off?’

‘It is. Just grabbing my wages. And there’s leftovers, Dev said. We can have a picnic.’

Dev was dead strict about the hygiene regs and we often got out-of-date stuff to take home. ‘Looks like a proper feast.’

‘Yay! See, it was meant to be. And guess what I’ve got?’ Eden whispered, eyes shining, gesturing at her backpack.

‘Magic monkeys to fly us there?’

‘Champagne! I nicked two bottles.’

‘Yeah, cos your folks have got an actual wine cellar. Flippin’ heck,’ Liam rolled his eyes but squeezed her in a quick hug.

After my shift, we caught the bus up the hill late afternoon. The air was so thick and golden, it felt like warm honey on my bare patterned skin. We rushed down the narrow stone path, squeezed between two green fields, pushing back the cow parsley that hung down into our faces.

My excitement grew with the noise of the falls. I’d been coming here all my life: it symbolised the best of the summer holidays. When we got there, there were just a few families left, packing up. Soon we had the place to ourselves: the basin of water and the sheeting white falls. There was a circle of perfect blue sky between the high banks, edged with green leaves where the sycamore and silver birch trees leaned in, moss and ferns on the lower levels.

It felt like a magic spell fell on us then. Maybe it was the light: that syrupy golden warmth, with seeds and blossom floating around through the haze.

Eden had a rug. ‘This is it: we know how to do it in style. Towel for you, Jess!’ She chucked it over with her spare bikini. I managed to shimmy into it under my dress.

Eden was stunning in her white bikini, showing off her whole-summer tan, and I tried not to mind how milky my skin looked next to hers. Liam stripped to his shorts. I averted my eyes.

‘Liam, go stick this bottle in the river, for later? It’s gotta be cold as ice.’

When he was back, Eden looked at us, with a serious expression on her face. ‘I want to, y’know, propose a toast. I know it’s not been easy for you two, putting up with me this summer...’

‘Hey, don’t say that,’ I butted in.

‘Don’t interrupt me! It’s hard enough as it is.’ Her eyes were big and bright and I could see this mattered to her. ‘I just wanted to say thanks. And you’re the best. Cheers!’ She lifted the bottle and then popped the cork before we could reply, spraying us both lightly with fizz.

‘Cheers!’ I leant in and kissed her cheek, tasting sunscreen and salt, our sunglasses clashing. ‘And you’re welcome,’ I whispered. ‘What else would we do?’ Then she was passing me the heavy bottle, sun glinting off its gold foil.

Afterwards, we all leant back on our elbows in the sunshine. The light made rose fractals on my eyelids. The champagne made my body hum with warmth. The best bit of the magic spell was Eden and her good mood. She was her old self, like before Iona died. Funny, but not unkind. She never used to be unkind.

‘What could be more perfect? Being here with my two favourite people,’ Eden said, lying back and closing her eyes, her fingers finding Liam’s on the rug.

Liam was restless. The champagne turned his dial up three notches. He couldn’t sit still and he couldn’t stop talking, endlessly changing the subject. ‘Hey, did you hear Dev banging on about his new menu this morning?’ he asked me. ‘That guy thinks he’s on *Masterchef*.’ Then he made us laugh, with his deadpan, brilliant impressions of all the other staff in the cafe. Next he mocked the tourists who expected London wherever they went. ‘No, we don’t do skinny soya lattes. Milk or no milk, your call? Hey, who’s hungry?’

We ate the food with our fingers straight from the ice-cream tub: quiches and nearly-stale wraps stuffed with olives and feta and roasted peppers. There was half a cheesecake, topped with strawberries – on the turn, Dev'd said, but it seemed fine to me. It collapsed into my lap and I had to wipe it off my scrawny white thighs.

Eden was licking her fingers, sticky and sweet, still elegant as a cat. I could see the way Liam was looking at her.

'I'll leave you to it. I need a swim,' I told them, but neither of them glanced up as I walked away.

You had to know this place well, where to jump from. If you got it wrong, you'd break an ankle on the stone shelves jutting out under the black peaty water. On hotter days, there'd be a line of kids waiting to take the leap, bombing down from the cliff above.

I took my time, finding the place. I checked for thistles, stepping carefully in bare feet through long grass onto the ledge. I looked down at the pool. The water looked like Irn-Bru in the shallows, turning to oily darkness in the depths. I took a breath and leapt – a blink of thrill, falling through air – then the shock of the cold, feet crunching on gravel and silt. I pushed up and out, spitting out water, that cool, weedy, dank smell. I shook my head, buzzing with the cold, and dived back under the water.

After a few strokes I glanced up at the high bank, at their long bodies entwined on the rug. Liam was lying on Eden, holding her face in his hands, like he'd never seen anything so beautiful. I looked away, squashing down a sudden rush of something sharp and bitter that rose inside me.

I swam on my back, looking up. There was a plane slicing through the blue, leaving a vapour trail. A bird poured out its heart in tumbling notes, and sheep bleated on the high moor. I floated, letting my hair curl out around me. With my ears under the water I let the bass churn of the waterfall banish every other thought.

Surely this was almost happy? Wasn't it enough? It had been a very long time since happy, but surely this was close? I'd kept my promise. It had been Eden's summer. I'd been there for her. She would survive: today was proof.

I floated, thinking. Weren't we due some good luck? I was finally painting again. I was training for a race next month. Sure, it was nearly school, but I

wasn't looking too closely at that, even as it sped nearer. Maybe things were finally back to normal, whatever that was. But I still felt there was a cloud over my happiness. Not full sunshine. Maybe that's how it was, now. Maybe that's the best I could hope for.

When I got too cold, I clambered out, nicking my shin on a ledge of rock, teeth chattering. I exaggerated it, giving them warning I was getting near, 'Brr, free-zing!' I rubbed myself warm again, hopping on the spot, and finally went over to the rug.

They were sitting now. I'd heard people say, 'Joined at the hip' but this was the first time I'd seen it. They were wedged so tightly together it seemed as though they'd grown into a new, combined creature. He had his arm around her tightly and she seemed smaller, wedged into his armpit. She had been crying – the only sign was a slight redness to her eyes, and their blue seemed greener.

Eden, crying?

'You OK?' I was actually relieved. I only saw tears once after Iona died, and that had not been good. But if she was crying now, maybe she was getting better, letting stuff out.

'Crying on Liam Caffrey's shoulder, who'd have thought it?' her smile was wide and wobbly.

He kissed the top of her head so gently. 'You're OK, Eden. You're gonna be OK.' But when he looked at me I saw something less certain in his eyes.

Chapter Nineteen

Friday 4th September

3.30pm

What difference a week makes.

I hurry after Liam, down the narrow path. Ferns and nettles lean in, hiding the ground, and I slip and curse, getting stung. Everything turns dark. The clouds are thicker now, gathering close and low. I can't see Liam.

In the field to my right there's a farmer on a quad bike, waving and yelling something. She turns the engine off and shouts, 'And take your bloody rubbish with you this time!'

I flee from her fury, but when I get close to the waterfall I see what she means. The green field and mossy banks are strewn with crushed beer cans, chocolate wrappers and disposable barbecues. Scraps of plastic are tangled in the brambles.

I stare down at the pool. I see a pale thing, turning slowly in the thundering white water.

My heart flips right over like a pancake in my chest.

It's not a body.

It's a plastic bag.

It's not Eden's top.

It's not Eden.

I stand there, scanning the river, checking each bank, till I'm sure.

When I can move again, I stub my toe on something hard. There's a metal plaque dug into the ground, etched with dark letters. I know about this: Barwell brought our whole class here, for our form project in Year Seven. The poet from our town wrote about this place, about an old photo of six young men who sat right here on this bank with the bilberry bushes. I've seen the photo: they're smiling and lounging, all ordinary, just before they went off and got killed in a war.

I remember that day, the excitement of being out of school. We clustered on this bank, shuffling close. Some of the lads were mucking about, swinging on branches and pretending to fall in.

'Right, listen up,' Barwell said. 'You know the plan. We'll read the poem now: you each have your line.'

It worked too. It was different reading it here with the page ruffled by the breeze. Everyone shut up, to hear their mates and to do their line. Afterwards it was quiet. The waterfall sounded very loud. You could hear the wind in the trees.

‘Well done,’ Barwell told us. ‘Now your words, please. What’s he saying, our Ted?’

Charlotte put her hand up. It looked strange – with the sparkling river, not a classroom behind her. ‘It’s right here. I mean, he’s got it right, this exact spot with the trees and the water and stuff.’

Billy talked over her, not waiting for permission, ‘Nah, it’s about the soldiers more than anything, in’t it, sir? The ones in the picture, right before they got killed.’

Someone chipped in with explosive sound effects but Billy closed them down, ‘Shut up, idiot.’

Eden spoke next, her voice high and clear, ‘And it’s about how you can’t imagine being dead, when you’re right here, so alive. Those soldiers ... they were as alive as we are now. But now they’re all gone. And the poet’s gone.’

Barwell was about to step in, but she wasn’t finished.

‘And we’ll all be dead one day too. And you just can’t get your head round it. That’s what he’s saying, isn’t he, sir?’

I blink and the memory vanishes. My mind will not accept the possibility that Eden could be dead, now or ever. Stopped. The End. Nothing. My best friend is too alive. Too everything. She can’t just disappear. What happens to all her Eden-ness? What the hell happens to me, without her?

I stare into the leafy shadows, looking for a ghost.

‘*Eden? Have you gone? Don’t leave me. I need you.*’ I whisper it and my words are whipped into the turbulent air above the falls. I imagine my prayer rushing off downstream, past fields and through the woods and into town, under bridges, past the school and the railway... I pray it will reach Eden, wherever she is.

I stand there, watching the water, unable to move. Would this be any easier if we’d had the best week ever? If I didn’t feel so bloody responsible? If it was this time last year, when we were all happy and straightforward and undamaged?

Except that it couldn't have happened back then. None of this is happening by chance. It isn't some random snatching of a teenage girl, like you hear on the news. It's all connected: what happened to me, to Iona, to Eden. Liam's part of it too.

I just need to see the pattern that connects it all, see it from the right angle, so everything clicks into place. I remember the image on the 'death' Tarot card and pray it doesn't mean Eden. There has to be another explanation, if I can only work it out.

'She's not here.' Liam speaks from behind me and I nearly slip off the path into the pool.

'Shit, make me jump, why don't you?' I snap at him.

'I thought you'd want to know.' He stares at me expressionlessly. 'I checked up- and downriver. Clear.'

'OK,' I sigh, telling myself that this negative can still be a positive. We can tick something off our list. We're one step closer to finding her. 'So where do we go from here?' I think aloud. 'I guess we might as well use our position, do a sweep downstream.' I know these hills well from all the different routes our running coach sets us. 'If we do this whole valley, duck down into the crags and then we can go over the hill to the poet's house. That's where we went on residential.'

'So?' Liam's being weird. He's staring past me, up the path we came down, like he's checking no one is coming.

A shiver goes through me. For the first time, I wonder if he planned it this way. This was his idea. Did he bring me out here on my own for a reason?

I make my voice brisk and practical to sound stronger than I feel. 'Stuff happened there. It's worth a try.'

'OK.'

'Got any better ideas?' I challenge him, keeping on with the brave face.

He shakes his head.

'Well, that's my plan anyway. You can do what you like.' I decide to put some distance between us. I walk over the little stone bridge. The water slides underneath me, smooth, deep and treacly brown, rushing to the falls.

Liam's standing on the other bank, watching me. His face is in deep shadow and I can't see his expression.

I turn and go up the rugged tussocky path on the far side of the valley. My heart is beating fast now, from the exertion and something else. I glance over my shoulder.

Liam's moving fast too, throwing himself at the hill to catch me.

It's fine, I can outrun him over distance. All I need is a head start. So I push myself, stumbling on the dry churned-up turf.

Behind me, Liam speeds up.

Chapter Twenty

‘Jess, wait!’

I don’t wait. I keep my head down and lengthen my stride. I reach the top of the slope, and fling myself down the main path. That’s when I trip and go flying. I land hard in the sun-dried dirt.

‘Didn’t you hear me, Jess? I said, wait!’ Liam’s there. He puts one hand under my elbow and starts helping me up.

My knees and palms are on fire, scraped white skin. Blood takes a moment longer to seep through. My legs are trembling from the adrenalin surge. ‘What are you doing?’ I shake Liam’s arm off.

‘Me? You’re the one who started sprinting off like a frightened rabbit!’

‘Look, we haven’t got time to stand here bickering. We need to cover some distance. We need to search properly.’ I dust myself off – there’s little bullets of dried sheep poo clinging to my leggings – and turn away, ready to run again. ‘We’re wasting time!’

‘Oh, and that’s my fault?’ Liam’s standing in an old gateway between dry stone walls, only there’s no gate, just rusty metal hinges holding thin air. Behind him the dusty track slopes off into the distance, to where hills curve in a dark wooded ‘V’ with paler green horizon behind.

I don’t answer. I don’t want to be with him any more. I can’t think straight near him. He pulls my thoughts off course, like a magnet: attracting, repelling.

‘You think that, don’t you?’ he takes my silence for an answer. ‘You’re blaming me, just like the others!’ The sun’s in his eyes, and his face is all scrunched up.

A switch flicks inside me. ‘Well, you saw her last, you tell me! Something must’ve happened!’

‘Yeah, Sherlock. Something happened – where’ve you been all summer? And you know full well, with that girl, anything could happen. You know what Eden’s like. Up and down like a flippin’ yo-yo. She’s not exactly stable, your mate.’

‘Oh, so she’s my mate now, is she? See how quick you want rid of her.’ And I hate him suddenly for being able to shrug her off like that. He’s known her ten minutes compared to me. She’s my best friend, for life. However long that is. ‘Don’t you dare talk about her like that!’

We're facing off against each other now. I'm shouting in his face, so close I see a fleck of my spit land on his cheek.

'Oh, it starts here, does it? Just cos she's missing, she's perfect suddenly? You and me know that's so not true.'

'Shut your mouth,' I shriek at him.

'And if she's dead, let's make her a saint, like they did with her psycho sister?'

I slap him.

It must shock us both, or he'd've dodged quicker.

He grabs my hand and hoists me up towards him, hissing in my face.

'These your true colours, Jess Mayfield?' His mouth twists in a sour smirk.

'What? So violence is only wrong when it's directed against you? When you get to play the little victim?'

I gasp and try to struggle away.

'But you get to lash out any time you like?'

My heart's hammering. The white sky spins above us. Liam's face looms into mine, like a nightmare version of last Saturday night. His blue eyes narrow, sparking pain.

'What if I'd done that to you, and you'd run to the police? What do you think, Jess? You think I'd get sympathy? You girls! All your banging on about fair this, equal that. You've got no clue. Fair works both ways and you're not playing fair.'

I'm lost. My vision's breaking up in a snowstorm of silver dots. His words reach me distantly through the sea of panic.

'I don't do violence – Clarkson was a one-off, to stop him. But you do, apparently.'

He's still got my wrist, and I'm falling away. Only his grip is keeping me up.

'Good job I find out now, before I got in any deeper. I thought you were the sane one, Jess.'

He throws my hand away and I fall back against the grass at the edge of the track. I rub my wrist, hot and sore where he held it, and listen to his footsteps pounding away into the distance.

The worst thing is, he's right about Eden, and it looks like he's right about me, too.

Saturday July 13th

1.20am

We staggered over the little canal bridge, me and Liam like two tugboats pulling Eden along. We'd left the club in a hurry after Eden almost started a fight.

'You can't go around telling people stuff like that,' Liam was saying to her.

'Yeah, but it's true. She *was* out of his league. And she was so giving that other lad the eye,' Eden was slurring her words and it took the two of us to keep her on track.

'Yeah, but if you piss him off, and I come over to back you up, then it's him and me, facing off...' Liam sighed. 'Don't you get it? If it all kicks off, it's not just you who gets hurt. There's me. And there's Jess, Eden. Remember us?'

Eden pouted at being told off. We'd reached the other side now, moving slowly along the canal path, by the park railings. 'Oh, yeah, sorry J. We're still doing eggshells and tiptoeing round our precious Jess.'

'You what?' I turned to her, stung, letting her arm fall. Let Eden keep herself upright then, if she was going to insult me.

'Just saying, it's been, what, six months since and it's like it were yesterday. Surely that's wallowing?'

'Eden,' Liam saw my face and tried to interrupt.

'I'm not going to wallow,' Eden wasn't even looking at me. She stood there, swaying gently. Her face was pale, her eyes unfocused. 'I'm not going to let the death of my sister stop me. That bitch does not get to derail my summer—'

'Eden, you're pissed. Let's go,' Liam spoke loudly over her. 'Move it on.'

I swallowed down my hurt. I took a long moment – deep breaths like the psychologist woman taught me. When I was calm enough to speak again, I kept it practical, 'All back to mine. You can't go home like that. Liam, I need you to help me.'

'I can walk! Get off me, you pair of fussy buggers. Mother hens! Ha!' Eden was taken with that image. She started squawking and flapping her way

along the path, but at least she was moving again. For a while. She petered out after a few steps and flopped over the metal bars that edged the canal.

Me and Liam came in and took one arm each, like some bizarre six-legged race. Liam had most of the weight. We slowly moved round and faced the stone steps that led to the road. Eden put her hand up and stroked my hair as we started again.

‘Ah, Jess, your hair is so soft. Feel that, Liam? You’d think all that dye wouldn’t help, but it’s so soft...’

‘Yeah, whatever, thanks E.’

‘So soft... But why do you keep dyeing it? You don’t make it easy for yourself, do you, J?’

‘What do you mean?’ I asked, bracing for the answer she’d give me in this state.

She stumbled and clung tighter to my neck. ‘Well, why do you dress like that – like the bride of Dracula - if you don’t want to get picked on? I’m not judging! But it’s the obvious question.’

I halted and she slammed sideways into me. Behind her, the canal was still and black, reflecting orange streetlights.

‘What the actual fuck?’ I couldn’t swallow this one down. I was white hot furious. ‘This is me, E. We can’t all look like our town’s next supermodel, and quite frankly, you’re not looking too great yourself right now.’

‘Hey, easy! Easy,’ Liam tried to come between us, looking freaked out. ‘She didn’t mean it, did you Eden?’

‘She’d better bloody not have done. Because it sounded like she was saying it was my fault, what happened. *My fault*, for looking the teensiest bit alternative? Not their fault for being aggressive Neanderthal morons who’d slam anyone for putting a foot out of line by their tiny birdbrain definitions!’

‘I’m sorry, J. I didn’t mean it,’ Eden said. Her drunkenness was a pale mask, only I wasn’t sure who was beneath it any more. Her mouth was slack, her hair getting tangled in her face. She was a mess. She was more of a mess than me.

I couldn’t stay angry. It’d be like kicking a toddler who’d tripped over. I waited, searching for a line to make it OK. ‘Good, cos you were beginning to sound like you’d swapped bodies with some old git. Trent maybe.’

‘Urgh, Jess. You’re twisted,’ Liam jumped gratefully onto the change of topic, ‘So you’re saying I’ve been kissing Mrs Trent? The Tank trapped in Eden’s body?’

Eden went even whiter. A hand flew to her mouth, ‘Oh, no, I’m gonna throw...’ She whirled round and leant over the rail, puking into the overflow channel between the canal and the river.

‘I’ve got this. You wait up the steps,’ I told Liam. She wouldn’t want him seeing this.

Liam backed away, mouthing, ‘You sure?’

I nodded, holding Eden’s hair out of the way and rubbing her back gently until she’d finished. Then I rummaged in my backpack for a water bottle.

‘Eurgh. I hate that,’ she groaned eventually.

‘Here, hold your hands out,’ I poured water on them, so she could wipe her face.

She spat one last time, then turned and folded into herself then, sliding down onto the floor and resting her pale face on her knees. ‘You’re good to me, J.’ Without opening her eyes, she reached out one damp hand. ‘Best friends?’

‘Yeah, E. Best friends,’ I replied, squeezing her cold hand gently.

Chapter Twenty-One

Friday 4th September

4.16pm

I jog down the valley after Liam, past the quiet National Trust car park. I've wiped my grazes on my tunic. Maybe that's why I get weird looks from the weekday dog walkers. I'm trying not to think about what Liam said. I tell myself I'm on autopilot, searching as I fly.

There is no sign of Eden anywhere. I go up the hill, through the woods, and over into the next valley, down the steep lane to the writers' centre where we came on the residential. The sun comes out again: heavy amber bars, slanting through the trees. Huge beech trees, like giants guarding the entrance gates to the poet's house. Oh, the stuff they've seen: over hundreds of years, in all weathers.

'Have you seen Eden? Where did she go?' I ask the trees, as I slip past. I know I shouldn't be here. They'll be busy with another group. It's their home this week, not mine. But I can't help feeling – because of what happened here - a little bit of it will always belong to me.

Monday 1st July

4.45pm

After the funeral, I didn't see Eden for weeks. Radio silence. I wondered what was happening up at their house, the three of them where there had been four. A missing limb.

Someone decided the creative writing residential would be the best way of 'easing Eden back into the school context without the stress of her usual timetable'. Whatever. When someone dropped out, Barwell offered me the spare place first, so I could come along with Eden. Me and all the top set English class. Liam didn't get a look in.

For weeks the weather had been heartlessly idyllic, but now it got the message. Low ragged clouds brought rain. We went up there after school on Monday in the sweaty little school minibus. It wasn't far, just a mile or two up the hill and down a steep straight lane: like a chute into another world.

I sat next to Eden on the way. She didn't speak much. I felt shy of her, rusty at being her friend. 'Want some diet coke?' 'I bought a new notebook and

a spare if you want it?' Everything I said sounded stupid, stilted, irrelevant. What did you say to a girl who'd just lost her sister?

The bus spat us out next to dark stone buildings that belonged to a different century. In the pouring rain, the place seemed to match the poet who'd once lived here. Beautiful but kind of forbidding.

I tumbled away from the stew of the minibus. I usually hated the rain. It reminded me of *that day*, but this smelt different: fresher. I followed Josh, Imogen and the others straight into the grounds: there was an apron of landscaped gardens jutting out over a stunning view. The valley cut a deep wedge between wooded hills, with the town tucked tactfully out of sight round the corner. The only noise was the rushing river far below us.

'I'm king of the world!' Josh yelled into the rain, with his hands in the air, leaning right over the railing. His cronies laughed, but I was with him for once. It felt like we'd stepped through a portal to a magic kingdom.

'Hey, I'm Rose. Welcome.' A smiling woman with purple hair opened a front door that was thicker than my arm. 'Come in out of the rain and put your bags in here.' She was in her late twenties, with an oval face, a kind smile and the bluest eyes I'd ever seen. She was wearing a grungy black T-shirt, a lace skirt and huge hobnailed boots that were even bigger than mine.

I liked her straight away. Even more when I saw the tray of tea and cake she'd laid out before an open fire.

Rose counted us in and served us cake while she explained the rules for the week. Afterwards, she showed us our bedrooms. Me and Eden got our very own staircase - like fairytale princesses in a tower - leading to two little attic rooms on the second floor.

'Which of you is Jess Mayfield?' Rose read from her crumpled sheet of paper. 'You're in here.'

I looked through the doorway and my heart clicked its heels. It was a little square room, empty except for a single bed covered in an orange throw, a small table with a bronze lamp, and an old wooden desk and chair. The ceiling curved down low under the eaves, held up by dark beams, to a huge window in the middle of the outside wall. The view was like a painting: silver rain needling down the valley, steep fields and the woods with their million shades of green. I could even hear the river.

‘And you must be Eden? Here.’ She opened the other door: a smaller room with no windows, only skylights where the rain was tapdancing loudly. ‘Not quite the same view, but cosy, right?’

I glanced at Eden’s face. ‘Or, can she bring her mattress in here and share with me?’ I asked.

‘Sure, just let me know,’ Rose said, smiled and left.

‘What do you think, E?’ I said as Rose went back down our stairs. ‘Do you want to share, or go solitary? Either works for me.’ I kept it light, trying to hide my concern. She’d gone inside herself, somewhere a long way down, and I didn’t know how to follow.

Eden shrugged, ‘I’ll stay put. Not really here for the views.’ She went in and lay on her bed without closing the door. She put her headphones back in and stared up at the rain hammering on the glass.

I waited for a long moment, but I couldn’t think of what to say. I went to unpack, taking possession of my room. I loved everything about it. I wondered about all the other people who’d ever slept here before me. It felt as though I could almost see their shadows, or feel the imprint they’d left behind like dust.

I could hear the others yelling and stampeding along the corridor below. Someone knocked on my door.

Barwell waited, carefully not crossing my threshold. ‘Everything OK, Jess?’

‘Sir,’ I nodded. ‘Better than OK, look at this.’

‘Lucky you. I’m out in the barn near the boys. Rose is at the end of the corridor if you need her. How’s Eden?’ he added in a loud whisper.

‘Like you’d expect,’ I told him.

He slumped a bit. ‘Dinner’s in ten. See if you can persuade her to come down?’

Everyone except Eden spent that ten minutes shrieking and chasing each other through the massive echoing rooms, discovering a library lined with bookshelves, several pianos, a whole floor of high-ceilinged bedrooms, and a dining table that could seat all twenty of us, no problem at all.

Barwell looked different here too. He changed into jeans and T-shirt instead of his usual suit and tie.

At dinner, Charlotte asked cheekily, ‘So, can we call you Neil this week, sir?’

‘No, you flippin’ well can’t. I’m still your teacher, and I’m *in loco parentis*. You know what that means?’

‘Nah.’

‘For this week only, I’m your mum and your dad rolled into one: *über-dad*,’ he growled in a daft voice. ‘So you’d better do as I say!’ but he twinkled into his mug of tea.

Besides, he wasn’t teaching us. The deal was, you got two proper writers to do that, and here they were, eating baked potatoes and beans right along with us.

There was a tall, softly spoken children’s author called Tom. He had a grey beard, a stoop and a dry sense of humour, and soon seemed like everyone’s favourite uncle. He had a line of bruises across his forehead – the doorways were brutally low here.

And there was a poet called Aisha, not five years older than us, but already published and so confident that she shone. She talked easily about rhyme and metre, throwing magic words into the air like juggling balls.

Straight after dinner, Aisha held the first workshop of the week. ‘OK, we launch in here, people. Ice-breaker, word-maker, dive in now. No passes out. Everyone reads. They’re my rules, right? Work in pairs for my lucky dip. Pick a card from this bag and describe your partner using only the clue you chose.’

Eden was as absent as it was possible to be in a room full of twenty people, all squashed in around the fire on four different sofas.

I grabbed a card and read it out to her. ‘*Food or drink*. Sounds all right. You go first?’

She blinked at me, pale and vacant. This was going to be a long week.

‘Come on, what would Josh say you were?’ I whispered, glancing over to where Josh was telling his mate Danny that no, he couldn’t be a Porsche, he wasn’t that fine.

‘He’d say I was coffee,’ Eden said finally, in a low, hoarse voice. ‘He thinks I’m strong, addictive, dark, all that bollocks.’

‘Nah, you’d be tea, not coffee.’ I said, relieved to hear her speak.

‘What, milky and boring? Ta very much!’ She didn’t smile, but it was only a moment away, if I kept on trying.

‘Eden Holby, how many cups of tea do I drink every single day of my life?’ I lifted the mug at my feet to make my point.

‘Ten? Fifteen?’

‘Exactly. Don’t bash the brew, E. I love my tea. Tea rocks. But if you like you can be a posh one: Lady Grey?’

‘OK, I’ll take that, cheers.’

Her lips finally curved into a brief, trembling smile.

I high-fived myself on the inside. ‘What am I then, E? Make it good! I’m thinking champagne ... hot chocolate at the least...’

‘Ah, easy. You’re a glass of water, J.’

‘What’s that – plain, cheap and everyday?’ I teased, keeping it warm and light.

‘No, I can’t survive long without it.’

I looked over. She was back. She met my gaze with eyes that shone. I leaned in and hugged her hard, burying my face in her apple-scented hair. I heard the conversations around us quieten, felt the weight of eyes on our backs. I didn’t care. I’d be her safety barrier. I’d stand between Eden and the world.

Chapter Twenty-Two

Tuesday 2nd July

10am

Next morning around the dining table gleaming in the muted morning light, Aisha read us a poem. It was about this actual house, by that actual poet who'd lived here, the one staring down at us from a photo on the wall with the startled, hunted look in his eyes.

‘What do you think?’

Silence.

‘Look, this is your territory. This is right here!’

I think she meant it as inspiration. It didn't work like that. His strong, supple words left me speechless. He'd been here first. He said it all. He said it too well. And if not him, his beautiful brilliant wife who'd killed herself. Between them, they had all the angles covered when it came to this valley.

I tried to say it. ‘Yeah, but Miss?’

‘I've told you, Jess, isn't it? Call me Aisha, I'm not your teacher and we're not at school.’

‘Aisha then. I mean, they've not left any space for us, have they? If we talk about the moors, it's all Cathy and Heathcliff. If we talk about this house, or this weather, we're copying him. If we talk about depression and that,’ I ignored all the faces that turned to Eden now, like a shoal of gawping fish, ‘then she got there first. It's all been said.’

Aisha sighed. ‘OK. Who else thinks this?’

A few hands went up.

‘You know what? Some people say there are only seven stories in the world. Seven! All the others are variations on those. But if I asked you now to write me a story about the worst experience of your life, I'd get sixteen different stories. And none of them would be boring. Am I right?’

Mutters of agreement.

‘There might be seven stories but there are a billion ways of telling them. So - thanks Jess - this is today's assignment. I want you to write a short fictionalised version of something either very good or very bad that has happened to you. Remember, that's short – a page or two. And that's fiction – no real people, people! OK?’

I did it too. When Eden fell asleep after lunch, I took a chair into her room and watched over her. While she slept, I got out my sketchbook. I didn't mean to, but I just started drawing properly, for the first time since last November. And it flowed out, like it was all there, and I was just the printer, spewing page after page.

Later that evening I copied it out, and went to find Aisha. 'Miss? Aisha, I mean. Here's mine.' I thrust it at her like it might bite me if I held on to it too long.

'Thank you, Jess.' She didn't look at it then and I was glad. 'Make an appointment tomorrow, after lunch. We'll talk about it then.'

The next day, I was surprised how nervous I was. All morning, each time I remembered the appointment, something lurched inside me. Finally, after I'd eaten about half a bowl of soup and chased some salad round my plate for a bit, it was time.

My name was the first on the sign-up sheet pinned to the door of the library. *2.30 Jess Mayfield*. I knocked on the white painted wood. You could see where the brush strokes had been, where they'd left little beads of paint.

'Come in, Jess.'

I went in. A posh house's grand personal library, like you might see in a film, with a deep red carpet. The walls were lined with books, except for one wall that was mainly window, and another that was filled by a massive stone fireplace with a big black stove in it. It smelt old but nice in here: like wood and polish, paper and ash. Aisha was sitting at the long table, but her back was to the window, so it was hard to see her expression. There was a thick shaft of sunlight with tiny gold specks floating through it like fairy dust.

I sat down and fumbled for a pen and paper, in case I was supposed to write some of this down. I noticed she had my pages in front of her and my mouth went dry.

'Jess? So, this is based on my challenge, right? This story is a bit like something that happened?'

I nodded. I couldn't look at her now, so I concentrated on my fingers, which were trembling. I slapped the pen down, spreading my fingers on the desk to stop the shakes.

‘This is it.’ Aisha’s voice changed, so that I couldn’t help sneaking a quick look. She was blinking fast. She cleared her throat. ‘This is how you speak of the unspeakable. This is how you speak even when others have come first and told their stories so strongly. This is how, Jess. In your words. In your way. No one else in the world could’ve created this. Do you see? This is it.’

Inside me, the thaw quickened. I heard the flump of falling snow, the drip of icicles, faster, faster, faster, and the rush of meltwater.

‘There’s not many words,’ I mumbled.

‘Yeah, but Jess? They’re the right ones.’

I tried to tell her. ‘I couldn’t draw, afterwards...’

‘You can certainly draw now. And Jess, you have to do this. When it’s time to choose what you do next, please will you remember what I said? You have a real talent. For art, sure - you must already know that. But also for this, words and pictures on a page that are unique and powerful. I don’t have any other feedback for you. This is just right. The shape, the content. What you left out. What you put in. You made me cry, and I can promise you, I don’t say that often.’

She stood up then, and I mirrored her. She came round the table and paused with one hand on the door handle, ready to open it for me. She kept a distance between us, but now she was facing the light, I got the full beam of her smile and the look in those tiger eyes and it was better than a hug. ‘I wish you all the luck in the world, you brave woman.’

I went outside. I didn’t know what to do. I wanted to hold the feeling a bit longer before I spoke to anyone. I went out and wandered round the house in a daze. I sleepwalked down through the gardens below. There was a bench there, looking out across the whole valley. I saw no one. I sat down with my bag and my papers held tight against me and I felt the warm afternoon sun on my face. I watched the rabbits hop and graze in the steep fields. A herd of white cows, chewing. The air was full of motion, the churn of the river and the trees, swaying green, but I sat completely still, smiling.

Chapter Twenty-Three

November 29th, previous year

9.07pm

Late November. I'd always hated November. After the minor sparkly compensation of bonfire night, it was a shit month. School was full-on hard work, triple homework each night, accelerating towards the end of term. It got dark earlier every day. Crap light for painting, so I was late with my art coursework, and that was the only subject I cared about. The weather was cold, wet and windy, punishing you for being outside.

Eden came round to mine after school. We did our homework. We had tea. Mum made veggie shepherd's pie and apple crumble and we took second helpings cos the weather seemed to demand it, then couldn't finish them: completely overfaced.

It was after nine when Mum put her head round my bedroom door, 'Isn't your mum going to be wondering where you are, Eden?'

'Yeah, s'pose.' Eden stayed where she was, leaning on the radiator, stroking Fluff, curled in a tight white circle next to her.

I knew Eden preferred being at our house. It kept her out of Iona's way. Their war was getting worse all the time.

Eden smiled at Mum and started getting her stuff together. 'Thanks though, for dinner and everything.'

'Any time, Eden. You know you're always welcome here. When's the next bus? Don't want you waiting in the rain. I'm sorry I can't drive you – our car's in the garage again.'

'It's all right.' She checked her phone and turned to me, 'There's one in ten minutes.' She gave me her best pleading face. 'Walk me to the bus stop, J?'

'Really? In this?' I could hear the rain splattering out of our guttering onto the street below. 'And you can save the puppy-dog eyes, E. They don't work on me.'

'Ah, go on. What if it's late? Anyway, I've not finished telling you what Josh said today.'

'All right then, seeing as it's you,' I got up too and followed her down the stairs. 'But I want it noted: I don't get soaked to the skin for just anyone, Eden

Holby.’ We put our coats on, hardly dry from the walk home. Then I turned and shouted through the open door, ‘Mum! Be back in ten, OK?’

We ran, yelping, through the rain, seeing as neither of us owned an umbrella.

‘Hurry up, E, you’ll miss it!’ The raindrops were heavy on my shoulders and my hood, little scrabbling paws, trying to get in.

We went along the main road, and then ducked under the underpass, where the back lane was pouring with water off the hill. From there, it was a sharp left, up the ramp onto the station forecourt, with Eden’s bus right there, waiting to head off in the opposite direction.

I yelled, ‘You owe me one, E! Tomorrow!’

She ran for it, with a backward wave. I saw the bus pull away, Eden safe inside its little warm bubble. She put her face up to the glass and made a daft face, eyes and mouth wide as a clown’s.

I laughed out loud - with the rain pouring down my cheeks, I bet I looked like a clown now too, waterproof eyeliner and mascara were no match for this - and then I turned for home.

I was hurrying back down the ramp when it began. I’d pulled my hood lower, now I was facing the wind. I didn’t see the people coming under the railway bridge, till they were right in front of me.

Six or eight of them, shouting and smoking, heading slowly for the station.

I hunched my shoulders, avoiding eye contact and did a quick check behind me to see I was OK to step into the road. I gave them a clear metre, dodging the two girls nearest me.

But just as I passed, one of them stepped back, screeching with laughter. Arms flailing, she slammed straight into my shoulder.

‘Oi, you blind bitch!’ She yanked my hood down but didn’t let go of it, or the clump of my hair that she’d grabbed in her fist.

Rain in my face, heart pounding, I tried to pull away. The second she let go, I’d be out of there and they would not catch me.

That didn’t happen.

My scalp burned. I felt hair ripping away. ‘Get off me!’ I screamed. Both my hands flew up, trying to push her away.

One hand connected with warm soft flesh. Her face? Her neck? All I knew was that her fingers released. I spun, gasping, ready to run.

‘She fucking winded me. Get her.’

The others closed in. The rain wasn’t bothering them. They had all the time in the world for this.

