What the Water Gave Us
by orphan_account

Summary

Post S2 AU. In the aftermath of Danny’s death and Joe’s trial, Hardy and Miller try to build a life together.
He returned to Broadchurch like a sailor homeward bound, one whose promise of return is tattooed on his arms in the shape of lilting swallows. He wound along the single road into the town with unmistakable purpose.

It was not the first time he had come back. He had made many trips to see her since he'd left that little blue house behind, though he could not remember precisely how many. It had become routine to him now, as inevitable as the tide.

He stepped out of the cab and breathed in the crisp air, still cool and briny from long nights spent fondling the waves. The summer sun at its zenith washed over him and he turned to it like a heliotrope, closing his eyes and letting his lungful of Broadchurch-air leak from his nose like sand through fingers. The cab rumbled off again and he opened his eyes, his gaze resting on the unkempt house in front of him. The lawn was uncut and growing wild. Where there had once been a neatly manicured flowerbed, there was now a flourishing patch of cheerful yellow weeds, bright with humming ladybugs.

There was something about the chaos that was beautiful.

Treading quietly up the overgrown path, Hardy dropped his bag on the step and knocked on the door. The second it opened, an excited toddler came barrelling out and clamped around his leg.

‘Awec!’ Fred exclaimed, looking up at Hardy with a toothy grin. Chocolate was smeared all around his mouth and fingers.

‘Oh. ‘lo Fred,’ Hardy said. ‘You’re… very sticky.’

Fred giggled and buried his grubby fingers tighter into Hardy’s trousers. Hardy looked up to see Miller smiling at him. She was wearing jeans and an orange t-shirt and was covered in flour and flecks of chocolate. He nodded at her.

‘We’ve been cooking,’ she explained. ‘Fred’s been helping me, haven’t you?’ She gestured for Hardy to enter. ‘Come in. How have you been?’

‘Fine,’ he replied, following her into the kitchen and depositing his bag on the floor. Fred refused to detach himself from his leg so he had to drag it along behind him like a hunchback from an old sci-fi film. Fred squealed delightedly.

‘Sorry,’ Miller said. ‘He gets a bit silly when I let him have sugar.’

‘S’ok,’ Hardy knelt and stroked the boy’s dark, curly hair. Fred removed his face from Hardy’s knee and looked at him, his eyes shining. He was the spitting image of his mother, from his cheeky smile down to his crooked toes. There was nothing of Joe in him except for those bright blue eyes. ‘You been helping your mum cook, have you?’

Fred giggled and patted Hardy’s face. He loved the feel of his rough whiskers. ‘Awec.’

‘He’s been excited to see you,’ Miller told him. ‘He’s been saying your name all morning.’

Hardy picked up the toddler and bounced him in his arms. ‘S’pose it’s nice to be missed.’

‘He’s got chocolate all up your trousers,’ Miller observed, looking at his knee.
‘What’ve you been making?’ he asked. The kitchen was an absolute mess. It looked as though a small tornado had passed through. Flecks of batter and chocolate were everywhere and a faint burning smell wafted from the oven.

‘Browies!’ Fred announced, accidentally smacking Hardy in the temple.

‘That’s right, Fred, brownies!’ Miller agreed. ‘I hope they come out all right. This is my first time making it without a packet mix. I think I used too much flour.’

‘I see the electric mixer got a workout,’ Hardy remarked, squinting at the flecks of batter on the ceiling.

‘Ah. That was Fred’s fault. His enthusiasm exceeds his abilities.’ She drew close and tickled the boy in his arms. Hardy looked down at her and she smiled up at him. Suddenly embarrassed by her proximity, she backed up. ‘TOM!’ she bellowed, making Hardy wince. ‘Hardy’s here! Come and say hello!’

A short silence followed.

‘What?’ someone called back, faintly.

‘I said, HARDY’S HERE, COME INTO THE KITCHEN,’ Miller roared.

Hardy rubbed his ear with his free hand. Fred, accustomed to the volume of her Mum Voice, was unperturbed and continued to pull on his whiskers.

