

# EARTHCRY

part one of the

## CAREAX CHRONICLES

By R A Browell

## PROLOGUE: JUDGEMENT BY FIRE

Bleedstone, 1348.

‘By the Order of the Cross, move!’

The knight was staring at them, his white surcoat with its emblazoned crimson cross contrasted with the dull earthy colours of the crowd as he threatened anyone who caught his stony gaze with the violence of his sword or a trampling under the hooves of his heavy warhorse.

‘Didn’t you hear me? Move aside!’ he commanded. His voice had an arrogance and authority which made the crowd uneasy. They pushed against each other, reluctantly following his instructions, but as soon as he’d moved on they started to strain forward again. Each was fighting with his neighbour, jostling to ensure that they didn’t lose their position next to the raised wooden platform and with it the prize of an unrestricted view. Those who had arrived early had climbed up the rough stone and were now perched like black crows on the castle walls. Others sat on the edges of the canopies that protected the merchants’ stalls. Those with still greater privilege were leaning out of

the small windows that were dotted here and there within the great walls.

Expectation hung in the air, as though everything had stopped in anticipation of the great event, and even though it was still early afternoon, the clouds had gathered and placed a dark veil over the whole valley. A cold wind from the northern wastelands blew, forcing itself into the square; entering through every available alleyway to attack exposed flesh wherever it found the opportunity. Yet even the anger of the elements couldn't dispel the air of excited anticipation. It hung like the prospect of a post-hunt feast over the crowd; bloodlust engraved indelibly on every face.

A young woman protectively clasped a rough bundle to her body, it whimpered for a moment, and then fell silent. She wrapped her cloak more securely around the child and moved forward, letting herself be carried by the natural ebb and flow of her kinsmen.

Opposite the roughly constructed platform, in the decorated chapel at the far edge of the square, a slow chanting could be heard as a single bell tolled intermittently overhead. Its low, deep note signalled that a Judgement was near.

And so it began.

Two processional mounts entered under the heavy gate, their holy banners billowing in the strong north wind. Their victim followed; a small delicate figure, seemingly insignificant beneath the gathering storm clouds, walking with her head held high under the massive stone archway. Behind her, two rows of chanting monks; holy men, moving slowly like a serpent waiting to strike, but for now the venom of this viper remained hidden under the blood red symbol of their religion.

The crowd quietened, following every step with their eyes, slowly parting to let the procession through. Within the dull patchwork of townsfolk, a child started to cry but

was quickly quietened. All eyes focused on the accused; a beautiful young woman, no more than a girl. They stared, searching the contours of her pale face hoping to find some indicator of her innocence or guilt. They looked for a glimmer of fear, a betraying smile of self-righteousness or a silent plea for forgiveness but most, to their eternal shame, only wanted to see the primitive animal fear and overbearing terror of one condemned to death.

Above them the clouds rumbled; the thunder growing ever louder, competing with the sound of the hooves and the feet of the procession as it shuffled into the courtyard. Finally, they arrived at the platform. Upon the dais was a central throne and to each side three lower seats. Seven seats of judgement for those who would give the final verdict. The girl stood before the steps. Her eyes glancing to her right, at the bundles of sticks and straw piled against the base of an old rowan tree, felled the day before and clumsily resurrected as a stake that morning.

She knew that more straw would make the ordeal's end quicker, but she also knew that they didn't want to make it quicker. They needed the crowd and the crowd wanted a spectacle; a grotesque *son et lumière* extravaganza. All of them hungered for the excitement of the hunt and those final moments when the prey finally succumbed in terror to death.

Gathered were her friends and neighbours. Most had known her as a girl and although some were driven to watch the Judgement by their own fear, others were simply predators, relishing the moment of the kill. She smiled to herself; she understood them more than they could possibly imagine.

Feeling an internal fatigue that she didn't want to struggle against anymore; she knew that she was tired of fighting, but most of all that she was tired of herself; frightened of who she was and what she'd become. There were others

like her; yet they weren't really like her at all. They were less than human, tirelessly thirsting for blood. She was unique and, like all those who are different, she was alone. She was as strong as others like her, but they thought her weak. They thought that she couldn't survive unless she succumbed to her true nature and so she was abandoned; left here with these religious zealots and their puny pile of sticks and straw, which would smoke and suffocate her slowly before the flames ever got the chance to perform their real duty.

The voice of the Grand Master boomed out from his raised throne. The spectacle had begun. The girl looked up, trying to remember to breathe.

'Mistress Carfax. You have been brought before this jury to answer charges of witchcraft and heresy. How do you plead?'

'Innocent, my lords,' she said clearly.

Her voice was beautiful, like the pure notes from the rim of a thin crystal glass; three single words that captivated the crowd into silence. The Grand Master paused and looked to his fellow inquisitors before he coughed and continued.