I had time to think, *this is real, this is actually happening*, then her boyfriend moved in, filling my vision. Tall, blundering, doughy: he had a shaved head and boy-breasts bursting out of the shiny United shirt under his sodden jacket. His eyes narrowed with drink and hate at the sight of my face, my red hair, my piercings.

I smelt his pickled breath as he came in for a closer look. I held my hands up, reasoning with him, ‘OK, I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to hurt her, but she was...’

He flicked his cigarette away. I remember focusing on how neatly he did that, between middle finger and thumb. Then he pulled his arm back and punched me in the face.

My head exploded. The pain was massive. It pushed every other thought away: blinding, crushing, awful. I collapsed. Wet hands and knees. The cold reached me distantly. My vision smeared with orange and black. I twisted my head and vomited, bringing more pain. Above me, the rain broke over the streetlight like an asteroid shower.

‘Fucking dirty goth.’

That twisted Mancunian drawl, rattling out words like bullets.

‘You’re not fit to touch her. Scum.’

My reactions were too slow. I pushed back onto my knees and tried to stand. I thought they’d finished. I’d touched his girl. He’d hit me. We were done here.

I went to get up, but there was something wrong. My body didn’t move right. If I could just get up, I was five minutes from home. I prayed for someone to walk this way. A neighbour. A friend. Someone who could help me up.

The lad jerked back, but not like he was leaving. His weight shifted backwards, with focus and momentum, like an Olympic high jumper...

His foot connected with my ear. Something cracked. The pain was worse.

Nuclear.

A mushroom cloud of pain blossoming, red on black.

Moments passed like years of pain.

I was flat again. Standing seemed ambitious, but I tried to crawl away, I knew enough to try to crawl away. 'Please... Don't...' My words were wet and mangled. My fingers slipped on warm stickiness and cold concrete.

A girl's foot appeared right next to my face, in a black, heeled boot. I could see the scuff marks on the toe. Was this help? Was this finally someone coming to stop it? I squinted up, searching for a hand, something to grab, a lifeline.

'Here,' she said.

My heart heaved with relief.

Then it hit me: a warm gobbet of spit, right across my face.

The boot disappeared and kicked my hands away. My chin hit gravel. The next kick left me gasping: fish on a slab. I curled up. Hands over head. Whatever I did, I left something exposed and that's where they hit me next.

Chest. Back. Shin.

Rib. Rib. Cheek.

Pain went off the scale. There had never been pain, till now.

I heard a shriek like a vixen. Laughter.

'Car!'

'Fuck. Come on. *Now.*'

'End it.'

Hands lifted me and I groped blindly, like someone capsized. Which way was up? A crack of vision returned. They swung me out into the road, towards the tunnel. A car coming.

A car.

Rain in headlights.

Light.

Light meant help.

By the time the driver saw me – arms out, blinded by blood, flying forwards, creased double – it was too late.

I slammed into the bonnet.

Fade to black.

Chapter Twenty-Four

29th November. Afterwards.

Light returned in flashes.

Sirens.

Mum's face, white as paper.

Pain was the sea I floated in. Sometimes the waves were high; sometimes it was calmer.

Machines beeped. Voices came and went.

Tides of confusion finally receded, leaving me beached and gasping on a strange trolley bed.

I felt Mum's hand touching my forearm. Stroking it. Cotton sheet under me. Pressure round my head. One hand felt strange. My body felt stranger.

'Where are we?'

'A and E.'

'Why?' The pain said it was me that was hurt, but I needed to check.

'Mum, are you OK?'

'Jess!' she sobbed. 'Don't you remember?'

I sank beneath the waves of pain again.

Next time I woke, everything was cushioned. I bobbed on the surface of the pain now instead of sinking.

'Is that better?' Mum asked. 'They've given you stronger meds.'

She stroked my elbow.

It was morning now. There were curtains round my bed. I could hear people moving, out there. Someone was groaning.

I flicked my eyes the other way. There was a window with a smooth silver catch. White sky full of clouds. The rain had stopped. *Rain*. I almost remembered something, but it twisted away and I was too tired to chase it.

'Oh my Jess,' Mum said. I'd never seen her like this. She was limp, flat, 2-D. 'I love you so much,' she said, kissing my elbow.

What was it with my elbow?

My head felt weird. My fingers were in padded gloves. I wrinkled my nose. Mistake. I breathed in and shifted my weight, trying to sit up. The pain shot off the scale.

I started to panic. What was wrong with me? What was wrong with my face? My hands? I got it now. She was kissing my elbow cos it was the only bit of me that didn't hurt.

'Mum? What happened?'

'You've had a CT scan, love. You've got two broken ribs. Your fingers are swollen, not fractured, they said. They've stitched up your face. And your ear. They had to shave off some hair, but it'll grow back in no time...'

'No, I mean, what happened before? Did we crash?'

The look of horror that crossed her face nearly finished me off.

'You really don't remember?'

So Mum gave it back to me, piece by piece. I had to watch her relive it, all over again. When she was finished, that made me hate them even more.

We went home.

Strange days came next. I slipped in and out of sleep. For someone who'd been in bed for days, I was surprisingly tired.

Dad, Rachel and the twins came, all the way from London, while I was still very groggy from the meds. Dad tried not to cry in front of me, but through my bedroom wall afterwards I heard Rachel comforting him as he sobbed. The twins were scared of me, and who could blame them, with my bandages and my Darth Vader voice? They stood next to my bed and stared at me, perfectly matching, with their beautiful round brown eyes and golden afro pigtails. Hope gave me her lucky white heart-shaped pebble. Esther tried to give me Mr Dog, her small saggy comfort toy, stained beyond recognition from nearly six years of hard loving.

'No, he'd miss you too much. He's a city dog,' I managed to whisper. When I opened my eyes again, they'd all gone.

Weeks passed. Christmas happened to other people. Mum sat with me, chatting, reading, silent. Sometimes Steph was there: I heard her, talking to Mum downstairs. I ate her cooking.

Mum took down the bathroom mirror. She wouldn't let me see the damage, not yet. I didn't need to. I could see myself reflected in her face. I knew we were both wrecked.

Chapter Twenty-Five

January 10th

12.35pm

I was a cracked egg. My brain was a sieve. First I couldn't stay awake: exhausted twenty-four-seven. Then I progressed to exhausted *and* restless. Jumpy as a box of frogs. Rattling with painkillers. Now I didn't want to sleep because of what waited there. I told Mum not to let anyone come round, but she chose her moment to deceive me.

‘Jess? Can I come in?’ It was Eden’s voice.

My tidal wave of panic rose – nothing new, it came crashing through twice a day at least – making my throat dry, my stomach twist. If I hadn't been slumped on the sofa, my jelly legs would've joined the panic party.

I heard Mum whisper, ‘Go on in’ and then, ‘Jess? It’s Eden!’ as if I didn't bloody know. Mum fussed in, zapping the TV to silent, tugging the curtains open.

‘Mum! Back off. What are you doing?’ I flinched from the light like a vampire, furious with her. I wasn't ready for this! How dare she decide when I was ready to see people?

I guessed what she was playing at. The doctor had hinted I should be doing better by now. The physio said I could take on *more of my daily activities*. I thought the psychologist looked plain worried.

I turned my head into the cushions, so I didn't have to see Eden's disgust when she looked at me. If I'd known, I'd have put on makeup, a scarf, anything to hide behind.

‘Hey, J,’ Eden's voice said quietly, somewhere near my unmangled ear.

I waited for her to ask me how I was, so I could laugh.

‘Thanks for letting me visit. I've missed you. People send love. Here...’

Rustling.

Fuck. Not a card. Not a pity card signed by the whole class. *Please.*

‘Magazines. And I went to the sweet shop on the way up, got all your favourites in a two quid mix. And... some DVDs, new releases.’

I didn't move.

‘I'm not staying. Mum and Iona have gone on some lame museum trip, so Dad's taking me to the football with him.’

I didn't even know it was the weekend.

'But anyway... I'll come back on Monday after school, if that's OK?'

I didn't speak.

Her hand found my hand. Her little finger managed to wiggle its way round my little finger. Our secret signal from years back, from juniors. She squeezed once and waited.

I couldn't do much, but I could do that. I squeezed back.

Monday after school, Eden was back.

I was prepared this time. Full make-up, right up to the edge of the cotton scarf I'd wrapped around my head. The fabric covered most of the mess. So what if it made me look like a cancer patient?

And credit to Eden, she didn't even blink at my freak-chic. She acted as if nothing had changed. 'Hey, J. So, they made me bring you stuff: updates on the lessons you've missed and homework.' She pulled a folder out of her bag and tossed it on the floor. 'What you do with that is your business. I'm not saying a word. I'm just the messenger pigeon.' She turned and smiled, looking directly in my face.

It was too much, like sudden sunlight in a dark room. She was too much. Too normal. Too much energy. She hurt my eyes and I had to look away.

'Hey, guess what? New lad in Year Twelve. Geeky but gorgeous. Imo's taking aim...' Eden launched into a stream of school gossip. When it ran out, she looked around my bedroom. I knew it was a stinking pit. Piles of books and zines. Crumpled tops and leggings strewn on the floor. Cups of tea turning grey under the bed. Old toast furred with mould. It was a battleground between me and Mum, but this week I was winning. This week I was very angry, and I couldn't blame her for backing off.

'So, your mum reckons you're doing really well. She said maybe we could go for a walk?'

Double-take. I hadn't left the house in weeks, unless Mum was driving me to a health appointment. I hadn't left the house *since*. And I wasn't doing well. I wasn't doing anything.

'No.'

'Why not?'

I stared at her.

‘You can walk, right?’

‘Yeah. But it still hurts.’

‘Jess, you can’t stay inside forever. We won’t go far. I’ll be with you. Just to the end of the road?’

Why was she doing this? She had no clue. Had Mum put her up to it? I needed to hide. I couldn’t go outside. Couldn’t she see I was broken? Stuff happened outside. Those people could hurt me, outside.

Actually those particular people couldn’t hurt anyone else, anywhere, since they’d been caught on the station’s CCTV as they legged it for the train. Plus witnesses heard them boasting about bashing an emo, saw the bloodstains, called the police. They were arrested off the train as it pulled in to Manchester Victoria.

It didn’t help.

Then I had a thought: if the pain got worse, I could take one of the strong pills, the ones that made me sleep so deeply I didn’t dream.

‘OK.’

She looked pleased. ‘What do you need me to do?’

I let her help me up. She was good at this, I realised with surprise. Patient. Letting me go at my own pace. Asking me what I needed instead of guessing.

It took a while to get downstairs.

‘We’re going out.’ I said it harshly, still cross with Mum.

‘OK love, got your phone?’ she said in a voice that might’ve sounded normal to anyone else. She looked so grateful she might cry but I knew full well she’d be pacing like a caged lion till I was back safe.

As I started down the corridor towards the front door, pale winter sunlight pouring through its glass pane, I began to doubt if I’d make it. I used the wall for support and my sweaty palm left a damp smear along it. My legs were shaking so hard I had to stop.

‘You can do it, Jess,’ Eden said, behind me. ‘Listen, it’s never going to be this hard again, right? The first time only happens once, so let’s get it over and done with.’

‘Who put you in charge?’ I muttered, but I latched onto her words. She was right. I didn’t have to go far. Then I’d be owed one of the good pills and I could hide for the rest of the day.

I put my hand on the door handle and pulled it open.

Air, light and sound broke upon me like waves crashing down. A car going past. Birds singing. Footsteps and voices coming up the road. So ordinary; so overwhelming.

I stood there, sucking down cold lungfuls of air.

The last time I did this, we went out into the dark and rain. We ran, laughing, down the road. We had no idea what was waiting for us.

What might be waiting today?

‘I can’t,’ I said, half-turning.

‘Yes, you can.’ Eden blocked the doorway. ‘Come on. Just a few more steps. Just to the end of the street?’

I shook my head, gasping, wondering if I could dodge past her like a rugby player. Was this madness? Was this me crossing the line into complete, barking insanity?

‘Jess, please?’ Eden crumpled, losing the attitude. ‘I want you back. I know you can’t help it and you can’t rush it, but *please*? Just take the first step, so I know you’re coming back, and then I’ll wait, as long as it takes, I promise...’

The begging landed better than sternness. Eden needed me. Maybe I could do this for her, even if I couldn’t do it for me.

My cat dashed through my legs, as if he knew I needed someone to follow.

‘OK.’ I inhaled. The cold air on my cheeks was raw and unforgiving. I stepped down off our doorstep, into our little terraced street that ran uphill, at right angles to the road. I stood, shaking, on the weathered flagstone outside the house. I felt naked, exposed, an insect wiggling madly with its wings pulled off.

Nothing happened.

Fluff stood there, nose twitching in the cold air and then he stalked off up the street with his tail waving.

Eden offered her arm and I grabbed it. Like two old ladies, we trudged slowly up my street. I looked at our feet, at my boots, unworn since that night. I kept my head down and plodded, counting the steps to hold it together. My ribs were on fire. Sweat trickled down my back. My head hurt badly - going off like a fire alarm wired into my brain. Finally we reached the top of the street.

I stood there, panting, trying to accept that this was my life now. The old Jess was gone. This trembling ghost girl was left. I looked around me, clinging to Eden like she was my life raft. A few kids were playing, further along. A white van was parallel parking opposite. Monday teatime, nothing special.

If we turned left, in a minute or two, we'd be back there, where it happened.

There, in the rain, seeing them approach... their laughter... I had to run. I had to flee.

'No!' With a moan, I pulled away from Eden's arm. Panic gave me wings. I stumbled, and then I ran. Adrenalin surged through me. I made it back to the house in seconds, falling through the door, into the hall, into the kitchen.

'Jess? Jess? What happened?'

I sank down in the far corner, against the fridge. I pulled my knees up and curled tight, ignoring the pain as I creased forwards.

Eden tumbled in, 'I'm sorry! I'm so sorry Jess. You weren't ready. I shouldn't've pushed it.'

I buried my head on my knees and made a noise I didn't recognise. A ball of pain. Eden and Mum knelt down, one on each side, not touching me, but there with me. Living through it, with me.

Eden was right though. It was never as hard again. And that mad dash back to the house? That's what first gave me the idea that I needed to be fast. I needed to be able to run.

Chapter Twenty-Six

Friday 5th July

8.15pm

On the last night of the residential there was this grand finale. A showcase of our talent. We gathered in the converted barn. Spotlights angled from high beams above us, making a circle of light that was our stage. We sat on squishy sofas, not slumped as on previous evenings, but alert and twittering with nerves. All day people had stressed about this, rehearsing lines, editing poems – you’d think it was a big deal, an actual poetry slam, not just a load of anxious wordy teenagers coming out as poets. Maybe it was. Maybe it was a beginning.

I was in the middle and Eden’s name came last in the hand-drawn running order pinned to the whiteboard. Mr Barwell sat on the edge of his seat, sucking it up. Rose had her camera out. Tom and Aisha were glowing and proud. They launched us, with words like: *did yourselves proud ... transformed... inner voice ... you are writers now.*

One by one people stood and shared their work. Blushing, stammering or defiant. Imogen filled three tissues reading a poem about her late grandad. Charlotte read a sonnet about a friend’s eating disorder. Danny did a funny short story about getting lost in a video game. And Josh glanced meaningfully from under his floppy fringe while he read a haiku, making everyone stare at Eden.

She looked down at her clasped hands the whole time, only uncurling to clap each person.

Finally it was me. I walked out, under the bright lights. I’d taken care with my make-up: the full works tonight. I had my hair twisted up, with a scarf round the scar, a few red plaits falling loose, my favourite lace-and-velvet black dress and my old boots. I found a spot on the polished wooden boards. I looked at my audience. My body tried its best to pull the usual trick: palms sweaty, throat dry, legs wobbling. I ignored it. Tonight, I was the boss. I knew I couldn’t read the strip I’d done for Aisha, so I went for the easy win. It wasn’t a great poem, but it summed up our week. I cleared my throat and began.

I’m Bronte-ed out. I’m over Heathcliff.

I’m even done with Plath and Hughes.

I’m stumbling, tripping, till I see

I cannot walk in dead poets' shoes.

*I need to talk of a hawk
- In sun, snow or rain -
I need to walk in these hills
Until they're mine again.*

*I wanna get Gothic, do some wuthering,
Set fire to my attic, get lost on the moor.
But everywhere I turn, all the words are gone.
How do I speak, when they got there before?*

*I'll speak cos I have to.
I'll speak in this tongue
Cos it's this place that made me
And it's here that I run.*

I wasn't prepared for the amount of applause I got, the stamping feet and the whoops. My wobbles vanished. My thaw turned to summertime under Aisha's dazzling grin. I smiled and bowed and returned to my seat.

'Go, Jess!' Eden whispered, giving my arm a squeeze.

When it was her turn, Eden stood a little unsteadily. She walked out to the front, gripping her piece of paper. She was wearing a red-checked shirt, open over a tight black vest. Her denim skirt was micro-short, but she'd made it slouchy with the leggings and boots. She squinted against the glare of the lights, and began.

It was the best thing anyone had written all week – you could see it from the shocked expressions on the adults' faces. Eden's voice was brittle and knowing, mocking her own pain. And maybe she was channelling the American poet, the one who was buried here, stuck for eternity in this crooked little village on the top of a rainswept hill.

The celebratory mood vanished. Imo started crying again.

Eden finished with a flourish, imitating Aisha. She put her paper away and spat every word at us, in case we missed her meaning:

... haunted by a lipsticked shade.

You seek revenge, you do.

Just the subtle blade

Of sharpened guilt, to send me

Headlong after you—

She stopped, mouth open, mid-line.

Her face seemed to elongate, till it looked like that famous painting, the awful scream. Only no more noise came. Instead she froze there for a long moment, and then fled from the room, her boots thudding on the wooden stairs.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Friday 5th July

9.19pm

I shot from my seat.

I heard Barwell barking, ‘Right, you lot! Stay here with Tom and Aisha – OK?’ Steps drummed after me.

Outside was still and quiet, no sign of Eden. I ran for the house. ‘I’ll take upstairs, sir. You do down here.’ I checked Eden’s room, then mine. I did a quick sweep of the first floor, slamming each door open. Bathrooms. Nothing. ‘Eden! *Eden!*’ I threw myself downstairs. Three steps at a time. Nearly collided with Barwell and we both ran out through the back door.

Rose was outside, on the terraced lawn, scanning up and down the valley. It was barely dark and the rain had stopped. The sky was darkening blue, a lemony smudge over the horizon.

Rose cupped her hands and yelled, ‘Eden!’ so loud it bounced back at us with a faint mocking echo.

Barwell started losing it. ‘No, no, no. Not Eden. Not now. Shit, shit, shit.’

‘Neil?’ Rose was the together one. ‘Get a grip. Let’s think. What’s your guess?’

‘You don’t get it, Rose. Her sister was killed last month. If anything happens to her... Why did I think this would be a good idea? Damn it all.’

Rose ignored him. ‘If we get the car out, we can be after her in two minutes. Where would she go, Jess? Home?’

‘No,’ I was sure of it. I leant on the railing and peered down the valley, at the steeply sloping fields that lead down to the river, at the woods beyond.

‘Sshh! Listen? What’s that?’

‘Just owls,’ Rose said. ‘Come on, we’ve not got long. Have you tried her phone, Jess?’

‘Course.’

‘I don’t believe it. This cannot be happening.’ Barwell was pacing up and down behind us. ‘What am I going to tell her parents? The Head?’

Barwell’s panic was contagious. I felt my heart speed up, but I kept searching, staring into the darkness, the dense black shadows under the trees.

‘Let’s split up,’ Rose was saying, ‘I’ll take the car up to the village... Tom and Aisha will stay here—’

Then I saw her. Down the bottom of the hill, moving fast, her bright hair still visible, a faint glimmer in the gloom. ‘There!’

‘Jess’s right, there she is. By the river. Shit.’ Barwell was already off, shouting over his shoulder, ‘Rose, stay here. I’ve got my phone. I’ll call if I need backup. She’s had a tough time, this one. Handle with care.’

‘Here, take my torch,’ Rose passed it to me. ‘Ring me, OK?’ she called after us. ‘Or I’ll follow in ten.’

We rushed downhill, in the narrow white glare of the torch. The steep track was rutted. I heard Barwell fall once, but we threw ourselves onwards. I was praying Eden wouldn’t disappear into the woods: we’d never find her then.

The path ended with one last hairpin, turning flat and cobbled as it led to a small curved bridge. With all the rain this past week, the river was swollen and fierce, thunderingly loud.

Eden sat on the narrow rim of the bridge, her feet dangling over a ten-metre drop. Below her, I could just make out a torrent of white, hurling itself into the darkness below.

I froze. I yanked at Mr Barwell’s sweatshirt to stop him. If we startled her, she might fall.

‘Eden!’ I called. My voice was nothing below the noise of the falls.

‘Eden, it’s Mr Barwell. I’ve come to fetch you, OK?’ his voice was loud and deep. It sounded calmer now. He seemed relieved, more in control. Maybe he thought this was over. But he didn’t know Eden. ‘We’ll go back up to the house, and talk, all right?’

We crept slowly closer. Step, pause, step: like cats stalking prey.

Without looking round, she started talking. ‘Why me?’

I could barely hear her. We went closer in.

‘Why does all the worst stuff happen cos of me?’ she raised her voice now. ‘I’m the kiss of death, and I’ve had enough of it. Of hurting people. If it’s all a test, y’know what? I’ve got my results. I admit it: I fail!’

And she started climbing to her feet, arms out, wobbling, right on the edge. It was barely wide enough for her boots.

‘No!’ I called. ‘You didn’t fail! You saved me. Stop it.’

‘Eden!’ Barwell shouted. ‘Eden, come down. We’re here. We can just sit and talk, OK?’

‘I fail!’ she yelled into the damp air, full of noise. ‘I can’t do it. I messed up. Again. I can’t take it any more.’

‘You didn’t mess up. It wasn’t your fault!’ I shouted. ‘Come down! Please.’ I turned to Barwell, my eyes pleading with him. ‘What do we do?’ I hissed, more quietly.

‘Take it slow,’ he answered me from the side of his mouth. ‘Don’t touch her, OK?’ The torch-glare wobbled. ‘Eden, please come down.’ His voice showed the strain now.

‘Why?’ Eden said, over her shoulder, quite calm.

‘Get down from the bridge, we can talk.’

‘Talk? I’m sick of talking. I’m even sick of drinking – doesn’t bloody work any more.’

That’s when I realized she was pissed. Why hadn’t I thought of that? The afternoon naps, the morning grogginess - I’d put everything down to fresh grief. ‘Oh my God.’ My hand flew to my mouth. How pissed? She could overbalance before we even reached her.

‘Sick of plodding on.’ She put one leg out, pointed a toe, stretched out her arms like a gymnast on a barre. She hopped forward.

‘No!’ Barwell and I both yelled.

‘Sick of waiting for it to get better. Sick of everyone pretending. Sick of my parents,’ she hopped for every item on her list. ‘Sick of my own head. It’s not pretty in there, no sirr-ee.’

She paused, extending one foot right out over the water far below.

‘I don’t care, Eden. I don’t care what your head’s like. We can sort it out. You and me, we always do. You’ve got to listen!’ I was babbling, panicking now. ‘It’s only been three weeks, and I know I haven’t been there. I’m sorry. Let me help, please?’

‘You’ve had an extraordinarily difficult time,’ Barwell took over with the official version, looking up at her, not daring to move. ‘But things won’t always be this bad.’

‘No. They won’t. Not if they stop right here.’ She put her heel down, ready to step into the drop. Below her, the water roared into darkness.

‘No!’ I screamed. ‘No, Eden, please! Do it for me: get down, please.’

‘Get down now,’ Barwell ordered. His hands flew up, but he didn’t touch her.

She looked over her shoulder at me, and it was an open door.

I put all the love, all the sympathy, all the strength I had in the world, into my words and my gaze. ‘Eden, I need you. Stay with me, please?’

She half-fell, half-jumped.

Backwards, not forwards.

She collapsed in a heap against the side of the bridge.

I threw myself at her. My fingers gripped her sleeve, digging into her flesh, but I didn’t care, I wouldn’t let her go again.

Barwell crouched on his heels, still not daring to reach out.

Her face was stretched in a horrible grimace and she let out a high-pitched wail, pure pain. I caught the scent of spirits on her breath: she must have been drinking all day in her room.

Eden sobbed and rocked, holding her chest. ‘It hurts. It actually hurts, missing someone. They don’t tell you that, do they?’

I grabbed her from the side, clutching her to me, wishing I could suction it out of her, take it away, forever.

‘It’s like a monster, on my back, whispering poison in my ear. And it’s so heavy, Jess, I can’t carry it. I can’t...’ Her hands moved to her forehead, ‘And my head – it’s nasty in there.’ She banged it back suddenly, against the stone.

I flinched. ‘No! Don’t do that. Don’t hurt yourself. None of this is your fault.’

She snorted, a deep, snotty grunt that turned into a choking cough. ‘Well, that shows what you know. It is all my fault. Iona died cos of me.’ It all came out in a hiccupping confession. ‘We fought that night. Mum and Dad tried to stop us. I was miserable and I took it out on her. I wanted her to feel as bad as me. I said some vicious things. When she got in the car, she was furious. She was crying.’

‘B-b-but the police report said it wasn’t her fault,’ I stammered.

‘No,’ Barwell joined in, ‘the other car was speeding. It came round the bend on her side. There was nothing she could do...’

‘Ever tried driving in tears? There’s probably a law against it,’ she laughed and put on a stupid, serious voice: ‘No driving under the influence of alcohol, drugs, or blinding tears.’

‘Eden Holby, you listen to me,’ I said. ‘Your sister died in an awful, tragic accident. It’s not your fault.’

‘It is, Jess. It’s completely my fault. Just like you getting attacked was my fault. I made you come out in the rain. I made Iona run off that night. I’m cursed, and it’s got to stop.’

‘That driver – the one who killed Iona – he paid with his life. Don’t make yourself pay for it too. This is hard enough without blaming yourself,’ Barwell’s voice was deep and gentle, but snagging on tears. ‘You have to listen to me: let this go. Nobody thinks it’s your fault.’

‘My parents do,’ she raised her head briefly. Her mascara was smeared round her eyes and her cheeks were slimy and damp in the light of the torch. ‘If it wasn’t for me, Iona would not have been in that car, going round that corner at that moment.’

‘I can assure you they don’t. They love you. They’re worried about you.’ Barwell sat next to us on the damp ground, leaning on the bridge. ‘Think about them for a second. If you’d fallen in just now and I had to ring them and say you’d been in an accident, it would destroy them. They’d have lost everything. Can you imagine that?’

‘Yeah,’ she said, teeth chattering, seeming to lose steam. ‘I can imagine that just fine.’

I saw Barwell take it, like a slap. He seemed lost for a minute. He swore under his breath, ‘I’m sorry Eden. I know I can’t imagine what you’re going through. But please, keep going, keep existing. It won’t always be so hard.’

‘We’ll get through it,’ I told Eden. I put my head on her shoulder and waited. ‘And I’m here for you. I promise. Anything you need. It will get better, I promise.’

There was a long gap then, but I felt something change.

When she spoke again, she seemed calmer, more sober, and it was almost worse. ‘Will it get better?’ she asked hoarsely. ‘When? I really hope it’s soon because I’m not sure how much I’ve got left.’

Chapter Twenty-Eight

Friday September 4th

5.30pm

I walk into the walled courtyard and grind to a halt, like I'm out of fuel. The dark stone of the poet's house hums with life. There's steam coming from a vent in the kitchen. I hear voices and laughter. Someone is playing a piano. I'm about to retreat when the door opens and I see a familiar figure coming out carrying a tray of mugs.

'Rose!'

She turns. 'Jess? It is Jess, isn't it?'

For a moment I'm surprised she remembers me. Then I realise: it's not every week that one of her visitors tries to throw herself off the bridge.

But I'm wrong, that's not the only reason she knows.

'I'm so sorry. I saw the alert online, about Eden. Listen, go wait for me in the garden, we can talk. I'll just deliver these teas.'

I walk through in the empty garden and look out over the valley. The sun's low and golden, wrapping itself in light scarves of cloud. You can see the first tint of orange in the wooded hills. It'll be autumn soon. Behind me, the front of the house is covered in a vine with bright red leaves, like splashes of blood in the sinking sun.

'Here,' Rose comes and hands me a mug of tea. 'I'm sorry, Jess. What a horrible day for you.'

'Thanks.' I take a sip. The tea tastes weird and floury - soya milk, maybe? - but it's hot and comforting. 'So you saw the stuff about Eden we posted online?'

'Yep. Forwarded it, too.' She turns to face me. 'They'll find her.' Her blue eyes are calm and steady.

'I've been looking all day. Sorry, I don't even know why I'm here, except I'm retracing our steps, from this summer, and I just thought... I know I shouldn't be here.'

'It's all right. You know me. It's worth asking. But we've not seen Eden. I'd have rung the police, if I had.'

I am very tired all of a sudden. Rose is being so kind, but it only makes me want to cry. 'Can I sit down?' I back away blurrily for the bench against the

front of the house. I put my head back against the stone and close my eyes to hide tears.

‘Have you eaten lately?’

I shake my head.

‘Stay there, I’ll bring you something.’

I try to get a grip while she’s gone, letting the sun warm me, sipping my tea. It’ll be dark soon, and then it all gets harder. I imagine looking for Eden in the night, in the rain. I’ll never stop looking for her.

Rose’s voice pulls me from that grim vision. ‘Here, Jess?’ She holds out a plate piled with food.

‘Oh. I... I... I mean, thank you.’

‘It’s fine, it’s just leftovers. Listen, I have to go. They need me inside. It’s their Friday night showcase – remember that? Stay a while, eat that and leave the plate there when you’re done. I’m working till eleven, but I’m here, if you need help later, OK?’

I’m ridiculously grateful, but she’s gone before I can find the words to say it. The plate is crammed with some kind of cheese pastry, potatoes and a grainy salad with beans and peppers. I eat it all fast, glad there’s no one to see, and lick my fingers afterwards. I go in and use the bathroom at the back of the barn, and then I’m off, out through the gates and away down the rough track to the river.

I pause there, looking over the bridge, re-living that last time. The river is tame today - a kitten not a lion - but the rocks look worse, uncovered. They are slick and black, raw and sharp as teeth. If Eden had jumped, back then, they were waiting.

The last of the sunlight filters down through the leaves, deep bronze. It catches the fine spray, making a halo, then a rainbow across the gorge.

My phone buzzes in my pocket. It’s Mum. I tap to accept. ‘Hi Mum,’ I say. ‘Any news?’

‘Oh my God, finally! Didn’t you hear me ringing? I’ve left five messages, Jess. Five! What the hell were you thinking?’

To be honest, I’d stopped counting after three. I hold the phone away from my ear a little.

‘Where are you? Are you all right? I’ve had school on the phone. What was I supposed to say, that I didn’t know where *my* daughter was, *either*?’

She is livid. Force ten gale. ‘Mum, I’m OK. I told you, I need to look for Eden. And I’m fine, I can look after myself now, really. I’m up the clough, on the bridge.’

‘What are you doing there? You can’t just wander the hills...’

‘Have you heard anything?’ I cut in, ignoring her.

She sighs and I hear the anger draining away as she gears up to tell me something. ‘There’s no official news, just that...’

I can hear the effort she’s making to control her voice now. My heart flutters, a moth against a flame, drawn to what will end it. ‘Tell me!’

‘It’s been on the news, local and national. There’s TV vans in town. Poor Claire and Simon. It’s bad enough without the media spotlight...’

‘What? What are they saying?’

‘Oh, love. I’m sorry. I don’t even know if it’s true. I mean, how could they know – unless the police leaked it or someone’s phone was tapped. These days, anything could happen...’

‘Mum!’ I snap. ‘What is it?’

‘It’s the text, the one Eden sent this morning. They think it was a kind of...’

‘Yes?’ Finally! The truth about the text. About time.

‘A kind of suicide note – apologising to her parents—’ Mum’s voice breaks off and I can hear her fighting tears. ‘And the same stuff in her diary...’

‘No. She can’t. She wouldn’t. It wasn’t, Mum, I know it.’ I hang on to what I’m saying, willing it to be true, denying any other possibility. But I’ve still got that diary lock in my pocket, and it begs to differ.

‘I know, Jess, I know. But maybe, we should prepare ourselves...’

‘No! I’m not giving up. How can you even say that?’

‘Jess, I promise you, I’m not giving up.’ Her voice is stronger now, on safer ground. ‘They’re organising search teams, alongside the police. Coordinating volunteers down the Methodist church hall. I’m going down there now. Come down and meet me?’

I hesitate. Part of me wants to go, to be part of something bigger than me, to stop making decisions. To be near Mum, to let her look after me.

I look up the valley, at the cascading river and the shadowy paths. I see someone, just upstream, in a blue T-shirt and jeans.

Liam. Coming for me.

‘I’ll meet you later, OK? There’s something I need to do first. I’ll keep my phone on.’

‘Jess? No! Don’t you hang up on me. *Jess!*’

I end the call. I’ll deal with the consequences later. There will be hell to pay, and I’ll pay it gladly, once Eden’s back. Everything else can wait till then.

There’s something else that bothers me. Mum’s angry, sure, but she’s not as worried for me, not like she was this morning. She doesn’t think anyone else hurt Eden. She’s not worried about a random nutter stalking teenage girls. She thinks Eden did this to herself. She thinks Eden’s gone.

She isn’t gone. She isn’t! But I remember her face when she saw the Tarot cards, as if she was cursed. As if this was her fate, her punishment or something. And what if she made it come true, just by believing it?

I stand there, feeling very cold, waiting for Liam to reach me. The sun has gone behind the hill. I hold on to the cool stone of the bridge, watching the water rushing away from me, taking away my hope.

He gets close. He looks like himself again. Some of the weight has gone from his shoulders. His face is softer. ‘I’m sorry about before...’ Then he sees me properly. ‘What is it, Jess? What did they say?’

And I can’t help it. I can’t hold it in. The tears come hot and fast.

‘I didn’t... I can’t... I don’t know where she is. They think Eden hurt herself. That her last text was saying goodbye.’ I’m twisting away from him, trying to escape it, but it’s the truth and I can’t. Through my tears I tell him, ‘Liam, we let her down. I can’t say sorry. I can’t find her and I don’t know what to do...’ Then there’s no more talking from me. The sobs come from somewhere very deep down. They make my shoulders and ribcage shake. They hurt. They fold me over and crumple me up like a piece of scrap paper.

Liam catches my hand. He holds me, all creased up and crying against him. He draws me in close and we sink together. We fall on the dusty ground, right there on the bridge. I feel his hands on my hair, on my back, on my face. And it doesn’t feel wrong. It feels right. It feels like home. It feels like the only thing I have left.

Saturday 29th August 12.45am

After that first kiss, Liam waited. He held my wrist and watched me.

There was no one to see, just the bright swelling moon and the laden plum tree and the hidden owl in the wood. We could hear the distant bass and voices spilling from Eden's party.

It was me who moved. My hand touched his cheek, saying yes. His face. His cat's eyes.

I screwed my eyes tight shut. The look in his eyes was too much. I reached for him blindly. My fingers crossed his chest, its warm drum beating faster. I stroked his bare arms: the warm skin, the solidness of him. My fingers danced up his neck. My knuckles grazed his cheekbones. One fingertip crossed his lips, and he kissed it.

His breath, warm on my ear, sending shivers down my spine. That breath, catching, jagging, speeding – just for me.

His fingers moved up my arm, tracking the lines of my tattoos, taking time over each one. I had a million nerve endings I'd never known about, more than stars in the sky. My skin was alive and breathing again. My skin wanted to be touched.

He sought out my scars. I felt his fingers, coarse at the tips but so gentle, lightly sliding across my face to where the skin was ridged. He caressed the wave of scar tissue by my ear.

I opened my eyes then, to check this was real. My eyes on his. His eyes on mine. And the air between us, so close and thick, like the tension before a storm. It did crackle: I felt it, between us.

There was still time. I could break the spell. I could move away, not much harm done. Just the line between us crossed and we knew it. He waited for me.

I held his gaze as I crossed it again.

I kissed him because I wanted to. I kissed him because I needed it. And when he kissed me back, that was it. I didn't know anything else, except his mouth on mine and our hands moving, and time flickering and flowing around us so smooth and so fast like the river running deep over rocks.

Part Three

Chapter Twenty-Nine

Friday September 4th

6.25pm

We pull apart from our collapsed hug. I'm exhausted from the crying. I crawl over to lean against the bridge. We sit there, in the gathering dusk, with the river's endless song filling the silence between us. My leg rests against his and it anchors me.