Tom sauntered into the kitchen wearing the cold, dead eyes of a teenage boy who had spent all night playing video games. ‘Hi,’ he managed. Hardy was a semi-regular guest now, but Tom still found him slightly intimidating. Admittedly, though, today there was something about him being covered in chocolate and clutching a wriggling toddler that made him less threatening.

‘Hi Tom,’ Hardy replied.

‘God, Mum, what did you do to the kitchen?’ Tom asked, looking around.

‘I’m cooking. I did ask you to help, but you were glued to your Xbox.’ Miller pulled out a pair of oven gloves and went to take out the brownies.

‘Whatever you do, don’t eat it,’ Tom said discreetly to Hardy.

‘Wasn’t planning to,’ Hardy muttered back.

‘I can hear you,’ she said sharply, still bent over the oven.

Fred wiggled in his arms. ‘Down please,’ he said, and Hardy placed him on the ground. The boy grabbed Hardy’s hand and led him into the lounge. He had turned the coffee table into his own personal art studio; crayons and drawings were everywhere. Sorting through the drawings, Fred pulled out one and gave it to him.

‘What’s this?’ Hardy asked him.

‘Awec,’ Fred said.

It was a crude drawing of a grumpy looking man rendered in black and brown. His expression was a deep frown, a severe black ‘V’ forming the eyebrows above the mismatched eyes. Odd lines appeared above the head.
'Is that me?' he asked.

‘Awec,’ Fred said again.

‘I think the brownies are a bit burnt,’ Miller said as she followed them into the lounge. Smoke drifted out behind her. ‘Never mind. We can just cut those bits off once it’s cooled.’

‘What’s that?’ Tom asked, entering behind her and looking at the drawing.

‘I think Fred drew a portrait of me,’ Hardy replied. He held it up.

There was a pause. ‘Are those stink lines?’ Tom asked.

‘What?’

‘There,’ Tom pointed at the odd brown lines above cartoon Hardy’s head. ‘I think they’re stink lines.’

‘Oh, so that’s what they are,’ Miller said.

‘What? No.’ Hardy flipped the picture over and scrutinised it. ‘They’re not stink lines. It’s just hair.’

‘They’re definitely stink lines,’ Tom said.

‘Definitely,’ Miller agreed. ‘Look, they’re too far away from the head.’

‘Stop saying that! They’re not.’

‘Well, let’s just ask him,’ Tom suggested. He knelt next to his brother. ‘Fred. Is this hair or stink lines you’ve drawn?’

Fred blinked his round eyes.

‘It’s hair,’ Hardy butted in. ‘It’s hair, isn’t it Fred? Tell them.’

‘No, Fred, say they’re stink lines,’ Miller said.

‘Miller!’

‘What? Go on Fred. Say they’re stink lines. He’s Mr. Stinky, isn’t he?’

Overwhelmed by the attention, Fred farted.

‘Ohhh, no!’ Miller laughed. ‘I think we know who the real Mr. Stinky is! Come here!’

She leapt on the boy and started tickling him. Fred squealed. Feeling self-conscious, Hardy took a subtle whiff of his armpits. ‘Is there something you’re not telling me?’

‘Oh, we’re only teasing,’ Miller said. ‘It’s a pretty good likeness otherwise. He got your expression just right. Look, your arms are even crossed!’

Hardy, who happened to be frowning and folding his arms, replicating Fred’s drawing exactly, swiftly uncrossed his arms and tried to adopt a more neutral expression.

‘Come on,’ Miller said. ‘Let’s go try the brownies.’

Tom, Miller and Fred all went into the kitchen. None of them saw Hardy discreetly fold the drawing
and slip it into his jacket pocket.

Miller’s brownies were swiftly pronounced inedible so the four of them went down to the pier for ice creams instead. It being a beautiful summer’s day, they packed their bathers too.

‘You can’t wear a suit to the beach,’ Miller was saying as she licked her ice cream.

Fred was holding Hardy’s hand tightly as they wandered back along the pier. More of the ice cream seemed to be smearing around the boy’s face and slopping onto his clothes than actually going into his mouth. He had insisted on an adult’s cone, but was clearly struggling with the size.