'It is alleged that on the twenty first day of the eleventh month in the year of Our Lord, thirteen hundred and forty seven that you were found drinking blood from the body of a living goat. Moreover, that you have a power over the natural order of things, the like of which neither we, nor others like us, have ever seen before. It is alleged that you injured yourself and that the wounds healed with miraculous speed.' The crowd released a collective gasp. 'Also,' he continued, 'that you were observed by a number of witnesses moving with a speed beyond that of mortal man to catch your child as it fell from an upper window and that you do not possess any looking glass for fear that it will attest to your ungodly pallor.' The crowd took another col-

lective intake of breath. ‘And finally,’ the Grand Master paused, looking around at the gathered townsfolk, ‘that the midwife who delivered you of child witnessed a birthing without the pain of our original mother Eve, which can only be described as being beyond that of a godly woman. Such relief from the natural burden of your sex can only direct us to one conclusion,’ he said, pausing yet again, his voice straining to suppress his own growing sense of excitement and power as he looked around the courtyard at the expectant throng. ‘We can only conclude,’ he said, now playing to the crowd, ‘that because such feats are not of this world, nor found in the world above, that they must belong to the world below.’ His voice became shriller. ‘Such instances of ungodliness must prove that you are in league with the Devil himself!’

The crowd gasped again as the Grand Master continued, his voice now competing with the natural elements. The wind had gathered strength and the sky had darkened. His white tunic with its blood-red cross blazoned across his chest flapped violently and stood in ghostly contrast to the dark stone walls that offered so little protection to the elemental fury.

‘Mistress Carfax, I put it to you that your lord left because he believed you a witch and he feared for his own body and soul. That you were already betrothed to the Evil One when you falsely took our brother for a husband and that the child you have spawned, is not a child of man, but of the Devil!’

The girl gazed into the face of her accuser. Perhaps her husband was the Devil, just as she was the Devil’s mistress. She had to admit that most of what the Grand Master had said was true, other than of course the ridiculous notion that she hadn’t experienced the pain of Eve at the birth of her child. She smiled to herself. If that ordeal could have been made easier using her ‘unnatural powers’ then she

wouldn't have hesitated. As it was, her screaming daughter had been delivered into this world in exactly the same way, and with exactly the same amount of blood, sweat and tears, as any child. The midwife knew that to be the truth and yet, as with most accusations, it was difficult to refute.

She recalled the last few weeks, noting that it was her unorthodox manner of feeding that had really exposed her. Her lord had always provided for her, but once he'd left she'd had little choice but to find her own food. She knew that being discovered in the barn, openly feeding, the warm blood staining the soft white coat of the animal as she sucked greedily, had been foolish. She realised that now. It was just too brutal, too public and had given the superstitious fools cause.

The maid who had discovered her had run to her neighbours, who, fearing the new mother was mad, had in turn spoken to the priest. The story had finally come to the attention of those so called Knights of Christ who involved themselves in the business of burning witches and heretics and so it was that she found herself here, before this so called jury which held her life in their hands.

'Do you deny any of the charges placed before you?' boomed the voice of her accuser, bringing her back to the reality of the dismal square and the all too ready rowan tree and the expectant crowd.

Silence fell again over the courtyard and it seemed that the whole crowd had stopped breathing and was craning its neck to hear her response.

'My Lords,' she replied respectfully with a clear voice, refusing to be intimidated by the crowd, the military presence or the Grand Master. She stood resolute, dressed in only a simple thin white woollen dress covered by a light blue cloak which blew around her upright form. Her fur-lined cowl rested off her pale face and on her shoulders, exposing golden hair twisted with simple braids and a long

elegant neck around which a small insignificant stone pendant was hung. Her face was etched with her recent anxieties, yet this delicate creature standing bravely before the seven seated judges, could not fail to move those present.

The crowd watched. They had seen these trials before, but usually the women were poor, old and infirm without the protection of family; women who suffered from the creeping diseases of an aging mind, who woke at strange hours and said and did strange things. The villagers could always predict who might be taken but this was different. This woman was not old or ranting, nor was she pitiful. She was young and wealthy, her mind quick and strong, with a natural radiance that shone out as her dark eyes stared confidently at her accusers.

She spoke.

‘My Lords, I am brought before you today; a woman born of woman. I have lived amongst these people and in this place since I was a babe in arms. They are my friends and neighbours.’

Her words were clear and eloquent and with them she didn't intend to appeal to the crowds for rescue, but to respond to the charges that had been levelled against her. From the way that she held herself it was clear to them all that this girl was educated and possessed of an inner dignity that even the Grand Master had only ever seen in those of noble blood. Why had he not been informed that her family was included on any of the rolls of honour? Who were these Carfaxes he wondered to himself and for a moment a look of uncertainty passed across his face? This was the first time any woman had been brought before him who, on closer inspection, unnerved him. Until today, she had merely been a name on a piece of parchment, one of a number to be tried throughout the country by the travelling justice machine.



‘I have not danced with the Devil,’ she continued, ‘nor sought an alliance with his demons. I have not made a contract and signed it with my own blood as some have suggested. I stand before you a girl, who has but recently left her mother’s hearth. I am pure of heart and of spirit and no creature on earth deserves to die in the way you propose for me.’

The Grand Master looked around. He could see the crowd nodding, sympathising with this girl, their mood shifting.

‘In response to your charges, it is true that I drank the blood of a living animal, but in my defence I was weak from feeding my child. My husband had gone away to the battle fields and left me little provided for. I could have followed him, to prey on my fellowman in the spoils of war, but I am a weak-minded woman and could not face such scenes of bloodshed and death and so I found that I must provide for myself and my child. Yes,’ she said, ‘I admit I was impatient and lacked self-control in feeding as urgently as I did and upon reflection, I should have had the maid provide me with what I desired.’

The Grand Master stared into her eyes, mesmerised by the pools of darkness. He acknowledged what she said with a nod and broke eye contact only to speak in a whisper to the clerk who was sitting behind his left shoulder. The clerk immediately scribbled with his quill on the parchment.

