

A COLD SEASON



"An itchy tension-cranker of parental paranoia."
—*SFX* magazine

A NOVEL

ALISON LITTLEWOOD

A COLD SEASON

A Cold Season

Alison Littlewood





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*For Mum and Dad
and for Fergus*

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Acknowledgments

ONE

The fog swallowed everything: moorland, color, sound. Even Ben was silent in the passenger seat. The road was little more than a narrow track winding across what Cass thought of as God's own country, which she knew to be wide and rolling and open where it lay hidden behind the fog.

Cass caught a glimpse of heather and bracken, everything sapped and rendered colorless. Ahead, the road dipped into a shallow bowl before winding upward once more. She took her foot off the accelerator and allowed the car to slow.

"What's up?" Ben stirred, and she realized he had been asleep. "Where are we?"

"Saddleworth Moor." Cass braked to a halt and gestured down into the dip. "Isn't it weird? You'd think the fog would gather here, but it's clear." She turned to him. His face was closed, uninterested. "You should take a look. You won't see much of the moor in this fog."

He shrugged. *Don't care.*

Cass gripped the wheel once more and took her foot off the brake. As the car began to move, she slammed it down again.

Ben jerked forward and scowled. "What's that for?"

Cass continued to stare down into the bowl.

Ben followed her gaze. "There's nothing there."

Her son was right, but Cass tightened her grip on the wheel anyway. "Didn't you feel it?" She took her foot off the brake and the car rolled. "It's going the wrong way."

This time Ben saw. He straightened up, looking back the way they had come.

Cass eased off the brake and the car rolled further, back. Up the slope. "Damn," she said, under her breath. She felt dizzy. "It's a hill."

"What are you on about?"

"I've heard about this. It's—I don't know, Ben—some kind of optical illusion. It looks like a dip, but it's really a hill. We're on an upward slope, not downward."

Ben's face lit up and Cass felt a surge of something. Hope? Joy? She wasn't sure.

"Wow," he said.

She reached out and rubbed his knee. "Feel. I'll let it roll."

"Go on, Mom."

Cass grinned, easing off again. The car started to roll back, slowly at first, then picking up speed. A sound blared into the silence, cutting through the air and dopplering away as a dark shape shot past them. Headlights made everything brilliant; then it was gone. Cass stomped on the brake once more.

"Mo-om," Ben complained. His face was closed again, the way it had been when they started their journey. The way he had been since Cass had told him his father wasn't coming back.

"Sorry." Cass checked the mirror, seeing only a solid gray wall. She eased down on the accelerator

going forward this time. Despite this, the car slowed again. Cass accelerated harder, but the car stopped anyway and she let out her breath.

“Mom, stop messing around.”

The car rocked on its wheels and rolled back. Cass braked heavily, leaning forward, gripping the wheel and staring out at the road. It felt as though something was pushing them, but there was nothing but only that dip, a round, natural bowl as though a giant soccer ball had landed in soft earth.

She accelerated until the engine roared, and suddenly the car was free and shot forward.

Ben made an exasperated sound and crossed his arms, turning to stare out the window.

“Sorry,” Cass said. “I don’t know what that was.”

“You’re doing it.”

“No—it must have been the wind or something.” Cass’s heart raced. Her hands felt slippery on the wheel. It hadn’t felt like the wind.

Her son remained silent.

The car navigated the dip—the *rise*, Cass reminded herself—and the fog closed in once more with a swallowing sound, swallowing the road save for a gray strip in front of the car and the tufts of grass that marked the edge.

Cass tried to decide whether they were going uphill or down, but it took all her concentration to follow the curves of the road. The white wall of fog drew back as the car approached, permitting them a narrow space into which they could see, and closed again behind them. It deadened everything. Cass listened for the steady hum of the car, but it only seemed to be there when she tried to hear it. The fog was a visible silence.

She hadn’t seen another car in a long time.

Ben wriggled in his seat. “Are we still on the moor? I don’t like it.”

“Yes,” Cass replied, and wondered how she knew that was true. “It can’t be much longer.”

She kept her eyes on the road. It was like floating. It reminded her of one of Ben’s video games: she was driving a racing car and the road was nothing but two short lines in front of the stub of a hood. It had been impossible to stay between them.

“What’s that?” asked Ben. He wriggled in his seat and turned to the window. Cass glanced over to see his breath spreading on the pane, fog coming out of his body and into the car.

“Don’t,” she said, and then thought, *Why not?*

Ben raised a hand and spread it on the glass. Each finger left a dark smudge in the mist. He pressed his face to the window.

“What is it? Ben?”

“I thought . . . Nothing,” he said, slumping back into the seat. “It’s nothing.”

Cass turned back to the road. The fog retreated as the car went onward, headlights shining on it like a white wall, making it look solid. She was still shuffling in her seat as it seemed to dissolve, showing its true nature after all—nothing but droplets of water suspended in the air, a shifting translucent thing. The center of it curled in on itself, revealing something dark in its heart.

Cass saw a figure standing in the road, its arms held out. There were no features, only shadow.

