

THE RUNAWAY

THE
RUN
AWAY

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Claire Wong



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*to my grandma,
for teaching me the magic of stories*

and the beauty of words



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PART ONE

KEY



CHAPTER ONE

RHIANNON

I never meant for this to happen.

I could still turn back before I pass the last houses and really have to commit to this. I could make the walk home along Church Road and onto Heol-y-Nant, where the window ledges are bright with marigolds at this time of year. But this is not how it was supposed to be.

I'd expected a shout to follow me down the road. I scripted the whole apology, and prepared how I would react on receiving it. I'd pictured it so perfectly: Aunty Di running after me, my cousins hugging me so that we look like a real family. People would have stopped what they were doing and turned to watch as we made our way back through the village. The twitch of net curtains would have betrayed the nosiness of our elderly neighbours. But I would have smiled reassuringly to all the families I know on these roads, as if to say *don't worry, I'm not going anywhere after all*, and I would have seen the relief in their eyes. I'd be known after today as "Rhiannon, who we almost lost forever". And I would have been far too gracious and sensitive to tell them it should be "whom".

I would have let them persuade me to come home, if anyone had followed me. But nobody came. Instead, here I am, already at the edge of the village, with Dyrys Wood spread out across the hills before me.

I don't understand how no one has noticed, but I won't go back, not after everything that has happened. I grit my teeth and walk

on. The road slopes down towards the farmhouse where the Evanses live, and after that the river snakes southward, and the green valley rises back up and then there's nothing but Dyrys Wood as far as the eye can see. If we'd grown up in another age, we'd have probably been allowed to play there as children, but these days no one thinks they are safe, and Auntie Di worries more than anyone I've ever met – not that she would ever admit it. So of course I was never allowed there without an adult to walk with me and call me back to the path when I ran off. Maybe that is why I find myself heading straight for the woods now.

Shifting the shoulder straps of my rucksack, which is already uncomfortable, I keep walking down the road, though it is becoming more of a muddy track now, and my feet are sinking deeper with every step. Not many cars come this way – just the occasional farm vehicle or some lost hikers looking for their campsite. Most turn back before the bridge anyway, because it's so narrow. People like to say that our village, Llandymna, was never built for an age like this: nothing seems to cope well with cars or technology round here. Visitors call it quaint; everyone at school calls it boring.

I stop on the bridge for a moment and look around the valley. It's peaceful here. The only sounds are birdsong and farm animals in the distance. I breathe in the clear air deeply and lean forward over the low wall. Blood rushes to my head as I tilt my weight down to get a better look at the waters ambling below. They say the basin this river runs through was first hewn out by ice millions of years ago, carved from its slow crawl across our land. The stones that make this bridge might be that old. They might remember the years when everything was frozen white, before sheep and humans and green grass came to cover the slopes.

Thinking about the oldness of everything calms me, and suddenly this afternoon's row with my aunt seems less important. Not so unimportant that I will forget it, mind. She treats me like a child, and it's time she learned to take my threats seriously. If I go back, she will think I didn't mean it when I warned her I'd run

away from home. I thought I meant it at the time, but standing here on the bridge I feel so unprepared for whatever follows next that I wonder how sincere I really was. I will never let anyone else ask that question, though. I have made up my mind: I am never going back.

I might still be visible from the village here. Someone walking down the west side of Llandymna, by the White Lion pub, could see me if they looked out towards the hills. I need to get out of sight if I'm to properly disappear. The dark green of Dyrys Wood stretches, rich and inviting, up to the horizon, and I am drawn to it.

I run up to the forest that unfolds ahead, climbing over the stile in the low fence that keeps sheep from straying there, passing through the gateway of those first few tree trunks, and overhead the sky is suddenly gone. The forest is cool, the air rich with the smell of earth.

There's a rough pathway, which I follow between the trees. Everyone knows that Dyrys Wood stretches for miles ahead and that you can walk and walk for ages here, and that's even if you manage not to get lost from the path. Even its name, *Dyrys*, means something wild and entangling. I picture briars and thorns gathering round me, like the enchanted forest in *Sleeping Beauty*. Not that I look like anything out of a fairy tale, with my rucksack on my shoulders, and my phone sticking out of the pocket of my jeans. I have always loved fairy tales, even now at the age when I am supposed to be too grown up and cynical for them. I love how the characters get to be heroes, no matter what they are working with: whether it's because they are clever, or kind, or brave, things work out for them. Whereas in real life, you can be as clever or brave as you like, and you might still live with a guardian who sees you as nothing but a nuisance and punishes you every time you disagree with her. Or you might be stuck in a tiny, inward-looking village where people gossip and interfere and your so-called friends are fickle with their support, and life never hands you the adventure or rewards that you hear about in stories.

I put my hand to my throat, and find the familiar shape of the

pendant I always wear – a chain with three charms on it: a key, a rose and a book. Each one is an emblem from a fairy tale. I wear it because it feels like carrying a little bit of another world, a better world, with me wherever I go.

The path through the wood hasn't been cleared for some time, and thorny stems have crept out to tear at my clothes. It seems to make little difference whether I walk along the path or over the forest floor, so I turn away from the narrow road and choose my own route. A startled blackbird flies away with a trilling alarm call.

My pocket buzzes. I take out my phone and see it's Aunty Di calling. She must have finally realized I have gone. This is quite slow to start worrying, by her standards. I know what she'll say. I can already imagine her voice, telling me off for making such a fuss, demanding I come home at once. As I stare at the screen, I know that if I answer this call I will inevitably end up going back. And if I ignore it? Others will worry too. They will finally pay for how they treated me. They will no longer be able to laugh at me, or ignore me. All the peacefulness I felt standing on the bridge minutes ago ebbs away and I am only angry now as I think of the people I have just left behind. I want them to miss me. I won't let them mock me by going back and being accused of melodramatic empty threats. I let the phone keep ringing.

LLANDYMNNA

Tom Davies knows his sergeant would advise against this, but he knocks on the next door all the same. Either you are on duty, or you are not. Taking on unofficial search parties confuses things: it blurs the boundaries, which a young police officer at the start of his career cannot afford to do. But Diana seems worried. It can do no harm for him to ask some questions this afternoon. Besides, it is a quiet day in the village; in Llandymna, Tom reflects, every day is a quiet day.