‘With regard to my healing ability, I cannot say from where it came. I can only suggest it was a gift from my own mother or father. I cut myself and I heal, but does not everyone present in this courtyard heal at different rates? One man may break his leg and it may take a month to heal, for another it may take two and yet for another, a whole year. For those who can heal quickly, this is surely a blessing from God rather than a curse from the Devil. I

am a speedy healer, I admit to this, but I tell you truthfully, I shall never heal from the affliction I will receive from the flames of those twigs, nor the smouldering of the burning Rowan tree should you tie me to it.'

The crowd listened, a murmur rising from the silence. All that she said seemed truthful and didn't seem to hold any of the pre-required qualities necessary for a witch burning. The Grand Master whispered once again over his shoulder to his clerk as she continued.

'It is true my reactions are sharp. It is true that I can move quickly when my child is in danger but show me one other in this crowd of women, who would not move with the speed of the lightning fork in order to protect her child from danger? Any mother must, and will, move with vigour that cannot be imagined by the human mind when the offspring of her womb is endangered. Is this not true and is it not natural that she should do so?'

The Grand Master felt her dark eyes penetrate his soul as she continued her defence.

'As for the absence of mirrors and my pale complexion... Well my Lords, are we not taught that vanity is a sin and that pondering over one's reflection in a mirror is sinful? It is true, I have banished all looking glasses from my home, but this was done at the request of my husband, so that I should not be tempted into sin. It is also true that I am of pale skin compared to others, but I have not worked in the fields as they have. I am what I am; the colour of my skin is my gift from God.' Her eyes shifted momentarily away from those of the Grand Master as she gazed upon the faces of her six other inquisitors.

'Finally my Lords, the last accusation can only be refuted by those who have already condemned me. They know in their hearts and in their consciences that my birth pains were equal to those suffered by any other woman who brings new life into this world. Some women die in child-

birth, others thrive. If my pains were less than my neighbours does this make me in league with the Devil? Should all women have to die in pain as they bring forth life in order to show that they are pure of heart? My Lords, if this were true then no man would have more than one child from each God-fearing wife and such wives would indeed, be in short supply...'

There were a number of suppressed chortles from the crowd and as she finished speaking she felt herself quieten. Her confidence was increased. Her inner strength, dormant until now, was awakening; an overwhelming desire to survive was returning. She wanted to fight. She wanted to escape from these men who threatened her existence and she knew that it was within her power to do so. Was she really going against the natural order by not fighting to survive?

The Grand Master turned his head and consulted with his clerk, who then approached the six others for their opinions and judgements but every eye was still fixed upon her. Every window and ledge leaned outwards with the crowd straining to glimpse the makeshift court. Conversations were hushed as the whole town considered the eloquent and persuasive arguments put forward by this graceful girl.

In their hearts they agreed with what she said. They could see her logic, understand her arguments and such understanding led them to wonder which one of them, which wife, widow or daughter, would be next should this seemingly ordinary young woman suffer the Judgement by Fire. Such thoughts partly tempered the crowds' desire to see the bonfire lit, so that in truth and to their shame, it was only a cold selfish fear that held back the natural bloodlust of the mob.

The Grand Master raised his hand. His oiled, perfumed palm facing the girl and the crowds behind her as his voice resounded around the walls of the castle.

‘Mistress Carfax you have been brought to this place having been charged with the heinous crimes of witchcraft and heresy, of allegiance with the Devil. You have denied any such allegiances and given powerful testimony as to your actions, however after careful consideration, it is felt by this tribunal that the explanations you have given could have been contrived and authored by the Demons of Hell. We therefore leave the decision of your innocence or guilt to the Almighty through his divine instrument, the Judgement by Fire.

The crowd gasped. For a brief moment they’d begun to believe that there would be a reprieve. Now they knew the grotesque spectacle would begin and their excitement grew.

The rough rope dug into her wrists as she balanced her small slippered feet precariously on the makeshift box. She could feel the cramp in her muscles bite as her movement was restricted, her flesh screaming for a fresh supply of oxygen-rich blood, yet she remained silent. She held her head upright and looked out into the crowd. She stared down at the individual faces. Some observed her with terror - she could see it in their eyes - others with pity and still others with an excitement that betrayed a desire to inflict harm. They all stood in anticipation before the unlit stake and the raging sky. Not a drop of rain had yet fallen and still the great thunderhead grew, its grey-black malevolent anvil dominating the sky as the rumbles of thunder grew from within.

Around her the monks proceeded to chant incantations to the Father, Son and Holy Ghost as the flame was first blessed within the small castle chapel and then brought out into the courtyard.

The Grand Master stepped forward. His face had taken on the unnatural yellow hue of the light cast by the gathering storm clouds. ‘And now,’ he said addressing the crowd, ‘we shall see if this woman is innocent of the charges laid against her. We shall see if her heart is pure and whether she has allowed it to be led by Christ. If she is guilty she will burn in the sacred flames and be cleansed by them. If innocent, she will walk away from the Judgement by Fire unmarked by the cool flames; unscathed and pure.’

What he failed to say, this soldier of the Church, was that in the many hundreds of Judgements by Fire over which he had presided, not one accused woman had walked away unscathed. In fact, not one had walked away at all.