In that instant Cass remembered the murders that had happened thirty, forty years before. The were murdered children buried on these moors. Had they all been found? She couldn't remember. She also had no time to think. Even while the idea of lost children formed in her mind she slammed on the brakes and hauled on the wheel. The car skidded and rocked, and then the wheels gripped and she jolted to a stop. Ben jerked forward, was caught by his seatbelt and thrown back into his seat. He didn't complain this time.

Cass and Ben stared at each other. His face was white. Cass imagined her own was, too.

She glanced in the rearview mirror. The fog was lurid in her brake lights, pressing in close. Another car came along. . . . She looked out to the side. It was impossible to tell how far across the road she'd ended up.

A rattle made her catch her breath. Ben cried out and Cass turned to see a face peering in her window. Ben leaned away from it, his small arm pressing against Cass's body. She reached out and drew him in.

A tap on the glass. There was a flash of a hand curled up—not a fist, but the casual shape someone might make when knocking on a door, the knuckle of the index finger protruding. *Tap tap tap*. There was a large ring on the middle finger, something with leaves and flowers in brightly colored stones.

Tap tap tap.

"Ben," said Cass, "roll the window down." He pressed up against her and she remembered she could control the passenger window from her side. She put one arm more firmly around her son and felt for the button with the other. There was a loud *whirr* and tendrils of fog snaked in, bringing cold, damp air.

"Thank goodness," a voice said. "Thank you so much for stopping." The figure bent and the face resolved into a woman's, her dark curls frizzed by the moist air. "I'm Sally," she said. "Are you going to Darnshaw?"

"We'd better get moving," Sally said. "You don't want somebody running into the back of you. It's a bad place to stop."

Cass prevented herself from shooting a hard glance at the woman. Sally was in the passenger seat. Cass had kissed the top of Ben's head and gotten him to jump into the back, where he was crammed amid a pile of luggage. Now the woman's dark oilskin coat filled the space. When she'd climbed in, Cass saw she was wearing boots with fur around the top. One of them looked soaked, as though she had stepped into a bog. There was a smell too, which pervaded the car. Her hair was wet, and her face and voluminous coat were damp and shining.

"Sorry if I gave you a scare," said Sally. "I've broken down further back along the road."

"Oh," said Cass. "I didn't see a car."

"It's pulled into a rest area."

Cass hadn't seen a rest area either, but she didn't say so. She could have passed within inches of the woman's car and not seen it. The rest area could merely have been a break in the tufts of grass edging the road, maybe not even that.

"There's no cell phone signal up here—I'm lucky you came along. It's a long walk home." Sally

laughed. “Sharp left bend coming up.” She went on in this way, punctuating her conversation with directions, and Cass picked up speed. Was it so obvious she didn’t know the road?

“You’re into the S-bends soon,” Sally said. “We’ll be dropping down toward the village.” She twisted around. “I’ve a son about your age,” she said to Ben.

He didn’t reply. After a moment Cass said, “Does he go to the Grange School?”

Sally smiled. “You’re the lady who’s taken a place in Foxdene Mill, aren’t you?”

“That’s right.” *Small world.* Word had spread already.

“Yes, Damon goes to the Grange. All the kids in Darnshaw go there. It gets good results.”

“I heard. It’s one of the reasons I came back.”

“Back?”

“I lived here for a while, when I was a child.”

“How lovely.”

“What’s Mrs. Cambrey like?”

“Sorry?”

“Mrs. Cambrey. The principal. She sounded really nice on the phone.”

“She is—yes, she is lovely.” There was something in Sally’s voice.

Cass glanced at her. “I have a meeting with her on Monday.”

“Of course.” Sally’s voice brightened. “Well, I’m sure she’ll be delighted to see you both. I am. It’s very quiet in Darnshaw. It’s time we had some new blood.”

They fell silent as Cass negotiated the bends. The road had indeed begun to snake down, edged by a steep bank on one side and a high stone wall on the other. Anything else was lost in the fog—but then the car popped out of it and the view spread around them. It was like emerging from a doorway. Cass glanced in the rearview mirror and saw the fog as a solid line across the road. Ben twisted in his seat to look at it.

“That’s strange,” said Cass. “It’s stopped, just like that.”

Sally didn’t look around. “It happens like that sometimes. It gathers on the tops. When you drop down a bit it’s as clear as day. Look!” She pointed. A pheasant stood on the wall. Beyond it was orange bracken, darkened by recent rain, and a few pines growing at a sharp angle. From the corner of her eye Cass thought she saw pale light flashing on water, but it was too late; it had already gone.

Cass remembered something. “Sally,” she said, “you know the road further back—it looks like it dips down, like a big bowl.”

Her passenger was silent.

“We stopped there. It looked like we were going downhill, only we weren’t. We were going uphill all the time. Do you know the place?”

Sally frowned. “Can’t say I do. I never heard of anything like that around here. It must have been the fog. It makes everything look different sometimes.”

“But it really looked like a dip—only, we rolled—”

“It’s just the fog,” said Sally. “I’d know if there was something like that. I know this road pretty well.”