It takes a while for this door to be answered, but eventually it opens, and a small white-haired woman invites him inside. Maebh O'Donnell has wrapped herself in a plaid shawl though it is the height of summer, for Llandymna's old stone cottages never really lose the chill that clings to their walls. Tom has to duck under the doorway as he enters the house. He always feels just a little too tall and gangly to be properly comfortable in his surroundings. Maebh offers him a cup of tea, which he declines. She returns to her armchair by the fireplace, lowering herself with knees that groan in protest at the strain put on them. Movement is something Maebh often views as an unnecessary luxury these days.

"Well then, what can I do for you, Thomas Davies?" she asks in the song-like Irish accent she has never lost, though she has spent most of her life in this little village on the side of a hill in Wales. Her eyes are sharp and searching, and Tom wonders if she already guesses the answer to her own question. She has known him since he was a child, and even though Tom has finished his two-year probation with the police force now, he knows Maebh still sees the boy who once crashed his bike, stabilizers and all, into her doorstep.

"I came to ask if you have seen Rhiannon today."

Maebh sits back slowly and clicks her teeth. "She is missing, then?"

"She isn't at home, and Diana is worrying. I hoped she'd be here."

"Rhiannon hasn't been to visit me lately. I take it there's been another row, then?"

"You know Diana. She isn't going to admit that in front of me," Tom answers, and Maebh nods. Diana is a self-possessed woman with a lot of influence in the village, but her relationship with her niece shows cracks in her polished image. Nobody would dare suggest that she actually resents caring for her late sister's daughter, but Rhiannon's behaviour gives gossips something to chew on as they imagine what shouts and insults must be exchanged in that house.

“But if they *have* argued,” Tom continues, “Rhiannon may have just gone to get some space, and she could be back home in an hour or two.”

“And yet here you are, on your day off, asking me if I’ve seen her, and wearing that look of concern on your face.”

Tom sighs. Maebh has a particular way of seeing through people with her steely blue eyes, and getting to the hidden heart of a matter with a single incisive comment.

“You know what she can be like,” he replies. “She’s a teenager with a fiery temper, and apparently a grudge to carry against almost everyone she knows. I don’t know what she might do to prove a point.”

“I imagine she’d do a great deal,” Maebh muses. “I believe she’s threatened to run away from home before now?”

“There wasn’t much she didn’t threaten at the school fundraiser last week.”

“Ay, I heard about that.”

“Could she be avoiding everyone out of embarrassment over that? She did verbally abuse most of the people there, after all. And significantly damaged one of the school’s display cabinets. I had to attend the scene after that, in an official capacity. The headteacher considered pressing charges for vandalism.”

Maebh barks out a laugh. “As if that would help! Besides, I can’t say I really blame her.”

Tom does not react to this last part. He has grown used to the fact that, at unexpected moments, Maebh will utter a sudden attack on the people of the village. He does not know why exactly, and nothing has ever come of it. When he compares her to Rhiannon, he wonders if there might not be the same rebellious streak in both of them.

“Do you have any idea where she might be?”

“She never spoke to me of planning to go somewhere, if that’s what you mean, and she talked to me about most things. I have enjoyed her visits. We always have so much to talk about, she and

I. Rhiannon understands the importance of stories, and you know how I do like storytelling!”

Maebh speaks lightly, but her bony fingers twist themselves up in the folds of her shawl, as if another, deeper worry is gnawing its way to the surface.

RHIANNON

If I’d been born into this community a thousand years ago, they would probably have decided I was a changeling. Even when you account for the fact that I was brought up by my aunt, even when you consider my mother’s wild spirit, it would still be easier to explain away my inability to fit in here by saying the fairies swapped me for the real Rhiannon early on, during that stage when all babies look pretty much the same, even if no one will admit it. We could have imagined her: the real Rhiannon, out there somewhere, dutifully fitting in with her surroundings, doing her homework on time and asking no difficult questions while I, the imposter, use my fairy-magic to dream much too dangerously, and to see far too much of what is rotten in the very fabric of the village, while others go on blindly.

Nobody believes in changelings any more, though we do still like to be able to explain things simply. I wonder if knowing my mother better would explain me.

I like to think she had something of the fey spirit in her. When people who remember her better than me talk of her, she is always described as headstrong and irresponsible, which, if you think about it, are just different words for untameable. The wind is untameable, and so are rivers, and there is something poetic in that. But in my mother, I am told, there was more trouble than poetry.

She was Auntie Di’s sister. She loved being outdoors, and never walked anywhere if she could run or skip, even after she outgrew the age when people allow you such indulgences. I like to picture

her racing along the hedge-lined track to the church on Sundays, with Diana walking all the slower and more stately to indicate that she was not participating in this behaviour. Di worries about what people think. She wants me to worry too. *“Brush your hair, Rhiannon. Don’t you know you’ll look a state to your school friends if you go like that?”* I don’t think my mother spent hours untangling and rearranging her chestnut curls, even after she met my father.

I forgot where I was for a moment there. I do that sometimes. Normally, it’s hard to come back to the real world when my thoughts have taken me away, but today the fresh air and the birdsong make a more refreshing setting than my tiny bedroom. I am sitting in a clearing in the forest. Opposite me, two trees grow a few paces from one another and a dead branch has come to stretch from one to the other, caught in the boughs. I wonder if I could use them to build a shelter. If I had some kind of blanket, I would hang it over the branch, like a child’s den.

Going home is out of the question, obviously, but I don’t exactly know what I’m going to do instead. I didn’t technically plan or pack for this outcome. As I left, I grabbed the bag on the landing because I figured that if you storm out without taking anything with you, you’re just an angry person going for a walk; but if you’re carrying some kind of luggage, then you’re someone who is leaving for good. It’s my old camping bag – not the full-size one with all the really useful stuff, but the smaller one Diana pulled out of the loft, saying that since I never did get round to doing the Duke of Edinburgh award with the rest of my class, we would have to get rid of all this clutter. It was taking up valuable space for my cousins’ finger paintings or something, and besides, no one from Llandymna would be mad enough to choose to go camping. The farmers round here tend not to take holidays: they can’t afford to leave their animals alone, and those who can leave for a week in the summer usually make the three-hour drive to the coast for a picnic where everything tastes of sand. Mind you, Hannah Bromley from my English lit class went to the Caribbean with her parents last

summer, and she came back all tanned and told the rest of us we hadn’t seen real beaches if we’d never been to the Bahamas.

Now that I think about it, I wish I’d brought my other bag: the brown one I take to school. That one has my purse in it. I could have bought a bus ticket to a nearby town – one with its own train station. Then I could have gone just about anywhere, although still not the Caribbean beaches, because Hannah Bromley says tickets cost hundreds of pounds, and that’s a lot more than I have. I suppose this makes me sort of homeless, but not like people in big towns and cities, who sit in the doorways of disused shops. I would be scared to be homeless in a city, where anyone could get to you, but if I live out here in the woods, that will feel safer. If I have to sleep outside, I would much rather it be somewhere remote. In big towns you have to deal with muggers and weirdos, and all the homeless women I’ve ever seen have had dogs, which have probably been trained to protect them. Here, your worst enemies are the cold and the rain, and any Llandymna native can handle them.