Eventually I start telling Liam about that Friday on the residential. About me, Barwell, Eden, right here on this bridge. 'If me and Barwell hadn't got there, she might've jumped. She was messed up. Blaming herself for the accident.'

'But you did get there. And she was OK, for a bit. We were there for her, weren't we?' Liam sounds like he needs convincing. 'Even when she pushed us away.'

'I should've been able to help her, like she helped me,' I say, still damp and hot and full of self-blame. 'But what if we didn't? What if we weren't enough? How can I live with myself, if...' I can't say it. I can't utter the words 'she's dead', in case it makes it true.

'What about me?' Liam says. 'She's supposed to be my girlfriend.'

'It's not your fault.' It's so much easier to say that about someone else. 'We're all in it together. It's like, like... when climbers get roped together?' I picture the three of us: me, Eden, Liam, knotted together on an icy rockface, with a blizzard blowing around us.

'What – she falls, we all fall? Nice one, Jess.'

'No! She falls and we pull her up – isn't that the point of the rope? I just hope I'm bloody strong enough, cos otherwise we're all going down.' And somewhere deep down I know it's true. We need to save Eden, cos we love her. But also because saving her is the only thing that saves us.

He doesn't reply.

'I'm sorry. For the slap. Just for the record: I don't do that. And I don't think it's OK...'

'Jess, it's all right. I know that. It's not exactly a normal day.' He turns to me in the fading light and gives me a quick flash of something like a smile.

'What a mess.'

I wonder what he's thinking. I wonder what it'd be like - me and him - without any of this crap going on. But it's not like we exist, perfect pure versions of ourselves, off in a laboratory somewhere. I can't separate how I feel for him from how I feel for Eden or how he feels about Eden. It's tangled up together. So tangled, so messy: I don't know how to sort out the knots without hurting someone.

'What do we do now?' He checks his phone: its display lights up the gloom. 'They'll be setting up the party. Dark soon. How about we go that way, check it out – then back to town, join the official search?'

It's the best plan we've got – it's even got three parts - and I text Mum, to let her know.

We turn up the valley and take well-worn footpaths under the trees. We're not the only ones. Soon the darkening woods are full of shadows, torchlight and laughter, people carrying rugs, bags clinking with bottles. Any other night, this would be perfect.

I check my phone again. There's five hours left of the twenty-four. I know that the longer it goes on, the less chance there is of finding her.

Eden? Eden? Can you hear me? Come back. Come back to us. To your parents. To Liam. Or Tyler. To me. No one will care, where you've been or what you've done. As long as you're OK.

We walk single file and he must find it easier to talk that way. 'Jess, about last Saturday...' he starts, speaking over his shoulder.

Straight for the killer subject. 'Uh-huh?' I manage to mumble over the pounding of my heart.

'I know the timing's all wrong. I know it. And I know what it looks like, that I can't be trusted...'

That applies to me too, but he doesn't seem to have clocked that.

'But it's not like that. I mean, you've always been there, but I didn't see you till now. Not properly. And yeah, I was flattered when Eden asked me out. I mean, Eden Holby, who wouldn't be?'

The full moon has risen over the hill. Fat and yellow. Harvest moon. Hunter's moon. The valley transforms in the leafy magical half-light.

I hurry after Liam so I don't miss a word.

‘And it was good for a bit. We had fun. But I’d already decided to stop it, back in May. Cos we don’t really get each other, not really. She’s always pushing it. Eden doesn’t hear me. She’d never admit it in a million years, but deep down, she thinks I’m not the same as her, not as good.’

‘No, she doesn’t.’ I tell him. ‘That’s all in your head.’

‘Even if it is! Still doesn’t work, does it?’

‘Were you really going to finish it?’

He’s stopped. We stand in the middle of a grove of beech trees, tall and massive, making it feel like a church or something.

‘Yeah, the day of that parade, back in May. Only all that stuff kicked off. So I couldn’t. And then it was June, and well, you know the rest. After Iona died, it’s like I was stuck. And I’m not a total arse, I did want to look after Eden. But I started to see you. Really see you, Jess. That was the only good thing, this summer, getting close to you.’

‘Oh good, I’m glad my best friend’s worst nightmare was useful to you! Bloody hell, is that supposed to be flattering? Will you hear yourself?’

The breeze rustles the leaves and I hear an owl ask ‘*Who-who?*’ so loud it has to be in the next tree.

‘Stop it, Jess. I’m just being honest. We’re honest, you and me. Can’t we keep on wi’ that at least?’ he sighs.

I meet Liam’s eyes properly. Even frowning - his dark brows telling me he means it - he’s so beautiful, it makes me catch my breath. The way he’s looking at me in the silvery light does something to my body that I feel all the way down to my toes, like an electric shock that goes right through me. I know I haven’t been honest, with him or with Eden, all summer long. Honest wasn’t an option in the circumstances.

The ferns shiver and I catch movement, above us. The owl launches, wide wings, and floats down the valley like a ghost, leaving us.

‘What really happened, then, the day of the parade?’ I ask. It’s not my most pressing question, but it’ll keep him talking, keep us moving, and keep my hands off him.

Chapter Thirty

‘She didn’t tell you? About her and Iona fighting?’

‘Sure, I mean, I knew it was bad,’ I say. The last few weeks before Iona died were the worst for their fights, I knew that. ‘The whole school knew it. Eden hated that, being gossiped about.’

‘That was the worst I’d seen, parade day. That’s why I couldn’t go through with the breakup.’ He starts walking again but slower now, waiting for me to keep pace on the narrow path.

‘Tell me everything,’ I say finally. I was away at my dad’s so I missed the parade for the first time in years. ‘Tell me why it kicked off.’ Maybe there’ll be something in it that can help us now.

‘You know how excited she was, right? She’d been practising on her stilts for weeks.’

‘I know. And she got one of the best costumes. She was so chuffed to be a phoenix rising, not a penguin or something lame.’

The Parade We Made was something that announced it was nearly summer, like the clocks changing. Every spring we’d do it. There were art workshops after school, down at the old factory on the edge of town. Artists had it all designed and they showed you what to do. They were the ones who made massive sculptures – the showstoppers – eerie, beautiful, unforgettable artworks as big as a house. They were giant herons and goddesses, flying horses or shoals of fish. For the price of your pocket money, you got to join in and make your own little costume. And we did. Half the town marched in the parade; the other half watched. There were face-painted babies in accessorised backpacks; whole families as matching aliens; bikes and wheelchairs transformed into spaceships or flying machines; and the older kids strutting their stuff on stilts. I’d been gutted to miss it this year, but it was my step-mum Rachel’s fortieth birthday and Dad said the twins wanted me there.

‘She did good,’ Liam says. ‘The rain stopped just in time. Her crew led the parade. Streets were packed, there were drummers, bands, the lot. She’d got really good with the stilts, so she was dancing along. She looked amazing.’

Ouch. *So I’m jealous now that Eden’s boyfriend thinks she’s gorgeous? Get a grip, Jess.*

‘She was buzzing, laughing, striding forwards. Till Iona found her.’

‘She went for her, right?’ I remember the school gossip mill on fire with it, the next Monday. I’d missed it all, and I was only in London for the weekend.

‘Yeah, it was near the end, just before the park. Iona and Katie were there, sitting on the wall drinking alcopops. I was walking next to Eden. Didn’t have a costume, but she gave me one of the flames off her stilts and I just waved it about and kept time with her.’ Liam lets out a long breath.

‘So, Iona saw Eden coming. Cos she was the tallest, brightest, best thing to see. Iona started up with the abuse, laughing at her, saying she looked like a fat chicken, not a phoenix. And it was OK at first. Eden just blanked her, kept on. She loved those stilts. She was not gonna let it get to her.’

‘Iona wouldn’t like that.’ I brace for the next part.

‘Too right. How did you know? Wish I’d seen it coming.’

‘What did she do next?’

‘Iona bloody tripped her, didn’t she? She jumped down, ran out and kicked the stilts. Eden went flying. Face plant. Right in the road, in front of everyone.’

‘Yeah, she told me. Surprised she didn’t break something.’

‘She was a bit scraped, not too bad. But when she got up, she went for Iona, no holds barred. Proper bitch fight, in the middle of the crowd. Iona’s all ‘You wouldn’t catch me dressing up like some toddler’s party’ and Eden’s like ‘You’re no part of this. No one wants you here, you don’t belong’.

‘Iona tries to push her off, telling Eden she’s just jealous, but I can see Eden’s got to her.

‘She keeps at it. Eden tells Iona, ‘Stop pretending you don’t know. That’s the real joke here. You know you don’t belong.’ I’m trying to pull Eden off Iona, and I’ve got no idea what she’s on about.

‘And Iona’s face changes. I can see something is really, badly wrong. Iona tries to hide it, calling Eden a bullshitter, but Eden keeps on at her and that’s when Iona goes ballistic.

‘Iona whacks Eden, right in the face. Eden’s nose starts bleeding and she’s screeching at Iona and they’re covered in blood and everyone’s watching and this kid starts crying. It’s total chaos. And that’s when Eden says it...’

‘Says what?’ I ask slowly, waiting for the bombshell.

‘Eden says, ‘You’re not my blood. See this – it’s not the same as yours, is it? You’re no sister of mine. You’re nothing and you know it.’

‘And I think she knows she’s gone too far, cos she lets me pull her away into the school yard, and I get her to sit down and stop the nosebleed, and she’s white as a sheet, and there’s blood splashed everywhere, over us both.’

‘So what was she saying?’ I have to get this right. We pause again, in the moonlit woods. Everything seems to have slowed down. The sound of the river fills my head, making it hard to think properly. ‘That Iona is not her blood? What’s that about?’ I can’t compute the words.

‘I dunno, I thought it was their usual drama getting out hand. Rejecting Iona for being such a bitch, I guess. I just stayed with Eden, tried to calm her down. She was a mess though. The day was ruined. We went and sat by the river. I got her a drink, but she couldn’t stop shaking and crying. So, I couldn’t add to it. I couldn’t break up with her. I couldn’t kick her when she was down.’

‘Poor Eden.’ She would hate our pity but we give it anyway.

‘Too right.’

Tears prick at my eyes. I start to piece it together.

Iona is not Eden’s blood.

Eden finding three passports, back in May. And some papers.

What made Iona change, so suddenly?

With a jolt, it clicks into place, the pattern I’ve been looking for. I think I’ve worked it out: what if Iona was adopted? And Eden wasn’t? It happens. I read a magazine article in one of the endless doctors’ waiting rooms, about a couple having IVF, nothing working. Then when they adopted the first kid, the woman fell pregnant naturally. Like being a mum already just flicked the body’s switch. What if that happened to Claire?

If Iona found out, it would explain why she took against Eden, all of a sudden, out of jealousy. Iona was adopted; Eden was the birth child.

And then Eden found out in May: that’s what she was going to tell me, that day at the dam. But she didn’t, cos she wanted to make it right with Iona. Even after everything, I know she wanted them to get back to normal, to how they used to be. So she kept it inside, till the parade.

I’m right. I know it. My blood flows like ice water in my veins. That must be what they argued about, the night Iona died. Eden said she’d been vicious. I can picture it now. Eden had secret knowledge. With it, she was armed and

dangerous. She was always good at arguing and now she brought out the big guns.

I can't tell Liam. It's not my story to share.

'If they'd just had a bit more time to get it sorted, none of it would've happened.' I'm crying now, sideswiped by the unfairness of it. 'Everyone screws up. Every family is fucked up in its own particular way. You just bump along, doing your best, hoping they know you love them really.'

'Yeah, me and Nic and our lot – we've had our moments. But it's OK now, cos we've had time to work it out.'

'It's not right!' I bawl at the trees, scraping the tears off my face, 'Eden's being punished for something all of us do. You get angry. You say stuff you don't mean. You don't expect to spend the rest of your life paying for it.'

'Jess, I know. Trouble is, that's just it – Eden thinks she has to.' Liam pauses by a stile. He goes first, up three stone steps built into the wall, and then he halts at the top. 'We're nearly there. Look!'

Just over the next ridge, higher up the valley, there's a light streaming up through the trees, flicking on and off. Liam's silhouette is outlined against the light: red, then blue, then yellow, pulsing in time to a beat we can't hear yet.

'Do you wanna wait? Do you want more time?' he asks.

'We don't have any, remember? Go on, let me through.'

The last part is the most dangerous. The path enters the ruins of the old mills. There's a solitary chimney poking up out of the undergrowth. We step past crumbling walls and half-buried slabs of stone.

We have to focus. It's a kind of relief to come back to something so demanding and physical and real. I need to look down, not miss a step, but it doesn't stop the thoughts and images flying round my mind.

Iona isn't Eden's sister.

Eden throwing it in her face.

Iona crying, hurting, driving, until–

If it circles my head on repeat, what's it like for Eden? I see for the first time what this summer has really been about.

The path gets precarious, about a metre wide, running along the top of a high stone wall.

'You got a torch, Jess? Be careful.'

‘Run this way a hundred times.’ But I put my phone torch on, just to be sure. To our left is a sheer drop, metres down, to the rushing river. To the right are shallow pools, scuzzily dank, covered with lime-green algae and edged with high weeds. ‘Shall I go first?’ I pretend to be brave, but I remember as a kid, needing to be carried along this skinny little ledge of a path. ‘I always think how weird it is, that people worked here once. Back when this was all modern and new.’

‘I like it. How quickly the woods grew back. A hundred years ago, this would’ve been dead busy. Now look at it.’

‘Yeah, makes you think, if we stopped now, how quickly we’d be covered over. Like that film, after everyone dies?’

‘Yeah, and I bet when they closed the mills, it must’ve seemed like the end of the world,’ Liam’s with me. He gets it. ‘And now there’s a party in the ruins.’

‘One day we’ll be gone, and some other kids will walk along here,’ I stop myself. It’s all a bit close to home, tonight, and I need not to start crying again, or I might never stop.

And we’re there. I hear the pounding beat, echoing off the hillside. I hear distant voices, lots of them, and spots of light like dozens of fireflies in the darkness.

Chapter Thirty-One

Friday 4th September

8.05pm

We reach the clearing in the woods. It's a bowl-shaped space, edged with tall trees, packed with people. The music hasn't ratcheted up yet: it's slow and mellow with a deep bass note I feel in my chest. I see the DJ stand down in the bottom – like this is a theatre and that's the stage - with a generator and the projector sending up rainbow lights. People are milling around in groups, sitting in circles, smoking, waiting.

'Shit, it's like a bloody wake,' Liam mutters. 'It's not right. What if Eden walks back into this? What's she going to think?'

I see Charlotte and Imogen, handing out flyers. They haven't given up either, and it makes me love them for the first time in our lives.

'Maybe this lot don't even know about Eden?' I say, scanning the crowd. I recognise a few faces from school. 'Isn't that what we're here for? It's our job to tell em, find out what they know.' I've got my job description and I'm sticking to it, even though Liam is right. It does feel like a funeral. It feels like the end of something. Is this it? Have we failed? When do we admit it - when we collapse on our feet?

I leave Liam and grab at Imo and Charlotte as they get near. 'Hi. How's it going? Can I see your flyer?'

'Hey Jess,' Charlotte greets me in a hoarse whisper, as though she's been crying lately too. 'What a nightmare. Did you see it on the news?'

I shake my head. 'Been out looking all day. Nothing. Did the police come to yours, too? What did they say?'

'Not a lot. Questions mainly.' Charlotte sounds beyond tired too. All her perkiness is long gone. 'They said they're exploring all the angles, whatever that means.'

'It's getting late, isn't it?' Imo looks different. This morning was an act, but it's sunk in now. She's shaky. Her mask isn't there. 'Do you really think she's all right?' she clutches at my arm like a drowning person. I'm sure it's the first time she's ever touched me, and I don't even mind. 'Jess, tell me the truth?'

'My mum told me about her text. Saying goodbye. It doesn't have to be that. Liam thinks she might've met someone.'

‘Who?’

In answer, I look through the crowds and my gaze falls on someone I recognise: Tyler. He’s with some of his mates from last weekend. I need to talk to him.

‘We don’t know. We’re just guessing, that’s all. Can I see the flyer?’

She gives me one and I hold it up, shining my torch on it. It’s the same stuff we put on social media, only somehow it feels more real, holding it in my hand. Eden’s face, in black and white, smiling, beautiful. Fair hair, white teeth. It makes it seem as though she belongs in the past already.

Was Iona really not her sister? Have I guessed right? I always thought they looked alike. But I guess if you’re going to adopt, you might choose the baby that looks a bit like you.

‘Can I have some?’ I ask. ‘I’ll help.’

‘Thanks, Jess.’ Charlotte passes me a sheaf of flyers, with a quick grateful smile.

‘Take care,’ Imo says.

Their politeness is chilling. I hate that it’s taken today to make them accept me. Then I have a horrible thought. If this is a wake, are we the chief mourners?

I turn away and start working my way around the edge of the crowd, keeping my eyes on Tyler as I circle towards him.

Me, Liam, Imogen, Charlotte, maybe Tyler too. We are Eden’s best friends. Would we be near the front at her funeral? Would we stand and speak about what she meant to us? Would I write a poem that made people cry?

I try to imagine a world without Eden in it, but it is impossible. It’s like imagining no more sun.

The pain in my chest feels like a bomb about to explode. Is this it? Is this what I’m facing? Life without Eden.

Tick, tick, tick.

I can’t go on. It hurts too much. I do not want to go forward into that future, without her. I fold my arms across my chest to contain the ticking bomb, as if I can squash it down and stop it from destroying me.

That’s when it happens.

My phone buzzes and I pull it out, expecting Mum again.

It’s Eden.

Her mobile. Not her landline.

Eden.

Chapter Thirty-Two

Friday 4th September

8.35pm

Eden! My fingers are stupid, swollen, clumsy. I nearly drop the phone. I nearly hit reject in my panic.

‘Eden? Eden, is that you?’

I can’t hear anything.

‘Eden? Eden?’ I sink down on the slope, the flyers drifting around my feet like snow. I jam one hand over my ear to block out the music. ‘Where are you? What happened? Are you there? *Eden?*’

Silence.

‘Are you OK? Eden, are you OK?’ I hardly know what I’m saying. I still can’t hear her. A plane burrs overhead. I hear that, in stereo, with the slow bass.

Icy fingers squeeze my heart. What if she’s hurt? What if she’s trying to speak, but she can’t? She might’ve fallen. She might’ve broken something. What if she’s been unconscious and she’s just woken up? What if she’s groggy and confused?

‘Eden? Eden, tell me you’re OK!’

I think I can hear someone breathing. Listening.

‘Eden?’

I press the phone harder to my ear, but I can still only hear the bloody plane and the music, distantly.

Maybe she’s going to hurt herself? Maybe she’s already done it? What if she’s done it and she didn’t want to be alone as she slipped away, so she called me?

‘Eden, if you can hear me, hang on, OK? Just tell me where you are? Everything’s going to be OK. Just let me help, please?’

Silence. A deeper silence this time. I can’t hear the breathing now, or the plane, or the music.

‘*Eden!*’ I scream it.

A horrible thought slithers in and coils round my brain. What if it’s not Eden? What if someone’s got her phone? What if someone’s holding her? A freak, a child-snatcher, a psycho?

‘OK, you listen to me?’ I try to sound brave, but it’s one of the hardest things I’ve ever had to do. The phone wobbles against the side of my face because my fingers are trembling so hard. ‘If you can hear me... and if that’s someone else? Just stay calm. Tell me where you are—’

The line goes dead. Whoever just phoned me has hung up.

‘No, no, no. You can’t. No!’

I call her back. Straight to voicemail. Redial, redial.

I sit there, in shock. My mind is a jumble, a deck of cards chucked to the ground. Which ones do I pick up first? I have to tell Liam.

First, I ring Mum.

‘Mum? Yes, it’s me. No, don’t lecture. Stop! Listen to me!’ Words pour out of me, a torrent that is so strong she can’t swim against it. ‘Eden just rang me, or her phone did. I couldn’t hear anything. Nothing! Just now. You’ve got to ring Claire. Ring the police. Quick. I have to go. In case she rings. Now, Mum, please!’

I hang up, gripping my phone tightly in my hand, like it’s the most precious thing in the world.

My legs feel like chewed grass. I get up and stagger down the hill.

Tick, tick, tick.

The clock’s speeded up. Countdown.

Come on, Jess, think! What’s really happening here? What would Eden do? What tipped her over the edge? Eden lost her sister. Her only sister, whatever their history.

Then it hits me. Now I know the whole story, I know where Eden is. I know where she’d go.

Chapter Thirty-Three

Friday 4th September

8.45pm

She's near here. When we were talking, I heard the bass of the music and the plane passing overhead at the same time – down the phone and right here. The plane noise might carry for miles, but not the music. It has to be nearby.

I'm going to get her. I break into a run, looking for Liam. I can't do this alone. I need Liam. If Eden's not alone, or if she's hurt, it's going to take more than me... I push through bodies, uncaring. No one can stop me now.

Tick, tick, tick.

This is the end of the race. Adrenalin gives me wings. I push on, shouting, 'Liam? Where's Liam Caffrey?'

People stare at me, faces blank as masks, split in two, light and shade.

I blunder through. 'Liam?' My voice gets high and desperate. I need him more than I want to admit. I can't do this without him. 'Liam!'

Suddenly there is space. And there is Liam. And Josh Clarkson. My heart sinks.

In front of the DJ decks, flanked by two huge speakers, there's a gap where there should be dancing. People cluster in a nervy circle around Liam and Josh.

'Liam!' I shout. 'Liam! She rang me! Eden's phone rang me!' But he's not listening. Josh is right in his face.

'Come on, shithead, what did you do to her?' Josh is taunting Liam, loud and slurring.

'Fuck off, Clarkson, I didn't touch her. I wouldn't.'

Josh is jabbing Liam in the chest and circling him. Unsteady, on his toes, like he thinks they're in Fight Club or something.

The stupid coloured lights give us all a front-row view of the circus.

Josh's still holding a can in his left hand, slopping cider as he strikes with his right fist. His boyband hair flops in lank strips, and his pretty-boy face is as screwed up as a snarling dog's.

'Liam! Stop it. Listen – I need to tell you something!' My voice sounds weak and strangled. I try to get closer, but my body has got other ideas. There is no way it's going near a fight. My legs are shaking so much I can't trust them

right now. This is ridiculous. It's like I'm stuck on an old setting. I need to override it. I will do it, for Eden's sake.

Liam looks down. I can see he's trying to do the same as me: find his own way forward. This isn't him any more either. He's moved on. He just needs to remember it.

'I didn't touch her,' he repeats. His voice sounds steady, but he's breathing so hard I see his T-shirt rise and fall, rise and fall. It's taking all he's got not to lose it.

'Liam!' Why won't he hear me?

'Not what I heard, you fucker.' *Jab.* Josh's too pissed to hide his jealousy. He throws his can behind him.

'So?' Liam's jaw juts tight with the effort of not hitting back. 'She's not your property. She gets to choose who she's with.'

I look around me, scanning the faces, illuminated green, blue, and yellow. Who can help me?

Tyler is there. He hears Liam and he takes a step forward, like he's going to do something, say something. But before he can speak—

'She was *my* girlfriend first. Bastard!' Josh screams and launches himself at Liam. He grabs him by his T-shirt and slams him up against the speaker behind them. He pulls his arm back and throws a punch. Liam ducks and the force of the blow topples the speaker backwards, taking both of them with it.

The music cuts out.

The speaker hits the ground and they roll off, tumbling onto the floor. People scatter, getting out of their way, but then coming back round for a better view, like all this is a spectator sport.

I'm trying to get a grip, my hands on my thighs, gulping down air. I can't help it. I sink slowly, letting people surge forwards past me to see. *Come on, Jess, this isn't aimed at you.* I manage to stand. I take a wobbling step towards them. I can do this. For Eden's sake. I can. I take control. I go closer.

I see Josh yelling in Liam's face, slamming his fist down again and again. Liam twists aside. He jumps to his feet, furious now. Even in this light, I can see his cheek swelling redly around a white blaze. His hair's all tufted up.

They face off, like two fighting dogs. Circling. Liam's ready, fists up, defensive. He's taller and stronger than Josh.

‘Yeah? Think you’re hard enough? Think again, Caffrey. I know about you. What you’re like. What you did to my brother.’

Everyone looks at Liam. He doesn’t answer. I see the tension in his jaw as he bites down his words.

I need to get to him. I need to tell him.

‘Go on, wanna hit me?’ Josh yells. ‘I can take it. It’ll be worth it to see the back of you. Second offence, with your record? They’ll throw away the fucking keys. Do it! Fucking do it!’

‘Liam! Don’t. Stop. Come with me!’ He hears me now, all right. Everyone hears me in the shocking silence. ‘Come on, Eden rang me. She needs us. *Now!*’

He looks over at me for a moment, and I think I’ve reached him. I think he’s going to choose me.

Josh spits in Liam’s face.

That’s when Liam cracks. I see him grab Josh’s shirt and pull him up, his fist raised.

I give up. I turn on my heel. I’ll do this alone if I have to.

Chapter Thirty-Four

Friday 4th September

9.06pm

I flee from the clearing, stumbling and clutching at tree trunks. My mouth tastes sour and dry with fear. What if I'm wrong? Did I really hear the music down the phone? What if I'm kidding myself? By the time I know for sure, Eden could be dead.

I ring Eden's phone. 'I'm coming, E. Wait for me, please. I'm on my way. Hang in there.'

I take the quickest route - up the hill to the old packhorse trail just above the tree line, where massive stones are set into the ground - a centuries-old highway. My feet skim over the smooth weathered stones, like whalebacks surfacing from the close-grazed grass.

I speed up. I'm almost running on empty, but like the end of a race, my body finds more. It changes gear, surprising me.

Eden wanted what she couldn't have: to make it right with her sister. That's impossible, so what's the next best thing? The place they'd been happiest. I'm sure Eden went there. That's where she is, right now. That's where I'm going. I'm trusting what I know about Eden. I'm trusting all our years together.

If I'm wrong, I'm out of ideas, out of luck, out of time.

I'm going to the place Iona loved, up this valley, near their old house - the one from the old photo in their hallway. The one where they'd been happy, Eden and Iona, kids together on the trampoline, running wild in the fields, walking to the village school, still friends. It was when they moved house that everything changed.

I'm going to the river, Iona's favourite spot, only two fields down from their old house. I'm going to that place, to the circle carved into the valley, like a cupped palm, so the sun gets trapped there, where the river flows into a sweet round pool, just deep enough to swim. I'm going to that place, where we spent hours exploring upstream, making dams, clambering over rocks, skimming stones, throwing sticks for the farmer's crazy collie. I'm going there, where the wide grassy bank's big enough for ten families to picnic at once. I'm going there, where Iona took us for long summer afternoons, where we'd eat bilberries till our mouths were stained purple, where we stayed all day till we were

sunburned and soaked through, with stubbed toes and grazed arms, completely exhausted.

I'm going there, where Eden and Iona were happiest together. I remember the last time. We must've been twelve, Iona nearly fourteen, at the end of the summer holidays. Iona, Katie, Eden, Me. A whole day at the river. Iona being bossy, rationing out the sandwiches, giving us challenges. Me and Eden, pretending to catch fish. Iona and Katie climbed ahead, downstream to the shadowy pool, hidden by the rocky overhang. Rays of sunlight shafted down, bouncing off the water, reflections of reflections, casting rippling veins of gold everywhere. We found Iona and Katie curled close on the same shelf of rock, so their hair was tangled up, light and dark together, whispering secrets, their feet dangling in the water. Mermaids.

When we got close, Eden whooped and scooped a glittering wave of water, soaking them both.

'Oi, I'll kill you!' Iona shrieked, but laughing, not cross, not mean, not like she became, later.

'Well, you did just say this was heaven!' Katie told her, then we all started play-fighting, splashing and sliding right into the water in our shorts.

It was heaven for Iona.

It's everything Eden's lost.

It's where she would go, to feel close to Iona. Or to join her.

I hurry over the last large stones, vault the stile, and I'm almost there, descending to that place, ducking down to the river. The moon is enough now. The pale grey path shines in the moonlight. A ghost path, beckoning me on.

'Let her be there. Please. Let her be alive!' I whisper to the rhythm of my rushing feet. I pray to the moon, to the woods, to the pale horizon.

It must be a shadow, a cloud over the moon, like a blinking eye. The light changes. I swear the world is listening. The night air is alive around me.

'I'll do anything! Let her be alive.'

The world waits. It's not enough.

What can I give?

'Let me be in time. If she's alive, I'll give up Liam.'

It's the only thing I've got, so it has to be that. It's what I want most, next to this. I feel my sacrifice ripping out of me, painful and real.

‘I’ll do it, I promise. I’ll do the right thing, I’ll give him up. Just let Eden be alive!’

My prayer ripples out into the night. I picture it, a little flimsy, feathered wish. It flies up, changing the fabric of space and time. I can’t bring back the dead, but I can restore this balance. I can give up my first love, for her.

My feet change rhythm as I hit the descent: staccato, offbeat steps. I see the river through the trees.

I need to be careful. I slow down. I silence my feet.

I pick my way over the last stones, and then dart over the little packhorse bridge: no more than two vast stones laid right across the river. I hide in the shadow of a slender tree, searching the wide moonlit palm of the valley.

Finish line? Or failure?

I stand there, every nerve strung tight, ready to run or fight or scream for help. I leave the bridge and tiptoe across the grass, scanning left to right, left to right. My eyes strain into the darkness. I see nothing moving in the dark blue shadows. There’s no one here. I’m wrong. I’ve failed.

I swing round, ready to howl at the moon.

That’s when I see her.

Eden’s there. Lying on the big rock. Her hair streams out, white gold in the moonlight, like a fairytale princess. One hand hangs limply down.

I fall on my knees.

Chapter Thirty-Five

Friday 4th September

9.32pm

I am a ghost. I'm pale and papery. I have no substance. I have no idea how I cross the space between us.

I'm too late. Do I touch her? I dare not.

Somehow, I climb up.

If there's someone else here, I've stopped caring. I've found Eden. Nothing else matters.

Her skin is ivory and perfect. Her eyes are closed.

I can't even tell if she's breathing.

I can't tell if I am.

Something crinkles under my elbow. It's a foil packet of pills. No bigger than my hand, and yet it's done this? I hold it up to the shaking light of my phone, reading the weird brand name, trying to see how many of the small white ovals have been pushed through the rows of foil. I count, trembling, and find six little empty nests of crumpled plastic. Six? Is that enough to die?

'Don't leave me. No!'

I can't believe I've come all this way, too late.

I can't believe she's dead.

'Eden, Eden, no... ' my tears drip onto her face.

My tears.

Not a kiss.

This is what wakes her.

'Jess. You came.'

Her skin is warm. Her hair is warm. She is real and alive and warm.

I collapse onto the rock next to her. I hug her to me, so tightly I can even feel her heart, pounding out the truth.

The bomb inside me melts, instead of exploding. I'm a river. I'm a flood. I'm crying and gasping. This must be hysteria, but happy. I stutter and sob. I'm tears and snot. I'm pure gratitude. I will never, ever complain of anything again.

Eden is alive.

'Of course I came. I'm so glad you rang,' I sniff and rub at my face. 'But why didn't you say something? What if I'd guessed wrong?'

She doesn't answer me. And then I realise: what about the pills?

It occurs to me in a horrible rush, this might be false relief. She's alive now, sure, but what has she done? 'Is that why you didn't speak? Cos you didn't want me to find you? Have you taken these?' I fumble on the rock, up on my elbows. 'Tell me. Eden, what have you done?' I realise I can smell whisky, that's the stale whiff on her hoodie. I shake the packet of pills in her face. 'What is this stuff? How many have you had? When did you take them?'

'I haven't. All right? I was going to, last night, but I haven't...' Eden sounds strange. Her words are slurring, her eyes won't focus on me.

'So why are they here?' She must've taken them. She's taken them and she's lying to me, so the pills have time to work. 'Some are gone. Oh my God, Eden... what did you do?'

'I was gonna chuck them away, OK?' she doesn't sound like her. She's trembling. She's ashen and shaking, mumbling at me, 'They're Mum's. She's the one who took em, after Iona... I wasn't going to take them.'

'So what the hell are you doing? You're sitting out here in the middle of the night, and you just happen to have some pills in your hand?'

'I didn't know what to do ... I wanted to tell you, talk to you. But I didn't know how to come home...' She's whispering so low I can hardly hear her.

Now I'm really scared.

I ring 999 because I can't trust her to tell me the truth about this, not if she's already decided to die. I hold on to her tightly with my free hand, gripping her hoodie like she's a hyperactive toddler, so she can't run off again, even though I can feel all the fight has gone out of her.

'What service do you need?' a man's voice asks me.

'*What service?* Oh: an ambulance! Quick. And the police will need to know...' 'A bit of my mind is noticing that I've never rung 999 before. I don't know what to say, but the man's obviously used to freaked-out strangers babbling at him, and he takes me calmly through some questions.

I give our location, Eden's name. Tell him she's the missing girl, alive, but I don't know what she's taken. I spell out the brand name of the pills.

Afterwards I feel like I've called her a liar. On top of everything. It seems very quiet, and we just sit there, hunched up next to each other, with the river

gurgling away like it always does, even if your world is ending. I take my hoodie out of my backpack and try to cover her with it.

Tugging the fabric round Eden gives it a layer of normality, as if we're just having a sleepover or something, trying to get comfy as we talk all night. But she might be dying, and this might be our last chance to say it all. In the moonlight, our world's gone eerie and surreal.

'I'm sorry E,' I wrap my arm round her shoulder and try to pull her close to me, for warmth, 'I know about Iona. What you were going to tell me, about her being adopted. But you can't blame yourself for what happened. And it's no reason to do *this!*'

'How do you know that, Jess?' she pulls away, still slurring.

I can see her eyes, heavy-lidded, struggling to stay open. A new spiral of pain starts mining down into my heart. 'No, Eden. Don't you fall asleep. Stay with me!' I slap her cheek gently.

'Get off me. Anyway, what do you know about my reasons?' she's back, glaring under her lashes at me. 'S'my turn to be the grieving fuckup. You had your go!'

'Well you don't get to give up! I didn't give up, did I?'

'It's my turn. My rules. And I choose when it's game over...'

'Oh, we're playing a game now? What's that then: top trumps of pain?' I'm actually angry with her. 'Yeah, OK. You win. Death of a sister trumps old-news-hate-crime, hands down!'

She could be dying right now and I'm still angry with her. She's put me through hell, and dead right, I'm raging mad.

'Is that what you were playing at today?' I ask her, my voice cracking into tears. 'Going for the prize in that game – *I hurt so much, I'm going to kill myself? Look, I'm dead, so I win!* And the great thing is how much you fuck up the rest of us who are left behind, so we never forgive ourselves for the rest of our lives? And we don't even get to answer back.'

I don't know who's talking. I don't sound like me. Have I changed so much today? 'I was there for you this summer. Just like you were there for me. It's what we do. I bloody love you. I'm glad you're alive. Thinking you were dead today, it nearly killed me.'

I can't tell if she's listening. She's leaning forward, all tense and trembly, with her hair hanging in her face so I can't see it.

'The thing is, if you kill yourself, Eden Holby, you know what? You take me with you. What's my life, without you in it? So you just think about that.'

'I did think about that. You and Liam, you'd be fine. I know you like him. I know what happened at the party.' She turns to me, all pale in the milky darkness, her eyes like huge dark pools. 'Was I not hurting enough?'

Her words cut me.

'I'm sorry,' I whisper, all my fight gone, 'It just ha—'

'Don't you dare tell me it just happened. Bollocks. 'S'always a choice. I knew he'd choose you in the end. Little Jess. Little bird with a broken wing...'

Her knife goes deeper.

I take a breath, 'OK. Yeah, I screwed up, I fell in love with Liam. If it makes it any better, it happened years ago. But I won't do owt. I'll back off. It was just that night. He was so sad when you went off with Tyler...'

'So it's my fault? As usual.'

'No. Listen to me, for once. You don't listen enough.' You'd think that I'd be more gentle, if she'd taken pills and were slipping away, but suddenly the most important thing is to be honest. Even if we've only got a bit of time. Especially then. I think she likes it too. She almost smiles, a little flicker, and shuts up for once.

'Yes, I love Liam, but I love you more,' I tell her. 'Liam knows that. He loves you, too. We've been looking bloody everywhere for you, E. We've walked miles.' I slump forwards, and I'm shattered, suddenly. I'm completely done in. I've got nothing left. I want to go to sleep, leaning against her.

'I love you, too. Honest. I just got stuck.' She sounds stronger now, more normal. Maybe she's just tired, not overdosed after all? She's been missing from home a night and a day. When did she eat or sleep? No wonder she can't stay awake. Maybe she's telling the truth.

A spark, then a little flicker of hope starts burning inside me. I feel her arm work its way round my shoulders.