Hardy bit into his own. ‘M’not swimming. Be fine.’

‘But look at you! Aren’t you hot? It’s sweltering out.’

‘I took my jacket off.’

‘No, this is silly. Let me buy you some bathers. Or some shorts.’

‘Mum, he doesn’t want it,’ Tom cut in, sounding aggravated.

‘But he’s at the beach and he looks like he’s about to file someone’s taxes!’

‘So? He’s not swimming. It doesn’t matter.’

‘Thank you, Tom,’ Hardy said.

‘Besides,’ he went on, ‘if he’s not swimming that means we’ve got someone who can watch our stuff.’

Hardy grunted. Miller threw up her hands. ‘Fine.’

They followed the steps down to the beach and wandered along the sandy shore. Gulls wheeled and soared above them, casting winged shadows on the waves. All along the beach children splashed and played, chased by admonishing parents. Yet even in such a sunny, jovial atmosphere, the sight and sound of the water caused a twinge to go through Hardy. Acutely aware of the weight of the pacemaker in his chest, he winced and took a moment to regulate his breathing.

‘You okay?’ Miller asked. She was so attuned to his moods that she noticed his trepidation almost immediately.

‘Spectacular,’ Hardy replied. Disliking his tone, Miller shot him a disapproving look but did not press the point.

‘We’ll go a little further along,’ she said. ‘Tom and I have a spot we like to go to. There’s hardly ever people down there. And it’s sheltered from the wind.’

‘Full,’ Fred announced. He tugged on Hardy’s hand and held up his half-eaten ice cream to him.

‘He wants you to finish it,’ Miller explained.

‘I gathered.’ To Fred, he muttered, ‘I told you you wouldn’t finish a big one.’

Unapologetic, Fred only brandished the ice cream more insistently.
‘Fine.’ He took the cone. Now wielding two, he ate them with difficulty. ‘I can feel my arteries clogging up already.’

‘Oh, lighten up. An ice cream is not going to kill you.’ Miller removed a handkerchief from her bag, spat on it and bent to wipe Fred’s face. He struggled valiantly, but there was no escape. ‘Would you look at that! There’s a handsome little boy under all this mess,’ she said as she cleaned him. ‘Who would’ve guessed?’

Fred rubbed his cheek angrily. Standing up, Miller spat on her hanky again and went after Tom.

‘Mum!’ the teenager protested.

‘Hold still,’ she said. ‘You’ve got a big blob on your chin.’

‘So just let me get it!’ He contorted and ducked out of her grip, wildly scrubbing his face.

‘No, you keep missing it. Keep still.’

‘Mum!’

She caught him in a vice-like grip and stretched out the hanky. ‘Stop fighting me!’

‘Get off!’

Tom caught Hardy’s eye and fixed him with a pleading stare. Hardy could only watch sympathetically as she scrubbed the ice cream off his face.

‘There. All clean,’ she said, releasing him. ‘Honestly, I don’t know why you’re being so silly. It’s not like I’m torturing you.’

Tom and Fred scowled at her. She turned to Hardy, who took a sharp step backwards. Fortunately, he passed her inspection and she put the dreaded hanky away.

They finished their ice creams and continued along the beach. A few rockpools were scattered here and there. Fred, still clinging to Hardy’s hand, pulled him back and forth to inspect them.

A splash of seawater got on Hardy’s shoes and he let out a tiny sigh. Absorbed in his search, Fred paid him no heed.

‘Crab!’ he squealed, pointing. Pulling free of Hardy’s grip, he plunged his fat arm into the water and grasped for the small crustacean.

‘Careful,’ Hardy told him. ‘Your mum’ll kill me if you fall in.’

The crab fled from his clutches and Fred whined. ‘No fair.’

‘Come on, you two!’ Miller called. ‘We’re nearly there!’

Hardy took Fred’s hand again and gently led him away. ‘Come on.’

Miller and Tom set up their blankets by a small inlet with rockpools on one side and clear, open water on the other. A few other families were nearby, but far enough away to give them some privacy.