I am almost an hour’s walk from home here. The clock on my phone tells me this, which is about all it’s useful for now, as the bars of signal have disappeared. You never quite know whether your phone is going to work in Llandymna. There are a couple of hills north of the village where reception is strong: people sometimes go up there for calls if they don’t have a landline, like when Elsie Jones speaks to her brother in Canada. Jenny Adams, who joined my history class after her parents moved from Bristol to Bryndu, which is about ten miles away from Llandymna and where my school is, said she couldn’t believe people still lived in these conditions. I told her she was narrow minded and stuck up for thinking her life experience was the only normal and right one. She hasn’t spoken a word to me since.

It’s grown cooler while I’ve been sitting here. I need to work out what on earth I’m going to do for shelter, and what I’m going to eat tonight, or my new adventure is going to be cut short very abruptly.

I open up my rucksack, my stage prop that was meant to

convince people they had nearly lost me, and empty out its contents, hoping there will be something useful in there. Most of the space is taken up with my sleeping bag. After that, out falls Uncle Ed's folding knife, and a lighter which was for starting up the gas stove, except the stove isn't here. It must still be in the attic. There's a small and flimsy saucepan, the sort where the handle folds in to save space. Finally, some crushed remains of rations from my last school hike fall out: an empty water bottle I forgot to throw away and several crumpled packets of dried couscous, which our teachers recommended as good outdoor food. No tent, of course; no waterproof clothes except for the jacket I am wearing, no torch: I could kick myself for not having planned this better. But of course, I had no choice. It was other people who goaded me into leaving so abruptly. This is not my fault. I wrap up the food again. If I can't see it, I will feel less hungry and then it will last longer. Instead I focus on the empty bottle, which I press and remould in my hands until it has just about returned to its original shape. If I could find a stream, I could collect water, and that would be a good step towards surviving my first day in Dyrys.

Standing up, I listen for any sound resembling running water. For a moment I think I hear it, but then a magpie drops from a tree nearby in a cackling bundle of black and white feathers. He hops away, squawking indignantly, and now all I can hear is the birds talking to one another, oblivious to my silence. Focusing again, I concentrate on searching through every level of sound about me, and eventually I pick it out again: something faint and light, like a shiver running over the stones of the earth. I gather my belongings and run towards the sound.

I run because it feels good to have a direction. There's no one else around except the birds and chattering squirrels. As I move swiftly between trees, it's as though everything here is enchanted, and I am part of the spell. The earth that is dislodged by my feet and kicked up as I run starts to shimmer like bronze dust in my wake. Then suddenly, *thud!* I'm on the ground, tripped by a tree root.

I clamber back to my feet and brush the dirt from my hands. As soon as I find this stream, I'll wash them properly. I walk slowly now, taking care to keep my footing where the ground slopes down, where it's riddled with tree roots or concealed by brambles. The sound of the stream is growing clearer with every step, and as I gingerly sidestep a tangle of holly that blocks my path, I finally see it before me.

It glints silver in the sunlight. Trees bend over it, as if trying to catch a vain glimpse of their reflection. The stream arcs in either direction away from me, gently drawing itself into a broad crescent and disappearing into the depths of the forest. Triumphant at having found it using only my keen sense of hearing, I bathe my arms up to the elbows in its cool waters, and then take a first well-earned drink, scooping up the water in my hands and lapping it up quickly before it can trickle away.

I look up from the stream and see at once that on the other bank, partially concealed by greenery, there is a little house, or rather the ruins of a house. A tangle of moss and ivy hangs off its stone walls, and the few weathered fragments of a wooden wheel lying nearby tell me that this was once the watermill. It must have been abandoned for over a hundred years, after the river shrank to a stream and no longer carried enough strength to turn the mill wheel.

I inspect it thoroughly, searching for breaks in the stones or gaps in the roof. There are plenty. I pluck an ivy leaf from its tendril clinging to the north side, and hold it in the palm of my hand. From a distance, it looks deep green and perfect, but bringing it closer I can now see the tiny veins that crack across its surface and the brown marks around the edge. Disappointed, I allow it to fall to the ground and do not watch to see where it lands. I suppose this place will do, for now.



CHAPTER TWO

LLANDYMNA

Diana rearranges the pans on the draining board a third time, and the kitchen rings with metallic slams. Next, she will tidy the cupboards. She has been meaning to do this for a month now. Everything must be taken out, sorted and wedged back into the available space. It is the only piece of housework left that is likely to hold her attention today. Quickly and expertly, she twists her dark hair into a knot that she pins to the back of her head with a silver clip. She has mastered the art of sweeping it all up in one motion so that not a single strand can get in her way while she works.

The other side of the back door, Owen, her youngest, sits on the patio and plays with the snails that crawl within reach. Occasionally he grinds his unfamiliar new teeth, somehow sensing that all is not right in his little world today.

Diana props open the kitchen door so that she can watch her son while listening for the doorbell. Normally, she insists on having all the doors in the house closed, so it takes her a while to find anything heavy enough to hold it open. From here she thinks she can hear a knock or approaching footsteps, but the sound doesn't turn into anything material. She goes back to her work, deliberately drowning out any noise that she might mistake for Tom Davies' return. She sets the jam jars in sensible rows on the counter, takes inventory of her supply of flours, and discovers that she will need more soon, as there is no question of her not baking something for Joan Perry's cake sale. Governments might fail, fire might rain down

from the sky, but Diana's coffee and walnut sponge is something you can count on.

The doorbell rings, and Diana throws a bag of caster sugar down onto the table, scoops up little Owen into his highchair, and answers it. Tom Davies stands on the step, next to his friend Callum Rees. Their faces tell her everything. Her heart seems to plummet into her stomach.

"Nothing?" she asks, losing her usual commanding tone in this simple question.

"Diana, I'm sorry," says Tom. "Nobody has seen anything. I take it you haven't heard from her?"

"No, I've been calling her but she isn't – I haven't managed to get through." Diana stops herself short of admitting that her niece is probably choosing not to answer her calls.

"If you're concerned for her safety, we could... I could investigate in a more formal capacity, if you want to report her as missing."