The Grand Master raised the flaming taper for a final blessing as she gazed out into the crowd, hoping for a reprieve, and then she saw him. His familiar face partly covered with a thick dark hood, his eyes willing her to remain silent. She allowed herself one glance before she looked across his head into the distance. She didn’t understand. Had he finally come back to her? But she’d received no word. There had been nothing from him for nearly a year and certainly no indication of any plan to return and rescue her from these men.

Another gasp from the crowd as the Grand Master bent down and pushed the flaming taper into the dry straw. It started to smoulder. She looked down and saw the small flames as they devoured the straw. They were growing in strength and with each curling mouthful they were consuming the oxygen around her. She started to cough, her lungs pleading for air as the flames flickered and the smoke thickened and the faces in the crowd became more obscure. Her little slippers offered no protection from the fire. She could feel the heat gnawing at her tiny feet and

her heartbeat, slow as always. Yet she still didn't move, shift her position or struggle against the biting rope.

She glanced at him once again through the hypnotised crowd. All was silent as they exchanged a momentary look. To the townsfolk it seemed that her calm was evidence of her innocence, her supreme confidence in the power of the divine and that she was determined to let justice be played out. Only she knew that she was choosing not to fight because she was placing her trust in Mother Nature and had decided to allow the winds of fate to blow in whichever direction they chose. She would let events run their course and accept her future destiny, and having reached this decision and knowing he was here with her and that that she was not alone, she felt calm. Any residual panic had gone, replaced by an inner peace.

Without warning, the thunderhead roared as the sky darkened, making the day seem like night and a terrifying bolt of white lightning flashed from the base of the black anvil-shaped cloud. It sped blindingly towards the earth, striking the platform, causing a million splinters to erupt and the seven temporary thrones to be engulfed in flames. The Grand Master looked up from where he had been flung to the ground. Although bleeding from a thousand small wounds he was still alive, unlike the charred, contorted remains of his jury, whose bodies were still burning in their own personal inferno. The townsfolk crossed themselves, muttering prayers under their breath. It was clear to them that this was the Judgement by Fire at work. The jury had deferred their judgement to a source more divine and it was they, rather than the accused, who had been found wanting.

Speechless, the Grand Master staggered to his feet. His face was black and bloody, his shredded garments hung from his shoulders so that he looked like a tattered black carrion crow. He looked up towards the boiling thunder

cloud, then at the ruined platform and finally back into that pale face and those dark eyes. Droplets as big as pearls were falling from the sky. He listened as each raindrop hissed, silencing forever the tongues of fire and stared in disbelief at the dying flames. For the Grand Master there was no mistaking the verdict; true justice had been deliberated and delivered this day, and for the first time in his life he was afraid... Very afraid.

# A DARK STRANGER

Bledeston, present day.

She turned and ran, running hard and fast, the tears blurring her vision as she skirted up the dirt track and headed up towards the moors. Her feet hardly touched the ground. Her legs were moving for sure, but they were a blur as she speeded up, running faster than she'd ever run in her life. Every sense seemed amplified beyond anything that could be classed as normal. Every sound, every smell, every touch and every taste was so intensified. If she hadn't been crying, her sight would have been up there too.

An owl flew past. It was low, crossing just in front of her, its huge wings pounding the air but she could hear more than the flap of its wings; she could hear the dull thud of each feather as it beat the air. She ignored it and ran faster, pushing her body as it had never been pushed before to make her escape and yet her speed didn't stop her from hearing the rustle from a distant mouse; sensing its whiskers as they twitched and the uncoiling of its worm-like tail as it hid from the predator overhead. The world was a noisy place, filled with insects scurrying, moles excavating and badgers burrowing and at this moment it felt like it was closing in on her, covering her with something so overwhelming that it threatened to suffocate her



and so she ran even faster to try and escape. In the dark unpolluted sky above her head, a single cloud part-covered the spring moon but its lost light was more than made up for by the myriad of equally bright stars and the long painted snake that was the Milky Way, standing out, obvious against the blackest of skies like a runway guiding a plane back home.

As she passed the last of the spindly trees that eked an existence in this upland wilderness she reached the top of the moorland plateau, where the hard stony track gave way to spongy peat and springy heather. The gorse was in full bloom, spikey and spiteful despite its cheery yellow flowers, hiding its true nature beneath something as small and delicate as a collection of petals, and as land met sky on top of the world, the wind picked up and started blowing through her hair, loosening her ponytail and rushing past her ears. She reached up and pushed the stray strands of blonde out of her eyes and was once again overwhelmed with the scent. There was no escaping it, her hands were still sticky with the fresh-spilled blood and as she unconsciously licked her lips, she found her mouth was once again filled with the taste which had made her run.

She slowed and then came to a stop, looking down at the dark stains on her hands. She couldn't undo what had been done. It had all happened so fast and now she was confused; part of her was exhilarated but the other part, the better part of her, was consumed with guilt. She saw her victim's face, his eyes looking up into hers as she had borne down on him and taken that which she should never have taken. She couldn't hide the evidence, there was little point, for it was all too visible. She thought back to where she had left the body. She had dropped it and fled, leaving everything, the whole messy affair, unhidden. Someone else had to take the blame, someone who wouldn't be able to stand up and defend himself. The cogs in her mind were

turning; there were two innocent, defenceless individuals who might just be deemed culpable.