‘I bet there’s loads of crabs here,’ Hardy remarked to Fred. The rockpools were sunk into a hard black rock shelf that stretched out into the waves and dropped off suddenly into deep water. It was
encrusted with ancient barnacles and webbed with dewy green and red aquatic plants. The waves washed clumps of brown seaweed over it.

Once they’d set up the towels, Tom eagerly stripped down to his trunks. Miller pulled her t-shirt off in one swift movement, then her shorts. She was wearing a black one-piece bathing suit. Hardy reddened and looked away.

‘Tom. Sunscreen,’ Miller said, holding out the tube to him.

‘I put some on before,’ he said.

‘Well put some more on.’

‘I don’t need it!’

She tried to foist the tube onto him but he darted out of her reach and went splashing into the water with his rubber football. She frowned after him but let him go, instead busying herself applying it to her arms and face. She held out the tube to Hardy and he accepted it without a fuss, squeezing out a blob and rubbing it on his face.

‘Um,’ Miller said, ‘do you think… do you think you could get my back?’

Hardy nearly dropped the tube. ‘What?’

She turned around and gestured to the circle of bare skin beneath the straps of her one-piece. ‘Sorry, I know it’s kind of… but last time I forgot it I got a killer burn.’

Hardy blinked once, his mouth ajar. Snapping it closed, he shook himself. ‘S’fine,’ he said gruffly. ‘I’ll do it.’

He squeezed some sunscreen into his palm and applied it to her back. She shivered.

‘Cold,’ she murmured.

He grunted. He’d used far too much. It was like smearing plaster onto a wall. He sweated as he rubbed it in, trying to make the thick paste disappear. Finally he gave up and swiped the excess onto her shoulders.

‘I can see where you got burnt,’ he remarked. ‘The tan’s still there. It’s almost a perfect circle.’

‘Oh, it was agony. I was peeling bits of skin off for weeks.’ His fingers massaged her shoulders and she unconsciously turned her head to give him better access. ‘I’ve lived near the beach my whole life. You’d think I’d’ve learned by now.’

‘Mm.’

She could feel his breath on her neck. Blushing, she pulled away and turned around. Then she smiled. ‘You’ve got sunscreen on your beard.’

She touched his cheek lightly, swiping the flecks with her thumb. He caught her eye and she faltered, her thumb brushing the edges of his mouth.

At that moment Fred upended his bag and a bucket and spade fell out with a clatter. Miller stepped back. ‘All right Fred,’ she said, a little too loudly. ‘Your turn!’

Fred looked at her in fear, but once again there was no escape. She stripped him to his trunks and
coated him almost head to toe in the stuff. When she was done he immediately leapt up, grabbed his bucket and Hardy’s hand, and toddled off towards the rockpools, towing Hardy along like a tugboat pulling an old steamer. Together they wandered across the cratered, alien surface.

‘Shell,’ he announced, giving it to Hardy.

‘For me? Oh,’ Hardy said. An old sponge followed, plus green glass beaten smooth by the water, and a cockle shard. ‘All for me?’

He juggled the gifts, then took the bucket from Fred and deposited them inside. Fred seized a large clump of seaweed and thrust it into Hardy’s hands.

‘Oh… Fred, I’m not sure if that’s…’

Fred ignored him and instantly went searching for more treasures. Tucking her hair behind her ears, Miller watched them as they roamed across the rocks. The boy was babbling happily, pointing out different things as Hardy listened with a parent’s gentle patience. A tiny, wistful smile formed on her face.

Suddenly, Hardy’s foot caught a slimy patch of rock and he teetered, windmilling his arms before tumbling into a pool with a small splash. Fred looked over at him unsympathetically and dumped a clump of seaweed in his lap while he struggled. She smothered her laugh in her hand.

‘Mum!’ Tom called, bouncing his ball across the shallows. ‘Come play with me!"

‘Coming!’ she said. She threw one last, longing gaze across the rocks, then splashed into the surf to join her eldest son.