"Report her?" Diana repeats, with an incredulous laugh. "You make it sound as though my niece is a criminal, or an interesting piece of journalism! She could be on her way home from the library right now. She likes to go there. Perhaps she simply forgot the time while she was immersed in one of her books." She starts to speak faster as she weaves together this picture: a scenario that does not involve Rhiannon having stormed off after yet another shouting match.

"That's probably right," says Callum, even though they have already checked the library and found no sign of Rhiannon. He fears he will get dragged into an all-night search party for a teenager having a tantrum if he does not act quickly. "Once she realizes she's missing teatime, she'll come back."

He had been on his way to the pub to watch the match this afternoon when he met Tom on Church Road and somehow agreed to help him in his inquiries. He is still in his red shirt, despite having missed the entire game.

"But if she isn't answering her phone, it will be difficult to know that," Tom presses, knowing full well why Callum wants to stop the

search as soon as possible, but feeling less sure that he understands Diana's reaction. "I'm sure everything's fine, Diana, but if you are concerned, I can call the station right now."

"No need, Tom. I know it's your day off. As you say, everything is most likely fine. It's just that you can't be too careful where young people are involved. And I just want to know that Rhiannon is safe."

Her words sound measured, careful, almost rehearsed, but in her eyes is a flicker of a growing panic that she hopes the evening shadows will hide. Tom relents with a compromise.

"All right, but I think we should check by the gorge before we call it a day. It's the only steep enough drop around here for anyone to fall and hurt themselves. And we can search it before it gets dark. If she doesn't come home tonight, I strongly advise you to call the police. But you may have managed to speak to her before then."

No one looks fully appeased by this suggestion. Diana looks conflicted; Callum realizes he has been volunteered to go with Tom to the gorge, which means more walking. Neither can think of a more reasonable suggestion, though, so they all agree to this.

RHIANNON

It's getting late. I've moved all my belongings into the old mill house and unrolled my sleeping bag where the ground is flattest and least stony. Next I need to build a fire. It will keep me warm and scare away any animals that come creeping round at night. Not that I think there will be anything that dangerous in these woods. There used to be rumours of an enormous wildcat living in Dyrys, but no one really believes that unless a visitor is asking, in which case we say it's all true! Callum Rees told me he saw it once, and that it was the size of a panther, but I never believe anything he says. He just does whatever he thinks will make people like him. I think he would grow out of it much faster if his strategy was less successful, but he seems to have a lot of friends.

As the shadows grow longer, I start to think more about my safety. I know it's unlikely that I'll see anyone else out here, but what if I do? I'm a long way from the nearest house. Suppose someone wanted to rob me of the few possessions I have here? There would be no witnesses to stop them. I suddenly wonder how much of the feeling of safety most people have, day to day, comes from being near others, neighbours and friends, and knowing that if we stay within close range of just enough of them, chances are at least one will want to uphold the law rather than break it.

I pull a few stray branches and twigs together into a pile near the doorway of the mill house. Whatever door once stood there has long since rotted away. When the pile of wood looks about the right size, I take out the lighter and press my thumb down on the button. A yellow flame jumps out of the casing and I press it to the middle of the wood. Nothing happens at first, and then a thin twig catches fire. The flame runs the length of the twig, blackening its bark, and then fizzles out. I try again, holding the lighter to another twig this time, which just smokes feebly for a few seconds. On the third attempt, even less happens. The wood must be too rain-soaked to burn.

I can't believe I am struggling at the first hurdle. I should be able to build a fire! I went on one of those survival skills weekends they send youth groups on, and I was far better than anyone else on my team. Of course, it turned out everyone else thought that the point of the weekend was to "bond" and "build relationships", so from their perspective I was bottom of the class, but only because their criteria were stupid.

It must be the wrong sort of wood. The branches are probably too young and green or too old and rotten, or from a tree that does not burn so well. I will have to test different types of wood to find what burns best. Then I'll be able to heat water over the fire and use that to cook the food I've brought. Not tonight though. I am exhausted, and can go without eating if it means getting to rest sooner. I wrap myself up in the sleeping bag and for a split second

am struck by the sickening enormity of the decision I have made in leaving home, before tiredness overwhelms me and I curl up inside my sleeping bag.

The sun has set now. Between the dimly silhouetted trees are gaping spaces of darkness so black that it might almost be solid and heavy – something one could claw at in a moment of madness and force away to bring back the light. But this is stupid, I tell myself; just my imagination getting carried away. It's been a strange day, and I am tired. Yes, that's it. This uneasiness, this fear, is simply because I am half asleep already, almost in a dreamland, where everything is felt so much more intensely. I wriggle deeper into the sleeping bag and close my eyes.

*

LLANDYMNA

Tom and Callum walk into the White Lion just as the barman calls for last orders. Callum groans: for him, this is another cruel reminder of how much of his day has been taken up with a wild goose chase. He marches up to the bar with the look of a man who knows he has earned this drink. Tom does not follow; he has spotted Ifan and Nia Evans sitting at a nearby table, saving two seats for the search party.

"Evening," he says as he joins their table. "Thanks for waiting so late for us."

"Not at all," Nia says, though Tom has to strain to hear her voice over the background noise. "We've been worried about Rhiannon, haven't we?"

Ifan realizes a moment too late that this last part was addressed to him, and grunts an unconvincing agreement.

"I don't suppose you had any luck looking for her?" Nia continues.

“None,” Tom replies. “We asked around the whole village, and then we went up to the gorge, just in case she’d gone for a walk and fallen somewhere. But there’s no sign of her.”

“Poor girl.” Nia shakes her head sadly. “And poor Diana.”

The Evanses have lived in Llandymna their whole lives, and own the nearest farm to the village. As is the way in Llandymna, Ifan and Nia have become friends with Tom and Callum, not out of any real shared interests, but because they are close enough in age and they are simply here. That tends to be enough to build a bond of loyalty in this small village. Nia was in the same school year as Tom, and they used to take the bus to Bryndu High School together. She was generous and well liked back then, but Tom thinks she has become quieter since marrying Ifan. She has placed herself in the corner seat this evening, and sits with the perfect poise of someone tightly holding in their limbs, barely breathing for fear of trespassing onto someone else’s territory. You can tell, if you watch her for long enough, that Nia has resolved to squeeze her life into the smallest possible space, ever minimizing any trouble she might cause to others.

Ifan, by contrast, has planted himself squarely on an armed chair, and keeps one hand resting on the pint glass in front of him, his legs stretched out under the table. In another part of the world, Ifan Evans might be laughed at for his name, Tom reflects, though he is hardly a man to let others mock him. Yet Llandymna has already weathered the naming of Billy Williams after his father William Williams, who used to run the corner shop next to the church before Callum’s family took it over, so its inhabitants have accepted Ifan’s name without question.