It was Cass's turn to fall silent.

"Here we are," said Sally. "Welcome to Darnshaw."

The first houses came into view, a row of terraces built of stone, blackened by passing traffic and smoke. Cass rounded the corner and found herself on a lane that followed the line of the valley. There were turnoffs to each side, where more houses nestled. She saw a general store, a small post office, a butcher, a grocery store, and a florist. On each side, steep hills rose to an opaque gray sky.

"You've gone past," said Sally. "That was your lane. Still, if you don't mind going on a bit, you could drop me at home."

Cass nodded. She tried to glance down the side roads as Sally pointed out a small park and the school. She told them where various walks began, mostly following the river. Then she indicated the road where she lived: Willowbank Crescent. It was ordinary looking, the houses built from brick rather than the local stone. Sally gestured toward a small semidetached house and Cass realized the woman was shivering.

"I suppose you won't want to come in," Sally said, reaching for the door handle. "You'll want to settle in and all that? Well, thanks again." She smiled, got out, and pushed the door shut behind her.

Cass turned around in a driveway and headed back down the road. As she passed the house, she saw that Sally was still watching. Cass waved and turned onto the main road, only then realizing she hadn't given Ben a chance to jump back into the front seat.

"We'll be there soon," she said over her shoulder.

There was no answer. Cass slowed and turned, saw her son frowning.

"I don't like it," he said. "The lady smelled."

"Ben, that's rude."

"She smelled bad and I hate it here."

"You need to give it a chance. I loved it when I was your age." Even as she said the words, Cass found herself wondering if that was true. And yet when she had heard the name Darnshaw again, she had pictured Ben here, running around the hills and laughing. Enjoying an idyllic childhood, everything she wanted to give him.

"She smelled like a butcher's shop."

"Oh, Ben." She didn't know what to say. And there *had* been a smell, hadn't there? A musky smell a little like wet wool. Something else, underneath the earthy moorland—a richer tang, more animal.

Like a butcher's shop.

Cass grinned at her overactive imagination. "Let's go and see the new place, shall we?"

The mill glowed amid wintry skeletal woodland. From the top of the lane Cass could see a gray slate roof amid the reaching fingers of mature oaks. It would be beautiful in summer. Even now, early in the new year, the stone, sandblasted clean, was mellow and warm looking. The photographs hadn't done it justice. She grinned. "What do you think?"

Ben shrugged.

The lane led steeply down to a wide graveled area that crunched under the car's tires. It stretched away to either side of the mill, but their eyes were drawn to the front. A central doorway was painted

in deep crimson, an etched glass panel proclaiming “Foxdene Mill.”

Ben stirred at last. “Will there be other kids?” He slipped his seatbelt off and leaned over to get a better look. The building was four stories high.

“Of course there will,” said Cass. According to the brochure, the mill had been converted into twenty-one apartments: six on each of the lower floors, with views toward either the valley or the millpond, and three penthouses on the top. “There are bound to be lots of kids. You’ll have a great time.”

Their apartment was at the back of the building on the left side, so they would have views over both the millpond and the river. Cass had snapped it up as soon as she saw the brochure, though she had opted to rent, not buy. She needed to build a home for Ben quickly, get him settled into something new. Renting meant everything would be provided—beds, dressers, tables, and chairs. She needed all of those things. They had been hers only while she stayed in Army accommodation, and she couldn’t do that forever, not without Pete.

When the brochure landed at her door and she saw that the mill lay in Darnshaw, it had felt like fate. She hadn’t even waited for a viewing.

Cass parked by the door. As soon as she stepped out she heard the river, rushing and burbling down the valley. The air smelled green and fresh: woodland after rain. She stared up at the building, spotted the clock tower she had seen in the pictures. The clock had a white face, as she remembered, but no hands. Time was standing still in the valley—that was appropriate. She remembered herself as a little girl, leaning over the garden gate and listening to the river rushing by.

Ben got out and stood by her side. She ruffled his hair and he squirmed, but she didn’t care. “Do you smell that?” she asked.

He wrinkled his nose.

“Come on. Let’s have a look at the place before we unload.”

“Where is everybody?”

Cass tapped the entry code into the panel by the door. It beeped and she grabbed the brass handle. “I could get used to this,” she said. The door was double width and paneled. Probably not original, but it looked grand enough.

The hall was wide and a little cold. To their left a stairway led up, carpeted in red. Mailboxes, each bearing a brass number, were set into the right-hand wall, and ahead was a door that must have led toward the ground-floor apartments. The lobby floor was flagstone, its rough surface showing the wear of many years.

Cass felt like she already knew the way: up the stairs, through the fire doors and into the hall. Ben hung back as they went, stomping his feet behind her.

The upstairs hall was as grand as the entrance had been, red carpeted, wide and lined with white-painted doors. Cass went down without looking left or right until she stopped in front of one of them. It looked like all the others they had passed but somehow she knew it was theirs. Sure enough, the brass number set into it was a 12.

A delightful apartment with stunning views of the millpond and down the valley, the picture of peace and solitude . . .