We hug, properly, at last. Like hundreds of times before. Like never before. I can feel her skin, her shoulder blades under my fingertips, and even after everything, her hair smells so right, all fresh and apple-y and just like her.

We cling to each other.

‘I’m sorry, J,’ she’s breaking down now too. I feel her sobs, her ribcage shaking. ‘It just hurts so much, I can’t keep on going. I’m not that strong. I can’t...’

She pulls back, and I see her mouth fall open in a wide ‘O’ of pure pain and for once Eden Holby is as ugly as the grief that shakes her, like a terrier with a rabbit.

‘Yes, you can. And you will. And we’ll be there with you.’ I don’t let her go. I hold on as she howls it out and I cry right along with her, longer than I think possible, till finally we’re done.

We’re damp and wrung out, shipwrecked on that stupid rock.

‘It seemed like the only thing left for me to do. Iona died and it’s my fault and I can’t make it right. I can’t bring her back and I can’t say sorry. My parents are destroyed and I can’t fix it. I can only show how bad I feel, how sorry I am.’

‘What, by taking away the only thing they have left?’ I can’t believe she can be so stupid.

‘Yeah, OK, so I got there in the end. That’s why I’m still here. And cos of you. And him.’

When I lift my head from her shoulder, there’s someone in a pale T-shirt coming along the right bank, faster, faster, faster...

Liam is too impatient to go round and cross the bridge. He splashes through the water at the top of the weir. ‘Eden? Eden! Is that you?’ he shouts in a voice that I’ve not heard before.

And she slides off, scraping and bumping her way down. She goes to him.

Eden and Liam stand in the river, embracing so tightly they’re one figure. A tall shape, lit from behind with the projections still beaming into the sky from the party down the valley. Together they’re a lighthouse. So no one is ruined on the rocks.

I get up, shivering now too, and slip down to the grassy bank, only skinning one of my palms on the way.

The wail of a siren floats down from the village road. In the opposite direction to the party, I see the lights of the search and rescue team coming down the bridleway towards us, their head torches flashing in and out of the trees. I hear their dogs barking and men’s voices.

I don't say anything. I leave Liam and Eden together. I walk back over the bridge and I flee.

Chapter Thirty-Six

Friday 10.20pm

I use my phone torch to show the way and I stumble down the valley to the party. I follow the music back to the clearing. When I get there, Imogen and Charlotte home straight in on me, starving for news.

‘Eden’s alive,’ I tell them. ‘Rescue team have her. Up there.’

We actually hug. Me, Imogen, Charlotte. So I’m no longer the smelly goth? I’m not on the outside any more. I’m one of them. We’re all in it, all of us. All so different, but all here right now. I look over their shoulders, at the moonlit clearing.

Who-who? The owl asks, sounding like it belongs in the music.

I wonder what the owls think of all this. They don’t stress about difference, do they? You don’t find an owl being jealous of a deer cos it can’t run: it knows it has wings.

Am I crazy? These feel like mad thoughts. I think I might be totally unhinged now. My mind’s seen too much, been too far today.

‘It’s going to be OK,’ Imogen tells me.

‘Everything!’ Charlotte agrees. She’s still holding flyers. She throws them up into the air, laughing, and the papers twist down, catching the rainbow lights.

I can’t speak, but I smile and I nod and then I turn away from Imo and Charlotte and wade deep into the crowd. I nearly laugh out loud, cos I actually feel safe here, deep in the middle of dancing bodies. It’s not about me: each person is lost in the music, and I dive in too. The rhythm grounds me. I can hold on to that. It tethers my body, and my mind can float off with the melody, with the woman’s voice, so pure and fierce, and I follow the piano that comes in next, taking me somewhere high and free, like a spiral up to the stars. For the first time in a very long time, I let go completely.

The wind gets up, sending clouds sailing across the sky. The moon goes in and out again, hiding between the clouds, tinting the world silver and black, black and then silver, like an old film, flickering. There are strobe lights in the DJ deck, and the moon joins in, making cut-out shadows on the ground, stark and crisp, appearing and disappearing. I see my body, my shadow, black on white, hair flying loose, arms out. Is that me? I look free.

I dance and as I move, I know that I'm whole again. I will survive. I did survive. They didn't destroy me, though they came close.

I made it through, with the help of Mum, Eden. And yes, Liam.

Eden made it too.

I know she's going to be OK. She's at the start of a path. The start of life without Iona. This summer was just the crisis, the shock of it. All anger and denial. Now she must start to mourn.

I dance on. And I start to mourn too. With wet cheeks, I dance for Iona. I finally admit to my sadness, my little grief that was so insignificant next to Eden's that I couldn't pay it any attention. But my heart is breaking for the Iona we lost, for the one-off girl she was, an almost-big-sister to me, before she got shunted onto the wrong track, before she had chance to make it right.

I dance and I cry for the future she won't have, for the forgiveness she never knew, for her friends and all the ones out there who were waiting for her, who she'll never meet now.

I dance for Eden and the big black hole in her heart.

I'm so light now, I feel I could break loose and float up over the valley. I'd see it from above, like the owl. Did Iona see this, as she left us? The steep craggy slopes where they hewed out stone and built this town. The houses, all snug and close, huddling in the valley bottom, looped by the curving lines of the canal, the railway, the river and the road, all holding our town in their arms. The old chimneys, the ruins and the new builds, all that life going on, right here. And we will be part of it: me, Eden, Liam.

Liam. I dance for him too. Thinking of him now is like pressing a bruise. I dance and I say goodbye to him. I dance myself further away from him, but this time it doesn't work.

Instead, I conjure him up. I open my eyes at last and I see him, coming through the shadowy dancing bodies, his T-shirt catching flashes of light, blue, green, yellow.

It's really him. Standing right in front of me. Filling my vision.

Chapter Thirty-Seven

Friday 4th September

11.30pm

‘Jess!’

‘What’s wrong? Where is she?’ I can’t see his face well enough to read it.

‘What happened?’ I can’t think why he would leave her.

‘It’s OK. Everything’s OK,’ Liam has to shout over the music. ‘Come over here, so we can talk?’

We edge through the press of bodies and find a quieter corner, behind two huge trees. My legs buckle and I slide down, leaning against the tree bark, knees pulled up. I rest my head on my leggings, feeling like I’ve been wearing these clothes for at least a hundred years already today. ‘Tell me,’ I whisper.

‘Jess, you should’ve seen it,’ he slides down at my side. ‘The search-and-rescue team came down, with dogs and stretchers and stuff. They checked Eden, wrapped her in blankets, gave her energy drinks. They got her up to the pub car park and that’s when her folks came. And the police, ambulance, the lot. Swarming round her.’ His voice breaks. ‘Her mum and her dad – it was... she was... kind of *squashed* between them. They were sobbing, losing it.’ He takes a breath and lets it out slowly. ‘Intense. After a bit, her dad tried to thank me. ‘Cept he couldn’t really speak. I told him it wasn’t me, it was you he should thank. Dunno if it went in. Don’t think anything went in, ‘cept Eden being safe. She’s really safe, Jess. You did it. You found her.’

‘Yeah.’ I can’t think what else to say. Part of me is still flying over the valley, weightless. ‘Why didn’t you stay? Where’s she gone?’

‘Home. Her mum wasn’t taking any shit. The medics did some checks right there, but Claire said the rest could wait, so they could go home.’

‘Good.’ I’m glad for Claire and Simon.

‘Jess, she sent me to find you, Eden did. We grabbed a second, while Claire was arguing with the uniforms.’

‘What did she say exactly?’ I’m not taking any chances here.

‘Eden told me to find you. To be with you.’

‘Are you sure?’

Liam nods, ‘Not the kind of thing I get wrong.’

‘But I can’t. Not now.’ Somehow I’m brave enough to tell him, ‘When I was looking for her, I made a bargain.’ It does sound crazy, so I drop my voice to a whisper, ‘I promised I’d give you up, if Eden was OK. And she is, so we can’t... I can’t. I gave you up for Eden.’

‘Well, Eden gave me right back. She doesn’t want me,’ he sits up, raising his voice. ‘Oi, anyway, why is it up to you? Or her? What about me? What about what I want?’ His eyebrows are telling me something urgent. ‘And a bargain with who? Jess, it doesn’t work like that.’

‘Who says?’ I want to believe him. I want to touch him. I want to kiss his neck. I want to be closer, breathing him in. But it’s not right. I promised. I remember the pale moonlight path of stones, how I felt the world listening. Could I have heard it wrong?

Liam swears, ‘Don’t you get it, Jess? Even after everything? Why is it OK for random bad things to happen, but you can’t let random good things happen? You don’t owe anybody for what happened today. You don’t have to give up what you want. If Eden says this is OK, who else can stop us?’

‘What about her? Maybe you got it wrong.’

‘Go see her tomorrow if you don’t believe me. Anyway, I were right. She’s moved on. I saw that Tyler lad just now. He already knows she’s back. She’d just texted him. He’s next.’

I look past Liam, at the magical silvery woods. I feel hope rising like water springing up from the earth, gathering pace as it rushes downstream. Is Liam right? Can I have it all? Can I be here and Liam and Eden too? All of us together and no one lost? It’s been so hard, this year, I can’t believe I’m allowed something easy, something good.

‘And another thing. I didn’t do it. I didn’t hit Josh. I wanted to.’ He swears. ‘God, I wanted to. But I just pushed him off and ran after you – only I guessed the wrong path first time, so it took me longer to find you.’

I smile. ‘Got there just in time.’

He’s digging out a cigarette and lighting it, still talking. ‘None of it is fixed. It’s not *fate*. What do you think, Jess?’ He waves the lit end of his cigarette around as he gestures wildly. ‘You think there’s someone watching us, with a giant pair of scales, weighing what we’re owed? Anyway, if there was, I

think you've suffered enough, don't you? We don't get to be happy or unhappy cos we deserve it. Do you think Eden and her folks deserved to lose Iona?'

I shake my head no, trying to follow his logic, like a safety line, hauling me up.

'We're just lucky if we get good stuff. But you still have to choose what to make of it, right? So let's grab it, Jess, why not? I'm up for it, if you are?'

I sit up straighter. Suddenly it seems possible. I look at this beautiful boy who's looking straight at me, and it hits me how ridiculous I'm being. Any one of us can be gone in a day, like Iona. There are no guarantees, I should know that by now. Life's too short, and you don't know what's round the corner. But tonight, he's here and so am I, and I can't think of a single reason not to grab that with both hands.

So I do. I grab him with both hands. My gold medal. 'OK, Liam Caffrey, you're on.' I gather the warm cotton of his T-shirt and gently pull him towards me. Then I kiss him. 'Now you get up and dance with me before I change my mind. And I need a drink, right now.'

Chapter Thirty-Eight

Saturday 5th September

11.45am

Less than twelve hours later, not many of them spent on sleep, and Mum's driving me up to Eden's.

'I'll just come in and say hi. I won't stay long,' Mum's saying. 'I need to give Claire a hug, is all.'

'OK. Don't wait for me. I'll walk back when I'm done. I'm just gonna see how Eden's doing, play it by ear.'

'Good idea, love.'

We're being kind and careful. We are reborn.

And while I'm on my life-is-short sleep-deprived high, I seize the chance to say, 'Is Steph coming over later?'

'Yeah, we'd thought so. But if you need a quiet one...'

'No, Mum. It's fine. It's great. It's just, y'know, I was thinking you two should make it a bit more permanent, Steph being round.'

She doesn't speak. Her fingers grip the wheel a little tighter as our car bumps and jolts, struggling its way in first gear up the last steep stretch to Eden's. When I turn my head, she's blinking fast.

'Oh, just ask her to move in and be done with it, Mum! Anyway, I'm going to be out more. With Liam.'

Then we're arriving and she pulls into the space by Eden's house and grabs me for the quickest of hugs. 'Thank you, sweetheart. We'll talk it over later with Steph, the three of us, yeah? So, you and Liam? That's how it is? How you really want it?'

I nod.

'OK, love. Now you get in there and find Eden. She's going to need you. And Jess? I'm so proud of you.'

We get out of the car. It's a cloudy day, like the whole world has got a hangover, not just me. The light is muted and grey. Except to my eyes, everything sparkles. Everything is crisp and clear and new.

Claire opens the door and the look on her face is worth a trudge to the North Pole and back. She is whole again, almost. A mum with one child home safe.

‘Jess! Come here,’ Claire squeezes me so tight I can’t breathe. ‘Thank you,’ she whispers into my hair.

Blinking hard myself now, over her shoulder I see someone else, someone surprising.

‘Hey, Jess, you did good,’ Tyler says, flashing me a grin.

Claire lets me go and though Tyler doesn’t hug me - I can see it’s not his style – he checks me out, head to toe. Assessing. Giving me credit.

I’m going to have to do the same. Tyler is someone I’ll need to know. ‘Thanks Tyler. See you soon?’

‘Definitely.’ He nods and saunters out.

He’s so slick: his city slouch looks jarring out there in the farmyard, but here he is. He’ll adapt and so will we. All I need to know is that Eden rates him. Plus, I owe him: it’s Eden choosing Tyler that makes the space for me and Liam.

I go through, leaving Mum and Claire to talk. Simon insists on shaking my hand when he sees me. I feel like a fraud. I’m an imposter. I didn’t save Eden. I nearly screwed it up. Today could be so different. I push that thought away as I climb the stairs. I’m sticking to my resolution to accept the good stuff when it comes.

‘Hey, E? It’s me.’ I tap on her door.

‘Come in then!’

I push the door open. The room is a mess again, and it makes me smile. Eden is sitting cross-legged on the bed with her phone, in a white vest and her loose grey yoga trousers.

Our eyes lock as we search each other for clues. How do we do this? What’s the script? I panic for a moment. Is it going to work?

But then she’s holding out her arms for me and I’m hugging her and we’re both crying buckets.

‘Here, tissues!’ she says finally. ‘Mum’s handing them out like sweets today. I’ve never cried so much in my life.’ She blows her nose.

I wipe my eyes and the tissues come away black with eyeliner. ‘Yeah, well, you had it stored up from June. Major backlog. Good to get it out?’

She nods hard, wiping her face, then she winds her hair up in a coil and fastens it with a bobble from her wrist. Like that, her face looks naked. Her eyes

are big and blue-green, like the sea. Her cheeks are slightly pink from crying. She still looks flipping gorgeous.

She looks at me, and I know it's her, it's really her. Eden is back. She is present. She isn't hiding any more.

Chapter Thirty-Nine

‘So, Tyler?’ I ask, gently.

‘Yeah,’ she looks down, smiling. ‘That night at the party – I know! Think what you like - but, well, we kind of fast-forwarded somewhere, me and him. He got under my skin. He knows I’m not *nice*, and it’s such a bloody relief. He saw through me, J, in a good way. And I let him in. He’s OK. I mean, yeah, he’s got swagger, but really, he’s solid, I promise.’

‘OK. If you say so, I believe you. But be careful, E. If he hurts you, I will be coming for him. You can tell him that.’ I’m so fierce, I can see she wants to laugh, but not today.

‘OK, I’ll tell him.’

There’s a long pause. There is too much to say. I don’t know where to start. But maybe that’s OK, now we’ve got the rest of our lives stretching out before us.

‘Where did you go, Eden?’ I can’t help myself, I just blurt it out.

She takes a deep breath and I wonder how many times she’s been through this story already. ‘Liam walked me home. I was gonna have a drink, then sneak out to meet Tyler. I’d done that Tuesday night and I said I’d meet him again. But I just couldn’t.

‘It was like hitting a wall. I was so tired of the pain. So tired of being sad and guilty. I wanted to sleep, forever. So I got Mum’s pills, a bottle of Dad’s whisky. I put my boots on and I just walked. I walked and walked, all night. I got near Stoodley Pike, just before morning. It seemed like the right place. Lonely, but I knew there’d be walkers next day, to find ... me. I texted Mum, to say sorry.’

Shit. I squeeze her hand. I bite down my words. I won’t interrupt.

‘I was going to do it. Pills, washed down with whisky. I drank a bit first, for courage. I thought I’d just go to sleep. Seemed an OK way to go. But I spilled the bloody whisky all down me, hands were shaking with cold and whatever... So there was a delay. I’ve never been good at swallowing pills with no drink.

‘It got light. The clouds were lovely, Jess, all pale and pearly. It did look a bit like heaven. And it got me thinking about Iona. How much she’d want to

live, if she could. If she had the choice, she wouldn't die. She had so much she wanted to do.

'So I couldn't do it. I couldn't chuck it all away, in case it did get better in the end. I thought of Mum and Dad, finding me. I thought of you. I couldn't do it, Jess, I couldn't.'

She crumples now, her lovely face all red and blotchy and sobbing and snotty.

I sit quietly, being patient. Being her rock.

I have a sudden flashback to January, when it was me all crumpled, and Eden sitting patiently, handing tissues. Salt tears in my scar...

I hold her hand till she can carry on, watching our pile of soggy tissues grow on the bed next to us.

'I lay there, freezing cold. Then I went up the tower and sat on the balcony, on the sheltered side, watching it get light. Best view in the world. So high. You feel like God. The sun came up, making the sky all pink and stripy. I could see the whole moor, all the hills and woods and farms and houses, right across the valley. It was so beautiful, Jess. It was like I'd been given a chance. A new day. I just needed to think. I needed time and space to sort my head out. I didn't want to walk back into the same crap.

'I took my phone apart, so no one could find me. I know - selfish cow! - but I figured, at least I was alive. I walked down the valley and up the other side, across the top of the moor, thinking, thinking, trying to answer all my questions. I stopped at the farm shop. Dunno what time it was, but I was starving. I bought two bacon rolls on Mum's account. Good job it was that spotty lad, so he didn't clock who I was, didn't ring the police like his mum would've.

'Then I went to our old house. There's another family living there now. I saw the kids coming in from school: a girl and a boy, maybe seven and ten. They kept our old trampoline. I watched them bouncing and playing, like we used to. I watched through the hedge for ages, like a crazy stalker lady.

'I was remembering me and Iona, when we were little, when we were happy. It's OK to do that, isn't it? I'm not kidding myself, I mean, it did happen, right? Those bits are just as real as the bad bits. Now Iona is dead, you can see her whole life. And it's OK to remember further back...'

'Course it is, E,' I tell her. 'I've been doing that. Bet everyone has.'

‘Anyway, that’s what I was thinking, yesterday afternoon. And I wanted more. I wanted to go back to the best bits. I went down the field, to our spot, by the bridge. It felt like full circle, you know?’ She looks up and away at a distant place, remembering.

I nod. I do know.

‘But she wasn’t there. She will never be there. I have to start admitting the truth. That I miss her. That I love her. That this is the hardest thing ever.’ She fades out and her eyes are full of tears again.

‘Jess, you need to know what I did.’

Chapter Forty

‘That night. The night she died...’

‘It’s OK.’ I can see how much this is hurting her. ‘You don’t have to say it...’

‘J, let me tell you the worst. And you can judge me or leave me, or think whatever you like. But I need to get it out, OK?’

‘OK,’ I tell her, taking her hand in both of mine.

‘After we fought at the parade, it was cold war. She knew I knew but we didn’t talk about all the adoption stuff. Just one big freeze. Worse than ever. I could see it was doing Mum’s head in, but I was so angry. It’s like I’d finally decided to fight back.’

‘Well, you’d taken it long enough...’ I say gently, but she flaps her hand free, looking anxious and I know she just needs to speak.

‘It came to a head that Friday night. I can’t even remember what set us off. I just know we both had our music turned up to the max. I was jumping around to it, trying to make as much noise as I could. She kept slamming her wardrobe door, so it made my pinboard fall down... pathetic really, weren’t we?’

I shake my head.

‘Kicked off at dinner. She was smirking at me, till I snapped at her. Dad blew his top – he’d had some crap week at work, said all he wanted was for us to eat dinner like a normal family.’

‘So I said that we weren’t. That we’d never be a normal family. Obviously Mum took that hardest, so Dad started yelling at me to apologise. Anyway, I blew up. Told them they were both liars. Asked how they thought it was going to end for us four, when they chose secrets and lies.’

I wince. ‘Shit.’

‘Hitting fan. Yeah. That’s when Iona whispered behind Dad’s back, something like, look who’s in trouble now, for a change. She always knew how to push my buttons. I flipped. I picked up my glass and threw it at her. It missed and shattered on the wall, bits flying everywhere. Iona’s arm started bleeding. Dad went mental then. Told me to get out.’

I’m watching her face and I can see we’re getting to the worst part.

‘So I said Iona should get out, not me, seeing as she was the one who didn’t belong. I went for her, shouting in her face. I didn’t mean it. I just wanted

to hurt her back, for once, like she'd been hurting me for years. Jess, I called her a stray dog. Asked if they got her down the rescue centre?'

It's like she's reading out lines, as punishment, but she keeps on, grimly determined to let me see the worst.

'I said it was no wonder she was such a bitch, her real mum was probably some psycho junkie whore. That's when Mum slapped me.'

'Your mum?' I'm shocked.

'Yeah, first time for everything. She's never hit either of us. Never.'

'What did you do?'

'I ran upstairs. Heard Iona slam the front door and drive off in Mum's car. Mum and Dad were both a few glasses down, so they couldn't drive after her. I went back downstairs after an hour or two. Kitchen was a state – chair kicked over, blood on the floor, wine spilled on the table. Mum and Dad were in the other room. I tried to say sorry. Dad said I'd done enough damage for one night.

'Waiting was the worst. I think I fell asleep on the sofa for a bit. It was just light when the police came. We were in the kitchen again, all cleared up. We saw the police car slowing down, up on the village road. And we all knew it was for us, even before it turned. Everything was slow motion, horrible. I went to throw up. I knew, even before they said. I was throwing my guts up in the downstairs loo when the doorbell went. I heard Mum screaming... Dad crying. I've never seen my dad cry before.'

Chapter Forty-One

‘Why didn’t you tell me, idiot?’ I whisper. ‘You could’ve said. I’m so sorry, E.’

She’s sitting there with wet cheeks, like she’s waiting for my verdict, waiting for the axe to fall.

‘I’m so sorry that you went through it. But it doesn’t change anything. I’m just glad you told me. You shouldn’t have to pay for this. It’s not your fault she died. She should’ve come back that night. You could’ve yelled at each other a bit more, then made up. Talked about it properly. It should’ve been the start of making it all right, now you all knew the truth. Not the end.’

‘You really think that?’

‘Course. It’s what I said to Liam, last night...’

‘You and Liam...’ she sighs. ‘It’s like you were so normal,’ she wipes her eyes, looking away from me. ‘When I looked at you two, I didn’t want to ruin that normal stuff, and bring you down into the slime in my head. Anyway, Jess, you’d had all your own shit to deal with, the attack and all that. And I was still feeling guilty enough about that!’

‘E, no! The attack was not your fault. Nobody could ever think that. *Hate crime*, remember? You heard the verdict.’ I’m furious with her suddenly. ‘When will you get it through your head? That’s the last time you ever say that, I swear...’

‘OK, OK!’ she has her hands up in surrender, till I calm a little.

‘And me and Liam - we were only trying to be there for you. Do whatever you needed. We weren’t trying to hide from it, we just followed your lead.’ I knew I should’ve kept pushing at it, making her talk to me. ‘I didn’t want to keep asking about your dead sister, not if you didn’t mention her. I’m so sorry.’

‘And that day in Leeds? Nightmare day – those cards of death – and I thought you’d had enough of me. You seemed so weird and distant. You said you had something to tell me. I thought you were going to ditch me.’

‘Ditch you?’ I’m stunned at the idea. *Me ditch Eden?* ‘As if! For who? I’d never ditch you, stupid.’ I lean in and kiss the top of her head. How wrong we both were, that day. ‘And I told you the Tarot cards read hope, not death.’

‘Yeah, maybe they did - cos when I met Tyler, he was something good, a way out,’ she smiles, thinking of him. ‘Only I didn’t think I deserved one. I’d mucked Liam about; I’d mucked you about. I’d been a bitch, Jess, admit it.’

I give her a quick smile to agree and to discount it, all at once.

‘Anyway, it all came together on Thursday night. A switch flicked. I just couldn’t do it anymore. I thought you’d all be better off without me. I’d seen the way you two looked at each other. Liam never loved me, Jess. He might’ve fancied me, at the start. But I’m too spiky for him. You’re good and so is he: two real, deep-down good people, you know? I thought you’d be OK without me. You’d have each other.’

‘Never, E. Don’t you ever, ever, think that again. Promise?’ I’m holding both her hands again now, and we’re gripping tightly.

Our faces are so close, our noses almost touch.

‘OK. Promise.’

I believe her. I’m filled with relief, like millions of tiny bubbles fizzing away inside me. ‘Eden, you’re my best friend and I love you. You don’t leave me and I won’t leave you. We’ll work this out, OK?’

‘Love you, too, J. I won’t. I’m not going now. Sorry, Jess, you’re stuck with me and all my crap, forever.’

She sinks sideways, next to me. I catch our reflections in the mirror on the other side of the room. Two girls, on a bed. One is all light; the other dark, but it doesn’t mean a thing. My eyes are ringed with black, but they’re lit up with hope. My lips are darker red than my hair today, and they curve in a wide grin. Against the shadowy lace and velvet of my favourite dress, Eden is all pale, a paler version of her usual self. She’s washed out, her gold hair gleaming in the light from the window. But she’s here.

Eden sees my reflection.

Hers smiles back.

Epilogue

Christmas Day

11.48am

Snow on Christmas Day? Like that ever happens! Only it has. Snow so deep, each branch has a thick white crust. Even under the trees, against the pure blue sky, this icy lacework is dazzling. Snow makes the walk to the chapel something like an expedition. It's hard work, trudging through deep drifts, harder than running up here on a normal day.

We talk all the way.

'So. First Christmas since Steph moved in. How's that working out?' Eden asks.

'Yeah, it's not bad actually. Mum laughs way more. Plus Steph's a better cook. Christmas dinner's shaping up nicely, ta very much. Homemade Christmas pudding – we never had that before! And Steph backs me up, sometimes, when me and Mum row. Wasn't expecting that. You wanna know the downside? Promise you won't tell anyone?'

'Course, J. What?'

'PMS week in our house is hell. I'm not even joking. Three of us in sync. Can I move in with you next time?'

When she's finished laughing, I ask, 'So. Are you seeing Tyler later?'

'I might be. If the snow doesn't put him off walking up our hill. Southerner! He's not used to it. You seeing Liam?'

We nudge each other, giggling, but there's something unsaid and accepted, about our lads and how we feel about them.

'I might be... Anyway, he's only four streets away, so no excuse. Plus, he's supposed to be helping me with the framing. Deadline's straight after the holidays.'

I still can't believe it, but I've got my own exhibition. Just a little shop in town, but I have to sort and frame all the prints I've chosen. These last few months, the painting's been so good, I've got more than I need and I can be choosy. My portfolio is growing fat. I've emailed Aisha for one of my art college references. There's a future taking shape, still blurry, but so bright I hardly dare look at it.

We reach the top of the hill and turn left on the long straight road to the chapel. You can see for miles, over to the tiny dark stub of the Pike on the far hill. There's a dirty yellow snowcloud approaching from the west, smudging out the horizon in an ashy blur. More snow soon then.

We don't speak for this last bit. Eden pushes the old iron gate open, over smooth compacted white. We're not the first to do this. You can see at a glance which graves have had their Christmas morning visit. Iona's row is deep, pristine snow, but we break a path to her, through the thick, powdery drift.

I wait and let Eden go first.

She pulls her backpack off.

'Hey, Iona. Happy Christmas.' Eden pulls out a bit of holly and sticks it in the snow at the base of the headstone.

Iona Holby 1997-2015 Beloved Daughter, Sister, Friend

'Here you are.' She places a mince pie on the top of the stone. Next she reaches into her pocket, pulls out a miniature bottle of brandy. She takes a swig and hands it to me.

I copy her – coughing on the hot burnt-sugar flavour - and pass it back.

She sprinkles it. Amber drops melt the snow where they land.

'Do you remember when we did about Mexico, and the Day of the Dead?' Eden asks without looking at me. 'How they party with their dead people, bringing them food and drink? I liked that idea, even back then, before I knew any dead people.'

She sits back on her snowy boots.

'The grief counsellor says it's OK to admit it all. Bad stuff. Good stuff. That we fought. That I loved her. That we were friends once.'

'Course it is.'

'She said grief is just love with no home. I get that. The love doesn't stop, just because the person has. But I felt like a hypocrite, you know, for being sad? Like she'd chuck it in my face if she knew – *You? Sad? You hated me! I thought you'd be glad I'm dead!* And you know the worst thing? For one split second the day she died, I *was* glad. Glad the fighting was over.'

'That's got to be normal. Don't beat yourself up.'

'Oh, but I do. I'm good at that. I've paid for that thought a million times over since then. The mad thing is, right now I would literally give my right arm

to see her again. Even if it was just one last time. To hug her and say sorry would be...’ she gulps on the tears.

I sit next to her in the snow. Giving her some time. I can feel the compacted cold seeping through the waterproofs. I don’t quite feel like me, in the bright outdoorsy gear. I’m wearing Eden’s old ski stuff. She’s wearing Iona’s. ‘How’s it been, today?’

‘It’s hideous, but I was ready for that. First Christmas and all. It couldn’t be more wrong. It’s like we’re unbalanced - a chair with one leg missing - so we’re all useless and crooked and tipping over. We just don’t work.’

I go with her image. ‘Maybe you have to get broken down and built into something else.’

‘What if I don’t want to be? I don’t want to get used to it, Jess, but I can feel it happening.’ She’s crying proper tears now, plopping off her chin and into the snow.

‘It’s still terrible, worse than you can imagine, but it’s not constant. Not like it used to be. I mean, sure, I was in the supermarket with Mum last week and they played an old Christmas song that made us think of her – and we had to abandon the trolley and run back to the car, sobbing so hard, and everyone staring... But then, there’s days when I can hear a new song or I can do a whole morning without thinking of her. Till it slams back in.’ She wipes her face with her sleeve, pulls out a tissue and blows her nose.

‘Soon there’ll be a day, maybe even a week, where I get through without being hammered by it. It’s lifting, just a little, but I don’t know if I want it to. It’s like losing her even more. I can still picture her though.’ She closes her eyes. ‘She could be standing right there,’ she waves a hand to her left. ‘I can see her, Jess, smirking down at me, for doing this.’

I see her too.

Iona, in her winter coat, laughing at us. Her fair hair is loose in the wind. Her cheeks are as pink as ours. ‘Holly? Brandy? For me? I’m honoured. Cheers, girls.’ She raises one hand in a salute. Then she turns on her heel and disappears just as the first flakes of snow start to fall.

Eden opens her eyes, exhaling long and slow. She pats the headstone. ‘We’d have made up. We’d have sorted it out, eventually. And just cos we didn’t

get time, it doesn't mean I have to get stuck on the bad bits. I was stuck too.

D'you know what helped?'

I shake my head.

'The grief counsellor asked me, what if it was me who died? Would I want Iona to suffer forever? Would I want her to be stuck?'

'You wouldn't,' I say. 'You'd want her to live her life, even more than ever.' That's what did it for me too, in the end. I had to come back to life, or those people who hurt me would've won. In spite of everything that happened – or was it *because* of everything that happened? - we had to live.

'Yep. So I have to let it go, let her go. But it's hard, still.' She sighs.

'It's OK. We can be the walking wounded. I reckon that includes everyone, sooner or later.'

She gives me a little crooked smile. Then her hands fall down and she starts scrabbling around in the snow.

'Come on, Jess. Let's make her a snowman. She always loved them. When we were little, we made a massive one on the front lawn, proper face and everything.' She's already rolling a ball.

So I help her. There's a hysterical edge to our laughter, but we commit to it. We make a respectable snowgirl, just to the side of Iona's grave – at the end of the row, in the vacant plot. I shape her head, very gently. I give her two perfect ears. We find stones for her mouth and eyes, little sticks for her arms.

'There,' Eden says, 'so you have company today, OK?'

She kisses her hand and taps the headstone one last time. 'Mum and Dad are coming later. Bye, Iona.'

Then we turn and retrace our steps in the deep snow, turning east at the gate, heading home.

END

61,000 words

Part Two: The Critical Exegesis

Introduction

YA fiction may be seen as the ‘teenage outsider’ within the contemporary literary landscape. It is still often treated as marginal when compared to adult fiction, yet it no longer fits within the field of children’s literature. It demands its own space. Like many teenagers, it is fast-growing, fast-changing and fashionable, asking awkward questions of its older counterparts, often proving more comfortable than they with our diverse and technological society. It may be that, in socially constructed dynamics, the ‘outsider’ can perceive more clearly and ask more demanding questions than the non-marginalised. If so, it is more urgent than ever that YA fiction develops a critical literature of its own to address its production and to interrogate the challenges involved in creating this dynamic and expanding form.

This study responds to that need by combining two elements: an original piece of Young Adult fiction (the novel *Eden Summer*, supplied above and in its published form as a supplement), and a reflective analysis of its production which contributes to current Creative Writing research. There is an emerging literature of CW research and a substantial body of academic work addressing children’s literature and, to a lesser extent, YA fiction. However, so far CW theory has not specifically addressed YA literature, except in the rare and limited cases I cite below.

My work therefore addresses the gap in CW theory regarding YA fiction and the linguistic, structural and thematic specificities of that category. This study will ask how an author writes creatively for young adults in this historical moment, whether there are literary characteristics that define this field, and if so, how they affect the process of writing it. I use the creation of the YA novel *Eden Summer* as a case study, examining its production, including an analysis of its main themes and content, as well as the technical and structural issues of its creation, following the approach outlined by Jen Webb:

The task for the writer-researcher is ... a matter of putting the writing in context and in perspective; comparing what was found with what was already known and what could be expected to be found; analysing their

practice – the poiesis, the techne; and responding reflexively to their own practice, and to shifts in their thinking during the course of the project.

(Webb 2015:186)

Throughout the study, I will return to and address the question of the ‘YA-ness’ of the creative work both in terms of its content and in terms of its imagined readership. If it is true that ‘in creative writing, knowledge is generated through textual production, its content, form and significance *and* through the simultaneous process of reflection that considers aesthetic effect, technique, micro and macro organisational process, anticipation, awareness and accommodation of the reader’ (Graham Mort 2013:209) then in creative writing focusing on YA, the latter three elements are particularly important. I will examine the technical and ethical consequences of this ‘anticipation, awareness and accommodation’ of the YA reader. Although, as I will discuss below, the readership of YA fiction may include adults, it is the implied teenage reader that is significant in the creative process, and therefore will remain the focus here.

This exegesis also contains reflections on elements of autobiography that informed my practice throughout this study, following Tondeur’s statement that, ‘autoethnography is a suitable methodology for an investigation of practice research ... It is an authentic approach to writing practice, where – very often – several ‘selves’ collide’ (Tondeur 2017:2) and move on to ask whether and how certain ‘selves’ may in fact be produced through practice research itself. If my primary research questions are ‘What are the processes involved in creating a YA novel?’ and ‘To what extent are those processes shaped by the characteristics of this category?’, I can then add a further question, ‘How is the YA author constructed through discursive activities in the early twenty-first century?’ Since a version of *Eden Summer* was published in July 2016 by David Fickling Books (a substantially different version which was rewritten, restructured, edited and proofread for commercial publication), the later part of the thesis takes the opportunity to examine some of the activities and texts connected with publication that together might be said to constitute the creation of the YA author.

The voice for this thesis moves between informal and personal, and academic and technical, as required, reflecting the creative-critical synthesis that is discussed. The scope of the study is limited to the creation of a single novel,

Eden Summer, written by this author for this study, with reference to the broader field of contemporary YA fiction. Other textual examples will be taken from English-language YA novels published in the last ten years by British publishers. Finally, for reference, I will include an appendix of documentation of the practical element in the form of extracts from my creative journal and, in the bibliography, links to published articles and blog interviews with leading YA authors.

Chapter 1 – Historical Contexts and Literature

1.1 Creative Writing

In this section, I will briefly examine texts that provide a useful historicisation of the term CW, before focusing on one of the central debates in CW: how to understand and describe the relationship between creative practice and its theorisation in critical and reflective work. I will identify the critical literature addressing the intersection between CW and YA, and then move on to place my novel in the wider context of contemporary YA literature in the subsequent section of this chapter.