She sensed something behind her and turned, blinking away the tears as she focused her eyes. Someone was there, but she couldn't see them clearly. She blinked again and focused her mind on the far distance. On the horizon, in the midst of the wild moor was a single solitary figure, standing watching her. Lily stood stock still, scanning across the rest of the horizon, peering through the darkness, listening for any other presence before she drew her eyes away and glanced quickly down at her phone. It was well after midnight, closer to 1am. It was possible that there were poachers up here, come for the deer and the hope of venison steak. Her mouth started to water as she thought back to the bloody steak that she'd consumed eagerly earlier that evening and of what she'd consumed just as eagerly later on... But it was a clear night and the poachers preferred a night when the clouds hid their criminal activities and besides, from what she'd been told, they rarely hunted alone. She looked up. The single figure was still there; distant but present. Was she being followed and if she was, had they seen what she'd done earlier? Had they seen how she'd killed in cold blood?

She scanned the horizon again and sniffed the air, but as her eyes returned to the spot where the figure had stood, whoever it was had gone, as quickly and as silently as they had arrived. She knew that she'd been seen and as she looked out into the night, she thought about the people who cared about her and that she loved and wondered what in the world was she doing up on these wild moors. Whatever was happening to her and whatever she'd done, she knew she had to go home.

Seven months earlier...

Lily stared blankly into the distance and the long straight road ahead. Her eyes focused on a droplet at the top of the window, following the small dirty tear as the radio droned in the background and the wipers cleared the rain with a mechanical efficiency. Lily felt stiff and cramped after the long journey.

It had been seven hours since they'd left London; seven hours of unceasing rain, broken by her feeble attempts at relieving the boredom. She'd emailed, texted, read and then discarded her teen-mags and listened to the radio and endless playlists but boredom had smothered her yet again.

'Are we anywhere near yet?' she asked, staring out into the dark night.

'Not far now Lil, then we'll be off the main road and out into the county. Just listen to the radio. I thought you liked this programme,' Andrew replied. He started to fiddle with the volume control as Lily muttered to herself and returned to watching the rain. She wondered why they were moving so far north but she knew the answer. It was for Dad's work and to help Gran and even though she knew why they'd had to come, she still harboured the vague hope that maybe it wouldn't work out and that they could move back to London.

The problem was that Andrew Carfax was smart. If he'd simply announced that they were moving, that Lily had no choice in the matter and had ordered her to pack her bags, declaring that the house was sold, the furniture packed and the car waiting, then she might have had a chance, but the truth was he hadn't. Her dad wasn't some ogre from a kid's fairy tale or one of those dysfunctional parents you read about; a distant presence who magically reappeared at birthdays and Christmas and then disappeared again. He was a great dad and she had no complaints. Of course he

got on her nerves at times but he'd always been there, always made time for her and so, true to form, he'd sat her down and discussed his plan. A move to the North to be near Gran, with a great job for him and a fabulous new school for her. Lily knew she'd lost when she couldn't think of any reasonable argument against what he was suggesting and started to feel excited about his plans for their future.

There were her friends at school, but it wasn't like she was moving to a different part of the world; there were emails, texts and skype and in any case, a few more years and she'd be away at college. Andrew had said that she could have friends to visit whenever she wanted and she could always go and stay with Auntie Debs in the holidays. This was the twenty first century after all; where kids had to adjust as their parents moved to different parts of the world. Only last summer her best friend's parents had separated and Lucy now spent term time in London with her mum and holidays in Geneva with her dad.

She'd said that Lily could go out to Switzerland with her anytime, and perhaps she would. So, as far as Lily could see, the only downside to moving, apart from this interminable journey, was a new school, having to make new friends and enter a fresh set of mobile numbers. She sighed to herself. It would have been great to think that she didn't have any hang-ups but she knew she had lots of them and she also knew that kids at school could be cruel. She looked across at Andrew. He was listening to the radio and concentrating on the road ahead. Sometimes she wished that she had a mother too.

Andrew finally indicated and turned off the main trunk road. They passed through a small village and then headed out along an unlit country road with Lily watching in the side mirror as the last of the stone built village cottages disappeared. It was weird, how everyone was lecturing kids

about the future being green, when so much of the night sky was still polluted by the yellow of sodium light. Lily knew the usual excuses; crime, accidents, loss of life but as they turned out of the artificial light and into the darkness, Lily found herself wrapped in a dark, natural blanket and it was the diseased yellow light which felt oppressive; the darkness in the road ahead felt safe.

‘It’s only about ten more miles. Give Gran a call and ask her to get the kettle on will you?’ said Andrew, arching his back against his seat.

‘How long do you think we’ll be?’

‘About half an hour given the rain and the state of the roads.’ Lily dialled. Even without the contact list she knew the numbers off the top of her head. She tapped at her phone as they ploughed on through the rain, now driving so hard against the windscreen that not even the wipers could keep up. Ahead of them were flashing red lights. Andrew slowed, then stopped behind a large farm truck. Back in London, pristine 4x4s with every possible extra, dropped pristine kids, also with every possible extra, at the school gates. It was all so clean compared to the truck in front which was caked in mud, had steamed up windows and something large and hairy moving around in the back.

A small figure, clad in an oversized oilskin coat, with a wide brimmed hat, approached the car and knocked on the glass. Andrew wound down the window, shielding his face as he tried in vain to avoid a soaking from the driving rain. Lily shrank back into her warm seat and waited. The oilskin apparition stooped down and peered through the gap, managing to soak Andrew afresh with a torrent of water from the brim of her oversized hat.