Cass pulled the key from her pocket. It had a cardboard tag with the number 12 scrawled on it.

ballpoint, along with a dirty fingerprint, a builder's fingerprint. The mill had been freshly converted. Everything would be new; they were to be the first occupants. Cass felt a shiver of excitement as she pushed open the door. When she turned to smile at Ben, though, there was no expression on his face at all. Cass beckoned him inside.

The apartment's hall was also lined with white doors, all of them closed except the one directly ahead. Cass went through and found herself in a wide living room with windows set into two of its walls. She went to the nearest, realizing as she approached how large it was. She would be able to sit on the sill quite comfortably, reading a book maybe, or simply taking in the view. She looked out.

The millpond was a line of acid green between the trees. Between the mill and the water were piles of gravel and sand, with a yellow backhoe standing desolate among them.

"Where is everybody?" said Ben, and Cass realized it wasn't the first time he'd asked.

"It's a Saturday," she said. "They won't be working on a Saturday. They must still be fixing up some of the apartments."

"So where are all the people?"

Cass frowned and went to the other window. This one looked over a wide gravel parking area with an outhouse at one end. What looked like bags of cement were piled against its wall and beyond it, a stile led into a field, and a path wound toward the river. Behind everything, the hills rose steeply away.

"Look," said Cass, "we can walk along the riverbank. Won't that be nice?"

"But where are all the kids?" Ben scowled, his eyes narrowed. There was a gleam in them Cass didn't like. She turned back to the window and noticed an odd thing. The parking area was completely empty.

"I want Dad," Ben said.

"Ben, *please*."

"I want him back—how's he going to find us now? He won't know where to look." His face crumpled.

Cass bent and put her arms around her son. Ben's whole body was hot to the touch and she felt his forehead. He didn't push her hand away. "I want him," he repeated.

"I know. I'm sorry, Ben. But you have to understand, he's not coming back."

Ben struggled in her arms and she drew him in closer. Holding him. "I want him too," she whispered. "Ben, I want him too. I do. But we'll be okay." She drew back. "It's you and me now," she said, "and everything will be all right."

TWO

Cass opened her eyes. Everything was in shades of gray, and that wasn't right. There was no sound and that was wrong too; she'd heard something. It had woken her up.

For a second everything turned sepia, the color of the desert. She rubbed her eyes. It had been Pete she'd been dreaming of him.

She heard a sound. *Scritch, scritch.*

Pete had been holding her close. He held her while the building shook and crumbling plaster rained down on her head, settling in her hair like snowflakes.

Scritch, scritch.

Cass turned, put out a hand and touched the wall at her back. It was rough under her fingertips. The scratching stopped. She heard a different sound, like the pattering of little feet running away. She grimaced.

Cass turned back to face the empty room, and that was when she saw Pete standing in front of her.

She blinked, but he was still there, his blond hair pale gray in the dark. He held out his arms and his lips moved. She couldn't hear what he was saying. As she watched he opened his fists to reveal handfuls of blue stones. They were bright, the only color in the room. The stones fell, one by one, to the ground, and the ground swallowed them. Everything was soundless, everything colorless, except the things he held.

Cass heard a noise and she jumped from her bed. When she turned back to face Pete, he had gone. She found herself looking for the blue stones on the carpet, but of course there was nothing.

She swallowed and took a deep breath. She had to keep it together. Of course she had just been dreaming of her husband. This thing she thought she'd seen—it was an afterimage, nothing more, a clinging remnant of sleep.

There came a new sound. A dry scrape, like heavy boots treading through sand.

She shook her head. The sound went on, but it resolved itself into something she could understand and Cass began to breathe once more. *Scritch, scritch.*

There were mice behind the walls. *Scritch, scritch.* It didn't sound like sand anymore; it was more like the scratching of tiny claws. Of course an old building like this was bound to have mice. She should have thought of it. She'd have to get traps or poison. Cass had a sudden image of Ben coming across a trap, holding up a gray-furred body by its tail, and made a face.

Cass squinted and let her eyes adjust to the dark. Ahead and to the right, where there was a dark patch, that's where the door was. She went toward it, felt her way into the hall without switching on the light. Ben's door was outlined by the pale glow that crept beneath it. She felt for the handle and went in.

Ben's nightlight glowed, a small plastic blue moon. It was one of the first things she'd unpacked. Her son didn't like to sleep without a light, not since Pete had left them for the last time.

He had the covers heaped up over his body, a snug bundle. Cass leaned over and looked into his face—then reeled back. ~~His eyes were wide open, staring up at her. She took a deep breath, then waved her hands in front of his eyes, but he didn't move. His cheeks looked wan and sickly in the nightlight's steady glow.~~

He was sleeping with his eyes open.

Cass eased the covers away from his face, loosening them, careful not to wake him. Part of her wanted to see the expression restored to his eyes, but it must be better not to interfere. Better to let him sleep. She tucked the bundle of covers in around him. She felt the need to do these things, but then remained standing there, looking at his face. She knew there was something else she needed to do for him, but couldn't think what it was.