In surveying the history and development of CW as a discipline, the available critical literature is relatively recent and sparse. D.G. Myers' *The Elephants Teach: Creative Writing since 1880* (1996 and 2006) examines CW's American history from 1800 to the 1970s, while Rebecca O'Rourke's *Creative Writing: Education, Culture and Community* (2005) claims to offer 'the *first* conceptual account of creative writing' in Britain (2005:blurb, my italics), examining how government policy shaped practice in different settings, and focusing mainly on community writing groups. A more recent and very thorough overview is provided in Michelene Wandor's *The Author Is Not Dead, Merely Somewhere Else* (2008). Wandor notes that the first Masters programme in CW was launched at the University of East Anglia in 1970, then goes on to trace its roots in the UK, from the establishment of the first English literature degree at Cambridge, finding a significant and fruitful parallel in the way this new discipline was, back in the early twentieth century, treated with some of the same suspicion and academic disregard as CW a hundred years later: 'the origins of the subject, from lower down the educational, class and gender scales, were used to diminish its value and scoff at its pedagogic potential' (Wandor 2008:32). In her account of the development of CW in this country, Wandor argues for the significance of the British tradition of adult and community education, which is different to the trajectory of CW in the USA, finding that both strands are important in understanding the way CW's theoretical principles developed. The workshop method that emerged from the Iowa Writers' Workshop has become CW's dominant pedagogical model, although a closer examination of that model falls outside the remit of this particular study.

Another useful perspective here is provided by Stephanie Vanderslice (2008:66) who focuses on the differences between a US system with a ‘pedagogy characterised by an anti-intellectual cult of personality’ and a UK system she views as having a more ““workaday” craft/technique-based pedagogy’ (Vanderslice 2008:70) which she suggests may be an inheritance from nineteenth-century Britain’s industrial history. However, while this may indeed still hold true for community-based CW teaching, in order to understand the history of CW in the UK academic context, Wandor’s next point is more pertinent. Wandor discusses the dominance of critical theory in late-twentieth-century UK universities, in terms of its double-edged inheritance for CW. On the one hand, the author was said to be dead; on the other, the dominance of the text and a new focus on linguistics and meaning-making enabled a CW pedagogy focusing on process. However useful Wandor may be in offering this overview of CW’s history – and however entertaining her scathing dismissal of certain popular CW ‘gurus’ – I am not entirely satisfied with her outright dismissal of all autobiographical impulses in favour of mere grudging admittance that ‘linguistic and cultural resources’ (Wandor 2008:212) exert influence on any given writer’s creative choices. While it may indeed be true that ‘the idea that Shakespeare must have poisoned a king to write *Hamlet*, or that Agatha Christie must have been a detective and a murderer, is clearly ridiculous’ (Wandor 2008:110), this leaves little room to theorise the rich and complex mesh of culture, lived experience and literary heritage within which any given writer is practicing. Here, I find Ann Patchett’s formulation the most useful way of conceptualising the relationship between autobiography and artistic practice of any kind:

I am a compost heap, and everything I interact with, every experience I’ve had, gets shoveled onto the heap where it eventually mulches down, is digested and excreted by worms, and rots. It’s from that rich, dark humus, the combination of what you encountered, what you know and what you’ve forgotten, that ideas start to grow.

(Patchett 2013:40)

Other CW theorists argue for the acceptance of autobiography as one form of qualitative research. Of particular note for this study is the emergence of a

debate, puzzlingly ignored by Wandor, that began in the pages of the Australian journal *TEXT*, to which I will now turn.

In her 2001 paper published in *TEXT*, ‘Practice vs Praxis: Constructing Models for Practitioner-Based Research’, Robyn Stewart engages with the challenge of theorising artistic practice as research, foregrounding the importance of experience:

Autobiography enables the studio practitioner to apprehend artistic practice by revealing personal experience, in the context of life stories, as the basis of research. It makes rationalisation possible by the revelation of personal reflection, interweaving self-consciousness with experience. Thus the artist becomes the principal researcher of their own artistic endeavours.

(Stewart 2001:5)

CW theorists took up the challenge of applying this specifically to the field of CW-as-research. The discussion was developed by Alyssa Ryan, Nicola Boyd and Bunty Avieson, among others, creating an exciting new exploration of CW’s theoretical paradigm at a time when CW was growing rapidly as an academic discipline. One of the dominant debates focused on the perceived split between creative and critical thought. That CW research is made up of both creative and critical modes of thought has been discussed and contested, with many recent theorists arguing for a hybrid model that synthesises or integrates the binary, so that critical and theoretical practices feed into creative work, and also that creativity nourishes critical thought. Various models for conceptualising the relationship between the two modes have been proposed, of varying usefulness and elegance.

Nicola Boyd’s paper ‘A Creative Writing Research Methodology’ (2009) provides an extension of Stewart’s argument, in order to conceptualise the scholarly and creative domains that CW researchers are working between. Boyd provides clear definitions of qualitative and quantitative methodologies, then develops her own critique of current definitions of practice-led research (PLR), asking, ‘if PLR is a methodology, then shouldn’t we be describing ‘practice’; specifically giving a guide to how to implement the method?’ (Boyd 2009:4). I wish to take up this challenge and offer descriptions of what ‘practice’ looks like

as a research methodology in this particular study and the many different processes 'practice' may be held to encompass.

Boyd goes on to include visual representations of various metaphors for creative writing research, including 'strange loops', 'tornadoes' or 'two hands drawing'. The loop works for Boyd because it offers a model in which repetition and progression are important, where research feeds back into practice and vice versa. 'Strange loops use a system to move from one place to another,' where the researcher, 'through a spiralling process of experience, reading, writing and critical thought moves towards a single idea or set of ideas to create both scholarly and creative work' (Boyd 2009:9). Other theorists have offered models which share a similar sense of both repetition and dynamic evolution (terms which in some contexts may appear oxymoronic), the most successful of which include Vanessa Harbour's 'gyre' (Harbour 2011:217) or Graham Mort's 'feedback loop' (Mort 2013:2008). Boyd's image of the 'strange loop' is a successful one for me, except for its infinite, open-ended nature. As I will expand upon in my discussion of methodology, it appears that any given loop used for any given project does indeed have some form of ending and in the case of this study, will result in the concrete artefacts of the manuscript and a critical exegesis examining its production.

An alternative model is offered by Alyssa Ryan (2005) who adapts the metaphor of the rhizome – taken from Deleuze and Guattari (1987) – as a broader interconnected system unifying theory and practice, though also characterised by movement or flow: 'connecting these two research strategies, praxis creates the cyclical movement between theory and practice to complete the development of the hybrid research model. This can enable an interactive environment where creative writing and established theory combine to create new ideas' (Ryan 2005:3). The rhizome metaphor is seen by Jeri Kroll as a particularly relevant image for describing non-traditional or interdisciplinary research that moves across traditional academic borders: 'the research itself can drive the writer's practice and then the practice itself can suggest new research directions, propelling the entire project forward' in a 'fruitful progressive circularity' (Kroll 2013:118). This rhizome metaphor works more successfully for me than the 'strange loop' because it is non-hierarchical, less linear and more complex. Recent work by Tondeur goes on to offer 'a disrupted, much more

messy sequence (or anti-sequence?)’ which also looks at the importance of ‘the writer’s context and its impact on the stages’ (Tondeur 2017:6-7).

Towards the start of my research, at the 2014 Conference of the National Association of Writers in Education (NAWE), a new CW journal was launched. *Writing in Practice* is intended to stand alongside other international CW journals, including *TEXT* and *New Writing*. In the very first volume (published in March 2015), two papers were particularly useful for my study. J.T. Welsch describes his solutions to the creative-critical divide in ‘Critical Approaches to Creative Writing: A Case Study’. Welsch begins with an image in two dimensions, where: ‘Creative Writing’s particular “bandwidth” along this spectrum falls within forms we might define as practice-based research and research-informed practice’ but rather than envisaging a fixed point along this spectrum, CW becomes ‘a self-reflexive, continuous movement ... sliding between reading and writing strategies ... process and product’ (Welsch 2015:2). The economy and clarity of this description are appealing as a way of summing up the two modes of thought and work that make up CW. We need ways of compressing complex processes for ease of discussion. However, Welsch’s model is perhaps too compressed. My research so far shows that, as well as incorporating repetition and movement between critical-creative modes, the most productive models also allow for a breakdown and description of the many specific concrete or invisible processes that are involved.

Philip Gross moves towards this desired ‘unconventional approach to research’ (Gross 2015:1) in his paper ‘A Walk in the Abstract Garden: How Creative Writing might speak for itself in universities’. Significantly, Gross includes many extracts from his poetry in the paper, revealing through example how critical and creative modes together enact what Avieson describes as ‘a symbiotic structure of analysis and exposition that is greater than the sum of its two parts.’ (Avieson 2008:1) Gross moves from the ‘concept of zero which is not just nothing, but a term that makes our mathematics possible’ (Gross 2015:5) to a creative equivalent in which ‘not knowing’ is not just a form of ignorance, but a fertile potentiality that has not yet been expressed in form: ‘I’m sure, from experience, that a kind of ignorance, or rather, patchy and chaotic knowledge, is one of the writer’s tools, almost a material that we work with’ admitting ‘that’s a curious position for an academic’ (Gross 2015:5).

There is nothing new about the recognition of this state of creative ambiguity or not knowing, which Gross likens to Keats's concept of negative capability: 'capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason' (Keats 1899:277). We might also find an earlier resonance in John Donne's: 'On a huge hill, /Cragged and steep, Truth stands, and he that will /Reach her, about must and about must go' (Donne 1971:163). However, Gross's statement that 'there are times when the very best state for a writer to be in is one of not knowing what he or she is up to' (Gross 2015:6) is later clarified in a way that speaks directly to my experience of the pre-writing stages of my study. Gross claims, 'what makes Creative Writing, and being a writer, a *discipline* is that we learn consciously and knowingly to use this vagueness and not-knowing' (Gross 2015:7) before listing examples of activities associated with this stage: 'reading, listening and thinking [...] writing exercises [...] practised stages of in-direction, methods akin to meditation, guided fantasy, free association, automatic writing, games designed to derail goal-oriented convergent thought.' (Gross 2015:7) There is for me a degree of discomfort around the early stages of invisible or informal creative work. This discomfort is integral to the creative process, according to Louise Tondeur, who asserts that 'a creative act ... is uncomfortable and uncertain, antagonistic, contradictory and unfamiliar' (Tondeur 2017:8). Learning to be a writer is also learning to accept and exploit the stages of 'not knowing' which make any project possible, and to realise that 'anxiety, and "imperfection" *caused* the creative process to move forward' (Tondeur 2017:8 original italics). As I will discuss below in the section exploring 'pre-writing', my research has shown that the invisible or non-concrete actions of writing are as essential as the concrete, more easily recognised and demonstrably productive actions. Tondeur's work has also been useful in its identification of three key elements or principles that became essential for me, as discussed later in this study. She highlights 'risk, constraint and play' as three crucial stages or junctures in creative practice, and she argues that 'a form of poetics emerges from the connections, contradictions and gaps between these three terms' (Tondeur 2017:7). As I will go on to describe below, in different ways these three guiding principles of risk, constraint and play enabled me to surmount the challenges encountered in the creative project.

In terms of critical literature addressing YA and CW together, at the start of this study, I discovered few texts which examine YA literature specifically in this context, although that did change during the three-year research period. *Get Started in Writing Young Adult Fiction* by literary agent Juliet Mushens, published in 2015, is positioned as a creative writing guide, with practical advice about writing a successful novel for this age group, and information about the publishing industry. She also provides a very useful definition of YA to use as a starting point here:

Some people mistakenly label ‘young adult’ as a genre when it is not a genre at all: it is about age categorization. Within the ‘young adult’ umbrella you can find romance novels, fantasy novels, literary novels and even crime novels. Many different genres are classed as YA novels, because what they have in common is the age range of the intended audience.

(Mushens 2015:3)

I am aware of a forthcoming text, titled *Writing Young Adult Fiction: Creative and Critical Approaches* by Vanessa Harbour (email correspondence with Harbour, May 2014). As the book has not been published within the timeframe of this study, I am unable to respond to it here. The intersection between CW and YA is thus a field whose critical questions are only just beginning to be fully addressed by scholars.

Of the existing texts which can be classified as literary criticism rather than CW theory – but which are still helpful given the paucity of YA/CW texts – of relevance here with specific reference to defining themes in YA literature, is Kathryn James’s *Death, Gender and Sexuality in Contemporary Adolescent Literature* (2009). James’s discussion of the use of dead protagonists in YA literature will be illuminating in a later examination of false starts as useful and inevitable stages of developing a creative project, although of necessity this kind of reflection must come towards the end of the creative process in order to observe the effect it has had on the whole project.

Even if – from an early stage of its development onwards – my novel can be classified as contemporary realism rather than fantastic realism, Alison Waller’s *Constructing Adolescence in Fantastic Realism* (2008) is highly relevant for my study in its discussion of a possible definition of YA literature.

Waller traces the emergence of YA literature as a separate sub-category in the already-marginalised field of children's literature, acknowledging the reluctance of critics and academics to accept it as worthy of independent study:

There remains a lack of confidence in the intrinsic value of young adult literature and an anxiety about how critics should approach it. Critics feel the need to defend their interest in this literature by showing that their knowledge of 'quality' children's literature is close at hand to frame and validate the more recent books in the branch of young adult literature. The implication is that teenage fiction cannot be left to stand on its own.

(Waller 2008:14)

Waller argues for the value of approaching YA fiction as an independent subject of study, while simultaneously recognising some of the inherent difficulties in doing so and the importance of addressing 'the ideological implications of the fact that most teenage fiction is created by adults for young readers' (Waller 2008:14). As Waller notes here, 'a separate critical methodology is necessary in order to theorise young adult literature's very in-between-ness or liminality' (Waller 2008:14). I will return to Waller below, as her model presents a useful structure around which I have been able to build an account of CW processes with specific reference to writing YA literature.

Existing literary criticism concerned with the wider field of children's literature tends to address YA fiction as a subsection within it. For example, *The Cambridge Guide to Children's Books in English* (2001) dedicates only four pages specifically to the subject of 'young adult fiction' in a volume that runs to over 800 pages, though it summarises usefully the development of YA fiction, citing key texts published within its historical reference term stretching roughly from the 1950s to 2000, since, it argues, 'as a genre young adult fiction did not exist until well after World War II' (Watson 2001:775). Although terming the category a 'genre', this guide also recognises the nature of YA literature as a marketing category when it notes that 'during the 1970s and 80s publishers became increasingly conscious of the role of teenagers in the market-place', pointing out that this was when the category was established through 'separate imprints with covers and blurbs designed to attract the young adult market'

(Watson 2001:776). Other early definitions of YA fiction immediately introduce a value judgement of that literature. Peter Hunt, writing in 1994, splits YA fiction into two streams, granting literary acclaim to the stream that most resembles adult fiction:

At one extreme are the ‘quality’ novels, such as Garner’s *Red Shift* (1973) or Aidan Chambers’s *Now I Know* (1987) and *The Toll Bridge* (1992), which are distinguishable from adult novels, *if at all*, by being focused through teenage eyes, or centred on teenage characters. At the other are the ‘manufactured’ series novels.

(Hunt 1994:16, my italics)

Nonetheless, some of the definitions explored here can be useful in mapping the territory in broad terms, although the historical emergence of the term YA and its evolution lie outside the remit of this study (for an overview of the development of the term ‘young adult’ as distinct from ‘teenager’ or ‘adolescent’, please see Wheatley, 1994). Kimberley Reynolds writes that YA fiction ‘deals with teenage identity and concerns, as distinct from those associated with adulthood and childhood’ (Reynolds 2007:72), also citing an important distinction made by Roberta Seelinger Trites, who argues that since YA fiction does not extend into adulthood, it is more specifically concerned with growth and development rather than coming-of-age per se (Seelinger Trites 2000:10-20, cited in Reynolds 2007:72).

However, more recent scholarship by Anthony Eaton questions the notion that the development or the journey is the central concern of YA fiction, positing instead that the most important aspects of YA fiction are the thresholds or boundaries crossed during the protagonist’s journey ‘and the impact of those crossings upon both character and society’ (Eaton 2013:11). Eaton also challenges the tradition of locating YA literature within either children’s or adult literature, arguing, like Waller, instead for its distinctiveness as a liminal category. He states that YA literature, ‘does and must exist as an entity in and of itself’, and that by viewing it in terms of its transgressive liminality, YA literature is placed ‘into an altogether different and unique area of critical consideration; no longer part of a continuum of literary discourse, but as an equal and significant “new literary space”’ (Eaton 2013:12).

I found one of the richest and most useful seams to mine, for critical examinations of YA literature and CW together, located in others' doctoral theses completed just before or during the period of my research, notably those by Vanessa Harbour (2011), Julia Green (2015) and Joanna Nadin (2016). Although our creative and critical preoccupations vary widely, there is a shared testing of definitions of YA literature. As Julia Green writes, after a broader discussion of YA fiction as a publishing category:

Put simply, Young Adult fiction is *a fiction for and about adolescents*: a fiction concerned with an adolescent viewpoint. There are numerous novels *about* adolescence, written and published for adults, but which might also be read and enjoyed by young people. I would suggest that the key difference, and it's a very subtle one, lies in the narrative viewpoint.

(Green 2015:8)

Green's identification here of 'narrative viewpoint' shares with Waller's model its focus on the teenage protagonist and concern with adolescent experience (Waller, 2008:15). Green also discusses liminality or 'crossing over' in terms of how she approaches the writing of YA fiction:

I'm crossing back and forth between child and adulthood, testing out in the writing itself what's appropriate, or relevant, or sufficiently engaging, for my readers. In this sense, the category 'YA' does have a use for me as a writer, beyond marketing.

(Green 2015:19)

Thus, YA literature's status as doubly marginalised has resulted in a critical hiatus at its intersection with CW, and writers working in this field must, by and large, chart the territory for themselves. I will return to definitions of YA literature and examine how they interact with the process of writing it in section 3.1 below. I will first explore how these teenage concerns have been reflected in broader YA literature. In the next section below, I cite a range of these depictions of teenage protagonists and adolescent experience that either influenced, overlap or contrast with my approach in the creation of *Eden Summer*.

1.2 Young Adult Fiction

In this section I survey a relevant slice of the rich contemporary YA literature landscape, examining a range of recent YA novels which share with *Eden Summer* some aspect of theme, content or stylistic approach, and reflecting on how they relate to my creative choices. To extend the natural metaphor, it could be argued that this landscape does indeed function as a kind of ecosystem in that it not only forms the fertile ground out of which new creative work arises, but it also goes on to act as a site for mutual interaction between published titles, and the cross-pollination of ideas, in a cyclical and ongoing manner. This survey therefore situates my work in the literary context it grew from and to which my work now contributes. I offer examples to which I was consciously responding, examples from other contemporary YA novels which express similar preoccupations in a contrasting manner, and extracts from my research into the creative processes of other YA authors, of which, more detail appears below in the methodology section. This chapter will look at contemporary British YA literature, as that is the literary context in which *Eden Summer* was published in 2016.

I read widely in YA literature before, during and after the process of writing *Eden Summer*. Some YA texts were notable for sparking conscious decision-making, either in terms of providing inspiration for plot, voice, or setting, or for highlighting a contrast, where I was prompted to choose an alternative. However, other novels (including those read or re-read after my draft was complete) have provided retrospective insight into my process, some elements of which may have been unconscious at the time of writing. Key texts which have illuminated my creative choices include Martyn Bedford's *Never Ending* (2014), notable for its depiction of sibling grief and guilt, and its split-chronology narrative; Jandy Nelson's *The Sky Is Everywhere* (2011), also concerned with sibling grief and featuring an effective use of landscape; and E. Lockhart's *We Were Liars* (2013) whose plot twist involving dead characters is so devastatingly effective it convinced me my own version was unsuccessful. In *Running Girl* (2014) (and again in *Kid Got Shot*, 2016) by Simon Mason, the author chooses to develop the character of Inspector Singh as the lead officer investigating the murder of a teenage girl, and alternates sections narrated by Singh with those of the teenage protagonist, Garvie Smith. The inclusion of an

adult narrator with access to the full resources of the police force helps to propel the narrative and resolve some of the plotting and realism problems which arise from having a teenage protagonist who may not have access to essential crime-solving information. However, I chose different solutions to the similar plotting issues I was grappling with at that point: having Jess and Liam investigate alongside the police and making the case of Eden's disappearance procedurally more straightforward.

Strong thematic similarities – including sibling conflict, grief and resilience – also link *Eden Summer* to two other YA thrillers published in 2016: *Lying About Last Summer* by Sue Wallman and *Cruel Heart Broken* by Emma Haughton. All three narratives hold back crucial information to create tension and narrative drive. In Sue Wallman's novel, protagonist Skye is sent to a camp for bereaved teens, with an initial premise very reminiscent of Martyn Bedford's *Never Ending*. However, Wallman's approach focuses less on the nuanced psychology of the grieving main character, and is primarily concerned with unmasking the malicious individual who is pretending to be Skye's dead sister through the use of an encoded social media account. Narrative satisfaction comes through the elimination of each suspect, in Skye's correct identification of Joe as the abusive and controlling villain, and in her courage and resourcefulness in saving the vulnerable Faye from him, which in turn helps Skye forgive herself for her shocked paralysis at the time of her sister's murder. *Cruel Heart Broken* uses reader-misdirection via the unreliable narrator, Laurie, to suggest that a murder has taken place: the first of many twists and turns in this deftly plotted YA thriller. The 'murder' is eventually revealed as an abortion, as seen through the eyes of the teenage character who experiences extreme guilt and self-recrimination after the event. Haughton also uses two separate time-frames to create suspense and drip-feed crucial information here, as I employed in *Eden Summer*. Interestingly, another of Haughton's novels, *Now You See Me*, 2014, which also involves the disappearance of a teenager, initially contains some narrative similarities, but soon diverges in both style and content. For example, again two distinct chronological narrative threads are used: the time when Danny disappears, and the moment when he 're-appears' two and a half years later. The protagonist, Hannah, experiences the shattering of her everyday

reality in a very similar way to Jess, the investigating protagonist of *Eden Summer*:

Not any old best friend, but the kind you get when you've practically grown up together. The kind who knows you better than you know yourself. But there was nothing. No warning sirens [...] Not even a little niggles of worry.

(Haughton 2014:16)

Hannah also visits her friend's parents at home, as Jess does, and works with a missing person co-ordinator, who is fully characterised here, unlike the officers in *Eden Summer* who appear in brief cameos. However, once these initial commonalities have been noted, Haughton and I make very different choices. *Now You See Me* focuses on the teenager's shocking reappearance years later, and Hannah's growing suspicions that this 'Danny' is not the real one. And while the story's locale is clearly described and is essential to the plot at brief, specific moments, its distinctiveness does not pervade the entire novel.

Sara Crowe's *Bone Jack* (2014) provides an excellent example of a character-driven, fast-paced YA novel where the landscape is central to theme, character development and the dramatic resolution of all the complex narrative threads. Crowe builds layers of sensory description with an almost forensic eye: 'the whisper of the breeze, the scrape and scuttle of loose stones underfoot. A kestrel trembling on the high thermals. The burnt smell of the sun-scorched land' (Crowe 2014:location 82, Kindle edition). Like Crowe, I aimed to include precision and detail in descriptions of the landscape in *Eden Summer*, choosing to name particular trees, and allowing time to dwell on Jess's sensory perceptions to ground scenes in a concrete and localised place, as on pages 105 and 115, for example.

The depiction of healing for teenage characters and the growth of resilience after shocking events receives a variety of treatments in other YA novels published around the same time as *Eden Summer*. I chose to employ Jess's tattoos as signifiers within the plot of her recovery and reclaiming of her body after trauma and of her identification as an outsider and member of a subculture, while her mother's unusual acceptance of Jess's decision to get a tattoo is intended to suggest the extremity of recent events before they have been revealed. In contrast, tattoos and the process of tattooing are a central organising

metaphor, occurring on almost every page of Deirdre Sullivan's *Needlework* (2016). The protagonist Ces longs to be a tattooist, and she constantly draws tattoo designs, reflecting on the history and cultural significance of tattooing, creating meaning from myth and individual history: 'there is something that makes us want to draw on ourselves, on other people. Talismans, identifying marks' (Sullivan 2016: 86). Like Jess, Ces has suffered physical trauma, although unlike Jess, her experience is of long-term abuse and neglect. She invokes powerful female deities to emphasise the spiritual dimension of the action that she is not yet ready to take:

I wonder what my tattoo will be when I decide to get one. Something that reminds me of purity and strength, perhaps. Diana. Athena. Morrígan. Macha. Méadhbh... There are strong women in the stories of every culture, but I need to find the one who is for me, the one who could guide me toward a sort of peace when my breath stops in my throat and all I want to do is not exist.

(Sullivan 2016:146)

Like Jess, Ces establishes her own identity and discovers a path through extreme emotional pain by exploring her artistic talent. Of less direct relevance for my contemporary realist work is Alice Broadway's *Ink* (2017), a fantasy novel in which the entire religious and political systems of a fictional world are connected to tattooing and the creation of books from deceased family members' flayed skin which are venerated as holy objects allowing connection to ancestors.

In Glenda Millard's *The Stars at Oktober Bend* (2016), both narrators are recovering from the long-term effects of past violence. Alice, the female protagonist, has suffered head trauma which affects her speech, making it slow and slurred. However, her narrative voice and fragments of poetry within the text are precise, elegant and lyrical. Alice's poetry functions in a similar way to Jess's art in *Eden Summer*, allowing the protagonist to express the traumatic memory creatively and tangentially, rather than through direct speech. The growing love and understanding between the two damaged characters is conveyed vividly through the use of idiosyncratic voice and syntax for each. The juxtaposition of the two voices works particularly well for a love story, with contrasting interior perceptions entwining to create a reinforced impression of

their connection. I experimented with writing in the voices of both Eden and Liam in the early stages of my project, and concluded that staying with Jess's perceptions allowed me greater control and conveyed a deeper emotional impact for this narrative.

In Millard's novel, the male protagonist introduces himself with 'I am the running boy. The one who loves Alice. I am called Manny James' (Millard 2016:27), here prioritising the fact of his running above all other biographical details. As it is for Jess in *Eden Summer*, running is also used by the protagonist as a means of escape, of self-realisation and healing in *Wing Jones* by Katherine Webber (2017). When Wing's beloved older brother Marcus is responsible for a drink-driving accident that kills two people and leaves him in a coma, Wing finds solace in night-time running, although her talent swiftly develops to the extent that it eventually provides an alternative future for her entire family. Webber weaves elements of fantastic realism into an otherwise realistic contemporary American high-school setting, with the appearance of a dragon and a lioness, spirit guides who appear at moments of need. They are subtly signposted as representing Wing's doughty grandmothers, one Chinese, one Ghanaian, who provide love, support and ancestral belonging for the protagonist. Although I rejected early experimentation with fantastic realism for *Eden Summer*, as described below, choosing instead to rely on descriptions of landscape and weather to create the uncanny atmosphere I sought, in Webber's work, the fantastic realist elements add depth and resonance to Wing's existential struggle.

Of relevance for the early stages of my study is the way Kevin Brooks handles confidently elements of fantastic realism in his *Black Rabbit Summer* (2008), resisting the impulse to offer logical explanations within the narrative, as well as his use of a taut, clearly defined time frame. Meanwhile Brooks' *The Road of the Dead* (2006) is a tightly plotted thriller with a spare yet lyrical style in which character development and a strong sense of place are achieved with great economy. Although structurally and thematically both books share concerns with my project, I made a decision not to include the extended violent denouements that Brooks uses, keeping the central violence done to Jess as short as possible – while still realistic and awful – and dwelling on the aftermath rather than the event. However, like YA novelist Sally Green, I believe that if

violence is diminished by diluting its description, writers do young readers a disservice. As Sally Green argued in my blog interview:

I'm a great believer that you should show violence to be horrific because it is horrific. The only thing I find appalling is if you make light of it and pretend it's some kind of joke or it doesn't really hurt. I think that's more offensive than ignoring it.

(Flanagan 2015b)

As I will examine below, even if I share the view of Meg Rosoff, Melvin Burgess and other writers I have interviewed (lizflanagan.co.uk/blog) that no subject is off-limits for YA literature *per se*, there are nonetheless particular ethical decisions to be made in anticipating a reader who is neither an adult nor a child. As Harbour states, 'applying creative judgment is a vital part of my writing process. As an author I have an element of responsibility' (2012:1). This is not to resort to a simplistic concept of authorial intention embedded in a text, but rather to posit writer, reader and text as involved in a culturally situated interaction through which meanings are made possible: 'Young adult fiction provides [...] the opportunity to develop an understanding of how to deal with real issues by means of the protected vicarious experience contained in and gained from the text. The vicarious experience is created by the interaction between reader and text, both of which are culturally activated' (Harbour 2012:6). I would like to draw upon Harbour's concept of cultural activation to account for that woven fabric of history, culture and experience within which any artistic creation is produced and consumed (that which I have suggested is inadequately described by Wandor as 'linguistic and cultural resources').

Part of the cultural activation for my study, it could be argued, includes a response to the murder of teenager Sophie Lancaster in a hate crime attack which took place only ten miles from Hebden Bridge, my hometown and the setting for *Eden Summer* (see BBC 2013). Simon Armitage's prose poem *Black Roses* (2012) is a direct response to this specific event. It uses the imagined voice of Sophie Lancaster to devastating effect. Meanwhile Alan Gibbons' *Hate* (2014) depicts a similar attack, but is not cast as a fictionalisation of that particular historical event. I felt a responsibility to tread very sensitively around the lived experience of others, wary of any kind of cultural appropriation.

However, I am, like any writer, historically, geographically and culturally located, and as such I experienced the impact of this event rippling out into the wider world. Unlike Gibbons' *Hate*, an attack is not the focus of *Eden Summer*. I wanted to depict the horror of violence and its long-term effects, and yet maintain an ultimately hopeful story of friendship and redemption as the central arc of the narrative. Although not all YA books are hopeful – notable exceptions that immediately spring to mind include *The Bunker Diary* by Kevin Brooks (2013), or *Only Ever Yours* by Louise O'Neill (2014) – many YA novels contain notes of optimism or redemption even when dealing with the darker aspects of human experience. My emphasis on hope may partly be a result of my awareness of an anticipated YA readership, but is also connected to another element of cultural activation, that of autobiography. My experience of bereavement, following the deaths of my younger brother and a close friend in recent years, perhaps exerts some influence – something of a haunting – on conscious and unconscious decision-making within the project. In writing *Eden Summer*, I was able to control fictional events in a way that was not possible in life, and making a deliberate decision to end on a note of hope could be seen as a reaction to my experience of bereavement, i.e. my friend's death could not be prevented, but Jess's friend Eden could be granted both life and forgiveness. As I will suggest below in section 2.3, although the work was not undertaken consciously as a form of therapeutic writing, with hindsight the process of turning autobiographical elements into fiction now appears to have operated in a transformative and positive manner, in a way that feels particularly appropriate for YA fiction as the site that expresses the many transformations of teenage experience. The interaction between the writing process and more subconscious processes will be discussed further in section 2.3. First, I will outline the ways my methodology draws on and differs from existing models.

Chapter 2 – Creative Methodology and the Resulting YA Novel *Eden*

Summer

2.1 Introducing the Methodology

When this PhD was first advertised, it appeared to be positioned more firmly in the literary-critical tradition, and I expected to be using this theoretical model in my exegesis. Consequently, as I stated in the initial PhD interview, as preparation I re-read some of the theorists whose work had been influential in my English literature BA. I anticipated drawing on the work of theorists such as Julia Kristeva, perhaps applying her work on the social and historical function of language to YA literature in particular; or Mikhail Bakhtin's understanding of the novel, particularly his work on the dialogic and carnivalesque. I considered drawing on Homi Bhabha's theorisation of hybridity and the construction of 'the other' as always incomplete, as it appeared to be rich in possibility for thinking about the otherness of children's and YA literature. However, at my first meeting with all my supervisors, most notably Garry Lyons at Leeds University, it was agreed that since this was a practice-led PhD, it would be appropriate to take creative practice research as my dominant theoretical model. At this point, I rewrote my proposal to reflect this shift. I felt energised and excited by this new approach, particularly after speaking to other artistic practitioners at the CREST Summer School in September 2014, just as I began my research. I was inspired by hearing visual artists speak about their practice research, and resolved to forge a similar path, pursuing practice theory and CW theory in particular. The reasons for this were threefold: firstly, because it appeared to me that research using the cyclical model of practice, reflection and theorisation, as described in more detail below, would be of most direct benefit to my creative process as a YA novelist; secondly, because as far as my research revealed, few had theorised the overlap between CW practice research and YA literature in this way; and thirdly, in order to create through this creative-critical work a contribution to the field which would be most useful to subsequent creative practitioners working with YA fiction. So my approach might be best described as practice-led research, if, as Craig Batty and Allyson Holbrook argue:

There are also methodological nuances to how a creative writing PhD is carried out and presented, wherein the contribution can be about process (e.g. practice-led research) or about a theory or idea that is explored and executed partly through practice, but is clearly evidenced via a product (e.g. research-led practice).

(Batty and Holbrook, 2017:3)

Having made that decision, my research led me to discover principal CW theorists including Harper, Mort, Kroll and others, as cited below, but then it also suggested that I circle back to literary-critical theorists, including Foucault and Butler, further down the research path, specifically when I was seeking ways of understanding the discursive processes associated with publication, as I will describe below.

Consequently, the approach taken in the study arises from current discussions within CW theory, viewing CW as a form of practice-led research through which new knowledge is generated: ‘creative writing itself can be the basis of a legitimate form of research practice’ (Kroll 2013:123). This ‘practice’, according to Kroll and Harper, ‘means an approach to a subject based on knowledge acquired through the act of creating. This knowledge is not superficial. It results from sustained and serious examination of the art of writerly practice’ (Kroll and Harper 2008:4). Of crucial significance here is the indivisibility of creative practice from reflection: this is what constitutes CW as a discipline. As Jen Webb states of creative writing research: ‘the writing is directed towards the making not only of a creative work, but also of a space for thinking, reflection and analysis’ (Webb 2015:28). This is also what sets apart the production of this novel from previous forms of writing I have undertaken: not only the intensity and depth of reflection involving every element of the process, but also its analysis and the subsequent adaptation of creative practice to incorporate the results of that reflection. This intensity is also highlighted in Webb’s examination of creative writing research, as she returns to the etymology of the word *research*, from the Middle French verb *chercher*, with the intensifying prefix ‘*re*’:

In the activity of making a literary work, we *look intensively*: we peel back surfaces and the layers beneath the surface; we test out ideas and

approaches; and through this, we attempt to produce new ways of seeing, thinking and telling.

(Webb 2015:7)

Webb's 'telling' is important in this context. CW research must be shared, or it is not research. As the metaphor below illustrates, in CW research, creative ideas must not only be realised, but also disseminated.

My methodology was made up of many repeated processes, as will be described below, with pauses for reflection at every stage of the research. In reality, as will be described, they cannot be separated fully, as many are simultaneous, unconscious or overlapping. For ease of reference however, the main stages and timeline of my practice-led research might be summarised broadly as follows. Italics indicate work that took place before the PhD began.

Summary of main stages of research	Timeline
<i>Seed of idea, developing three main characters, setting and premise in embryonic form, writing early chapters</i>	<i>November 2013-Jan 2014</i>
<i>Writing 'treatment' or pre-draft, exploration of supernatural twist idea, Jess as dead character</i>	<i>Jan-July 2014</i>
PhD application and interview, originally suggesting a different speculative novel as the subject of the PhD and a literary-critical approach to the exegesis	Feb-March 2014
Start of PhD, switch to <i>Eden Summer</i> as PhD novel, start of practice-led research into CW and reflection on treatment	September-October 2014

Beginning first draft proper, incorporating feedback and reflection. Also CW research and publishing blog interviews.	November 2014-April 2015
CW research and writing Transfer Report	April 2015-August 2015
Second draft work, editing and rewriting <i>Eden Summer</i> , incorporating feedback, factual research, results of reflection	September 2015-December 2015
Editing a version of <i>Eden Summer</i> for publication, including stages of copyediting and proofreading	December 2015-February 2016
Research and teaching	January 2016-July 2016
Publication of <i>Eden Summer</i>	July 2016
Research and writing thesis	August 2016-July 2017

Figure 1: Summary of research timeline

Capturing the dynamic relationship between creative practice and its theorisation is a central preoccupation of CW literature, and this study will be no exception. I have developed an extended metaphor to describe the complex hybrid relationship between critical and creative modes, and I then apply this framework to YA literature in particular, arguing for its literary distinctiveness, with this novel-in-process as evidence. As a CW practitioner, it is unsurprising that I am drawn to express ideas in metaphor. Metaphor itself enacts the creative-critical synthesis that CW researchers seek. As Avieson states, ‘a rich

metaphor can communicate an elusive idea or complicated concept more effectively than a detailed description' (Avieson 2008:2), drawing a comparison between the hybrid CW PhD where the combination of 'the theoretical and the creative, the description and the metaphor [...] can create a symbiotic structure of analysis and exposition that is greater than the sum of its two parts' (Avieson 2008:1). I will therefore develop an extended metaphor here to describe a methodology that draws upon previous models and adapts them to capture the different actions that make up this study.