“Poor Diana?” Callum joins them, setting a pint glass down emphatically. “She’s not the one who’s been traipsing round the fields all evening. I’ve been out there with a torch for more than an hour.”

He takes out his penknife, a recent birthday present, which he has taken to flicking open and shut distractedly in moments like

this. It seems to fit with the image he is trying to achieve.

“If you ask me,” Ifan says, “Diana should’ve expected this to happen one day. That Rhiannon’s her mother’s daughter after all.”

Ifan eyes each of the others to check that they agree with him. No contradiction is forthcoming, and this is encouragement enough for him to continue. In the corner of the pub, against the background murmur of last orders and other people’s conversations, Ifan reminds them of the stories of Elin Morgan, whose name has become a byword for losing touch with reality and your roots, living wildly and understanding nothing of consequences.

“Disappeared for years, she did, and then shows up back here, pregnant and unmarried. And then one night she leaves her child at home all alone, and goes out no one knows exactly where, except that she goes at such a speed that she overturns her car on the way and leaves her family to pick up the pieces.”

With such a mother, Ifan argues, and no father to speak of, how could anyone be surprised at how Rhiannon has turned out? Nia, who has helped Diana with babysitting ever since she became her niece’s legal guardian ten years ago, looks pained at the way her husband tells the story.

“But we don’t know for certain what has happened,” says Tom, when Ifan’s clear-cut assessment of the situation has finished unfolding.

“Well, I expect we’ll know tomorrow, when she’s come back to her nice warm home and a guaranteed hot meal.”

“I hope you’re right.”

“You don’t suppose,” Nia asks, “that she might have gone off to look for her father?”

“I think it’s one of the options we’ll have to start considering if there’s no sign of her tomorrow.”

“She’s a good girl really,” Nia says with a sigh, “but things have been very hard for her. She’s been through such a lot for someone so young.”

“Haven’t we all?” says Callum. Being the member of the group

who believes he has ostensibly suffered least in life so far, he is the most defensive on this subject. He kicks absent-mindedly at the chair legs and tries to look solemn.

Tom considers reminding Callum of how much more tragedy that family has experienced over the last ten years, first with Elin's death, then the death of Diana's husband Edwin two years ago, but thinks better of it. With both Callum and Ifan, it is worth choosing your battles wisely. Callum may be young and hotheaded, quick to see accusations at every turn, while Ifan is a little older and requires a certain level of respect from even his closest friends, but the end result is much the same. They do not like to be challenged when they have articulated an opinion. Tom glances at Ifan, and sees with relief that he is still relatively sober. Tonight will not be a night for helping him stagger back to the farm, or intervening in the arguments Ifan likes to search out after too many drinks.

The barman, having called for closing time ten minutes ago, is now tidying up as noisily as possible.

"Best drink up," Tom says.



CHAPTER THREE

RHIANNON

I know something is different even before I am fully awake. The sunlight falls warm on my eyelids, and the birds warble somewhere outside. But the surface under my shoulder blades is hard and uncomfortable; my bones ache with each shift and turn. The air is cold, too. I open my eyes and take it all in: the walls of moss and stone, the broken roof overhead, the leaf-strewn floor. So it wasn't a dream.

Drowsily, I stand up in this strange new space where every breath tastes of dew and smells of rich earth. The ruins of the old mill look strangely bare in the daylight, my belongings occupying one small corner of the space. Then, as if I've done this every morning of my life, I go down to the stream and wash my face in the glittering water.

Something in the clear morning light and the cool running water makes me hopeful about today. I feel as if here in Dyrys I might have a chance at the life I've wanted for so long. I will not be afraid. That's exactly what they would want, for me to be scared so I would go home and apologize. I shall live wonderfully instead. I shall do whatever I want, with no one to give me orders, and I shall depend on nobody.

With renewed determination, I look to the pile of twigs that I tried to turn into a campfire last night. This time I won't be beaten. I discard any bits of wood that feel damp, and pull together some

new timber from the forest floor. I pile the thinnest twigs together in the centre, surrounded by bigger branches. Then I hold the lighter in the middle of this pile until the twigs catch light. Quickly, I push the branches over them and watch as the flames lick round the bark, blackening it so that it curls away. The fire starts to take hold, and I stand with my hands on my hips and survey my work, not needing to hide the grin that is spreading over my face.

I take the little pan down to the stream and dip it into the water, then inspect the contents to make sure no leaves or bugs have been captured along with it. I carry the pan back up to the fire and realize I have nothing to balance it on. I could make some sort of tripod from a few branches, but that would catch fire before long and throw hot water over the flames. I resign myself to holding the pan over the fire until the water boils, and I sit on one of the larger pieces of the broken mill wheel, which lies on its side and has become home to moss and ferns over the years.

While I wait, swapping the pan from one hand to the other as my arms start to ache, my thoughts drift off again and I see myself as I might one day be: gathering my own food, keeping a look out from high up in the trees, living out here like some kind of Robin Hood figure. I picture travellers getting lost in these woods one day, until I appear out of nowhere to help them find their way, and the look of wonder on their faces will be enough to sustain my confidence that I have made the right choice. And so the stories will filter back to the neighbouring villages and towns, rumours of the girl who lives in the woods. Legends start with a kernel of truth, and mine will begin here.

I love the feeling of timelessness about this place. It feels as if Dyrys could easily be straight out of my imaginary world. I have my own place that I go to when I'm gazing out of a window or when I can't sleep for rage at how the day played out with all its ignorant people. When I'm there, I am not Rhiannon any more. I am not in Year 12 and thinking about university, or expected to cook fish fingers for my cousins while Diana goes to another community

council meeting so she can tell other people what to do and hope they will reward her by electing her as the next Chair. And, since I get to make the decisions in this world, I choose a version of me whose hair never frizzes after rain, and who dances amazingly and who knows how to speak in a way that people take her seriously.

While I inhabit this other world, I can cope with anything. Who cares what people say behind your back if you can go on adventures whenever you like? When Ellie Williams told everyone I had called her some names that were definitely outside my usual vocabulary, and petitioned the class to stop talking to me as a suitable punishment, I just ignored their silent stares by thinking about the book I was reading that week. It had glorious mountain ranges that needed scaling, and horrifying mysteries to solve along the way. I had no time for their childish concerns. I have lived out epic sagas in the time it takes Ellie Williams to decide what colour nail varnish best matches her shoes.