Then she knew, and put out a hand before she could catch herself.

She pulled away at the last moment. The thing she'd wanted to do was reach out and put her hand on his eyes, smooth his eyelids down, like closing them on a corpse. Cass shuddered.

Quietly, she backed out of the room.

THREE

Ben stood in the living room, looking out the window. Cass stretched as she went to join him, still trying to shake off sleep, and put a hand on his shoulder.

“We’re still here,” her son said in a small voice.

She bent and hugged him, feeling frail bones through his pajamas. “Why don’t we set the TV up,” she said. “And your video games.”

His eyes widened. “Can we? I’d like that, Mommy.”

Mommy. It was as though he was a toddler again. Cass grinned, lifted him onto the windowsill, propped a cushion behind his back. “Watch the world go by,” she said. “Tell me if anything happens.” She glanced out of the window. There were no cars, no movement. It was overcast, the colors muted, not even a breeze stirring the branches. Nothing happening at all. *Good,* she thought. *Nothing was good.*

Soon Ben was glued to the TV and Cass set up her computer in the corner. The Web connection worked fine, just as the estate agent had promised. Still, it was a relief. She’d known that cell phone reception would be poor here, but the Internet was her lifeline. She had a website to develop for her client—her only client so far—and she had to make this work. With Pete gone, she had to take care of Ben: build something for him, a new life for them both.

“I want to play a game, Mom,” Ben called out.

She set it up for him, and then returned to the computer screen: there was an e-mail from her client listing some changes needed for the website. She responded: “Will upload site changes for checking ASAP.” Her client wouldn’t even know she’d moved.

That done, she closed it down. It was Sunday, and work could wait. That was something her father had always insisted on, and she found the habit had stuck.

She looked at Ben, who was sitting on the floor, the controller loose in his lap, staring at the television, his mouth hanging open.

“Ben, what is it?” She went to him and saw that his favorite game was on the screen. It was a war game, and the ground was littered with rubble and barbed wire. Everything was sepia, the color of sand.

“Ben?”

The game had been a gift from his father. At the time, Cass had thought it a little old for Ben, but Pete had liked it, and he’d played it with him. For a while the two of them had been soldiers together.

She reached out and smoothed her son’s hair, then took the control pad from Ben’s lap. His lips started to jut out, and she knelt down and hugged him, holding his head tight to her body.

“Come on, sweetie,” she said, “it’s a beautiful day. Let’s go out and see it, shall we?”

Cass looked back at the mill as they walked up the lane toward the village. The mellow stone suited the ~~dour~~ weather, blending with the surrounding greens and browns. It was good to be outside breathing in cold, clean air. On their way out of the building it had struck Cass that she didn't like to walk through the silent mill. She had strained her ears, but still she had heard no sound from any of the other apartments. The crimson carpets swallowed the sound of their footsteps too, so that it felt like no one was there at all.

All of the shops in the village were closed save one, the general store. Cass bought some sweets for Ben. The gray-haired woman at the cash register was stony faced; she took Cass's money in silence and gave the change in silence, only nodding when Cass said goodbye. Outside, Cass exchanged a glance with Ben; they both burst out laughing, and she felt a stab of gratitude for the unfriendly woman. Ben offered her a sweet and she took one.

They headed toward the park, which sloped down toward the river. The grass was short cropped and scabbed with patches of bare earth, and at the bottom there was a little playground with some swings, a merry-go-round, and a slide. Empty potato chip bags and candy wrappers had accumulated under the shrubbery hiding the chattering water, looking as though they were sheltering from rain.

Cass and Ben raced for the swings and sat there side by side.

"How do." A man's voice came from behind them.

Cass turned to see an old man emerging from the riverside path. A grizzled black dog followed him through a gap in the bushes. The man had patches of gray hair clinging to his scalp, as though just holding on. He was hunched over against the cold, hands shoved deep into his pockets. His cheeks were red and veined.

Ben jumped from the swing and ran to his side, bending to pet the dog. As Cass made a mental note to talk to him about strangers, she was smiling at the same time.

"You'll be from t' mill," the man said.

News spread fast. Did the whole village know about them?

"Bert Tanner," he said, "from t' flats." He said this as though she should know where the flats were.

"I'm Cass," she said, holding out her hand to shake his. "This is Ben." They turned and watched Ben stroking the dog, whispering something in its ear. The dog was a squat, stolid thing, graying around the chops. It huffed in Ben's face and he wrinkled his nose as he smelled its breath.

"'e's an owd un," the man said, "like me. Been 'ere man and boy, I have."

Cass didn't know what to say. "That's nice."

Ben jumped up and ran to the bushes. He thrust a hand underneath, among the litter.

"Ben, don't—that's dirty," she started as he turned and held up a faded green tennis ball. It looked well chewed. He held it under the dog's nose.

"Captain dun't chase balls no more, lad."

Ben threw it anyway and it flew up the slope and rolled part of the way back. The dog looked up, sniffed, turned its head to Ben, and then waddled, tail moving in a slow wag, up the slope. It picked up the ball and then turned as if to say, *Aren't you coming?*

"Well, I'll be," said Bert. "You've got the touch, lad."