When Fred decided he had gathered enough treasures, he led Hardy back to their little camp. While Hardy was blessedly permitted to repose upon the towels, Fred sat on the damp sand and busied himself constructing a sandcastle, using his collections to decorate the structure. As he sorted through the items in the bucket, he occasionally picked up some of them and ambled up to Hardy to deposit them by his side.

The cycle continued until a veritable hoard was built up beside Hardy. The finishing touch was when Fred crowned him with a piece of red kelp.

‘Looking good, Hardy!’ Miller called. Hardy frowned at her and removed the kelp from his hair. Fred made a disappointed noise.

‘Fred, come play with us!’ Tom said. He bounced the ball from knee to knee. ‘I’ll teach you how to kick. Mum’s rubbish at it.’

‘Am not!’

‘Alec, do you want to play too?’ Tom called.

Hardy shook his head. ‘M’fine here. Might have a rest.’

‘Okay, then.’

Fred toddled off to join his mother and brother in the shallows. Hardy watched them pass the ball between themselves for a little while before he exhaled and lay back, stretching himself along the beach towel. He contemplated the blue expanse of the sky and closed his eyes. The bright sun filtering through his eyelids turned his world red, crosshatched with pulsing veins.
Fred soon decided that football wasn’t for him and went back to his sandcastle. Deciding he needed more trinkets, he picked up his bucket and headed out to the rockpools while Miller and Tom continued to kick back and forth.

‘You’re hopeless at this, Mum,’ he laughed.

‘Just show me again. I can get it,’ Miller insisted.

‘You have to do it quickly,’ Tom explained, bouncing the ball from one knee to the other. ‘Like this, see? Now you try.’

He passed the ball across to her and she caught it. Biting her lip in concentration, she dropped it on her knee and started bouncing it.

‘I’m doing it!’ she exclaimed, elated. ‘Look, Fred! Mummy’s doing it!’

A realisation gripped her and she froze. The ball splashed into the waves and bobbed forlornly.

‘Fred?’

‘Mum?’ Tom said. ‘What is it?’

‘Where’s Fred?’ she asked, looking around her. ‘I thought he was… oh no. Fred!’

Hardy’s eyes snapped open. He scanned the beach, gravitating towards the sight of Fred’s bucket sitting on the very edge of the rock shelf. In under a second, his keen detective’s mind pieced together the evidence.

He was off before he knew what he was doing, racing towards the rockpools, right out to the edge where the cratered shelf dropped into the sea.

He leapt in.

Miller saw him go. A panic like she had never known before seized her in its jaws and she ran after him, stumbling on a rock and splashing frantically through the knee-deep water to reach the shelf.

Dragging herself atop, she raced out to the far edge where Hardy had jumped in.

Tom reached her side, panting. They looked along the shelf. A wave crested over it, flooding their feet. Just then, Hardy surfaced with something small in his arms. The water foamed around him. Clinging to the rocks with one hand, he used the other to lift up the tiny body and deposit it on the shelf. Before the wave could sweep him out again, Miller and Tom seized his hands and pulled him up.

As Tom kept a grip on Hardy, Miller turned to Fred. He rattled like a doll in the swelling foam, a prized shell still caught fast in his pink hand.

‘He’s not breathing,’ she cried. Tears flooded her cheeks, briny as the water swirling around them. Fortunately, her police training kicked in before the panic could overwhelm her. She checked his airways for blockages and began light compressions on his chest. It only took three for Fred to vomit seawater everywhere. He opened his eyes and looked around, coughing hard. Fresh air filled his lungs and he began to cry.

‘Oh Fred, Fred.’ Half-comforting, half-angry, she repeated his name over and over and hugged him tight, so tight it hurt. ‘I’ve told you about wandering off, I’ve told you!’ She was hysterical now. ‘How many times?’ With one hand she clutched him to her chest. With the other she reached for Tom.
Hardy was breathing hard, watching them. Tom left his side and went to his mother’s embrace.

‘Is he all right, mum?’ he asked, shaken.