The water starts to bubble and boil, at last. As I tear open a packet of couscous and pour the contents in, I can't help but wonder how they make kettles heat water so fast, compared to this. I have no fork to eat it with, but I remember reading once that in Morocco they eat couscous without cutlery, rolling it together with their hands. I am so hungry this morning, I barely have the patience for my meal to cool down before I start scooping it up. In minutes, I have wolfed down the whole portion. As I swallow the last mouthful, I realize that I only have a couple more of these, and some cereal bars in the pocket of my coat. How long will that last? I have just gone through about a quarter of my food supplies on my second day in Dyrys.

Stop and think. I remember what I learned from Uncle Ed, and from books at the library. *The average human can last three minutes without oxygen, three days without water and three weeks without food.* Air and water will be no problem here, so that just leaves food. Of course, if you leave it the full three weeks without eating, you'll be too weak to go and find yourself anything. But the point is that it

should be possible to ration things out and make them last, if I can just get used to ignoring the feeling of being hungry. And I can add to my supplies by foraging in the woods.

It's a good time of year for gathering food – there are fruit trees already covered in cherries and damsons around the edge of the village, and later on there will be blackberries on every thorny clump of brambles in these woods. When I was younger, I used to go blackberry picking with Nia Evans on September weekends, and then we would bake a pie together back at the farmhouse. Just remembering the smell of it makes me hungry. I wish I could remember more about which plants are edible so that I don't poison myself by accident. Uncle Ed had a book on foraging, which is still on the shelves in the hallway, but I haven't picked it up in years. I don't imagine Di reads it either. She kept most of Uncle Ed's things after he died, but they all just sat around the house in boxes, like we were collecting for a museum exhibit on his life. I kept his pocket knife though. I figured no one else was going to need it, and it made sense to keep it somewhere out of Owen and Eira's reach. They are too young: Eira is in her second year of school and Owen is just learning to put sentences together. I think, out of all the people in Llandymna, they are the ones I will miss. Them and Maebh, of course.

If Auntie Di were here, she'd make a plan for the day. She would write me a list, and it would say: *“Go to that overgrown hedgerow that leads out of the village where you know there will be damsons ready for picking, and then come back here and think about how you are going to fix the roof of this old house before it rains next, and for goodness' sake remember to boil any water before you drink it, or you'll get ill and have no one to blame but yourself.”* Since she isn't here, I am free to do whatever I want, whenever I want, so I start to gather more firewood instead. Fallen twigs and branches lie scattered all around, but anything sturdier, like a proper lump of wood, is harder to find. I gather up an armful of what I can see, and the twigs scratch at my skin where I hold them. I take the wood and put it just inside

the house by the doorway. Now, if it rains, I will still have a supply of dry wood to make a fire. But I still need to fix that hole in the roof somehow. I need something waterproof, like a tarpaulin, only smaller. Standing in the doorway of the house, my eyes fall on the drawstring bag my sleeping bag was previously rolled up in. I won't need that any more, and it is probably waterproof.

I take out Uncle Ed's pocket knife and flip out the blade, using it to cut through the drawstring and down one seam of the bag, opening it out as a flat piece of material. Now it is wide enough to cover the hole. I just need to find a way to get up to the roof. There is no chair or ladder to stand on here. I may have to climb up the outside of the building somehow. And how will I attach it, without nails or pegs? I need more time to think about this.

*

LLANDYMNA

At nine o'clock exactly, the doorbell rings three times. Maebh opens the door to Diana and her two young children. Diana's face is taut, all the muscles in it clenched with sharpness and urgency.

“Thank you so much for doing this, Maebh dear,” she says as she ushers Eira into the house. “I really do appreciate it so much. Now, Eira, you're going to be good for Maebh, aren't you? I want to hear nice stories about what a lovely little girl you've been., Understand?” She lowers her voice as she turns back to Maebh. “I don't know how long I'll be – the police are on their way over to the house now. Owen won't understand what's going on, but I don't want Eira to be upset by any of this. Here, I brought you one of my marmalade cakes to say thank you for being so helpful to us all. It's still warm – no please, keep the tin it's in, I have plenty. I'll telephone to let you know when I can pick her up.”

Though her tone is bright, all the words come out a little too fast

and clipped. Maebh thanks her for the cake and reassures her that they will be fine spending the day together.

“Will it be our Tom who comes to speak to you, do you think?”

“Oh no, I shouldn’t think so,” Diana replies. “I’d hope they’d send a proper policeman for a matter like this – one with a bit more experience.”

Eira asks if she can do some colouring, as she has brought her best pencils with her today, and Diana leaves quickly, with Owen gurgling as he is carried out. Maebh sighs as she closes the front door behind them and feels peace return to her house.

“Now then, Eira, my lovely, have you had any breakfast yet? How about some toast and jam?”

Eira is five years old, with fair hair so light that her parents chose to give her a name that means snow. She is everything one might expect a daughter of Diana to be: well behaved, polite, and very articulate, though she has inherited her father’s complexion. She skips ahead of Maebh into the kitchen and clambers up onto the chair where she always sits, while Maebh takes out a jar of raspberry jam and puts a slice of bread into the toaster. Today must be a day of normal, familiar things for Eira. She will have enough uncertainty to deal with when she understands what has happened.

“Look, here’s the crust of the loaf,” says Maebh. “You don’t like to eat that part, do you? But do you know who does like it?”

Eira thinks for a moment, and then her face lights up. “Mr Blackbird!”

“Yes. Shall we take him some breakfast too?”

They go out into the garden and Maebh tears the slice of bread in two, handing one half to Eira, who carefully and methodically breaks off small pieces and scatters them on the grass.

“Food for you, Mr Blackbird, and all of your friends,” she sings to a made-up tune as she distributes the bread. When they have finished, they retreat back inside, where the toaster has popped, and so Eira is distracted by eating for a few minutes. By the time she remembers to look up through the window, a pair of blackbirds

and a house sparrow have appeared in the garden. Eira squeals with delight and watches them avidly.

When the birds finally leave, startled by the arrival of a neighbour’s cat, Eira remembers that she had planned to draw pictures with her favourite colouring pencils today.

“Can we go to the living room now, please?” she asks.

“Yes, but you’ll have to be patient with poor old Maebh. I can’t walk as quickly as you these days, with my ancient bones!”

They make their way from the kitchen to the front room of the little house, one bounding ahead full of energy, the other taking it more slowly. It is a small room, sparsely furnished with some comfortable chairs for guests and Maebh’s own chair next to the fireplace. Over the mantelpiece hangs a painting of a boat crossing the Irish sea, with the misty blue form of land just visible on the horizon.