He turned to Cass and pointed toward the river. "It's a nice walk, that," he said. "A long way, mind."

It keeps me going. Not that I go out of Darnshaw much.” He started to tell her where the school was and the shops, and Cass let him talk. No need to let on that Sally had already pointed them out. They walked together back toward the village. “Up there’s the post office. I’m above, if you ever need owt. Just say.”

She smiled, touched. “That’s really kind. Thank you, Bert.”

“And up there’s t’ church.”

He pronounced it *chuch*, without the *r*. Cass followed his gesture and froze.

The church stood almost at the top of the hill, its tower rising against the pale sky. From here it seemed to loom over them, a forbidding presence. But that wasn’t what made her shudder.

“Tha’s not a churchgoer, then,” Bert said.

She looked at him. He had very pale eyes, rheumy under their drooping lids.

“It’s not that,” she said. “We always went when I was a kid. It’s just that it’s the only part of Darnshaw that looks really familiar. Memories, I suppose.”

“Goose walked over your grave.”

“Something like that, yes.”

“Well, anytime you want to go, you’re right welcome. Priest comes ower from Moorfoot every other Sunday. Next week’s his turn.”

Cass started to tell him she didn’t attend any longer, not now, but something in his gaze stopped her and she merely nodded. Ben came chasing up, the green ball in his hand, a sparkle in his eyes.

Bert nodded. “We’ll be off. Remember what I said. You ever need owt, come see me. Ower the post office.”

They watched him go, Ben still panting. Her son had been running around more than the dog. Cass glanced back across the quiet park. When they were gone, it would be empty. That was sad. She had promised Ben children to play with, lots of children, and all they’d found was one old man and a dog.

Still, her son smiled at her, flashing his teeth. “Can I keep it, Mom?” he asked, holding out the grubby, spittle-covered tennis ball.

“Of course you can.” Cass smiled back at him. She looked up into the sky. It looked completely flat. As she watched, pinprick flakes floated out of it, drifting like tiny fragments of ash.

Ben held out his hand. “It’s snowing,” he said.

Cass craned her head back and let the snowflakes fall on her face. They were so fine she barely felt them land, just felt the chill spread slowly across her skin.

FOUR

The valley was clothed in swathes of mist, a half-erased picture. The snow hadn't settled, but Cass grabbed Ben's warmest coat ready anyway. When she woke him up he screwed up his face, a nasty-medicinal expression, but he didn't say anything. Monday morning, and he was going to school.

The main road through the village was busier than Cass had yet seen it. Every car had a child in the passenger seat and she barely needed to think about the school's location, just followed the line. The parking lot was already full but she managed to fit into an end slot narrowed by an overhanging Land Rover.

"Sorry." A young woman with sleek dark hair waved from the other side of the vehicle. "In to school so much of a rush this morning. I'm Lucy."

"I'm Cass. And it's no problem." Cass spotted a young girl peering around the Land Rover's hood and smiled at her while encouraging Ben from the car. She introduced her son.

"This is Jessica," said Lucy. "You two will be good friends, I think. Jess, you could watch out for Ben, since he's new. Why don't you show him inside?"

"We have a meeting with Mrs. Cambrey first," said Cass. "But you could play later, couldn't you?"

The little girl nodded. She was a couple of inches shorter than Ben, and a girl—he didn't often make friends with girls. Cass saw her son's lower lip jutting. Well, they'd tried, and who knew? The children might hit it off anyway.

"Mrs. Cambrey's really nice," Lucy said. "Well, I'd better take off." She watched Jessica walk toward the double doors, then waved before climbing into the Land Rover.

"Right," said Cass, forcing a positive note into her voice. "The principal sounds great, doesn't she? Ben? Let's go."

The hall was gloomy, even after the grayness of the morning. While Cass was getting her bearings, she saw the walls were lined with pictures, bright splashes of color emerging from the dim light, and she caught the faint smell of poster paint.

They walked past classrooms where children were chatting and removing their coats. The building was single story and Cass could see offices at the far end of the hall. One was marked STAFF ROOM, another PRINCIPAL, and beneath that, MRS. CAMBREY.

Cass knocked, and knocked again when there was no response. She leaned closer to the door, trying to hear if there was someone inside.

"My apologies," called out a voice behind her, a man's voice, smooth and cultured. "I'm sorry to keep you. There's such a lot to organize."

Cass turned to see a tall man with dark tousled hair and artfully shaved stubble, which outlined his slightly hollowed face. He met Cass's eye, took her hand, and squeezed it in his. "It's a little chaotic this morning," he said. "Do come in."

He led the way into the office, and they sat on either side of a large wooden desk strewn with

papers. Cass stared at a desktop sign that said MRS. CAMBREY.