Fred mewled a complaint and she pulled back. He rubbed his stinging eyes with the back of his hand and coughed. ‘Yeah,’ Miller stroked the hair from his face and covered him with kisses. ‘He’s all right. Thanks to Hardy.’

Shuffling on her knees, still clutching the boy tightly, she turned to Hardy.

‘Are you okay?’ she asked. She found his hand and gripped it hard. ‘Are you hurt?’

He shook his head. Blood was pounding in his ears and his chest felt like it was going to burst, but none of that mattered. Fred was safe.

‘Thank you,’ she whispered. ‘Oh God. Thank you. If you hadn’t been here…’

She shuffled closer again. The rocks cut her knees but she did not notice. She pulled Hardy into a hug.

The four of them – Miller, Hardy, Tom and Fred – huddled together, their arms tight around each other. The sea fondled them, somehow gentle, and wave after wave broke around their feet in an endless, cascading lace of salt.

* Water dripped onto the sterile white tiles. A nurse strode past them, clutching a clipboard, and barked a name. Hardy shifted in his seat, towelling his hair and his soaked suit dry. Tom was slumped next to him. Hardy glanced him up and down, then folded the towel into his lap.

‘You all right?’ he asked.

‘Will Fred be okay?’ he asked. His bottom lip trembled.

‘Aye. ‘Course he will. He wasn’t under for very long. This just a precaution.’

‘Mum was so worried. I haven’t seen her this emotional since…’ he broke off and turned away.

‘It’s always scary when something happens to your kid,’ Hardy said gently. ‘I remember when my daughter Daisy nearly choked on a lollipop. I went mad. Running all over the place. In the end I was worse off than her.’

‘I can’t imagine you being hysterical.’

‘Oh, aye. Every parent’s like that when it comes to their kid. And your mum loves you and Fred very much.’

‘Yeah. I know.’ He stared at the water pooling on the tiles. ‘Do you think she’s still mad at me for defending Dad in court?’

‘Why are you asking that all of a sudden?’

‘Well… does she ever talk to you about it?’

‘It upset her at the time,’ Hardy admitted. ‘But she doesn’t hold it against you.’
'I know how much she loves us. And I know I really hurt her when I wasn’t living with her. And when I defended Dad.’ He wiped his nose. ‘I still feel guilty about it.’

‘Did you ever apologise?’

‘No.’

‘Maybe you should. I know she already forgives you, but it might make you feel better to say it. It’s not good to bottle things up.’

He sniffed. ‘Can I tell you something?’

‘Course.’

‘But you have to promise not to tell mum.’

‘That’ll depend on what it is.’

‘I miss him.’

The cogs whirred in Hardy’s head. ‘Your dad?’ he said softly.

Tom stared hard at the floor. ‘Yeah. Even after everything. I still miss him. And I feel guilty about it, but…’ he paused. He sounded very, very small. ‘He was a good dad.’

Hardy replied carefully, ‘I’m sure he was. Tom, you don’t need to feel bad for loving him or missing him. Not you, nor Fred, nor your mum. You had no way of knowing what he’d do. And to lose someone you loved so suddenly and in such a way… it’s only natural that you’d have a hard time accepting that he’s gone, and that he was never the person you thought he was in the first place. It’s a deep, terrible betrayal, and I’m sorry it happened to you. But the only guilty person here is him, you understand? Only him.’

Tom looked at him gratefully. His eyes drifted up to Hardy’s hairline and he smiled. ‘Your hair’s all funny,’ he said.

Hardy sighed and tousled his hair. It was damp and stiff with salt. ‘I’ll give it a brush later.’

Miller emerged from the corridor with Fred in her arms, wrapped in a blanket. A doctor followed her. Hardy jumped to his feet at once, Tom starting up beside him.

‘Is he okay?’ Tom asked.

‘He’s fine,’ the doctor smiled. ‘He was very brave, even when we put disinfectant on his cuts.’

Fred clung sulkily to his mother’s neck. He had small white bandages over the scrapes on his knee and elbow where the rocks had grazed him.