As she sits herself down on the rug and opens her pencil case, Eira suddenly says, “Rhiannon’s gone, hasn’t she?”

Maebh sighs. She had known Eira was a clever girl and would figure out the truth before long. “What makes you say that, Eira-wen?”

“She and Mummy were shouting at each other again yesterday, and then Rhiannon said she was going to run away. And then I heard her slam the door, and she didn’t come home even after bedtime.”

So, Maebh thinks, *Eira has known all along what others only suspected: that Rhiannon has run away. It won’t come as much of a surprise to anyone.*

“Well, today your mummy is talking to some people who are going to help find her. So don’t you worry.”

“It was very quiet without her. She shouts a lot, mostly at Mummy, but sometimes at other people too. She used to tell me stories though, before she started being cross all the time. I liked that a lot more.” Eira does not look up as she says this, so that she can focus on counting out her pencils.

“I’m sure you did, my lovely. Tell me, what is your favourite story?”

"I like the ones with talking animals."

"I see, and do you know the story of the white fox who could talk?"

Eira shakes her head, and Maebh smiles, because this is a story she is about to make up. She asks Eira if she would like to hear it, and of course she says yes.

With the four age-old words, Maebh begins, "Once upon a time, there was a little white fox cub that lived in a land covered in snow. All the trees and fields and hills were covered in it, and all the lakes and rivers were ice. Can you picture that much snow everywhere? The little fox cub loved to slip and slide around on the ice lakes, and he would spend hours every day playing outside, building snow mice and snow badgers with his brothers and sisters, because in that land the schools could never open because it was so snowy, so they stayed closed and none of the animals ever had to go to classes.

"One day, the little fox stayed out playing extra late, and kept on rolling in the snow until he was much further from home than he had ever been before. When it was time to go home, he looked around to see no sign of his family, and realized he was lost.

"The little fox felt scared to be on his own, and began to cry. But as he was crying, he heard a voice say, 'Are you all right, little fox?' He looked up, and what do you think he saw there? A talking fawn, with big kind eyes and a black shiny nose!"

Eira stops arranging her pencils from red through to violet and her eyes grow wide as Maebh continues.

"I'm lost and can't find my way home,' the fox told the fawn sadly.

"I'll help you find your way back!' said the fawn. 'We should go and ask the king of the owls. He flies all over this land and knows where everything is. He can tell you which way to go.'

"So the little fox and his new friend went to speak to the king of the owls. He lived in a hollow in a tall pine tree on the edge of the forest, the tallest tree you can imagine. And when he heard the sound of a fox and a fawn coming towards his home, he flapped down to a low branch to see them, and all the other owls came and

perched nearby too. There were tawny owls and barn owls and eagle owls, all peering down from their branches to see these new visitors.

"Whoooooo are you?' asked the king of the owls, with a frown that was very stern." Maebh pulls a face that might resemble a gruff owl, and Eira giggles. "The brave little fox was not afraid, though; he explained why he was there, and the owls all looked at him curiously. The king of the owls seemed thoughtful at this, and said, 'Hmmm, how interesting. I believe we received a message not long ago about a white fox cub just like you. It was delivered by one of our messenger owls, who fly all round the land bringing me news. Fetch me that letter!'

"A tawny owl flew up to the hollow tree and returned a few moments later with a letter in his beak. The king of the owls read it carefully.

"Well, little fox, this letter appears to be from your family. It seems you are very important to them, and they want you to be safely with them again. They ask that if I see you, I show you which way to go home, and they sent you this.' The owl held up in his taloned foot a collar as blue as the evening sky. 'Apparently it will help you get home. I believe it may have magical powers.'

"And so the owls gave the fox the blue collar and pointed him in the right direction to go home. The little fox thanked them and the fawn for their help and set off.

"Wait for me!' cried the fawn. "I'd like to come with you and help you get back to your family!' The little fox smiled, because he knew he had made a new friend. They walked and walked together, trudging through the deep snow drifts. Overhead, the moon was bright, and lit their way.

"What do you think the collar does?' asked the fawn.

"I don't know,' replied the fox. 'It's from my family, but I've never seen it before.'

"Maybe it makes us invisible, so no big scary animals see us. Or maybe it will help you to fly home. Do you think it can make you fly? Try jumping and see what happens!'

“The fox jumped up into the air, but quickly hit the snowy ground again with a bump.

“Ouch! I don’t think it’s a collar that makes you fly.’

“They kept on walking, and after a while more snow began to fall. Soon the snow turned into a whirling blizzard, and it became hard to see ahead.

“‘Have you noticed,’ said the fawn, ‘that it isn’t cold, even in this storm? How strange!’

“The fawn was right. Even as it grew darker and more snowy, the fox and the fawn felt none of the bitter chill.

“‘That’s it!’ said the fox. ‘Somehow the magic in the collar must be keeping us warm so that we can keep walking!’

“At last, the blizzard cleared, and it became easier to see the way ahead. Two tall hills loomed on the horizon, and the little fox recognized them. Those were the two hills he could see from his home. They were nearly there! But between them and their destination, there was a wide rushing river. And over the river was a long narrow bridge. And in front of the bridge stood a wizard dressed all in grey.”

Maebh picks up her shawl from the arm of the chair and throws it over her head and shoulders like a hooded cloak.

“‘Hello there, little ones,’ the wizard said. ‘Have you come to cross the river?’

“‘Yes,’ said the fox, answering honestly because he knew that wizards were kind and clever. ‘What must we do to cross it?’

“‘This bridge, my friend, is a Fearless Bridge. Only those with no secret worries can cross it. So, for example, if I wished to cross the river, I would first have to tell you that I am terrified of spiders, and a little anxious that I may have left the kettle on when I left the house this morning. Now, see! I can stand on the bridge without a problem. But if I had not told somebody that before stepping on, I would have been thrown into the river.’

“The little fox and the fawn thought very carefully about this. The fawn spoke first: ‘I’m a bit afraid of bears, and eagles, and things

that eat deer, but not of you – ’ he turned to the fox, ‘because you’re my friend!’

“‘I’m a bit scared of this bridge now,’ said the fox, ‘and also of not seeing my family again. But actually, now that I’ve told you about it, I feel a bit better already.’

“‘That is the magic of the Fearless Bridge at work,’ said the wizard. ‘Now you are ready to cross it.’

“The fox and the fawn stepped onto the bridge and, to their relief, it did not throw them into the water. They scampered across and there, on the other side, was the fox’s family, all waiting for him. He had made it back! They were all so happy to see each other again, and they thanked the fawn for helping him come home. And they all played together for the rest of that day and the next, making snow angels in the deep drifts by the little fox’s home.”