The man followed her gaze, picked up the sign and dropped it into a drawer. “Unfortunately Mr. Cambrey has been called away,” he said. “A family emergency. I’m Mr. Remick—Theodore Remick—stepping into the breach.” He turned. “And you must be Ben.” He stretched out his hand for Ben to shake. Ben stared at it, glanced at Cass, then shook hands and smiled up at Mr. Remick.

They ran over a few details—Ben’s progress in his last school, class times, after-school clubs—and Cass thought the teacher quick and efficient. Then he stood, and she followed suit. As they left the room Mr. Remick turned to Ben once more. “You’re going to be in my class,” he said. “I’m sure we’ll get along famously.”

A voice rang out along the hall. “Cassandra. Yoo-hoo, Cassandra, come and meet everybody!”

Cass turned to see Sally heading toward her, pulling along a boy of about Ben’s age. She was trailed by a group of women.

“This is my lady knight in shining armor from the other day,” Sally said as they drew near. “She quite rescued me from the moor.” Then the woman noticed Mr. Remick and something in her face changed. She took Cass’s arm and pulled her away, her curly hair brushing Cass’s shoulders. “Oooh, you lucky thing,” she said. “He’s a fox, isn’t he?”

Cass smothered a smile. She was sure Mr. Remick must have heard.

“Come and meet the girls. This is Helen. Dot. Myra. Girls, this is Cassandra.”

“It’s lovely to meet you. Actually, my name’s just Cass—it’s short for Cassidy.”

“Cassidy? Well, I never heard that before,” said Sally.

“It comes from—”

“Like David—David Cassidy.” Sally’s laugh rang out.

“You’ve met the new teacher,” Myra said. She made it sound like an accusation. She was a stocky woman in a flowery dress, with long auburn hair.

“He’s a cutie, isn’t he?” Sally laughed.

The corner of Myra’s mouth twitched. “He’s a blessing.”

“Quite right,” said Sally. “We’ve been praying for someone like him.”

Helen grinned at her. “I’ll bet you have. Lucky cow,” she said, and they all laughed.

Cass glanced from one to the other.

Sally laughed louder and longer than the others. “You’re right, I am. Don’t I know it.” She grinned at Cass. “Teaching assistant,” she said. “And I used to help Mrs. Cambrey, so . . .”

“So,” the others echoed.

“Of course, this one swooped on him first.” Sally nodded at Cass.

“I just had a meeting about Ben. It’s his first day.” Cass looked around for her son, but he had already been swallowed up by one of the classrooms. She wasn’t sure which one.

“He’ll be in Damon’s class,” said Sally. “Damien, more like.” She spluttered laughter, and the others joined in. “Well, I must be off—new acquaintances to make and all that. As long as he hasn’t lost his heart to another.” She looked back at Cass as she went into one of the classrooms. “Don’t forget to call on us some time.” Then she was gone and the hall fell silent. When Cass turned back

the other women, they were already moving away.

She looked back toward the classroom doors, closed now, and considered peering through the glass panels. But Ben might see her, and Sally might make something of it, maybe embarrass her son on his first day.

After a pause Cass turned, alone, and headed back toward the exit.

The shining door of the mill opened onto silence. Cass started up the stairway, then remembered the empty floor, all the closed doors, and she changed her mind and headed instead through the door that led from the lobby into the ground-floor hall. This hall looked just like the one on her floor, with its red carpet and rows of white doors. The apartments were numbered 1 to 6. Cass walked past each one listening for any sound from inside, but she heard nothing.

She retraced her steps, and this time as she passed each door she knocked softly. Still nothing. When she reached the apartment below hers, she rested on the handle while listening and it moved under her hand.

She took hold and pressed. There was a click.

Cass peered back down the hall, but she was still alone. She stared at the brass 6, then pushed the door open with one hand while knocking with the other. Her lips formed a hello, but somehow she didn't make the sound; the mill's silence had swallowed her voice.

Cass saw at once she needn't have bothered knocking: the apartment was not just empty, but unfinished. The floor was nothing but bare wooden panels and she saw why it was so cold. There was no glass in the windows, nothing to stop the biting air flooding in, nor were the walls any hindrance. Wooden studwork sketched out where the rooms would be, but no plasterboard covered them. Cass could see the bundled wires inside, and sockets hanging loose on the floor.

She crossed to the window, her feet echoing on the boards, and looked out. The backhoe was still parked outside. Its cab was empty. She glanced at her watch: almost ten o'clock on a Monday morning and the builders had not come.

She looked down and saw something on the floor: half-buried in a heap of dust and wood shavings was a child's doll. She picked it up and dusted it off. Two pieces of cloth had been cut into a rough human shape and stitched together, but it was a sorry-looking thing, the fabric stained and mildewed. It reminded Cass of a gingerbread man. Its hair was a few strands of wool and its face was drawn on. Scrawled lines suggested a top and a skirt. Cass held it closer to her face; it had a peculiar smell. It could be years old, some mill-worker's doll, maybe, but it didn't quite look like that. The face appeared to have been drawn on using a felt-tip pen.

She looked down again and saw another shape, smaller than the other. It looked a bit like a boy. It wore a T-shirt and shorts.