‘No long-term damage, as far as I can see, but I’d advise that you bring him back in a few days so we can check on him again. If he starts coughing excessively or he has trouble breathing, bring him back at once. But honestly, I don’t think there will be any issues.’ The doctor turned to Hardy. ‘It was lucky you got him out so quickly. Are you the hero I’ve been hearing about?’

Hardy’s complexion purpled. ‘Not hero,’ he grunted.

‘I think Fred here would disagree,’ he laughed. ‘Now, in terms of care, make sure he gets plenty of rest. It’s been a stressful day, so take it easy. Keep a bandage on those cuts and they’ll heal up just
fine. Other than that, I don’t think you’ve got anything to worry about.’

Miller thanked him and the doctor left them alone. ‘How you feelin’, Fred?’ Hardy asked.

Fred, looking supremely grumpy, cuddled into his mother’s shoulder and said nothing.

Miller kissed his cheek. ‘We’d better get you home. I think you’re well overdue for a nap.’

Miller was upstairs giving Fred a hot bath to clean the salt and sand off him. Hardy, who had changed into a spare pair of jeans and a t-shirt, went to the fridge and looked inside. It was worryingly sparse and populated mainly with old condiments and curry pastes that had been used once and never thrown out.

‘Tell your mum I’ll be back in a bit,’ Hardy told Tom.

An hour later, he returned bearing two full bags of groceries. Miller had evidently showered and was standing in comfortable, loose-fitting clothes, her half-dry hair curling in odd directions. She looked at him in surprise as he came in.

‘There you are! I was wondering where you’d gone. Fred’s just sleeping now.’ She looked down. ‘What’ve you got there?’

‘Groceries.’ He dumped the bags on the kitchen table and started unpacking them. ‘Thought I’d cook something.’

She looked confused. ‘You want to cook me dinner?’

‘For all of us.’

‘Oh. You don’t have to.’

‘I want to. After today, I think you deserve a night off.’

Miller shuddered and rubbed her upper arms. ‘Yeah. Okay, that sounds nice. What are you going to make?’

‘Spaghetti. Is that okay?’

‘This is a lot of stuff just for spaghetti,’ she said dubiously, looking through the bags.

‘I like to make my own pasta sauce,’ he explained, taking out the vegetables.

‘I usually just whack in a tin of the ready-made stuff,’ Miller said, sniffing a bunch of basil.

‘Hence why I’m doing the cooking.’ Hardy knew only too well that Miller’s idea of a home-cooked meal was a tray of half-thawed fish fingers and a block of chocolate. ‘Want to help me chop?’

He brandished an onion at her. Miller hesitated for a moment, then shrugged her assent. Washing their hands briefly in the sink, they each took a knife and began cutting vegetables side by side.

‘Is Fred doing okay?’ Hardy asked, slicing into a tomato.

‘Yeah. He’s sleeping like a log. He doesn’t seem too worse for wear, just tired.’
'Let’s just hope he doesn’t have a fear of the water now. All it takes is one bad experience.’ They were chopping in almost perfect harmony. ‘What about Tom?’

‘Bit shaken. He came up and gave me a big hug before, which was nice. I think he’s playing video games now.’

‘And you?’

Miller’s hands grew still. ‘Not so good.’

‘Do you want to talk about it?’

She put the knife down and braced her hands against the tabletop. ‘I shouldn’t have taken my eyes off him. I should have been watching him.’

‘It was my fault too. I should’ve been keeping an eye out.’

‘I didn’t see where he fell in,’ she said. ‘I didn’t see it, I didn’t hear it. I had no idea where he was. If you hadn’t been there…’

‘Don’t think about it.’

‘But if you hadn’t…’ Her eyes screwed up. Two tears dripped down her cheek and she bunched her hands into fists.

Hardy did not know how to respond. He dared to pat her shoulder and was pleasantly surprised when she did not dodge out of his touch. ‘It’s okay,’ he said. ‘Please don’t cry.’

‘It’s the onions,’ she said, wiping her eyes on her sleeve.

‘If you say so.’ His hand settled on her upper arm and he rubbed slow circles with his thumb.