Since my primary research questions are 'What are the processes involved in creating a YA novel?' and 'To what extent are those processes shaped by the characteristics of this category?' I offer in response a dynamic spiralling image where process is imagined as many discrete 'individual actions' that contribute to the whole, and which – unlike Boyd's 'strange loops' or Harbour's 'gyre' – has a beginning and an ending. Emily Sutherland, writing about research, travel and creativity, and quoted in Boyd, above, states that 'some research involves moving from one question to another in a pattern akin to a spiral staircase, which takes us towards our goal via a circular path' (Sutherland 2008:1). However, I want to be more precise than that. The spiral stair, for me, ends somewhere unique and exists for a particular purpose. Moreover, as I will discuss in later chapters, there are defining structural and thematic characteristics of YA that influence the process of creating it. Thus I envisage a more robust architectural metaphor on the following lines:

Let's use the image of the tall lighthouse. Let's imagine that I, the YA novelist, climb its inner spiral stair with the intention of reaching the top and lighting the lamp. Each step is made up of a different element, a concrete and definable process in time that takes effort and focus.

For me, the individual writer in this moment of history, writing this specific and identifiable YA text, these elements include: thinking, dreaming, long-hand doodling, transcribing, walking, reading fiction, reading theory, interviewing other writers, blogging, reflecting, editing, all repeated and repeated until a conclusion is reached.

It's not true that the cycle is endless movement. There are definite pauses, punctuated by temporal breaks. Let's say that for each draft, each pause, I reach a new floor within the lighthouse. Here, something else happens. In pausing, a

new form of reflection is made possible by the effort that has been undertaken so far. The perspective from this window of the lighthouse is different from the ground level. Here, I may draw breath, before continuing.

Let's imagine, for example, that this particular lighthouse has four floors, four pauses, four elements driving the next stage of work. For this project, each floor corresponds with one of the defining characteristics of YA, as I will discuss below.

Revision is built into this model: revision produces the spiral. As I go higher and higher, each spiral of the staircase is a repeat, a re-covering of the base, the same horizontal dimensions. Change occurs on the vertical axis. Perhaps every round of thinking and editing is another circuit of 360 degrees.

When I pause near the end of the journey, the view from the penultimate floor allows an increased capacity for reflection. From this vantage point, I see much further than at the start of the climb. One final round of thinking, dreaming, doodling, editing, walking and reflecting is completed and finally I reach the top of the lighthouse.

I light the lamp.

I press 'send' on the email. The text is bound in a thesis, or digitised in an electronic book or laid to rest in a dusty box where it is found years later after my death. Either way, no further changes are possible.

Light streams out from the top of the lighthouse.

It is seen from far away. I have no control over its message now. Some will know it speaks to them, with an urgent and specific message about this place; for some it's a momentary diversion; others still will barely register it. This is not my concern. My job is done.

Like some of the other metaphors already discussed, mine is also a spatial one, operating in three dimensions. For me, this metaphor is satisfying because it speaks of the many actions and processes involved and because it focuses on momentum, progression and purpose. However, it is unsatisfying because no creative process is as neat, consequential or clearly defined as that. Like all metaphors, this one too must fail, since by definition it seeks to compare distinctly different entities. And yet, this metaphor still appeals me as one way of describing the processes involved in this study. It is a way of collecting and holding the complex creative-critical work, while never losing sight of the fact

that there is an aim and an end in sight. For both the novel and the critical commentary upon it, the aim is to be read, to engage with an audience outside the self. This is what makes the lighthouse metaphor so appealing: all the work will one day, the writer hopes, reach another. This feels particularly true for the YA novelist who, arguably more than other novelists, always works with audience in mind, since YA literature ‘is fiction aimed specifically at young adults, and it deals with issues and storylines that aim to capture their imagination’ (Harbour 2012:4). The metaphor may also be used in a more general way as explaining the motivation of a YA novelist, who writes to entertain, to distract, to inspire or console, hoping that their book might one day act as ‘... a lighthouse. So no one is ruined on the rocks’ (Flanagan 2016:257). It is pleasing and unintentional that this metaphor found expression in both the creative and the critical pieces of writing that make up this study.

If the purpose of the lighthouse is to warn against danger, and to be a source of vital information about the landscape, could this also be true of YA literature? Harbour suggests that YA literature is an influential source of information for teenagers, and that its narratives ‘open vistas for young adults, allowing them to explore, vicariously, activities that will help to inform their future choices’ (Harbour 2012:12). Without ascribing didacticism to all examples of YA literature, it can be argued that engaging YA texts can indeed act as sources of information, either as a warning or as a beacon of hope. John Yorke writes that we enjoy stories, ‘not just to awaken our eyes to reality but to make reality bearable as well. Truth without hope is as unbearable as hope without truth’ (Yorke 2013:181). The lighthouse could be said to combine hope and truth, in the same way as stories, including (or especially) those intended specifically for young adults.

However, the primacy of light in this metaphor risks leading us to overlook the importance and potential of darkness itself. As Patrick Ness argued at the launch for his 2017 novel *Release*, if YA authors do not write about difficulty and darkness, then they abandon teenagers to face that darkness alone. Exploring darkness might indeed be one of the most useful and compassionate directions for a YA novelist to pursue. For example, Sarah Crossan’s 2017 verse novel *Moonrise* tackles what might at first glance appear desperately bleak subject matter – the protagonist Joe spends one last summer living as close as

possible to his brother Ed, who is on death row for a crime he didn't commit. All the legal challenges to Ed's sentence fail, and Joe has to endure the pain of this most futile of deaths. And yet somehow the narrative manages to be utterly compelling and ultimately comforting. This is achieved not through the denial of darkness and difficulty, but by facing it fully. Crossan describes precisely not only that painful experience, but also what is revealed through suffering and adversity. As Joe reflects towards the end of the narrative: 'Because, / hell, / you never know / what you might find in the dark' (Crossan 2017:383).

So in the end, the lighthouse metaphor cannot hold. In spite of its appeal as an image, when required to hold all the stages of the writing process *and* to speak of light without ignoring the richness and comfort of darkness, it collapses, overburdened by the work I require this one image to do. Yet, I am still constantly drawn to metaphor when articulating creative practice research. Metaphors may be imperfect, but they are vivid, revealing and instructive, conveying complex messages and sparking connections in the mind of the reader. They might not last, nor endure weighty extension, but perhaps in their momentary illuminating fragility they mirror the instinctive, non-linear and imperfect creative process. It is to that process that I now turn in more detail below.

2.2 Methodology in Detail

Returning to Boyd's challenge to describe the processes that make up practice-led research as a methodology, I will now look in more detail at specific actions that form my research, and describe them with reference to examples from this project. Like Boyd, Graeme Harper also calls for further research and 'a closer examination of our individual actions as they contribute to the overall event in any creative writing' (Harper 2013:146). The more detail that is shared by CW researchers, the more useful our work may be for future researchers. If, as Harper suggests, CW can be used 'as a term for actions or a gathering of actions' (Harper 2013:145) where 'some of this action might indeed be action of the mind, action of a non-material kind', how do we as practitioners begin to isolate and describe tasks involved in our work from these very general descriptions? What do these actions involve, and how do they relate to each other? As extracts from my creative journal in the appendix will show, actions may take place simultaneously or in a way that overlaps so closely that it is difficult to conceive of them separately. However, for clarity of discussion and the application of useful frameworks, they will be teased apart as far as possible here. Graham Mort offers a three-part creative writing research model of 'preparatory, synthetic and reflective' stages as a broad overview 'to understand and rationalize the methodologies of creative writing as research' (Mort 2013:208). This is a useful way of starting to consider the 'gathering of actions' but I'd like to break down the actions that made up my research even further into connected and sometimes simultaneous processes, for more detailed analysis.

In Mort's preparatory stage of work, I employed pre-writing strategies and actions of a material kind (drawing, doodling, journaling, walking) and non-material kind (planning, imagining and dreaming). For this study, the non-material actions were usually followed by material actions intended to fix or exploit them. For example, in my creative journal, see below, I describe a train journey spent fruitfully dreaming: 'on train to LTU, had great session thinking about characters, and letting them come to life in my mind' which was immediately followed by 'capturing this in notebook' (Appendix 1). The activities connected with factual or investigatory research also belong here in terms of archival research, interviews, primary and secondary reading, all documented in the form of filed correspondence and notes of relevant material to

be incorporated or responded to. For this project, factual research involved a combination of reading information texts, internet-based research, interviewing authors and correspondence with experts in relevant fields. I emailed contacts with expertise in child psychology, head-trauma treatment and police procedure. Once facts were absorbed, sections of text were written or rewritten to incorporate the new knowledge gained. Sometimes this meant losing sections of text I had grown attached to because of the language used, or for what they revealed about character. At other times, rewriting sections because of new research allowed the development of character and new plot possibilities.

It is worth describing one example in detail here to demonstrate how factual research can open up fruitful creative possibilities. Before embarking on what could be described as a second main draft, I approached two medical experts of my acquaintance and asked for advice on the first complete draft of *Eden Summer*. Child psychologist Dr Andi Johnson-Renshaw gave me a verbal description of how PTSD might be experienced by a young adult, and provided some online resources for me to read. Taken together with advice on head trauma given to me by a GP friend (acknowledged in the printed edition by his writing pseudonym Dr Finian Black) I was able to incorporate this research and write a new section in the middle of the book, which later became chapter seventeen (pages 130-139). This section describes Jess's immediate experience of recovering from the attack and Eden's central importance to her recovery. Although only ten pages long and arising directly from this medical research, this section gave me an opportunity to deepen the characterization of Jess and Eden, and offer a new and contrasting perspective on each. Jess is shown in a more negative light in these chapters, as angry, vulnerable and closed-down. For this chapter, Eden is the strong and active partner in the friendship, being patient and generous in her communications with Jess, even when her help is spurned. For most of the rest of the book, this dynamic is reversed. After Iona's death Eden is depicted as angry and conflicted, while Jess provides patient support. Having the contrast in chapter seventeen is intended to make both characters more three-dimensional, to create more empathy in the reader – particularly towards Eden who otherwise risks being somewhat unlikeable – and to add a more nuanced note of realism to their enduring friendship. This part of the work

was therefore ‘preparatory’ for a convincing second draft, although it followed previous synthetic and reflective stages.

At all stages of work – though particularly at the start and whenever problems were encountered – before doing anything resembling writing, I spent stretches of time simply thinking. As Meg Rosoff explicitly stated in my blog interview with her: ‘underlying every beginning is months and years of thinking’ (Flanagan 2015f). Recognising my personal preference in all types of work for producing measurable results, this stage was often distressing for me. This was not a unique experience, as Rosoff concurred, ‘for me, there’s a lot of waiting in writing. I hate it, but there it is.’ I too grew anxious, worrying that I was wasting time. This can be seen as the invisible stage of work, or the ‘creative zero’ Philip Gross describes, from which all else emerges. As the novelist Ann Patchett explains, ‘the activity I’m most likely to be engaged in is staring [...] Hours and hours of my day are spent with my eyes glazed over, thinking, waiting, trying to figure things out’ (Patchett 2008:45). Significantly, it was from this apparently unproductive phase that the most important features of the novel arose, including character, plot and theme.

Another example of preparatory work can be found in my earliest notes. These included a ‘matrix’ adapted from Scarlett Thomas’s book *Monkeys with Typewriters* (2012). My matrix looked something like this:

Matrix

Character names	Locations you know well	Jobs you have done or roles you have played	Problems faced (as a teen)	What do you worry about (as parent of teen)	Four novels you like (this month) & why	Current obsessions
Jess	Hebden Bridge – of which:	Waitress	New school, no friends	School choices	Code Name Verity – strong female friendship & capable chars	Hens
Sam	Town centre	Shop assistant	Being bright & bookish & bullied for it	Self-harm for girls	Orkney - lyrical poetic limpid prose	Zumba
Iona	Gaddings Dam	Cook	No confidence at 12/13	Body image / positive female role models?	Secrecy – great historical language, no anachronisms	Tarot
Lewis	Lumb Falls	Literary host	Revising for exams	Violence against women	Greyhound of a Girl – humour and intergenerational family love	Crime drama on ITV
Talia	Lumb Bank	Teacher	Balancing studiousness / hedonism	Making bad or stifling parental choices		Wanting to travel
Eden	Jack Bridge	Survey-monkey for census	Painful siblings	End of NHS		Grieving well
Joe	Golden clough		First job vs homework	Sibling rivalry		Reading YA

Figure 2: Matrix, August 2014

Thomas describes the matrix as a tool for combining disparate elements of experience in new and startling ways to produce creative ideas, stating that ‘this method forces us out of predictability (what we simply ‘imagine’ might happen), but keeps us grounded in what really matters to us (and what has emotional truth for us). It has integrity’ (Thomas 2012: 201). It is certainly interesting to me now which elements from this brainstorming exercise endured right into the final draft of *Eden Summer*, either explicitly, as in the case of names (Jess, Eden, Iona) and locations (the waterfall, the wooded valley), or implicitly, as in the case of my preoccupations including crime drama and grieving well.

As noted above, as part of the element of background research for this specific project, I conducted interviews with established and emerging YA authors, focusing on the creative process, and published the edited results on my blog (lizflanagan.co.uk/blog). By interviewing a cross-section of YA writers from different backgrounds and with different levels of experience, I hoped to capture a range of responses. I examined patterns in creative practice in this field, and compared them to my own approach to draw out any significant observations. From this research, I gained insights which then fuelled subsequent phases of creative work, as per the spiralling models described

above, with reflection continually feeding production for the lifespan of the project. All of these processes could be said to form part of a loop of preparatory work.

Moving on to Mort's next phase, the synthetic stage covers the creation of character, temporal and spatial simulation and the unification through narrative of these elements. For this project I include here pre-writing strategies of mind-mapping, character sketches, character monologues, longhand doodling, as well as longhand first drafting, followed by transcription or writing-as-typing (the traditional image of the writer sitting at typewriter or laptop, tapping away at the keys). Once some ideas formed, I found it useful to create mind-maps to capture the first tendrils of thought and develop them further, jotting them down on the largest pieces of paper I could find and linking sections with arrows and bubbles. These scribbles could include character names, places, general themes or obsessions to be explored, questions that arise that may not be answered for months or years. One example of mind-mapping is shown in Figure 3, below. Free-writing happened now, and whenever an impasse was reached. Free-writing comprised longhand outpourings to experiment with one aspect of these first thoughts or to test a character's voice, as discussed in more detail below.

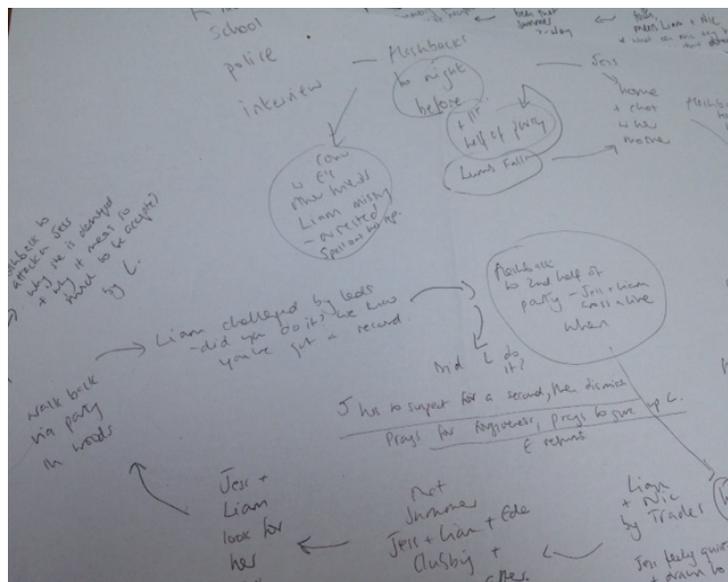


Figure 3: *Mind-mapping plan, October 2014*

In my blog interview with him, David Almond placed great emphasis on the importance of playfulness as part of this creative mode, worth quoting here at length:

It's also messing about a lot. I do a lot of scribbling, a lot of doodling, a lot of playing around with notebooks and pens, seeing what's inside my head and what's in the language [...] It's important to do that all the way through, to keep on testing out what you're doing, to keep on playing around with it. The process of using a pen and paper, scribbling and doing things quite quickly and actively, is much better than trying to think your way through a problem in writing – that can be counterproductive [...] It's a mixture of being in control of what you're doing and allowing the subconscious to take some control as well. So it's a weird balance between pushing it forward and allowing it to find its own place.

(Flanagan 2015d)

As noted in my creative journal in the appendix, reflecting on this observation produced a change in my writing practice, so that I now made more time for informal character development sketches or doodling. My journal evidences the explicit link between contemplating this interview with David Almond and 'finding time to play and scribble throughout', recording on 29th January 2015 that 'this week I made time for scribbling' and that this was 'a good direction' consisting of 'notes on backs of envelopes, in workshops, on trains' (Appendix 1). Returning to Tondeur's identification of play as one of the three crucial junctures leading to creative change (along with risk and constraint), she asserts that play is an integral part of the creative process:

The role of the practitioner is that s/he sees things new, or experiences the familiar as unfamiliar, and it is only through experiment, curiosity and playfulness that this can work.

(Tondeur 2017: 12)

Certainly these notebooks and captured fragments evidence the creation of new ideas via an unstructured and informal openness, along with a commitment to experimentation, before selecting and pursuing certain emerging threads.

I am able to contextualize these techniques in terms of the CW culture of pedagogy and my engagement with it prior to and during this project. One example for which I have evidence in the form of a writing notebook is

described here: during an Arvon residential writing course in March 2014, I took part in a workshop run by Mark Haddon and Molly McGrann. Students were invited to consider the concept of ‘moments of being’, or intense moments of hyper-awareness or awakening, with reference to examples by Virginia Woolf and Elizabeth Bishop. In response, I wrote down memories connected to a friend’s funeral. The last paragraph of writing contained references to the heat and the ‘slipperiness of tears on my face’, and it is clear to me that it formed some of the basis for the funeral scene in *Eden Summer* on page 100. I conclude my notes for this workshop with the comment: ‘try not to sum up emotion, but give very physical or action-related detail without naming the emotion, just the actual, real-time effect of the emotion on the character’, to which I’ve added several asterisks. My approach to conveying emotion in *Eden Summer* could be described in part as a response to learning this technique.

Mort’s reflective stage may come last here for ease of discussion, but as well as following the previous phases, it is also actually happening constantly and simultaneously alongside the preparatory and synthetic elements. Editorial stages and macro- decision-making may appear relatively straightforward to track across different drafts and documents. However, one of the challenges faced by CW theorists is to capture and describe the micro- reflective processes of creative writing that are often intuitive and partly unconscious without interrupting, significantly altering or derailing those processes. For this study, the solution was to keep my daily creative journal entries brief and retrospective at the close of each day’s work, acknowledging that certain processes may have already been forgotten, taken for granted or subsumed into each other, but judging this was less of a threat to the success of the project than constantly stopping to question processes in what appeared a more artificial way. It is worth noting here that this cyclical, progressive multi-stage methodology allows for a view of risk-taking, whether aesthetic or technical, as a valuable part of the process. As Tondeur points out, ‘risk-taking predicts, envisages and welcomes breaks and imperfections’ (Tondeur 2017:10), and in a counter-intuitive way, perhaps, this removes the writer’s initial fear of failure, by rather inviting it in as a necessary and revealing part of the process. As I show in chapter 2.3, the initial pre-draft or treatment, in which I experimented with the protagonist-narrator being already dead, was an important failure in this respect as it allowed me to

realise that I was prioritising the cleverness of the concept over reader satisfaction. Even when certain trajectories lead to partial failure within a study, the insights gained from any false starts nonetheless contribute to the knowledge generated by the project. This has proved true for me of working in a structured way as a CW researcher in an academic setting. As Kim Lasky suggests, ‘this is the kind of knowledge practice-led research develops, knowledge that grows in the shift between writing and reflecting modes’ (Lasky 2013:24). While it no doubt holds here that the observation of this research is influencing the research, for me the influence brings the benefits of structure, reflection and this positive approach to risk-taking, all of which outweigh any possible disadvantages associated with an inhibiting self-consciousness.

I will move on now to apply this CW model specifically to YA literature. Foregrounding Graham Mort’s argument, cited above, that in CW knowledge is created both through the production of a text and the author’s reflection on its production, including the ‘anticipation, awareness and accommodation of the reader’ (Graham Mort 2013:209), I will implement this CW methodology in relation to the field of YA fiction, with examples from my novel. As stated, I will return to Waller in chapter 3, as her model presents a useful structure around which I have been able to build an account of CW processes with specific reference to writing YA.

2.3 Writing *Eden Summer*

In this chapter I will examine the production of the text *Eden Summer*, analysing some of its thematic and structural elements. I will look at my early experimental pre-first-draft work, then at memory, chronology and autobiography, and finally at landscape and literary inheritance, examining how these concerns are entwined and exert influence on each other.

I would like to begin by describing a strategy used at the very beginning of the project: an essential part of the process of writing *Eden Summer* which I believe was a crucial element both in my development as a YA writer and in creating a more successful piece of work than I had previously achieved. Having written two full-length YA novels (80,000 and 70,000 words, representing seven and two years' work, respectively) and having only received feedback very late in the process, I set out to write a 'mini-draft' or extended 'treatment' in which I could test a narrative approach. I would then seek feedback and review the success of the approach after only months of work rather than years. I also had the sense that this novel might represent my third and final attempt at creating a novel that was suitable for publication, based only on my own assumption that my agent might have a finite attention span for a client who was not proving successful. I therefore decided to bring the novel 'closer to home' both in terms of its setting and in terms of my conscious decision to mine my own painful experiences of bereavement without reserve, not in a direct way, as already mentioned, but in a way that retained emotional truth within a fictional transposition.

Once I had fixed upon the notion of Eden's character being the grieving missing girl, I wanted Jess to act as the investigating character who would drive the narrative, and the first few chapters poured out very easily. It might be that YA fiction as a category lends itself to this kind of exploration of grief and loss, as Watson suggests: 'a common catalyst for the search for a new identity in teenage novels is the death of a friend or family member and the hero/heroine's need to come to terms with grief' (Watson 2001:777). Some weeks into the initial stages of the project (but before I applied for the PhD, see Figure 1, above) having decided Jess would be the victim of a hate-crime attack that shared some similarities with the murder of Sophie Lancaster, the idea that Jess could be a dead narrator brought an abrupt halt to the flow of work. I spent

several days writing nothing and toying with the idea. I was drawn to it as a way of testing my skills as a writer: could I write a character who was dead but who didn't realise it? What were the technical requirements of making the idea work? How could the twist be disguised until a grand reveal at the end of the story? I even wrote a list of advantages and disadvantages to the concept, as follows:

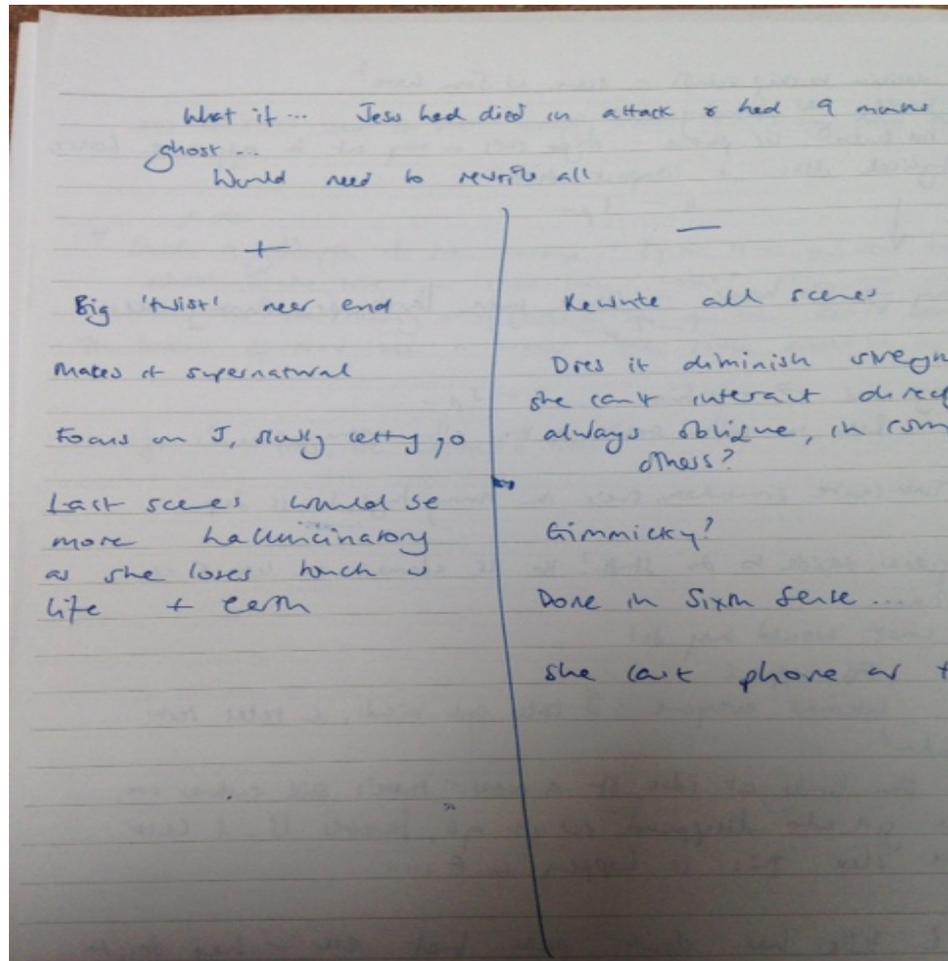


Figure 4: Pros and cons list, Jan 2014

These notes provide evidence that I was being drawn to the idea of a 'big twist near end' and 'supernatural' aspects, while my anxieties included the fear 'does this diminish strength if she can't interact directly ... always oblique in company of others'? Even with these reservations, I set out to start the project again and rewrote the early 'mini-draft' with Jess as an absent/dying character who doesn't realise her status as such. As Kathryn James points out in her chapter on dead narrator novels in YA fiction, this created a new central challenge of 'how to represent a subject who is no longer corporeal but is housed in a "body" made different by death' (James 2009:144). I chose to make Jess invisible and absent to all other characters, a kind of ghost-in-a-coma, while allowing her to retain an

illusory sense of her own corporeality until the final chapters. This entailed making every scene work from Jess's point of view, so each conversation required gaps that she (and the reader) could believe she was filling with her own dialogue and thought processes, but which also worked from the point of view of the remaining characters who were unaware of her 'presence'. This also necessitated that each scene had at least three characters speaking. I was fiercely attracted to the notion of a text which would be read in a shockingly different way after the twist was revealed.

However, this device acquired more and more difficulties as the text progressed, and Jess couldn't exert direct influence on events as they unfolded. I ended up with a passive main character who couldn't speak, act or change in the real world, with all the action happening to her only in the flashback sections. This led to a lack of tension at the climax of the narrative, precisely when it should be at its peak. For example, in the early draft, Eden simply walks back in to the story at the point where Liam and Josh are fighting at the outdoor party, as follows:

'Go on, wanna hit me? I can take it. It'll be worth it to see the back of you. Second offence, with your record? They'll throw away the fucking keys. Do it! Fucking do it!'

Josh spits in Liam's face.

'Stop!' a new voice screams. 'Just stop it!'

And my heart stops.

It is Eden. It's really her. I didn't dream it. She's here.

She runs between Josh and Liam and pushes them apart. She has her arms extended like someone in a film pushing back the walls that are closing in on them.

There's an audible gasp from everyone around me, then a pause, then a twittering of gossip, like this is the surprise twist they were all waiting for, this is better than HBO.

'Eden Holby?' 'Thought she were missing?' 'Is that the missing girl?' 'So she's not dead?'

I hate them.

But we're all still watching. The leading lady has made a miraculous return, but we all want to know who she's going to choose.

'What do you think you're doing?' Eden demands.

Josh slurs, 'Eden, I knew it. Knew you'd be OK.' He leans in to kiss her, but she keeps him at arms length.

I see Liam crack.

(unpublished early treatment of *Eden Summer*, Flanagan 2014:85)

In this draft, the whole driving force of the narrative provided by Eden's disappearance is unravelled in one line ('It is Eden. It's really her') and it is left to all the other characters to speak and act. Comparing Jess's actions in this paragraph to the number of actions required by Jess to find Eden in the same section of the final version – Jess receives a silent call, works out that it is Eden, guesses where she is, tries and fails to convince Liam to join her, runs there, sees Eden's body, realises she is still alive, confronts her, suspects she may have taken an overdose, phones the emergency services, confesses to loving Liam, decides to leave Eden and Liam together and departs – then it is clear that having a 'live' protagonist creates more propulsion, emotion, tension and reader satisfaction for this particular story.

It might also be that I was responding in too mimetic a fashion to other contemporary texts that use surprising and dramatic narrative twists, including *Follow Me Down* by Tanya Byrne (2013), and E. Lockhart's *We Were Liars* (2013). When I read each of these books, I was shocked and delighted by the plot twist and immediately re-read the book from the start to see how the text revealed or concealed crucial information. The question of power and authorial presence is bound up in the creation of a plot twist, unbalancing an already unequal author-reader equation still further with a concluding sleight-of-hand, which might seem even more unfair in a YA novel when the imagined teenage reader is already putatively less experienced than the adult author. Harbour highlights this issue, writing: 'the moment the YA engages with the text the adult writer is already standing aside, present, but as an absent presence and invisible' (2011:223). In order to be successful, the shadow of the adult self and the constructedness of the form need to stay suppressed, to retain the illusion of fictional immediacy. By adding a twist, the adult writer is in fact drawing

attention back to themselves, pointing to the author-reader contract involved in the act of reading. Adding an unexpected twist could be seen as the narrative equivalent of pulling the rug from under a reader's feet, forcing them into an abrupt acknowledgement of the adult authorial presence. When a twist 'works', it may be because its very unexpectedness is thrilling and pleasurable enough to overcome this disorientation; because the shock of the twist appears to reflect the unpredictability of 'real life' in a satisfying manner; or because the reader has in fact anticipated it from clues embedded in the text to be followed like a treasure hunt. It seems that I was hoping to replicate that kind of narrative surprise, here at the expense of character and satisfying plot. As Lisa Cron writes, 'when done properly, reveals can be extremely effective. But they're so woefully overused and almost always to ill effect – perhaps because writers rarely seem to ask themselves this crucial question: What does holding back this information *gain* me, story-wise? How does it make the story *better*?' (Cron 2012:140). Cron's question appears to place the emphasis back on the reader, in this case the YA reader, and their readerly satisfaction. When I asked this question on completion of this mini-draft, and reflected on my response and that of others, it was clear that a new approach to the narrative was required. I showed the 30,000-word mini-draft to my agent Ben Illis and to Martyn Bedford who had just been appointed as my supervisor at Leeds Trinity University. Their feedback was unanimous: the characters and set-up showed promise, but there was no adequate reason for Jess to be dead. As Martyn wrote to me at the time:

I'm afraid I have to agree with your agent that you should consider dropping the twist of Jess being dead and go down the realism route instead. You disguise the fact that Jess is dead quite well and very deftly handle the scenes where other characters seem to be aware of, and talking to, her. But, even so, I did figure out that she was dead some way before I should have done. More importantly, I'm not at all convinced that the twist adds anything to the novel. Indeed, for me, it detracts from it as it serves as something of a prop for Jess's character 'arc'. Her 'story' seems to be that she was dead all along but didn't realise it - then, near the end, the truth is revealed to her and she comes to an

acceptance of her situation. This is a bit thin, I feel. And a bit gimmicky.

(Email from Martyn Bedford 14/7/14)

This feedback chimed with what I had feared at the outset, but my desire to challenge myself as a writer led me to follow through with a short-lived experiment to test a hypothesis regardless of my initial reservations. Significantly, in two other recent YA dead narrator novels, *Haunt Me* by Liz Kessler (2016) and *Jessica's Ghost* by Andrew Norriss (2015), the ghost is 'outed' as such in the opening pages, and the main question of the novel is about the ghost's impact on the living characters. One of my errors was in making Jess's status the crux of the plot, instead of focusing on her relationships and character arc. To tie this dilemma back to the title of this study, 'Incorporating the Teenage Outsider', it is worth noting that 'incorporate' comes from the Latin word *corporare* meaning 'to embody', and it is therefore highly relevant that in the pre-draft I attempted to create a disembodied protagonist. Only when Jess was rewritten as an embodied or *incorporate* protagonist, did she come alive as a character, key to the success of the narrative. The descriptions of Jess's body became central to the story. Jess is attacked; she heals physically as well psychologically; she learns to run; she is marked by tattoos; she experiences desire and acts on it; and she tests her physical limits in her search for Eden. By incorporating this particular teenage outsider, by creating for her a scarred and resilient physical body, I believe that I began to write a more successful piece of YA fiction.

However, I wanted to retain these characters and the key thematic elements that I believed still had potential and the underlying atmosphere of this experimental draft. Having received feedback and reflected for several months, I then embarked a new version of the story and a first draft proper as I began working on *Eden Summer* as my PhD novel in the autumn of 2014. Certain characters were either deleted altogether (Jess's friend Sam, another 'ghost'), while others were shifted to the background (Imogen and Charlotte) and others rounded out and brought to the fore (Tyler). Jess's arc became more important, from the broken, damaged victim of assault, to the confident agent of change who works out where Eden is and redeems them both in the process. Interestingly, Kathryn James suggests that 'dead narrator tales are overtly

concerned, too, with life, grief, love, and other such existential issues. However, soul-searching takes on an especially profound meaning here because what is represented is not the death of an/other, but the death of oneself' (James 2009: 143). I would argue that *Eden Summer's* genesis as a dead narrator tale arose from a preoccupation with these existential concerns. These concerns did endure into later drafts, however, in the final version of the narrative Jess's death is only metaphorical. She is slowly reborn, after the death of self represented by the attack, both through her friendship with Eden and via her new self-definition as evidenced through her running and the acquiring of tattoos. This transformational aspect of the dead-narrator tale is highlighted by James, 'whether tragic, comic, or serious, the transformations represented in these texts are also, like other YA texts about metamorphosis, apt to symbolise the physical and psychological changes involved in adolescence' (James 2009:143). Nonetheless, it is also worth noting that a YA novel does not require a dead narrator in order to be concerned with metamorphosis. As Joanna Nadin states:

The best novels chart the growth of their protagonist(s); the change in self they experience as a result of their journey. Within the YA banding this is often the literal storyline as they chart the very process of 'growing up', with metamorphosis stories explicit metaphors for this. (Nadin 2016: 271)

It could be argued that if YA fiction is centred on teenage experience and concerns, it will inevitably involve change and loss. The move away from childhood and the gradual emergence into adulthood can itself be understood as a kind of death and rebirth that all of us must undertake. I concluded that the experiment in crafting a dead-narrator tale was worth staging for what it revealed about the kind of narrative I wanted to write, the depth of characterisation I was striving to achieve, and the pitfalls I wanted to avoid. As with any experiment, the results were noted and reflected upon, my strategy was adapted accordingly, and the next draft was fuelled by the insights gained. Unlike previous attempts, as a result of my new strategy of seeking early feedback, I had not lost years of work exploring unsuccessful approaches, but was able to adapt my goals through reflection and begin a first complete draft relatively promptly.