‘I’m so sorry!’ she apologised straightening her head as she bent her knees to see into the car properly. ‘I’m afraid we’ve got a tree down. The road’s completely blocked,’ she explained. ‘I’ve called for help but I’m still waiting. Where

exactly did you say you were heading? Perhaps I can help with a detour?’

She was friendly but as Gran had pre-warned, the locals could be a touch too familiar, as the warm northern accent, that Lily recognised so well, threatened to enchant them.

‘That’s my place over there,’ she continued before Andrew could reply, pointing to the west of the road, towards a distant light. ‘I’m just bringing a patient in for the vet tomorrow. Got caught with this monster!’ she nodded towards the fallen tree.

Andrew smiled. ‘We’re heading up to Carfax Hall but I think this is the only road across there so we’re pretty stuck until your help arrives,’ he said, trying to ignore the driving rain which was now pouring from both his face and the hand that was supposed to be shielding him. The smile beneath the hat broadened.

‘It’s Andrew isn’t it? Willy’s son-in-law?’ she replied enthusiastically, peering closer into the gap. ‘And this must be Lily? I’m Rachel, Rachel Cookson. We’ve met briefly before, you probably don’t remember me, at least not dressed like this. I knew you were on your way up this weekend, but what a day to choose,’ she continued. ‘We’ve heard so much about your move. You must have been driving for ages? What’s the traffic been like? Have you got everything with you? You must be absolutely shattered.’

Her friendliness tumbled out. She seemed to know everything about them and they knew nothing at all about her, but in a strange way, Rachel’s knowledge didn’t seem to have any ulterior motive other than just being neighbourly. Lily felt her mouth relax into an involuntary smile as she looked into Rachel’s wet, welcoming face.

‘Anyway,’ she added as the storm continued, ‘welcome to your new home! Carfax Hall is a lovely place, I’m sure you’ll settle in quickly and I promise it doesn’t always pour like this!’

She gasped as the wind lashed another volley of driving rain at them, drenching Andrew afresh through the part open window. ‘You really picked a night to arrive! And if you listen really hard,’ she continued, lowering her soft voice and nodding over her shoulder to the far distance, ‘on a night like tonight, you can sometimes hear the wolves; packs and packs of them, howling as they hunt over on the moors.’

Lily glanced uneasily in the direction Rachel was nodding before she caught her mischievous wink and easy smile. Lily returned the grin; friendliness was infectious.

Headlights flashed in the road behind them.

‘Looks like our knights in shining armour have finally come to the rescue,’ Rachel called as she waved the huge tractor on and then turned back to the open window. ‘Look at the state of you. Sorry!’ she apologised, gazing down at Andrew’s soaked sleeve.

‘Close your window and if I don’t catch you before the tree’s lifted, it’s been lovely meeting you again and welcome to your new home. Be sure to give my love to Willy.’ She paused, fixing her eye on Andrew. ‘Hopefully we’ll see each other before too long. You know where I am. Willy has my number. If you need anything, anything at all, just call. We’ll try and get things moving and get you home.’

It was only with the illumination from the tractor’s wide beam of white light that Lily saw what Andrew had been gazing into for the whole conversation; the most startling emerald green eyes ever. Rachel Cookson turned away and the spell was broken. Andrew wound up the window and shook the water from his cold, wet hand.

‘Well it seems as though the whole neighbourhood’s been expecting us,’ he said and grinned. ‘Goodness knows what Willy’s been saying!’

‘But did you see those eyes and remember, you can call her anytime!’ added Lily with an impish grin. He reached

down to turn up the de-mister and was smiling as he wiped the water from his face and back through his short blond hair but he looked paler than usual and tired.

‘You okay Dad?’ Lily asked. ‘I wish I was old enough to drive. I could have helped you out.’ Andrew leaned across and patted her leg gently.

‘Even if you could drive Lil, I wouldn’t have let you, but thanks for the offer, I’ll note it down for future reference.’

He sounded sad and Lily knew why. Her eyes were bad, even with glasses. Problems from when she’d been born. There’d been complications and she’d nearly died and if it hadn’t been for Andrew’s quick thinking she might not have been here now. Lily thought of the brothers and sisters that might have been here with her now had they survived, as her mind turned to her mother and the fact that she wasn’t coming with them to Carfax Hall.

Over the years Lily had seen more specialists than she could remember. None of them knew whether or not her eyes would improve and whether she’d actually be able to do the things that most teenagers took for granted; like playing sports properly or being able to drive. All anybody would say is that she needed to ‘wait and see’, but as the years had passed, they’d discovered that it wasn’t just her eyes. Her responses weren’t as quick as the other kids. She was clumsy, always bumping into things, so she tended to be the last pick when it came to any team. It wasn’t that she disliked sport but as she’d said to Andrew a thousand times, it was pretty scary when you had a ball whizzing towards your head at a hundred miles an hour and you couldn’t see it until it was at nose distance. Or you had ten kids all charging towards you with big sticks after a small white ball and you were the only one who didn’t realise that it was right there, next to your left foot!

Lily sighed and thought back to the last term at school. She was pretty much resigned to the fact that some kids



would always pick on her. It was just part of life. Andrew had said that humans had a horrible habit of discriminating against those who were different, and that it probably all stemmed from a healthy fear of the unknown. He had a theory that it went back to their origins, humans attacked first, before being attacked, but Lily wasn't so sure. She couldn't help but wonder why, after millions of years, certain evolutionary features were still necessary and why something like bullying hadn't been 'selected out', particularly in high school!