The story ends, and Maebh is about to ask Eira what she thought of it, and which animal she liked best, when the phone rings.

“Was that Mummy?” asks Eira, when Maebh returns.

“Yes, my lovely, it was. She says you are allowed to stay and play here for a bit longer.”

“Oh good. I’m going to draw a picture of a fox for you.”

Maebh says nothing of the rest of Diana’s news: of the interview with the police officers, or of how even now a search party is setting out to search the surrounding countryside. She shudders at the thought of it all.

*

Diana sits opposite the two police officers who occupy her sofa. The room smells of fresh coffee, which she had anticipated would be appreciated today. Owen is sleeping upstairs, affording them some peace to talk. Light streams in through the window, and she smooths out a wrinkle in her navy blue skirt.

“Can you describe for me the circumstances of Rhiannon’s disappearance, Mrs Griffin?” The officer’s voice cuts through the serenity of the picture Diana has been enjoying. He is a tall, slightly

rotund man, with a musical Welsh accent. His colleague is a woman who eyes Diana with detached suspicion.

“I last saw her yesterday, at quarter past four,” she says. She listens to her voice as she speaks, critiquing herself for any sign of unsteadiness. “She left the house then, and has not come home since.”

“And did she say where she was going at the time?”

“She did not. I had assumed she would be at the library, or out for a walk. When I had fed the children, and Rhiannon still hadn’t come home, I tried to call her, but there was no answer. I was unable to go out and look for her myself, as that would have meant leaving Eira and Owen here by themselves, so I asked Tom Davies to look for her.”

“Ah yes, Constable Davies has told us that he knows you.”

“Mrs Griffin,” the female officer interrupts, “did you argue with Rhiannon before she disappeared last night?”

Diana puts her coffee cup down on the table, careful to avoid spilling it, and answers, “Yes.”

“What about?”

“Nothing that seems especially important now. I tried to bring up the subject of her behaviour over recent weeks. Rhiannon can be a difficult girl, you see. She is what you might call...” she pauses, to be sure she finds the right word, “strong-willed, and has a fierce temper. Lately, that temper has flared up against people in an ugly manner. I tried to talk to her about the fact that this is not acceptable. She became defensive and, unsurprisingly, angry. She shouted – something insulting, I forget what – and then stormed out of the house.” Diana sips her coffee as she waits for the officer to finish scribbling notes.

“And has this happened before?”

She raises a single eyebrow. “Are you asking if the teenage girl I am raising has ever argued with me before? Of course she has! And we have accepted that it works to allow one another some space after these exchanges. I assumed Rhiannon felt that going to her

room was not sufficient this time, but that she would come home later.”

It is the other officer’s turn to interrupt. “Mrs Griffin, would you mind clarifying your relationship to Rhiannon Morgan? You are her legal guardian, I believe?”

“Yes, and also her aunt. She is my late sister’s daughter, and my husband Edwin and I were named Rhiannon’s guardians in her will. Frankly, I still haven’t got over the shock that Elin thought to make a will, but people do surprise you. And I had been helping her to care for Rhiannon long before that, of course.”

“But you’ve never formally adopted Rhiannon? I see that she has kept her mother’s surname. You aren’t her parent by law?”

“No.”

“Why is that?”

Diana sighs with irritation. “I hope these questions are necessary, and not just for your own curiosity. After Eira was born, my husband wanted us to adopt Rhiannon. He said it was important for us to show her that she was just as valued as our own children, that she had the same status in our family. He started proceedings, but then became ill. He passed away shortly after Owen was born, and since then I have had my hands full raising two small children and a teenager, not to mention sitting on the community council and having an active role in Llandymna village life. I simply have not had time to look at it again. And it would hardly make a difference in the day-to-day running of our lives.”

“I’m very sorry, Mrs Griffin. You seem to have experienced a great deal of loss. Do you think that the very same loss could have caused Rhiannon to feel less stable and secure at home, to prompt her to want to run away?”

Diana casts an eye around her pristine front room, from the white china coffee cups to the perfectly co-ordinated furnishings. “I can assure you, I have done everything a person might do to ensure the continued stability of Rhiannon’s life. She has stayed at the same school with the same friends, she has always had a good home here

and a routine to her days. And when I am not here, taking care of her, I am busy working to improve this village so that it provides better services and facilities for young people like her.”

The coffee pot is empty, so Diana excuses herself to refill it in the kitchen.

“Observations, Matthews?” the older officer asks his colleague, keeping his voice low so as not to be heard from the next room.

“Well, she’s clearly hiding something, sir. No one looks that together after they lose one of their children. And she got very defensive just now.”

“True, but she strikes me as the kind of woman who would be more outraged at the suggestion that she hasn’t tidied her house enough than if you accused her of a criminal offence,” he replies.

“Should we be contacting social services, sir? It seems like this girl’s family situation is complicated.”

“Possibly, but look at the date of birth you wrote down there. She turns eighteen in a few weeks. Not a lot of point putting her into care as and when she turns up. By the time the process was sorted, she’d be an adult.”

“*If* she turns up, sir. I’ve read all the guidelines. We’re supposed to consider the worst case scenario. That’s what it says.”

“It does, Matthews, and we have to entertain that possibility.”

Matthews is about to put forward her initial hypothesis – that Diana Griffin has locked her niece away, or even murdered her, to preserve her public image – when Diana returns with more coffee and flapjacks.

“Mrs Griffin, does Rhiannon own a computer?”

“Yes, she has a laptop for her schoolwork. It’s up in her room.”

“We will need to take that away with us. There may be something on there that gives us a clue as to where she has gone. What about social media sites? Would you know her account details for those?”

Diana shakes her head. “Rhiannon refused to join any of those websites, even when all of her class did. She said they were for narcissists to engage in popularity contests. Her words, not mine.”

Matthews smirks. “Smart girl.”

“And is there anything about Rhiannon that would make her especially vulnerable?”

“Aside from the fact that she’s a teenage girl not at home?” Diana retorts.

“Mrs Griffin, people go missing around the country every day. Most of them turn up safe and unharmed before long. It’s our job to assess the risk level to Rhiannon. Aside from her young age, is there anything else that puts her in danger? Any mental health issues, disability, anyone known to you who might want to harm her?”

“Goodness no, of course not,” Diana snaps. “Rhiannon is a perfectly normal seventeen-year-old.”

“Exactly,” Matthews mutters, but Diana seems not to hear this.