One of the next building blocks of the novel's construction was the use of time and temporality. Once I made the decision to situate most of *Eden Summer's* action in a single day (partly inspired by Virginia Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway*, I was interested to hear Patrick Ness cite a similar inspiration during launch events for his recent YA novel *Release* in 2017) and to use flashbacks explicitly for revelatory sections that provide the drip-feed of clues, the narrative thrust became much more dynamic. The first draft proper had the time of day listed at the start of each chapter, highlighting the importance of the device at this stage of writing. I chose to employ a present-tense forward-thrusting continuous narrative for the investigation of Eden's disappearance on September 4th. This narrative is interrupted by the past-tense, non-sequential and self-contained flashback scenes, moving the reader between different 'pasts' and the fictional present. From the start of writing the first entire draft – following the experimental treatment – I envisaged the use of the different time frames in a cyclical way, something like this:

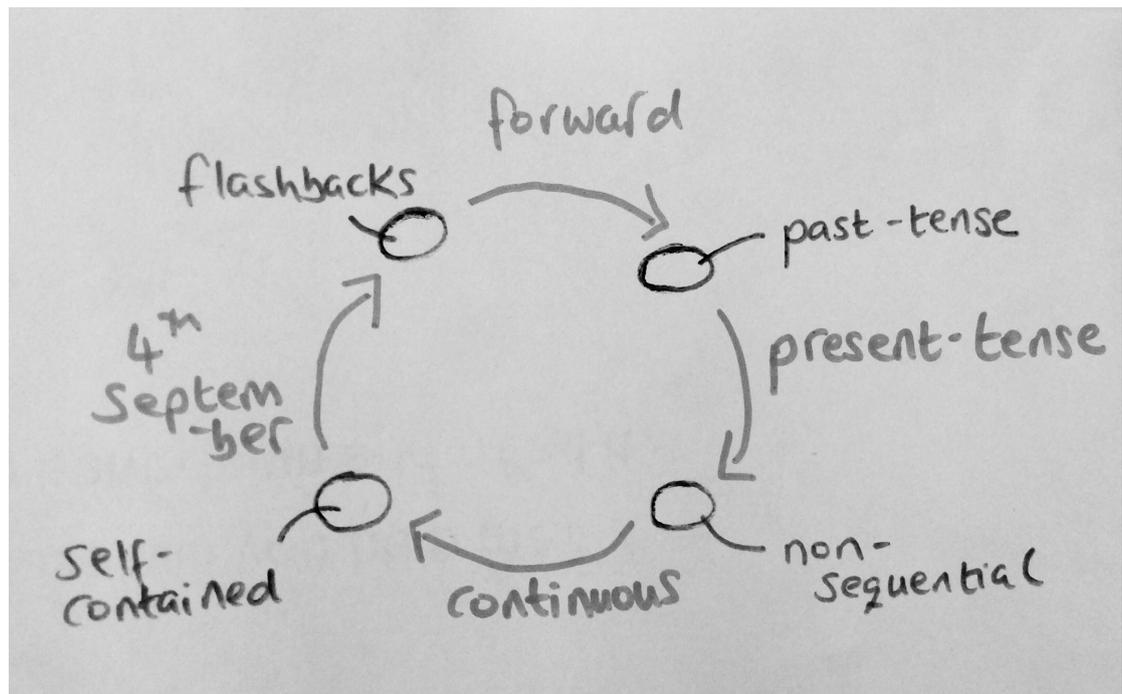


Figure 5: Temporal structure plan, April 2015

This literary device appeared to capture successfully the way memory, particularly traumatic memory, resurfaces and interrupts the fictional present, adding crucial information that colours the interpretation of that present. Once I had visualised this temporal device of the single day with flashbacks, it enabled me to make rapid progress with the narrative.

This is a fruitful tension that I had noticed earlier in my writing career, but failed to fully exploit before this project: i.e. that limitations or obstacles (like this temporal frame) can have a liberating effect on my writing. Or, to view it another way, by narrowing the field of vision, what lies within that frame now leaps into clearer and more precise focus. Tondeur also identifies the importance of creative limits and asserts the dynamic nature of constraint when it works symbiotically with the other two elements cited earlier: ‘play requires risk followed by constraint in order to function as a creative tool’ (Tondeur 2017: 11). Certainly all three elements can now be identified as crucial to the success of this work – making time for playful experimentation outside of formal drafting; being willing to take creative risks with structure and plotting and to begin again if they failed; and to employ constraint in perspective and structure. With hindsight it seems clear now that the intensity of writing within the PhD framework brought about this development of my practice. I was no longer working in a vacuum, but had to produce work regularly to meet my supervisors’ expectations and to receive feedback on it; I also undertook a much deeper level of critical reading and reflection during this time; and there was a profound shift in my self-image as a writer who was being taken seriously, working with practical and financial support in place.

Contrasting *Eden Summer* briefly now with my previous attempts at writing novels, I believe that the tight ‘framing’ devices of temporality and setting were crucial to the success of the narrative. My first manuscript, *The Last Weavewalker*, was a sprawling middle-grade fantasy novel; while the second, *The Maia Files*, was a contemporary YA spy thriller. Both manuscripts, I now see, had problems with characterisation, focus and plotting. Rejection notes from editors on the second novel include the comments, ‘it began to lose edge and tension and seemed to get a bit bogged down’ and ‘I actually thought it began really well but lost its way a bit towards the end’ (email correspondence with agent Ben Illis, 16/1/14). In contrast, the use of a limited time-frame in *Eden Summer* became key to its relative success. The sense that time was running out for my characters added impetus and tension. Anything that fell outside the two time-frames became extraneous, allowing me to create a leaner and more successful plot. This aspect was highlighted in the critical reception *Eden Summer* has received, for example, by Michelle Pauli, writing in the *The*

Guardian: ‘told over the course of a day, with flashbacks to the last year, it’s a breathless read as Jess races across Yorkshire hills to try to discover Eden, and the truth, before it’s too late’ (Pauli 2016). The choice of ‘summer’ in the title and timeframe of the novel is also significant. As I spell out in an article published in *The Guardian* in July 2016 (Flanagan 2016b), as a teen reading YA fiction, I conceived of summer as an idyllic golden period during which transformations could happen. As an adult writing YA fiction, this idea of the long summer full of potential lingered on, now as an awareness of the imagined teenage reader undergoing metamorphoses of their own. These metamorphoses would then be shockingly visible to peers at the start of the new term in September, or in Eden’s case, by the end of the first week back at school, she crumbles, unable to sustain the façade she has constructed over the summer to hide her pain and grief.

I also chose to depict Jess moving beyond her post-traumatic stress disorder through the capturing or ‘fixing’ of the attack as a moment in time, in her drawing and writing about it which acts as a kind of exorcism, allowing her to move forward. This aspect was pinpointed in the Study Notes for *Eden Summer* written by Radhiah Chowdhury, an editor at Scholastic Australia: ‘a large part of *Eden Summer* is Jess’s ‘unspeakable’ story – her conscious and subconscious management of the legacy of her assault’ (Chowdhury 2016). As I will examine below, I also came to suspect that the depiction of Jess’s healing through storytelling mirrored a process of working through my own experience of loss through the creation of *Eden Summer*. Writing the work became my own ‘conscious and subconscious management of the legacy of’ recent griefs.

I was also consciously working with an explicitly feminist agenda, in that I set out to create active, complex and evolving female characters who were not defined in relation to male characters. The most important relationship in the novel is the platonic friendship between Jess and Eden. Although I include romantic relationships for both Jess and Eden, I chose to foreground female friendship, and in Jess’s case I intended that her relationship with Liam was a result or symptom of her recovery and not a cause. This decision needs to be understood in the context of current misconceptions about YA fiction. It appears the case that even when YA novels are not preoccupied with romance, they may be pre-judged for being so. An article in *The Guardian* by Amelia Tait criticised

the selections for the 2016 Zoella Book Club as ‘cute and glittery’, and bemoaned the books’ narrow focus on romance, accusing the range of being ‘a bit vanilla’ (Tait 2016). This provoked a swift backlash from YA authors and bloggers keen to point out that was inaccurate and that several of the titles selected for the book club that year, for example Patrick Ness’s *A Monster Calls* (2012) and Sara Barnard’s novel *Beautiful Broken Things* (2016), contained no romance at all, in this case dealing with the terminal illness of a parent and the dynamics of female friendship respectively. I would argue that I added the element of romance between Jess and Liam as a way of creating tension between Jess and Eden which they then overcome, highlighting the strength and resilience of their friendship, and the subordination of romance to platonic female friendship in these characters’ lives. In a similar way, for example, as noted by transfer examiner Amina Alyal after reading an early complete draft of *Eden Summer*, I chose to reference obliquely Grahame Greene’s *The End of the Affair*, but with a different emotional focus for my characters. Where Greene’s character Sarah makes a deal with God to give up her lover Bendrix if his life is spared, I make Jess offer to give up Liam if Eden’s life is spared, again prioritising female friendship over romance. It was also with awareness of Greene’s work that I wrote Liam’s indignant reaction to the whole concept of such spiritual bargains: ‘You think there’s someone watching us, with a giant pair of scales, weighing what we’re owed?’ (Flanagan 2016:265)

Another central preoccupation of the work can be found in the protagonist’s relationship with her local landscape, an environment which can be described as both post-industrial and post-pastoral. When presenting *Eden Summer* to readers at literary events, I have argued that the geography of my home town shaped its plot. Once I made decisions about Jess’s route around the hills and valleys in her search for Eden – also shaped by the sequence in which I wanted the revelatory flashback sections to happen – this lent the plotting a logical sequence which felt successful to me. Together with the decision to compress the main action into one day, these constraints of time and place gave me a clear structure to work with that I found liberating in the way noted above. I had a path to follow with regard to the story, effectively setting myself the same dilemma as my protagonist – find Eden before the end of the day – thus aligning my creative goal with that of the work. The constrained horizon I

applied to my creative work can also be seen to reflect the constrained condition of YA-ness: of being a teenager who craves independence and agency, but who is confined by parental and societal expectations, like Jess in chapter thirteen of *Eden Summer*.

My work also engages with literary legacy specifically where it intersects with landscape. I set my novel in my home town of Hebden Bridge, two miles from the birthplace of Ted Hughes and eight miles from The Brontë Parsonage in Haworth. Jess's struggle to find an appropriate language with which to speak of that landscape mirrors some of the difficulty inherent in creating the novel. In *Eden Summer*, I explicitly address the formidable and intimidating body of canonical literature that describes my local area and the impulse to find new ways of speaking about a familiar landscape in ways that do not merely always quote or reflect previous well-known work. I desired a language for my story that felt authentic and fresh for a YA reader, that captured something of the landscape's history as well as the contemporary experience of living in it, but which also referenced this rich literary culture. That my characters are young adults helped to foreground a certain iconoclastic rebelliousness and the desire to establish a new identity defined against the previous generation. However, the presence of a complex literary heritage felt so strong that it demanded a textual voice within my work, and the published edition of *Eden Summer* actually contains direct quotations from Ted Hughes's poetry, used with permission of his estate. This seeking of permission can be read in a variety of ways: as a hoped-for blessing, or as an appropriation or wishful borrowing of the mantle of literary merit, or indeed, as a stripping of precisely that fresh originality that was initially craved.

This local literary legacy invites further exploration, particularly where the echoes of the literary antecedents chime so clearly through my lived experience as a reader and a writer from this specific geographical location. As a bookish child growing up in the Calder Valley in the last quarter of the twentieth century, it was impossible to avoid our local literary heroes. I encountered Ted Hughes's work at an early age, in school assemblies, in readings of his children's poetry, in productions of *The Iron Man*. I recall a vague regional pride in the knowledge that someone from our town had written a book that we read. I was chosen by my English teachers, aged seventeen, to attend a writing course in 1990 at Lumb

Bank, The Ted Hughes Arvon Centre. Taught by Berlie Doherty and John Latham, it was a memorable week for me, not least because Doherty read from *Dear Nobody*, her then-unfinished YA manuscript which would go on to win the Carnegie Medal in 1991 (of which Watson writes, it ‘has been praised by critics, parents and teachers alike for its thought-provoking account of teenage pregnancy’ (Watson 2001:777). I remember the excitement of hearing from a fellow student the story of Hughes and Plath’s relationship, as we sat in the library in Hughes’s old house. I remember my friend’s excitement as she conveyed what felt like shocking contemporary gossip. I recall a sense of a kind of shared ownership or domestic intimacy with our local lad who became the Poet Laureate, one which I try to convey in the scene by the river in the published edition of *Eden Summer* when Mr Barwell calls him, ‘Our Ted’:

It was different reading it here with the page ruffled by the breeze. As I read my little section, I looked at the place it described. Everyone shut up, to hear their mates and to do their line:

‘... I know

That bilberried bank, that thick tree, that black wall,

Which are there yet and not changed.

From where these sit

You hear the water of seven streams fall

To the roarer in the bottom, and through all

The leafy valley a rumouring of air go.

Pictured here, their expressions listen yet,

And still that valley has not changed its sound

Though their faces are four decades under the ground.’

Eden got that last bit, the heart of it. The next lines were harder, describing the war and the deaths of those young men, the same lads in the photo, in their smart suits and polished shoes and those daft straw hats with ribbons round. And we knew, cos we’d looked at it, how each lad was different, but all were full of life and swagger as they sat there. *Here*. Where we stood.

After the poem, we were quiet. The waterfall sounded very loud. You could hear the wind in the trees.

‘Well done,’ Barwell told us. ‘Now your words, please. What’s he saying, our Ted?’

Charlotte put her hand up. It looked strange – with the sparkling river, not a classroom behind her. ‘It’s right here. I mean, he’s got it right, this exact spot with the trees and the water and stuff.’

...

Eden spoke next, her voice high and clear, ‘And it’s about how you can’t imagine being dead, when you’re right here, so alive. Those soldiers ... they were as alive as we are now. But now they’re all gone. And the poet’s gone.’

(Flanagan 2016: 173-174)

So the intimacy with the work and life of Ted Hughes that we see in this section of the novel is connected to the ongoing involvement with this place in my own life, particularly my work as Centre Director at Lumb Bank from 2008 to 2013. His portrait peered down at me from the dining-room wall, as I hosted a different group of writers each week, and I was frequently questioned about his history and that of the building in which I worked. At one point I even visited Ted’s widow Carol Hughes at Court Green in Devon, in order to ensure safe receipt of a set of hand-copied poems which later hung on the walls of Lumb Bank, and I heard some stories of Ted first-hand. Although these elements are not literally described in the novel, my awareness of them irrevocably shapes my portrayal of the students’ feelings and responses at the workshop.

There is also a link to be made here between the canonical status of Plath and Hughes, representing literary ‘adulthood’ in comparison with the ‘YA-ness’ of my narrative, flavoured as it is by my teenage memories and positioned here as younger and as seeking to establish its own identity. Like my character Jess, during this time I was struggling to find my voice and confidence as a writer, surrounded by writers, surrounded by words, surrounded by evidence that even the valley where I worked had already been written up and captured in another’s language. Now that I have recently returned to Lumb Bank to teach creative writing to young people, I am acutely aware of needing to leave space for their own interpretation of their experience, sometimes choosing not to read certain sections of *Eden Summer* precisely in order not to impose my words on them. I

recall that as a young writer I felt excluded, daunted and inarticulate, in a way that I pass on to my teenage characters in this scene:

Next morning around the dining table gleaming in the muted morning light, Aisha read us a poem by Ted Hughes.

*'This house has been far out at sea all night,
The woods crashing through darkness, the booming hills,
Winds stampeding the fields under the window
Floundering black astride and blinding wet
Till day rose...'*

It was about this actual house, by that actual poet who'd lived here, the one staring down at us from a photo on the wall with the startled, hunted look in his eyes. 'What do you think?' Aisha asked.

Silence.

'Look, this is your territory. This is right here!'

I think she meant it as inspiration. It didn't work like that. His strong, supple words left me speechless. He'd been here first. He said it all. He said it too well. And if not him, his first brilliant wife who'd killed herself. Between them, they had all the angles covered when it came to this valley.

I tried to say it. 'Yeah, but Miss?'

'I've told you, Jess, isn't it? Call me Aisha, I'm not your teacher and we're not at school.'

'Aisha then. I mean, they've not left any space for us, have they? If we talk about the moors, it's all Cathy and Heathcliff.' I gestured at the portrait of Ted Hughes: 'If we talk about this house, or this weather, we're copying him. If we talk about depression and that,' I ignored all the faces that turned to Eden now, like a shoal of gawping fish, 'then Sylvia got there first. It's all been said.'

(Flanagan 2016: 190-191)

In this scene I have consciously reworked my memories of being a teenage and an adult writer at Lumb Bank, giving my remembered feelings to teenage characters, where perhaps I felt their youthful dauntedness was more forgivable than my adult trepidation. Interestingly, this section, and Jess's poem that

follows, were singled out for critique in an otherwise positive review of the book by Elizabeth Gibson, who wrote:

One element that jars a little are the views about writing and writers expressed by Jess. They aren't the kind of thing a teen would say, and feel like the author using her protagonist as a mouthpiece. Jess shows no interest in writing most of the time but then says rather dark things about the likes of Ted Hughes and Sylvia Plath, which doesn't really ring true.

(Gibson 2016)

So, for Gibson, this section of the story isn't embedded or contextualised clearly enough. Jess's thought processes appeared realistic to me as a child of this locale, and having witnessed other young people engaging with the work of Ted Hughes because they were living in his house for a week. However, for this reader, these sections failed to persuade in their construction of young adult experience, perhaps because conversations about writing within a novel point to its very constructedness by an adult, breaking the illusion of fictionality. As Perry Nodelman argues in *The Hidden Adult* (2008), here discussing children's literature, childhood (or, here, 'YA-ness') and its construction by adults, is an inescapable element of this form: 'it is an invention of adults, the main quality of which is exactly the way in which it is conceived to be opposite to adulthood' (Nodelman 2008:197). In this case, it could also be due to the similarity between the teenage and adult feelings of dauntedness and inexperience, that this section of the narrative failed to uphold this constructed binary distinction, and for one reader at least, the 'YA-ness' of the narrative is punctured in this scene.

On the other hand, a different approach to this section of the novel was highlighted in the study notes for *Eden Summer* written by Scholastic Australia editor Radhiah Chowdhury. She asks, 'In what ways is *Eden Summer* about creating a narrative legacy out of our lives, even if that legacy is only fleeting? How is this tied to its intertextual use of Ted Hughes's poetry? How do our legacies inhabit the landscape even when all trace of us is gone?' (Chowdhury 2016). Chowdhury's questions crystallise for me something I attempted to articulate in the section where Jess and Liam walk through the ruins of the mills, discussing this evidence of recent history and the speed with which it is erased or healed over:

‘I like it. How quickly the woods grew back. A hundred years ago, this would’ve been dead busy. Now look at it.’

‘Yeah, makes you think, if we stopped now, how quickly we’d be covered over. Like that film, after everyone dies?’

‘Yeah, and I bet when they closed the mills, it must’ve seemed like the end of the world,’ Liam’s with me. He gets it. ‘And now there’s a party in the ruins.’

(Flanagan 2016: 227)

The other literary heritage to which I responded in the novel was that of the Brontë sisters. On a conscious level, the Brontës have always felt like a more positive and enabling influence, irrefutable proof that women from this corner of the world can be, have been, writers. Perhaps in part because they are historically removed, because their language is archaic as well as vibrant, there is less of an obstacle to write around, and there is already an established tradition of women ‘writing back’ to Charlotte Brontë in particular, from Jean Rhys’s *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966) to the recent collection of short stories edited by Tracy Chevalier, *Reader, I Married Him* (2016). Francis Spufford identifies the Brontës and other female novelists as the ideal bridging literature for young female readers starting to leave children’s books behind, as ‘a reliable path into grown-up literature’, musing ‘perhaps it works especially well for girls’ since ‘Elizabeth Bennett, Jane Eyre and Dorothea Brooke are not heroines a teenage girl reading sees through the eyes of men for whom they are primarily daughters, sisters, lovers. They are alternate possible selves, speaking directly to the female mind considering them, despite all the differences of history’ (Spufford 2002: 166). This is an important point for two reasons: firstly, that complex, three-dimensional female characters can be found here; and secondly, for its suggestion that *Jane Eyre* acts as a kind of proto-YA fiction, a middle ground between children’s and adult literature. It is very tempting to see Jane Eyre as a YA heroine *avant la lettre*. Indeed, in contemporary YA we find many examples of a naïve young heroine with inner strength who is drawn to the older, more worldly man who may be hiding secrets, and who attracts and redeems him through her purity and integrity. This dynamic feels very familiar and has been used many times in YA fiction, most recently and famously perhaps in the *Twilight* series by Stephenie Meyer.

I would like to think that, even I were not aware of it at the time of writing, my character Jess is a literary descendent of Jane, rising from difficulty and disadvantage to demand:

Do you think, because I am poor, obscure, plain and little, I am soulless and heartless? You think wrong! - I have as much soul as you - and full as much heart!

(Brontë 1975:269)

Like Jane, Jess has internalised the disregard of her peers and, in the opening sections at least, she cannot see her own worth because of her self-perceived lack of conventional beauty and vivacity in comparison with Eden.

The shadow of the Brontë sisters falls across my process and my writing most distinctly in two places in *Eden Summer*: in Jess's poem; and when describing the moorland landscape around the waterfall (geographically closer to the Brontës' home in Haworth than any other setting in the novel). By giving Jess a self-aware, referential poem, I was attempting to articulate and make light of the difficulty of writing against literary classics. I deliberately avoided re-reading the Brontë canon at the time of writing, but that presence is still unmistakable. Again, using teenage characters here felt as though it gave me a licence to do this dance of avoidance within my text: approaching, referencing, and then pulling back. An interesting question yet to be answered here might be how other readers will zoom in on the intertextuality invited by Jess's poem and the common literary landscape of our works, finding readings like this one from Chowdhury, which were never part of my intention for the work. Her study notes ask, 'What other intertextual references can you find in the novel? How, for example, does the relationship between Cathy and Heathcliff from *Wuthering Heights* serve as an analogue of sorts for what happens in the story?'

(Chowdhury 2016) Indeed, a very recent American review of *Eden Summer* by Karen Coats (2017) focuses on precisely this intersection of landscape and literary inheritance:

The turbulent emotional landscape is perfectly complemented by what amounts to a love song to the furiously beautiful Yorkshire moors in which they live; even as Jess alternates between focused searching and drifting into memory, she sees her immediate surroundings with an

artist's eye, giving the descriptions a feeling somewhere between the Brontës' Gothic novels and Ted Hughes' poetry.

(Coats 2017)

In conclusion then, the writing of the novel as discussed in this section has circled around and come back to the YA elements of my own experience in this particular literary and geographical landscape, enacting Stewart's mode of 'interweaving self-consciousness with experience' as cited in chapter 1.1. I will return to theoretical examinations of autobiography and selfhood in chapter 3.2 below when I examine both the construct of self as author and the strangeness of examining this 'self' from an external point of view. However, I will first offer an examination of the intersection of CW and YA fiction in this study.

Chapter 3 – Critical Dimensions of the Work

3.1 Where CW and YA Interact

Using definitions adapted from the work of Alison Waller, in this section I argue for the distinctiveness of YA literature as a category, and then map some working definitions of YA literature across my creative process, investigating which aspects of the category affect the way it is created.

It is necessary to begin this section by interrogating the label ‘young adult literature’. Waller asks whether young adult literature can be accepted as being whatever literature happens to be currently being read by adolescents, before admitting that this range is too wide to be critically useful. This definition is further complicated by recent evidence that more than half of YA books are purchased by adults (55% according to *Publishers Weekly*, 13th September 2012), and yet do not cease to be categorised as YA literature when they are read by adults, if indeed the books are read by the purchasing adults themselves. As literary agent Juliet Mushens adds when citing this study, ‘people aged between 30 and 44 are responsible for 28 per cent of YA sales. This really hits the point home that when you are writing a YA book you are still dealing with complex ideas and language’ (Mushens 2015:2). Mushens use of ‘still’ here feels problematic, with its implication that it might be because of the adult segment of its readership that complexity is demanded of YA fiction. It has become clear that the issue of who reads YA fiction can be a controversial issue. The ‘Great YA Debate’ of 2016 refers to a literary spat at the Edinburgh Book Festival that year. The main themes were also discussed at a panel on which I appeared at the Hebden Bridge Arts Festival, alongside Melvin Burgess and Anthony McGowan in July 2016. Anthony McGowan claimed on both occasions that ‘90% of YA fiction is crap’, like any other art form, following it up with the comment that caused most provocation: ‘there is a huge amount of energy directing these kinds of texts, texts that may well appeal to women in their 20s and 30s rather than to teenagers. We’ve got this female-dominated world producing texts that reflect themselves’ (Anthony McGowan, as quoted by Sian Cain 2016).

I do not have space in this thesis to map the complex connections between the teenage outsider and the female outsider. I am therefore going to steer away from the implicit misogyny here, misogyny that was unintentional, according to

McGowan's later blog (McGowan 2016), and focus more usefully on another response at the panel on which I appeared. Melvin Burgess repeated concerns he had voiced to me in a previous blog interview, specifying that while he has no problem with adults reading YA fiction in general, he does not want this to evolve into a situation where YA writers are no longer working specifically with a teenage audience in mind. He said, 'a lot of crossover fiction has been *usurped* by adults' (my italics to highlight this emotive verb) going on to clarify, 'there's nothing wrong with adults reading crossover fiction. It's wrong when people start writing for the adults reading it. Then who is writing for the teenagers?' (Flanagan 2015a), here making a case for the implied teenage reader to be prioritised by YA authors, as I will explore in more detail below.

Having set out to write for young adults, it is understandable that some YA authors are dismayed to find they are being read by adults, although a broad quantitative study still needs to be done here in order to make robust conclusions about how YA novels are bought, borrowed and read, and by whom. Nodelman's analysis – again, of children's rather than YA fiction, but nonetheless applicable – offers a more complex interpretation of the mixed child/adult readership for children's fiction. He suggests, 'what people call "childhood" is always an imaginative construct of the adult mind' (Nodelman 2008:179) but goes on to offer a sophisticated relationship between what the adults who write and produce the text might think that text is doing, versus what the child who reads it might think it is doing, both being simultaneously aware of the possibility of the other's reading, i.e. that adults 'must still presume to have the ability to imagine how these children will understand the texts' and also that the readers whom 'these texts imply are very much aware of the shadow texts of complex adult knowledge that underpin' them (Nodelman 2008:185). This equation is necessarily complicated further by the status of YA fiction as 'other' to both childhood and adulthood, occupying a liminal space in-between.

As will become clear below, the implied reader of YA fiction for this project is an implied *teenage* reader. This does not preclude the possibility that adults may read the resulting novel, but it is the YA status of the implied reader that determines both content and structure. As argued by John Stephens, citing Iser's work on reader response theory:

The implied reader is what an interpretative act will pivot on, in that it mediates the meaning which is a potentiality inherent in a text's structures and the (real) reader's actualization of this potential. The 'implied' reader thus tends to blend into a notion of an 'ideal' reader. (Stephens 1992:55)

Whether the 'real reader' is an adult or a teen, the implied or ideal reader here who can 'best actualize a book's potential meanings' (Stephens 1992:55) is a YA, a point to which I will return below.

Other theorists, including Waller, John Rowe Townsend and others, use a pragmatic working definition of YA literature arising from its commercial or educational production as such: 'books that are organised, marketed, sold, lent (in libraries) and taught as young adult literature *become* young adult texts and in this way, cultural, economic and educational forces dictate the definition' (Waller 2008:16). Here, a YA text is one explicitly produced and marketed for a teenage audience, although not exclusively read by that audience. Harbour also points to this commercially driven aspect of defining YA fiction: 'there is no definitive definition of YAF, only interpretations ... Books for this group have always existed but were only labelled as such once the publishers acknowledged the commercial sense of categorising YAF' (Harbour 2011:243-4). Harbour also highlights the power relations involved in the production of YA literature, stating that YA literature 'is also subject to opinions promoted in newspapers and other media, where the expertise required to enter the discussion seems to require no other authority than simply being an adult. This is partly because writing for children is (almost) never written by children, and mostly written by anyone but them' (Harbour 2011:210). There are nonetheless a number of well-publicised cases of teenagers writing YA fiction (from SE Hinton's *The Outsiders*, 1967, to contemporary examples such as Beth Reekles' *The Kissing Booth*, 2013, Alice Oseman's *Solitaire*, 2014, and Helena Coggan's *The Catalyst*, 2015). In the more recent cases – now YA fiction is established as an economic and cultural construction – the identity and age of the author is foregrounded for marketing and publicity purposes, privileging the texts as being more 'authentic' because of the age of the author. However, these exceptions – their status as exceptions is precisely what is being celebrated in the attendant

publicity – only serve to confirm the norm: that YA literature is largely created by adults.

Although Waller resists a definition of YA literature via textual features, claiming it is impossible to draw up an ‘infallible list of features common to all individual instances’ (Waller 2008:15), as a reader and writer of YA fiction it is helpful to map the territory in broad terms, even while acknowledging that there are always exceptions to these rules, or perhaps choosing to break them in my work. Summarising Waller’s very general list of the features one might expect in a book aimed at teenagers (Waller 2008:15), a working list of the defining characteristics of YA literature looks like this:

- teenage protagonist
- a single or well-defined plot
- language that is ‘accessible’ and ‘appropriate’
- focuses on ‘adolescent experience or interest’

Pertinently, in a recent panel debate about YA fiction to which I contributed at the Bradford Literature Festival 2017, Melvin Burgess offered his own verbal definition of YA literature as being that which ‘has a teenage main character, speaks to the adolescent imagination, has a tight plot and is accessible, that is to say, the language is clear, not flowery or obscure’ (Burgess 2017), one which matches Waller’s list almost precisely.

Having established that, in spite of Waller’s reservations, her definitions provide a useful framework with which to work, I will now address each of these points in turn and relate each to a stage, draft or process within this study. My research investigates how these defining characteristics exert influence on the process of creating this YA novel in particular. A related feature also mentioned by Waller, that of the length of the YA novel, seems of little relevance here, partly because the length of the novel produced for this study has been set by the submission requirements of this practice-led PhD, and partly because length is arguably one of the less interesting aspects of YA literature except where an extreme example is unexpectedly successful at either end of the scale.

Like Waller, I argue that a teenage protagonist is typical in YA literature. Even if the protagonist is not actually a teen – whether a child, adult, animal or alien – then YA fiction tends to use a protagonist who shares some of the concerns of a teenage protagonist and effectively ‘stands in’ for them. Bringing

forward Waller's final defining feature here, as it is inextricably linked with the first, what are those teenage concerns? 'Adolescent experience or interest' covers a very broad range of theme and content, which could be more usefully illustrated with examples. I prefer to think of this defining characteristic of the category as asking 'big questions' around identity formation, relationships and the testing of limits. For me, YA fiction is defined by its posing of questions such as, 'Who am I?' 'Who do I love?' 'How do I survive this?' and 'What am I capable of?'.

The question of the teenage protagonist is the swiftest to answer with regard to my novel and all the other primary texts cited, since they all have teenagers as the lead character. All also include adult characters in the supporting cast. However, it is important to note here that while most YA texts feature a teenage protagonist, it does not follow that all texts that feature a teenage protagonist are necessarily YA texts. Note too that sometimes the YA protagonist's voice is that of an adult, looking back at their teenage self, as in Joanna Nadin's *Eden* (2014). For my project, the use of teenage protagonists was never in question. In fact, it could be argued that the creation of three main teenage characters came first, before any other aspect of the project. I have pages of rough notes going back five years or more, concerned with the dynamics between three (unnamed) teenage characters, including notes on personality, appearance and class. However, I did not yet have any sense of plot or theme, nothing that propelled the characters into movement and fictional life. I experimented with fantastic realist ideas within these notes, and spent a little time exploring a notion around a kind of vampire that, when it drank the blood of a given individual, would gain exactly the life span that person 'would have lived' otherwise. I later rejected the idea as derivative and unappealing. However, something about this central triangular dynamic refused to die. In late 2013 and early 2014, when I began work on *Eden Summer*, with 'loss' as a general preoccupation following my own experience of bereavement, and after reading about the murder of Sophie Lancaster, new themes began emerging in mind-mapping and pre-writing documents, which in turn re-animated the three central characters. As discussed above, in the early stages of work, I experimented with the device of Jess being dead and witnessing the events as a ghost who was unaware of her status as such. Having a teenage character

coming to terms with the nature of death falls unarguably within the realm of the ‘big questions’ of teenage experience noted earlier, making this very much a YA novel. As explored in section 2.2, this study takes a positive view of risk-taking, so that even when certain strategies were discarded, the insights gained from any rejected work still form part of the knowledge generated by the project. For example, although I was drawn to the subversive possibilities of fantastic realism within YA literature, I then committed to discovering through trial and error what form best suited this narrative. When I decided that explicitly magical or unreal scenarios detracted from the characters’ depiction in *Eden Summer*, I sought alternative, more subtle ways of creating a gothic or uncanny atmosphere in order to achieve a similar effect, most notably in the descriptions of the landscape via Jess’s perception as she approaches the waterfall, and also Jess’s magical thinking as she runs through the moonlit landscape looking for Eden: ‘the moon is enough now. The pale grey path shines in the moonlight. A ghost path, beckoning me on...’ (Flanagan 2016: 243)

However, the ‘pre-draft’ had a whole section covering Jess’s realization of her non-corporeal status, including this extract:

‘Is this dying?’

He shakes his head, eyes bright. He’s changing, and so am I, and I realise there isn’t long left.

‘Sam! Wait! What about you?’ I want to say thank you, but it’s too late. He’s gone.

And then I’m moving. I’m floating. I’m in the late summer night sky, with the first taste of autumn. I’m leaving Eden and Liam, and it’s OK.

(unpublished treatment of *Eden Summer*, Flanagan 2014:93-94)

At this stage in the project, it seems that the approach taken in the ‘pre-draft’ could be said to correspond with an over-reliance on one of Waller’s definitions – that of the ‘adolescent experience or concerns’. After allowing the desire to deal with adolescent concerns (here, the ‘big questions’ around Eden’s sense of guilt and her search for existential meaning, Jess’s coming to terms with life and death) to dominate at the expense of the other elements (teenage protagonist, linguistic appropriateness, single plot), then via reflection and feedback from my supervisor and agent, I decided to redraft the novel, as described above.

Although the final version of the text retained some of these ‘big questions’ of

adolescent experience, they were later balanced more effectively with the other elements, particularly those of protagonist and plot.

The next draft focused more on developing character, foregrounding Waller's premise that YA literature is defined also by its teenage protagonists. Now that Jess was a 'living' fictional character, she could be more fully explored, given more complex motivation and history, and allowed to change through her interactions with the other characters. At this stage, the 'love triangle' element was introduced, which created more tension between Jess and Eden, and more depth and complexity in their dialogue as Jess was impelled to conceal her sense of guilt. However, as is typical in any first draft proper where the author could be said to be 'telling themselves the story', on reflection – some of it through digesting supervisory feedback – I acknowledged there were long sections that were too expository and where tension dissipated.

The following draft, the next floor in that imaginary lighthouse, I argue, was shaped by the response to factual research about police investigation and other issues. As part of the editorial decision-making arising from this requirement to rewrite sections, a stronger chronological structure began to emerge. The present-tense sections became more dominant, with shorter, more purposeful past-tense chapters, culminating in the 'recollection-within-a-recollection' on page 138 when Jess recalls the attack in November from the vantage point of her healing and renewal at the writers' centre in July. These decisions could come under the umbrella labelling of the creation of a 'single or driving plot'. Although the use of split chronologies does add narrative complexity, the flashbacks are structurally subservient to the main plot. As I discuss above, I found that the use of creative limits – three main characters, one single day, one distinct location – to be key to the success of this novel. It could be argued therefore that there is indeed a very clear driving plot in *Eden Summer* – Jess is looking for her missing friend Eden – but that it interacts with the back story in a complex way. There are no subplots as such (unless Iona's death and Jess's attack are seen as subplots in themselves, secondary but connected to the search for Eden), but the unfolding of Jess's search for Eden, punctuated by the gradual unpeeling of onion layers of difficult history is what drives the narrative here. There is, however, an important point to be made about plot here, one that is not limited to the number of subplots. Although YA literature is typified by a

single driving plot that is launched in the opening pages, as with the age of the author, there are several notable exceptions, including Mal Peet's books, which tend to be dense and subplot-rich. I would argue that none of the boundaries of YA are clear-cut, but rather that at the outer limits of all these characteristics, we find blurring and constant testing of boundaries. It is worth questioning briefly what assumptions might be behind this approach to plot in YA literature. Is it assumed that a teen reader has a shorter attention span or more competing distractions from social media and other activities than a child or an adult? I propose that this quality is not actually a definition of YA literature since it derives from the other requirements. That is, if a YA novel is shorter than say, literary fiction or sci-fi; if it is written in accessible language; if it concerns itself primarily with adolescent concerns and if it features a teenage protagonist, then all these elements together increase the likelihood that a narrative will feature fewer or no subplots.