The tractor moved slowly, passing the two stationary vehicles and lighting up the road ahead with its bank of headlights. Two massive trolls, lumberjacks in luminous jackets were already hard at work, lifting heavy orange chainsaws above the old gnarled trunk. It was still raining but not as hard as it had been, and now they could see, they saw that the tree had split into two, with one of the huge central boughs lying right across the road, flattening the hedgerow at each side.

'Typical northern weather!' grunted Andrew as he looked out of the window. Lily nodded. She didn't like to point out to him that it had been his idea to move up here, that it'd been raining for most of the day as they'd travelled up the length of England and that the North didn't have the monopoly on foul weather.

'It was like this the first night that your mum brought me up to meet your gran and grandpa,' he said, reminiscing. 'Pouring with rain, freezing cold and a tree had blocked the drive up to the big house. That was before Grandpa died and Gran moved,' he explained. 'We just abandoned the car, clambered over the branches and walked the rest of the way. I can see her now, her long dark hair blowing in the wind as she threw a blanket around her shoulders, folded her arms determinedly and struggled over the

branches, trying to keep her balance and stop that blanket blowing away.'

He smiled to himself as he remembered. Lily listened, silently willing him to continue. She loved it when he talked like this. He always managed to provide so much detail, that she felt like she was almost there; his words becoming vivid moving pictures in her mind. Lily was grateful that he possessed the meticulous observation skills of a scientist, combined with a wonderful gift for storytelling. It was almost as if he resurrected Maggs every time he talked about her.

Maggs Carfax was Lily's mother. She had died over ten years ago when Lily was just four and Lily found that the memories of her were clouded and fading fast; losing their colour and becoming less vivid with each passing year.

'She adored it up here,' he continued. 'She loved the freedom, the nature, the history of the place and believe it or not, the weather!' Andrew smiled, his memories rekindling the sparkle in his eyes. 'She reminded me a lot of Cathy in *Wuthering Heights*. You have read it?' he asked uncertainly. Lily nodded, not wanting to speak in case she broke the spell.

'She was definitely a free spirit, loved the moorlands, being up on the fells over there.' He nodded ahead of them. 'There's Yorkshire blood flowing through your veins direct from your grandmother's side, so maybe it's Earnshaw blood after all!' he said and glanced at Lily.

'Did Mum really have Yorkshire blood?' Lily asked, her eyes wide, willing him on. Andrew nodded.

'Apparently so. Willy's parents were from Yorkshire, from the same place as the Brontës; a little Yorkshire town called Haworth. *Wuthering Heights* was set on the wild moorland above there,' he explained.

'So my great, great, great, whatever grandparents could have been friends with the Brontës? Maybe Cathy and

Heathcliff were based on them? Can you imagine?’ she said excitedly. ‘How awesome and romantic is that!’

‘Well I don’t know,’ smiled Andrew, ‘but you could always do some digging in the library. I’m sure Willy will have something in there, maybe some kind of family tree.’ He paused as he watched the chainsaws. ‘I always fancied those roles for me and your mum, rather than Gran’s ancestors,’ he added with a wink, ‘except I doubt whether I’m quite Heathcliff material! He was a bit of a hunk, right?’

Neither of them spoke, the only sound was that of the windscreen wipers scraping against the glass.

‘I wish she’d come back and haunt us like Cathy did,’ whispered Lily.

‘I know you do, Sweetheart!’ Andrew replied quietly as he reached over and squeezed her hand. ‘And so do I.’ Lily rested her head on his shoulder. Only the two of them, and perhaps Willy, could really understand how much Maggs was missed.

Now at full throttle, the chainsaws screamed against the wind, their teeth chewing through each seasonal ring, consuming each successive generation of growth. Tiny black blades that managed to sear through time in one hungry bite, travelling back to days before industrialisation and computerisation, when the fields were fought over by Scots and Border men. This was a place of history, of action and of bloody encounters and this old tree had seen it all.

‘You’d better call Gran and let her know we’re stuck, otherwise she’ll just worry,’ said Andrew. ‘I’ll go and see if the blokes need a lift with some of those branches.’

He reached into the back of the car, grabbed his coat and went out to see if he could help. Lily made the call and then settled back to wait; her feet resting on the dashboard, her eyes closed, with an ear-phone lodged securely in each ear, and had just found the track she wanted when there

was a short, sharp tap at her window, loud enough to make her jump.

She looked out of the window but couldn't see anything in the darkness and assuming it was a stray branch, she settled back to listen to her music. Within seconds there it was again; another tap, this time definite and sharp. Lily sat up in her seat, turning her head and narrowing her imperfect eyes to see the lumberjacks clambering over the fallen tree. They were busy chopping through the main trunk and Andrew was helping Rachel lift some of the smaller branches from the road, but they were all at the other side of the fallen tree and there was no way any of them could have tapped on the window and got back to work.

Lily stared again through the misted side window, wiping the condensation with her hand and was just about to reach for the window button when a pale face pressed unexpectedly against the glass. Lily shrieked and jumped away from the window and then looked back, only to find she was staring at nothing. The face had disappeared into the foul night as stealthily as it had appeared. Lily turned to look out of the rear window, peering through her glasses, hoping to see some trace of the mysterious stranger; her heart racing as she recalled the woman's pale features. As her imperfect eyes became more accustomed to the darkness outside she saw the outline of a woman, dressed in a long, black, hooded cloak who was beckoning and then she turned and started walking towards the hedgerow before disappearing into the night.