Cass grimaced and dropped the doll. Her fingertips felt tainted by the dust.

There was no sound from the apartments on the second floor, or from any of the penthouses. Cass tried the handles too, growing bolder and pushing at the doors, longing to see the views from the top floor of the mill, but she didn't find any that would open.

When she returned to her own floor Cass found a newspaper had been pushed partway under the

door of Number 10. She stopped and looked at it. Odd that someone had come up here to deliver when there were mailboxes on the ground floor. She went to the door and knocked.

She waited. No one came. Cass listened at that door too, and heard nothing; they must be out.

There was no answer from any of the other apartments on her floor either.

She thought back to the conversation she'd had with the real estate broker. "Number 12 is free," he'd said as though this was a sudden discovery and she should snap it up before anyone else found out. As though the mill was full to bursting.

She remembered the scratching noise she'd heard in the night and shivered, pushed the thought away, opened her own door, and went to fire up the computer, ignoring the sense of emptiness at her back.

There was another e-mail from her client—more work Cass hadn't expected, but that was good; she could charge extra. She started on the website changes, moving pictures and changing setups, mentally ticking off the items as she sank into the work. Finally she uploaded the files and sent an e-mail: "All done. Hope you like it. Let me know if there's anything else I can do."

She sat back and rubbed her eyes, then stood, banishing the stiffness from her joints, and turned.

The world outside the window was white.

Cass exclaimed and went for a closer look.

The parking lot was covered over, maybe an inch deep in snow. The hillsides were white, and so was the sky; the flakes that filled the air were fat and white and drifted lazily down, settling on everything. Snow had caught in the treetops, swelling each branch. Only a flash of yellow remained where the backhoe stood. The world had turned monochrome.

She thought of Ben and cursed under her breath. At least he had his thickest coat with him, the real one.

But the road. Cass traced the journey to school in her mind: The main road headed straight through the valley, running more or less flat through the village. The road down to the mill, though—there could be treacherous. She took a deep breath. She had never thought of it before, hadn't checked what access would be like. Still, it didn't matter, not really—she could work anywhere. And she could wait for Ben to school if the roads got too difficult.

Cass looked out the window. Whatever problems it brought, the snow was beautiful. A memory came to her, startling in its vividness. Cass and her mom and dad, walking together in the snow, back when such a thing was possible. Cass wore a frothy white dress under her coat and she twirled, laughing, partly because snow was dancing around her hair and partly because she knew the other children would be jealous. She opened her mouth and tasted snowflakes on her tongue.

Then she looked up and saw the church. Her father turned and—

Cass frowned. She didn't want to remember what followed, when things became stern and severe and joyless; only the fun of them being together, all of them laughing, still a family, before Cass went into the church.

Of course, she hadn't been called Cass back then.

FIVE

Fresh snow spread away from the mill's crimson door. It was pristine, innocent of footprints. No one could have been in or out of the mill in the last few hours, and Cass wondered once again about her mysterious neighbor in Apartment 10.

Her car was the only vehicle parked by the door. Cass brushed snow from its headlights, then the mirrors and windows. The snow darkened her sleeves and turned her hands red and tingling with cold. Her face too was stinging by the time she slipped behind the wheel and turned the key.

The engine made a rough sound, the geriatric cough of a lifelong smoker.

Cass swore, pumped the accelerator, and tried again. More empty spluttering, then the engine fired up. Cass ran the heater for a while, holding her fingers in front of the vents. She promised herself she'd wear gloves next time.

She put it in reverse. The car shuddered and the wheels spun. Cass eased off on the accelerator and it started to move, rocking over the snow, then it slid sideways. In the rearview mirror Cass could see the lane heading steeply up the hill to the main road. Too steeply. She sighed, took the car out of reverse, and eased forward, back into what she'd already come to think of as her space. Her watch read 3:15 p.m.

Cass jumped out of the car, slammed the door, and hurried up the hill.

Her calf muscles ached by the time she reached the school, and her feet were soaked. A few kids were still in the yard, throwing snowballs and giggling. They were decked out in scarves and hats and boots. Cass's heart sank. Ben's boots were still packed away in a box somewhere.

Then Cass saw the stand-in headmaster, Mr. Remick, by the door. Judging by the white patches on his coat, he'd been entering fully into the spirit of things. Either that, or some of the children were bolder than she might have expected to find in a quiet part of the world like this. He waved at her.

"Sorry I'm—"

"No need, no need. We've been having a wonderful time. It's not altogether how I imagined my first day, of course."

"I don't suppose Ben expected this either." They smiled at each other, and Cass saw that Mr. Remick's eyes were blue, the color strong and clear. "Where is he?"

"He's waiting with Mrs. Spencer."

Cass raised her eyebrows.

"You met her earlier today, I believe. Sally Spencer." He grinned. "You can't miss her."

"Oh. Of course." Cass laughed in spite of herself.

"Sally's keeping him occupied with some drawing. I hope you don't mind, Mrs—"

"Cass."

"I hope you don't mind, Cass, but I took the liberty of asking Mrs. Spencer if she wouldn't mind"

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