It is pertinent here that *Eden Summer* has been described several times since publication as a kind of 'thriller', i.e. as belonging to a literary genre characterised by the emotions of excitement or suspense – the 'thrill' – that it generates in the reader. *Eden Summer* has been positioned in this overlap between YA fiction and the thriller, notably and most visibly on the book jacket where a quote from Melvin Burgess announces it to be 'a thriller of the heart', (complicating the issue still further through the softening the label 'thriller' with the addition of 'of the heart'). *Eden Summer* was explicitly linked to two other YA thrillers – *Cruel Heart Broken* by Emma Haughton and *Lying About Last Summer* by Sue Wallman – in an online Twitter discussion as part of #YATakeover, curated by Christopher Moore in August 2016, in which we responded in different ways to the question as to why and whether we had set out to write thrillers. In the screenshot below, both Emma Haughton and I link 'thriller-ness' to pace, plotting and character:

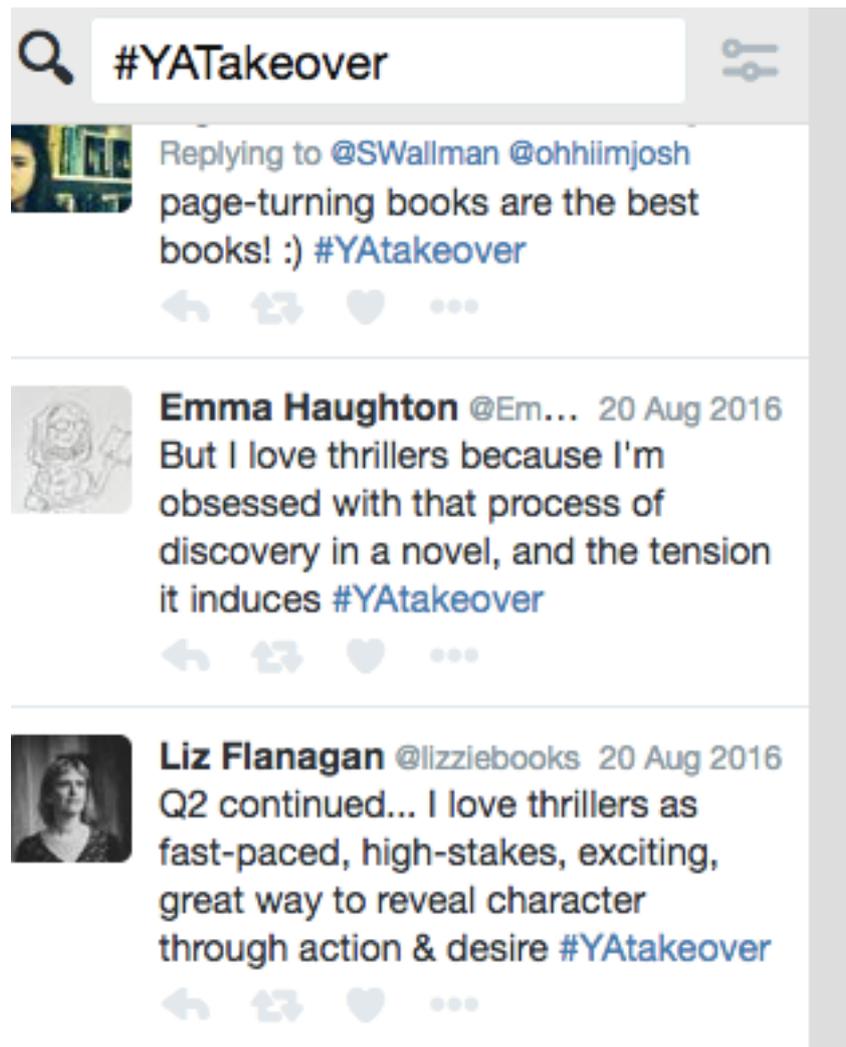


Figure 6: Screenshot 1 from #YATakeover 20 August 2016

Interestingly, in this Twitter chat, the category of ‘thriller’ was assumed to be a subset of the category ‘YA literature’ for the purpose of this discussion:



Figure 7: Screenshot 2 from #YATakeover 20 August 2016

Although I did not consciously decide to write within this sub-category, for me the overlap between YA novels and thrillers appears to be a logical outcome of the combination of two of Waller's definitions: the 'single driving plot' and 'adolescent concerns' when those concerns are dramatized in exciting ways.

Waller's other characteristic of YA fiction is 'language that is accessible and appropriate', although these descriptors require some differentiation here since neither is transparent or unambiguous. 'Accessible' appears the simplest to decode, since two of its primary meanings are listed in the Oxford English Dictionary as: 'readily reached' and 'able to be (readily) understood'. While 'appropriate' could be used interchangeably with 'accessible' in some contexts, it carries the added connotation of what is 'suitable' for a young adult readership, immediately raising the question as to which adults are deciding what is suitable, including depictions of sex, violence, and drug and alcohol-use, as discussed at length by Harbour (2011), (and throughout its relatively short history, YA literature has continuously challenged the boundaries of 'appropriateness'). The difference between 'accessible' and 'appropriate' is brought into a slightly different and more useful contrast with reference to the publishing house Barrington Stoke, known to commission stories that appeal to YAs, regardless of reading ability. Their YA fiction list, including YA texts by contemporary authors such as Non Pratt and Phil Earle, is made up of stories with young adult content and teenage protagonists designed to appeal to teenage readers, including reluctant readers. As the publisher states on the Barrington Stoke website:

We're here for the children with dyslexia who struggle with bright white or see-through paper. We're here for those who haven't built up the reading stamina yet to manage complex language structures and non-linear plots. And of course we're here for the kids who love their Playstation, their friends or football more than reading and really don't want to sit down to seven hundred pages.

(Barrington Stoke 2017)

So here, this YA-centred view of 'appropriate' would align more with a synthesis of *all* Waller's definitions: 'adolescent experience or interest', in combination with a teenage protagonist, well-defined plot, accessible language and shorter length.

However, I will interpret this characteristic offered by Waller as primarily concerned both with linguistic clarity for comprehension and with age-related suitability of language including use of profanity, and I will therefore now go on to examine how these elements were important for my writing process. In

particular, this characteristic could be said to dominate the final stages of writing a YA novel, the top floor of the lighthouse. As I went through the process of rewriting and editing of the text, I put its language through careful testing. I examined the text for consistency in character thought and dialogue, rewriting any language that felt ‘too adult’ in my characters’ speech. I polished syntax and checked spelling and grammar at sentence and paragraph level. For the published edition of the work, there were also distinct formal stages of copyediting for grammar, consistency and appropriateness of language, and then proofreading as a final revision before printing. Interestingly, both copyeditor and proofreader queried my (very occasional) use of language and syntax that was deliberately intended to be Yorkshire regional dialect. Examples included the word ‘overfaced’ on page 124 to denote ‘having accepted more food on one’s plate than one can actually eat’ and ‘while’ to indicate ‘until’ as in the phrase ‘stayed here while half eleven’ on page 148, although better-known examples such as ‘nowt’ for ‘nothing’ were left unchallenged, indicating that the principle of creating regional dialect was respected, even if not all instances of its use were recognised. Indeed, the inclusion of regional dialect was praised in one review by a librarian from my region who said ‘I like the language... it’s quite familiar to me. It does strike a personal chord’ (Calderdale Libraries 2016). During the final editorial stages, although my editors had stressed the importance of my retaining ‘ownership’ of the text, they requested that I did a read-through for profanity, suggesting that I delete any instances of swearing that I felt were not utterly necessary, to make things more acceptable for the American market. I changed a handful of explicit swear-words at this point, agreeing that if they were saved for the most dramatic scenes, they would be more shocking and effective. However, at no point did any editor (UK, American and German edits have been completed to date with Italian and Polish edits ongoing) suggest editing out the violence.

While it may be satisfying here to offer four defining characteristics of YA aligning precisely with four drafts of the study, in practice, just as with Mort’s ‘preparatory, synthetic and reflective’ stages, they all overlap. Each of the characteristics is present from the earliest stages of pre-writing. As mentioned above, I had my main characters, but until theme and plot were developed, they could not be explored. Equally, character is enacted through description and

dialogue, which inevitably involves decision-making about language. As an adult writing teenage characters in YA literature, I need to choose how I am going to ‘impersonate’ young adults, as Harbour states, ‘in order to enable me to enter the experiential gap between my young adult readers and myself, the adult writer. I need to ‘impersonate’ young adults by creating characters, in order to engage and encourage young adult readers to join me in the [...] gap’ (Harbour 2012:10). Julia Golding, writing as Joss Stirling, explained her approach to this impersonation when I interviewed her: ‘You have to dig in and find your inner teen...There’s part of me who’s outside that, as an adult. It’s like doing a mental transferral. You know that film *Freaky Friday* where they swap bodies? You have to do something a bit like that’ (Flanagan 2015e). This impersonation involves making choices about dialogue, dialect, use of slang, etc, which may indeed be the focus of final editorial stages, but which have to be grappled with from the outset.

Even if these four characteristics cannot be separated out so neatly, for me they operate effectively together as a working definition of YA, and they overlap crucially with the relevant parts of my creative practice. Certainly they are true for this study, which is characterised by a dominant driving plot, a teenage protagonist, language that has been considered and chosen for its appeal and appropriateness for young adult readers, and themes that speak to adolescent experience, involving big questions like ‘Who do I love?’ and ‘How will I survive this?’. The way my practice addressed these concerns might not separate neatly out into drafts, but together both the definitions and the creative way of addressing them form a useful way of conceptualising how this novel was produced, one which may prove useful for other writers of YA literature.

3.2 Writing the YA Author

I argue in this section that the third element in a practice-led PhD, alongside the creative element and the exegesis, is the construction of the creative practitioner as a persona. This section of the thesis arose from the discomfort I experienced as a researcher also reading – and sometimes writing or staging – the texts and other discursive activities that could be said to constitute the authorial persona. It also sprang from an anxiety that these activities meant I wasn't engaging in 'proper' academic research, according to some outdated preconception of my own imagining. This section will take as a case study a fixed period of time immediately before and after publication of *Eden Summer*, examining how the author was written in and through discursive activities. I will suggest the process is and was ongoing, iterative and proliferating beyond my control. As Melvin Burgess said in an interview I published on my blog: 'I felt it wasn't a question of writing a book; it was becoming someone who writes books. The first fictional creation is yourself' (Flanagan 2015a).

As I came to understand, the creation of the authorial persona was something that would occur whether I liked it or not, connected to the marketing and publicity activity associated with contemporary publication: beginning with the author photograph and biography printed on the book jacket, or even with the first announcement of a book deal in the trade press. What needs to be specified at the outset here, is that the 'author' is not 'me', and to acknowledge that it may appear odd to use as a point of departure various poststructuralist ideas of the death of the author precisely at the moment that marks the start of my journey as an author. However, I will argue for 'authoring' as a discursive, performative activity, a construction that is always unstable, always a work-in-progress, making an explicit link with 'young adult-hood' as depicted in YA fiction as also ongoing, multiple, and performative. Indeed, as Joanna Nadin has argued, following Hood and Baggini, this perspective on self-hood is not limited to YAs:

That self as a solid, stable, singular entity – something locatable and quantifiable – does not exist. That what we think of as 'self'... is an illusion, an ego trick, played by the mind to give us a sense of wholeness. Self, in Baggini's and Hood's conceptions, is not an object, but a construct or process; a story we tell ourselves about ourselves.

(Nadin 2016: 227)

This final section will look at this construct or process with reference to YA-author-hood, and the digital stories told about it.

Roland Barthes offers in ‘The Death of the Author’, first published in 1967, a seminal understanding of the author not as the originator of a text, but as being written into being alongside it: ‘the modern scriptor is born simultaneously with the text, is in no way equipped with a being preceding or exceeding the writing’ (Barthes 1977: 145). Barthes posits too a useful model of the text as a kind of holding space of citations, a place where intertextuality happens, where meaning-making occurs in a constant present: ‘a multi-dimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash. The text is a tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centres of culture’ (Barthes 1977:146). In a contemporaneous work, like Barthes, Foucault argues for the unyoking of individual author and text, but also offers a useful discursive model for understanding what he calls ‘the author function’ – a function of discourse which is not constant or stable. He states, ‘the name of an author is not precisely a proper name among others’ (Foucault 1977:122) and importantly here, ‘rather its status and its manner of reception are regulated by the culture in which it circulates’ (Foucault 1977:123). For ‘culture’, we may read the YA literary discourse specifically, particularly around issues like audience awareness, as has already been discussed. Foucault’s essay, ‘What Is an Author?’ concludes with further questions, including ones which will be pertinent here: ‘where does {this discourse} come from; how is it circulated; who controls it?’ (Foucault 1977:138).

Judith Butler later developed Foucault’s notions of authorship further, through her extension of J.L. Austin’s concept of performativity. In *Excitable Speech* (1997) she offers an Austinian understanding of the performative to denote an utterance which enacts the change it describes or names (the ‘I do’ of the marriage vows, for example), applying this notion to concepts of gender and identity. Although the notion of performativity can be problematic and somewhat slippery in its circularity, as a way of understanding the creation of the author in and through discursive activity, Butler’s formulation is illuminating and relevant: ‘if performativity requires a power to effect or enact what one names, then who will be the “one” with such power, and how will such a power

be thought?’ (Butler 1997:49). Crucially then, for Butler, following Foucault, performativity is intrinsically connected to power and authority: if the one who speaks has no authority, what does this do to the utterance? As I will demonstrate later, different kinds of ‘authoring’ activities (such as being published or having work reviewed), depending on cultural and social context, may produce dominant or suppressed meanings.

More recent work by Mona Livholts and Maria Tamboukou, on discursive and narrative methods, provides a useful framework for understanding the process of constructing the author. They problematise questions of the complicated dynamic between the writing self, what they term ‘textual staging’, and the shifting relationships between authors and their audiences. As Mona Livholts argues, the ‘interpellating force of language and naming occurs in a complicated interrelation between authority, citation, repetition and authoring’ (Livholts and Tamboukou 2015:21). Although their work focuses on scholarly rather than literary authoring, it acts as a useful lens through which to view my experience as a case study, with a focus on ‘how the performative agency of authoring is historically created through a number of conditions, including technological transformation and the writing through virtual worlds’ (Livholts and Tamboukou 2015:55).

The process leading to commercial publication, it could be argued, is that of *being named* as the author, or to look at it a slightly different way, *the creation of the name* of the author by a number of operatives, sometimes including but not limited to the author themselves, with a set of visual and textual references that can later be decoded and from which meaning will be made. In this instance, I had a choice of publisher for the book and rejected a major transatlantic publishing house, partly because I feared being lost in their large pool of authors. That decision could be equated with a choice of syntax here. By selecting an independent publisher with a reputation for its small and literary list, and being selected by that publisher in turn, the process of being named as an author began.

In its simplest form, the construction of the author may be compressed into the name of the author on the spine of the book, the author photograph and two-line biography on the book jacket. Without hesitation, I gave the name Liz Flanagan in all correspondence with my publisher, since I do not use my full

name in my day-to-day life unless at a health appointment, and ‘Elizabeth Flanagan’ is reserved for legal documents. However, this has resulted in the anomaly that the name on the front page of this thesis is my full legal name, while the name on the book jacket is my ‘ordinary’ daily name. Perhaps unconsciously I was hoping to make my ‘author self’ appear more approachable, as ‘Elizabeth’ retains some connotations of being distant and dated.

In order to focus on YA as a discourse, it is only necessary to consider for a moment what would be different if this book belonged to a different genre or category. For example, whether popular fiction, crime aimed at adults, or fantasy, each has its own set of visual and linguistic codes, including font, cover image, author photo and testimonial quotes which combine to speak to a certain readership.

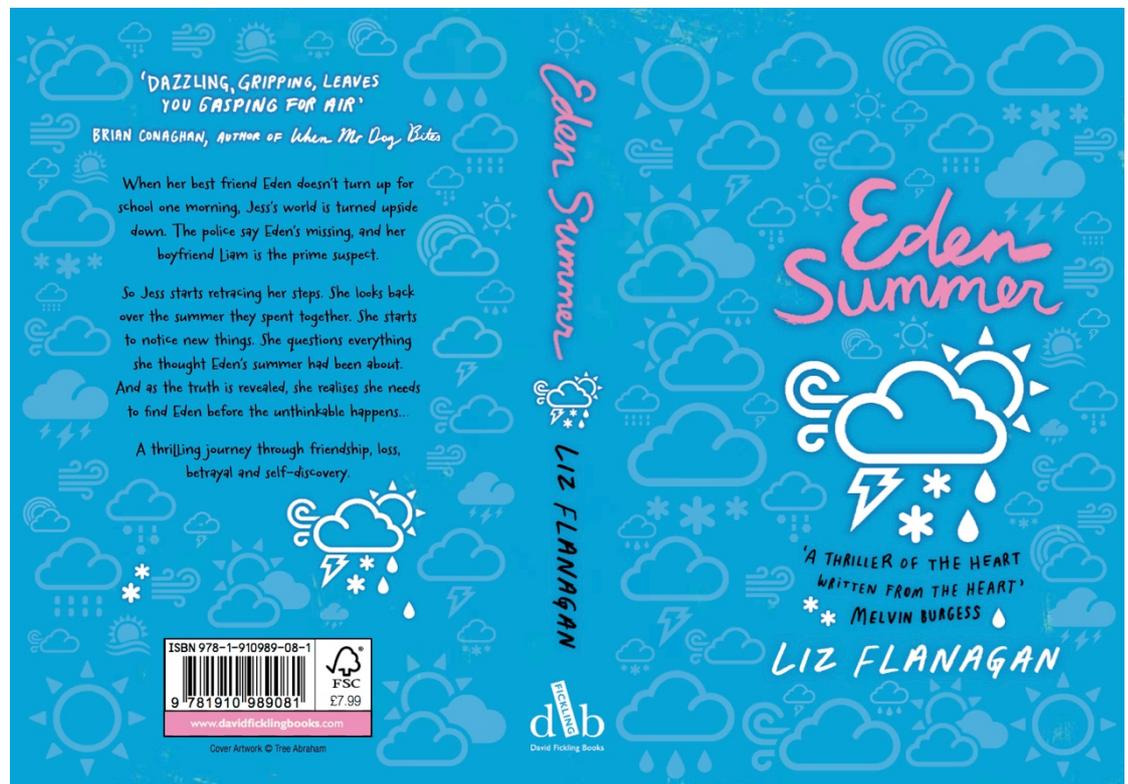


Figure 8: *Eden Summer* paperback cover

In this example, the ‘YA-ness’ of the *Eden Summer* paperback cover (here also distinctly gendered) is proclaimed by the use of emoji-style graphic artwork; by the testimonials from both a well-established YA author and a recent YA-prizewinning newcomer; by the loose scrawl of bright pink hand-lettering; by the perkily informal back cover font selection; and by the implicit visual

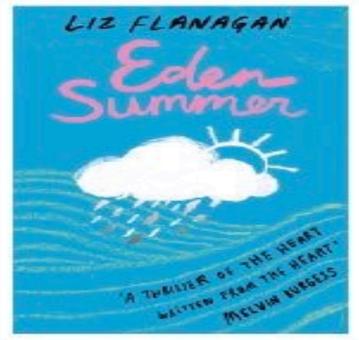
reference to previous well-known YA book covers such as John Green's *The Fault in Our Stars* (2012), here echoed in the use of the background blue and the white cloud imagery.

Furthermore, the YA author in the twenty-first century has access to more locations than ever in which to engage in the discursive activities that constitute the authorial persona. Indeed, some might argue that without recourse to the digital activities preferred or even required by some publishers, it is not possible to fully occupy the position of the twenty-first-century author. What does this look like? And do 'I' control the meanings produced? For example, when engaging in social media activity as 'Liz Flanagan', I work within certain parameters. Since *Eden Summer* is set in my home town, I often post photographs of the landscape here. I tend to focus on the rural rather than the urban landscape, a fact which can be read as a visual citation of the literary and landscape inheritance discussed above. Aware of an implied reader of social media who may also be a teen, I censor myself to an extent: largely avoiding profanity and offering only positive comments on others' creative work. I frequently share publishing and writing opportunities, merging my digital authorial self 'Liz Flanagan' with my teaching and mentoring persona in my real-world professional role, although I do not hide my political leanings. I am aware of a somewhat fluid demarcation between my personal life and my authorial life, complicated by the growing circle of digital 'friends' who are also writers. I rarely share photos or information about my family, and I maintain a separate 'author page' on Facebook which is entirely devoted to my publishing activity. My 'author self' profile pictures are taken by a professional photographer, a choice which is also an attempted manipulation of visual codes, an aiming for connotations of quality.

Here follow several of those online activities:



Figure 9: Tweet from {at the time} broadsheet literary editor, Emily Drabble



TEENAGE & YA

LIZ FLANAGAN
EDEN SUMMER
DAVID FICKLING,
7TH, £10.99, HB,
9781910989074

New to the DFB list, Flanagan makes her YA début with a literary thriller which had me reading late into the night. Shy, gothy Jess and popular Eden are best friends who have supported each other through bullying, death, love and heartbreak. But when Eden goes missing, Jess embarks on an urgent quest to find her in the vividly drawn West Yorkshire landscape, realising her friend may have had secrets. A truly gripping plot is combined with beautiful, emotionally rich writing.

Figure 10: A review from online and print trade journal *The Bookseller*



Liz Flanagan
@lizziebooks

Teaching, writing, chasing a PhD. Debut YA novel EDEN SUMMER forthcoming July 2016 from @DFB_storyhouse. Rep'd by Ben Illis: the-bia.com.

📍 Hebden Bridge lizflanagan.co.uk

1.973 FOLLOWING 2.086 FOLLOWERS

Tweets Media Likes

★ Pinned Tweet

Liz Flanagan @lizziebooks 6d
I have finished copies of my book!
And it's so pretty. Much 🙌 &
thanks to all @DFB_storyhouse
🍷 🍷 ❤️ ❤️

Figure 11: above, Twitter profile for Liz Flanagan, June 2016

I would argue that even though ‘I’ enact some of these activities, attempting to manipulate this set of visual and linguistic codes, meanings may quickly proliferate and exceed any control I might think I have. Following Barthes, we understand that ‘the claim to decipher a text becomes quite futile’ (Barthes 1977: 146) as is the claim to ‘author’ one, if we move now to a digital context. In such a context, it is easier than ever before to retweet, to manipulate images or hijack hashtags. It therefore seems evident that meanings ‘blend and clash’ to an even greater extent online. There, in the public space of the digital self, language and image can be quoted, commented on and reposted in seconds, becoming text-within-text in a way that evades control. Any rueful reader of critical ‘below the line’ comments on blog posts is familiar with the pang of being misunderstood in a digital context. Resistant readings can spread like wildfire online. Hashtags created for high-profile marketing campaigns may be recruited for subversive effect. Tweets may be retweeted in a way that creates precisely the opposite effect to the original reading, in this febrile and fast-moving context. Different meanings result and in turn produce more texts which in turn produce more meanings in a spiralling repetitive evolution: one without a controlling individual, except, perhaps in part, the algorithms of the platforms that disseminate them.

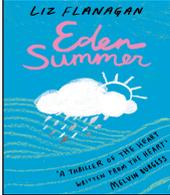
A publisher may try to control this process by producing texts with the ‘stamp of authority’, e.g. a press release on headed paper, with a quote from the publisher, see below:

d b
David Fickling Books

EDEN SUMMER

Liz Flanagan
Publishing in hardback from David Fickling Books on 7th July 2016, priced £10.99

A stunning debut about friendship, loss and finding yourself in the midst of tragedy.



LIZ FLANAGAN
Eden Summer
A THRILLER OF THE HEART
WRITTEN FROM THE HEART
BY MELVIN BURGESS

"A powerful exploration of the extraordinary power of friendship, both truthful and intense. It's that rare and wonderful thing: a thriller of the heart, written from the heart, that hits home straight to the heart."
- Melvin Burgess, Carnegie Medal winning author of *Junk*

"Dazzling. Utterly gripping. Writing so fresh every chapter leaves you gasping for air and SO tautly plotted it hurts. If you're going to read one book about the true nature of friendship let it be EDEN SUMMER."
- Brian Conaghan, Carnegie Medal shortlisted author of *When Mr Dog Bites*

"My mind will not accept the possibility that Eden could be dead, now or ever. Stopped. The end. Nothing. No. My best friend is too alive. Too everything. She can't just disappear. What happens to all her Eden-ness? What the hell happens to me, without her?"

It starts like any other day for Jess – get up, plaster on black eyeliner, cover up her tattoos and head to school. But it isn't any other day: Eden has gone missing. And Jess knows she has to do everything in her power to try to find her best friend before the unthinkable happens. So Jess starts to retrace the steps of the summer they've just spent together. And she starts to notice things she didn't notice before.... She starts to question what she thought Eden's summer had been...

Set in the beautifully described stunning countryside of West Yorkshire, this is a tense and thrilling journey through friendship, loss, betrayal and self discovery.

"Liz is a special and rare new voice, she captures the very essence of what it is to be a teenager. The heartache, the trauma, the lies and the love between friends. This book will make you cry, but it will also remind you that for every tear in life there are some of the greatest moments of joy..." – David Fickling



About the Author: Liz lives in Hebden Bridge with her husband and two daughters. She used to be Centre Director at the Ted Hughes Arvon Centre, and previously worked in children's book publishing. She's currently studying for a PhD in Creative Writing at Leeds Trinity University. *Eden Summer* is inspired by Liz's own experiences of loss. @lizziebooks

Liz Flanagan is available for interview and to write features. For further information please contact Carolyn McGlone, PR Manager: carolyn@davidficklingbooks.com; 01865 339 008

Figure 12: Publisher's press release for *Eden Summer*

Another recognised method of creating intertextual references, to circulate existing cultural weight, is by inviting award-winning authors to write testimonials and book-cover quotes, as used in the image above. Interestingly, since publishing *Eden Summer*, I have been invited to provide a testimonial quote for the 2017 paperback edition of *The Stars at Oktober Bend* by Glenda Millard, cited above, an act which can be read as identifying certain similarities between our work, but which also in turn bestows meaning upon the quoting author, as someone whose opinion in such matters is worth sharing: a layer of meaning I had not previously considered.

However, as with any text, subversive readings of all such material are yet possible. The position of the reader is key to the meanings produced. Teachers, parents, librarians and booksellers are the 'gatekeepers' who make initial value judgements which directly affect the stream of titles made available to young adult readers, and they may read reviews, book jackets, press releases and prize announcements in particular ways. As an adult reader of YA fiction, I find my reading selection influenced by reviews and prizes, although not necessarily in straightforward ways. However, young adult readers themselves may read such activities differently or disregard them altogether. Young adult readers occupy

different social and cultural locations, in which a peer's word-of-mouth recommendation, or a blogger's or Booktuber's opinion may have more value than a traditionally published broadsheet book review. These activities also constitute the authorial persona, but they are created or staged by others, some of whom might operate at the margin of the publishing industry or outside it altogether. Online platforms such as Goodreads or Amazon allow readers to post feedback of any kind, visible to anyone who cares to search, and which can be deciphered in order to produce sets of meanings flowing around and between the fictional text and the persona of its 'creator'.

To conclude, in this historical moment, in the year after my novel is published, the authorial persona 'Liz Flanagan' is being written and re-written, in overlapping, sometimes citational ways, across different digital contexts, using textual and visual elements. This persona is created in and through these discursive activities, and I suggest that this construct is a performative one, unstable and evolving through repetition. To conclude this section, I will return again to the elegance of a visual metaphor. The creative persona could be likened to a murmuration of starlings: a body made up of multiple elements, constantly moving and changing, yet with the temporary impression of cohesion and purpose. And from all of these stagings, there emerges a crucial outcome: that the way the author is staged changes the way the book is read.

Conclusion

In conclusion then, returning full circle to where I began, with Graham Mort's contention that 'in creative writing, knowledge is generated through textual production ... *and* through the simultaneous process of reflection that considers aesthetic effect, technique ... anticipation, awareness and accommodation of the reader' (Mort 2013:209), the evidence from my research strongly suggests that in creative writing focusing on YA literature, the latter three elements are of primary importance and for this project were bound up with textual production from the start. The features of YA fiction offered by Waller and used as a working definition here, including a driving plot, concern with adolescent experience, the use of a teenage protagonist, and appropriate language, are all inextricably linked to this anticipation of a teenage reader, even if not all readers of YA fiction are teenage. By examining the relatively unexplored intersection between current CW theory and YA literature, I have used the creation of my novel *Eden Summer* to discuss how the defining characteristics of this literary category did indeed shape the process of writing it, producing the new knowledge generated through the course of the study and offered here.

At the start of this project, the 'anticipation of a teenage reader' was purely theoretical. On the one hand, it shaped both conscious and unconscious decision-making around character and plot, and the linguistic, structural and thematic specificities of the work; but on the other hand, I did not dare to anticipate *actual* teenage readers. For my theoretical future teenage readers, I was motivated to take greater risks and undertake more challenging technical tasks in the writing of *Eden Summer*, with the safety net of working in an academic setting with financial, practical and creative supports in place. I welcomed the opportunity for more profound reflection on my creative process, and responded eagerly to my early reading on the subject of the creative-critical feedback loop.

The result is contained here, in the pages of the thesis and the accompanying draft of the creative work, but there are two further elements that have been produced as a result of these intense three years of practice-led doctoral study. If, as Iser argues, 'the convergence of text and reader brings the literary work into existence' (Iser 1974:275), does this convergence also bring

the author into existence? As suggested in part 3.2, using narrative and discursive theory, the young adult author is written in and through various digital processes connected with publishing in the twenty-first century. In addition, if, as Tondeur claims, the ‘exegesis is always auto-ethnographic’ (Tondeur 2017:2), could it also be that the exegesis is also performative, enacting the creation of a new ‘self-in-progress’, that of the practice-researcher? If the process of undergoing this study can be summed up through Tondeur’s equation: ‘risk + constraint + play = change. Creativity brings change of some kind, and this creative change occurs at either an individual or a community level’ (Tondeur 2017:12) then what does this change look like? For this study, through a series of processes as described here – including elements of risk, constraint and play – creative change has occurred: *Eden Summer* exists as a book in the world and this exegesis exists as the thesis currently being read, both of which point to or enact two further elements. These are the authorial persona ‘Liz Flanagan’, being written across digital platforms; and the persona of ‘Liz / Elizabeth Flanagan’ the doctoral researcher, being written through the presentation of this work at conferences and the process of judgement and examination which follows submission of this thesis. If the years of creative-critical research are viewed in this way as a process of becoming, the question of becoming the YA author-researcher is thus aligned with the condition of young adulthood itself, one of iterative change and ongoing development.

It is therefore fitting to return to the anticipated teenage reader with these final words. No longer theoretical or purely imagined, one effect of this study is that it has brought actual, individual teenage readers whom I encounter in the real world and online, at book-signings, award ceremonies or conferences, and who respond to my work with detailed reviews about what worked or didn’t work in *Eden Summer* for them. If I can listen, reflect and absorb this information from teenage readers, this could be the most useful feedback loop of all, as I move forwards and consider future creative projects exploring and extending the landscape of current British YA fiction. This, then, is how the teenage outsider is finally incorporated: through listening, through reflection, and through the production of future creative work.

Appendix

Extracts from creative journal, in reverse order (edited for relevance and demonstration of the constant switching between thinking, prewriting, walking, doodling, writing longhand, typing up, editing on screen, editing hard copy, reading on e-reader, etc)

20th March 2015

I'm on a roll now, with momentum. I did more editing on hard copy, followed by taking in corrections, adding little emphasis and changes throughout.

Read on Kindle, to give distance, so it can be read like any book.

Kept notes, made more corrections.

17th March

Read and edited to date. Think it's OK. This gave momentum – moved through editing next section, right up to new bit after the attack. Pre-writing: did diagram on A4 paper.

Took it 'for a think...' while walking the dog.

I ended up using a bit of an old draft, changing it, changing tense and adding detail. Emailed a doctor/writer colleague to check medical facts. This meant approaching it in a whole new way. Had to rewrite all the sections after Jess's attack based on the info given. Back to longhand, then typing up.

Monday 16th March

Mondays always tricky and today no exception, tired and distracted. Read hard copy pp1-61, edited hard copy and took in edits. Wrote new scene longhand. Not sure if I'm missing something. Took it for a daydream, added in a new emphasis. Typed it up, printed out new section and up to p90.

11th March

Slowed down again, re-reading yesterday's new opening, thinking about the flow of scenes. Think I have to write more from scratch, whole new scene and then stitch it into the old scene, para by para, keeping the best of the old and swapping rest for new. Seems quite long job, slightly disheartened.

10th March

After a certain amount of procrastination, re-wrote opening scene longhand after planning in head on way home. Then moved sections around and cut bits, ready to redraft to new structure.

Feeling a bit anxious about dismembering, but pleased with the new opening, although since it's very new it's much less polished and will need lots of tinkering.

Printed out first 30 pages with scenes in new order to read and edit hard copy. Scissors and much scribbling. Feels good.

29 January – read through draft. Mulled over interview with David Almond, around finding time to play and scribble throughout a draft, not just at the beginning. Perhaps this week I made time for scribbling, and it feels like a good direction. Notes on backs of envelopes, in workshops, on trains. Letting characters speak in monologues that may never be written up, but there are nuggets in each that will be used.

How to retain this, going forward?

22/01/2015

To begin with, I was concerned about pacing, so I read over the past few chapters.

I plotted the next scene longhand – a few flashbacks could work here, smaller, quicker, keep pace moving. I'm worried about saggy middle in general here, whether the episodic thing is working, or needs breaking up.

I started three new scenes, longhand intercutting flashback. Needs to be typed up next Mon. Think about how to increase tension in this section – new piece of info.

21/1/15

Better start today. Reading and taking in edits from the travelling days' notes. Then typed up new scene from yesterday, editing previous one substantially to make sense of it.

Last night's writing group helped me feel tuned in to the characters again – I wrote new scenes in their voices. They won't make the final edit, but it helped me 'flesh out' the characters.

Word count now over 31,000, which feels like progress and momentum.

It still feels important to recognize need to slow down when there's a risk of disconnect. Is the chapter plan too rigid? Are the characters becoming flat? What surprises could happen here?

15/1/15

Slower day. Mainly working on yesterday's writing which didn't feel right: reading, editing, taking bits out. Last night as I was falling asleep I had two ideas that I scribbled down and that gave me somewhere to start today.

I need now to consider the shape of the chapters, the beats within them as well as how they fit in the overall shape.

Not much word count added, but felt better by the end of it.

12/01/2015

First day of creative writing work after long Christmas break and meeting with supervisors in Dec and last week's blogging/reading/admin week.

First thing I found concentration a real problem. I procrastinated till 10.30am, although had read through and re-formatted ms over weekend to be ready to go.

Worked in short bursts, starting with editing previous weak sections and tweaking line-by-line level.

When I came to new section, I panicked a bit. Cut-and-pasted phrases from the treatment that I didn't want to part with, till I'd gained confidence and momentum.

Work felt bitty and disjointed. Finally started feeling smoother from around 3pm, when I remembered James Scott Bell's chapter on action-reaction within chapters and tried to focus on this chapter's purpose.

Concluded that today's work will need revision, but for now, momentum has been gathered and I've felt my way back into my character's head, so that's OK for a first day's work.

Long break over xmas

11th Dec 14

On train to LTU, had great session thinking about characters, and letting them come to life in my mind. Capturing this in notebook, longhand.

Consider what helps most with imagining a new section – lucid dreaming and train journeys? Time and space, containment – i.e. can't go do something else, can't actually write formally, no other distractions, nothing else to go and do.

Movement frees the mind, unusual connections, keeping the mind moving, not

sticking on anything. Something about provisionality and motion, dream-like and hallucinatory quality.

27 November 2014

Output – up to 12,120, and today’s word count is nearly all brand new.

I had better focus today and felt very positive after a run of good days, building momentum. I wrote the new scene from scratch longhand.

Had to go to school at 11.15, and the walk gave me chance to consider and realize I missed something crucial at the start of the scene. In this story, this version, Jess is facing Eden for the first time since she and Liam got together at the party, so Jess must be racked with guilt and hypocrisy.

Got back at 1pm, re-wrote beginning, then typed up whole scene. Printed off work to date and pencil-edited on hard copy.

24/11/2014

Output – 1450 words

Following supervision last week I felt eager to start writing but also fearful of ‘wrecking’ the project with actual words of a proper draft.

Did morning pages 6.15am, so I could start writing 9.40am after walk, tidy up, weekly planning.

I began by writing new prologue. Wrote longhand in notebook sitting on bed to avoid ‘censor’ then typed up substantially different draft into laptop at desk. Did light editing.

Broke for coffee, then wrote longhand draft of ch1 also not at the desk, to try to avoid feeling of it being ‘proper’ or daunting. Felt disappointed with this draft.

Felt previous ‘treatment’ had been stronger, but felt conflicted by advice to try working up entirely fresh draft.

Fell asleep for twenty minutes. Had waking dream about Jess’s mother giving strong advice.

On waking, read old ‘treatment’, read final section of YA novel by Eva Ibbotson. Thinking about opening chapters, so I read the opening lines of a few favourite YA novels, including E Lockhart’s *We Were Liars*.

Made cup of tea and tinkered with this draft till lunch.

Starting typing up longhand draft, changing substantially. Felt better. Went for 30 min walk. Finished to end ch 2, incorporating some phrases from first treatment.

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By 4pm switched to admin, emails, etc.

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