Lily blinked, shaking her head to make sure she hadn't been dreaming. Why would anyone tap on the window and then walk away? Where had the woman come from? There were no other cars behind and she felt certain that Rachel Cookson, having gone to the trouble of explaining the presence of a sick sheep would have mentioned any hooded passenger she might have had with her. Lily

grabbed her coat from the backseat and a torch from the glove compartment and opened the door, looking back towards where the figure had gone, compelled to follow as she left the safety of the car.

The torchlight swung backwards and forwards. What feeble light it managed to generate illuminated the dark outline of a gate, half hidden by a small overgrown ditch with a stile fixed at one end but there was nothing else; no footmarks, no disturbed grass, no sign that anybody had passed that way recently. Lily flashed the torch up the road but again there was nothing. She thought back to the pale face at the window, reaching out, trying to speak and turned to see Andrew striding out towards her.

‘What on earth are you doing wandering out here, so far away from the car? You’re soaking wet!’ he asked with a puzzled expression on his face, but before she could explain, he put his arm protectively around her shoulders. ‘You’ll catch your death. Let’s get you back to the car.’

‘Did you see her Dad?’ Lily asked.

‘Who?’

‘The woman with the long dark cloak. You must have seen her? I think she jumped over the stile and into the field. Maybe she was in trouble? I think she was asking for help.’

Andrew shook his head.

‘I didn’t see anyone, Sweetheart. Come on, you need to get dry.’ He guided her back towards the car as Lily pulled away and turned back, flashing her torch up and down the hedgerow.

‘Please Dad. Maybe her car’s come off the road with the rain. She might need help. Maybe someone’s injured or worse. You need to help!’

Lily stood in the middle of the road, staring at him defiantly with her deep brown eyes. Her hood had fallen from her head, leaving her long blonde hair plastered to

her face; the incessant rain streaming down her cold, pale cheeks.

Andrew looked at her, slightly taken aback. She was growing up and his little girl was clearly her mother's daughter.

'But Lil, I didn't see anyone before and I can't see anyone now,' he sighed.

'And what if there's someone who needs help in that field?' she asked. 'We can't just leave them there. The least we can do is call the police. Dad, that woman could be lost; she might have had a knock to the head, have amnesia or anything and then when she dies of hypothermia...'

'Okay,' Andrew sighed in defeat, lifting both hands in the air, 'I get the message. You get back in the car. I'll go take a look.'

'What's the matter?' called Rachel above the sound of the wind, the rain and the chainsaws. She was heading towards them. 'Anything I can do?'

'Probably not,' replied Andrew. 'Lil thinks she's seen someone who looks like they may be in a spot of trouble. She's asked me to take a look. Did you see anyone when we were moving the branches?'

Rachel shook her head. 'Can't say I did, but then again I wasn't really facing in that direction and you can't hear anything over the sound of this wind and those chainsaws. It was only when I turned around to see how the boys were doing that I spotted Lily out of the car.' She paused. 'It's bad tonight. Maybe a car's come off the road? I haven't seen anyone else up this way, have you?'

'No,' replied Andrew, pulling open the back door and reaching behind the driver's seat for his black bag. 'Lil, I want you to stay in the car while I go take a look in that field. You never know what you might find,' he added as he shook his torch to get a better light. Lily nodded, she

knew better than to question him further. She opened the car door and slumped into the passenger seat.

‘And give your grandmother another call – let her know what’s happening will you?’

Rachel reached into her great coat and handed him her spare torch as the two of them set off towards the hedgerow and the overgrown stile. It must have been about fifteen minutes later when the car door opened and Andrew edged into the driver’s seat, soaked to the skin, his shoes covered in thick mud and exhausted. He tossed his medical bag in the back.

‘Well,’ asked Lily. ‘Did you find her?’

Andrew shook his head.

‘Not a thing, no sign at all. Rachel and I walked all the way down the field to the bottom but there was nothing to suggest that anyone had passed that way; at least not recently. We need to get to Gran’s. I’m soaked to the skin. I need to get these clothes off and get a warm bath,’ he complained, wiping his face with his frozen hands.

‘Do you think we should call the police?’ Lily persisted.

‘I’m not sure Lil,’ replied Andrew pursing his lips, ‘there was no trace of anybody. No car, no footmarks, nothing. I know you said you saw something, but are you sure it was a person, could it have been something blown against the car? Or maybe you were daydreaming? It’s been a long day.’

Lily stared at him.

‘I know what I saw, Dad. It was a woman with a pale face. She tapped on the window a couple of times and said something that I couldn’t hear. She needed help. I wasn’t dreaming. She headed back towards the stile as though she needed to get back to someone. She seemed desperate.’

Andrew looked at his daughter, took a deep breath and opened his mouth as if going to say something but then thought better of it. He sighed and turned the key in the ignition.

‘Look, we’ll call the police when we get to Gran’s,’ he said. ‘I can’t say fairer than that. We’ll be there in fifteen minutes and then they can take up the search.’ He wound the window down as he put the car into gear and moved slowly over the leaf and bark debris that were scattered across the road. ‘Thanks Rachel, I owe you and the lads a drink. I’ll give you a call tomorrow.’

‘Anytime and drive carefully, it’s a naughty night!’ she called, watching as the remaining branches snapped under the heavy wheels of Andrew’s car and the new arrivals drove the last few miles over the windswept moors towards their new home.