‘Thank you,’ she said softly. ‘Thank you. For today. For everything.’

‘You don’t need to thank me.’

‘Yes I do.’ She dabbed her eyes again.

‘I got tomato juice on you,’ he apologised, wiping at the stain he’d left on her clothes.

She managed a half-smile. ‘It’s fine. Sorry. I’m all right, really. Let me just…’

She took a deep breath to steady herself and they returned to chopping vegetables. Hardy finished his first tomato and Miller rolled a second one across to him. ‘I haven’t cooked a proper meal like this in ages,’ she admitted.

‘I was never much of a cook til I left home,’ Hardy said. ‘I survived on TV dinners for a while, but then I got diagnosed with…’ he gestured to his chest. ‘Suddenly I had a big list of things I couldn’t eat. I found it was easier to just make my own stuff. Didn’t take me long to get the hang of it. I kind of like it now. It’s relaxing.’
The sound of their synchronised chopping filled the kitchen.

‘It’s nice,’ Miller said quietly. ‘Having you here. And I’m not just saying that ‘cause of your daring rescue today.’

Hardy murmured, ‘I like our visits too.’

Miller wrinkled her nose. ‘Ugh. Onion fumes!’ She squeezed her eyes shut and rubbed them on her sleeve.

‘I can take over if you like. You should get some rest. Lie down for a bit.’

‘No, it’s okay.’

‘Your hands are shaking,’ he pointed out.

Miller gripped the knife hard to stop the trembling. ‘I just can’t stop thinking about… what would have happened if…’

‘Then you should rest. Go lie down. Play a game with Tom, call Lucy. Let me do the work tonight.’

‘Are you sure?’

‘Yeah. I enjoy it.’

‘Okay.’ She put down the knife. ‘Thank you,’ she added, touching his arm lightly.

He nodded and she left the kitchen. After briefly checking on Fred, she went to Tom’s room.

‘All right?’ she asked as she entered.

Tom nodded. ‘Want to play FIFA with me?’ he asked, holding up a second controller.

Miller was surprised. He’d never asked her to play video games with him before. That had always been Joe’s domain. ‘You seriously want to play with me?’

‘Yeah. Maybe you’ll be better at this than real life.’

He showed her the basic controls and started up a game.

‘Alec’s making dinner,’ she said as she rolled the joystick with her thumb, trying to get the hang of the controls. ‘Don’t make fun if it tastes terrible.’

‘It can’t be any worse than your cooking.’

‘Oy. Cheeky,’ Miller cautioned. She hammered a few of the buttons, watching the screen intently. When Tom had scored on her for the third time, she said, ‘Can I ask… and be honest, sweetheart, what do you think of him?’

‘I dunno,’ he shrugged. ‘He’s fine, I guess.’

‘Do you like him coming to visit us?’

‘Yeah. He’s sort of funny, in his own way.’

‘Mr. Stinky,’ she said, recalling Fred’s drawing.
Tom laughed. ‘That drawing really summed him up. Hit the A button,’ he added, pointing at her controller. ‘Fred seems to like him a lot.’

‘Yeah,’ she agreed, smiling faintly. Her fingers grew still and Tom scored another goal.

She played with him for about half an hour more. He laughed at her mistakes and she laughed at his teasing. Finally, she admitted that she was even more rubbish at the Xbox than real football and left him to play alone.

She went into Fred’s room and quietly approached his bed. He was fast asleep, his mouth slightly open and his hand bunched in a fist on his pillow. She stroked his chubby little cheek with one finger, then smoothed his curly brown hair. He was so small and perfect and vulnerable. The thought of losing him paralysed her to the core.

She lost track of how long she sat there, watching him breathe, marveling at his tiny cherubic visage. Finally, a distant clatter in the kitchen made her stir. Printing a kiss on Fred’s forehead, she stood up and went downstairs to find Hardy setting the table for dinner. He looked up at her as she entered.

‘Okay?’ he said.

‘Are you staying in Broadchurch tonight?’ she asked.

He lined up the cutlery on the table. ‘I’ve got a room booked at the Trader’s.’

‘Do you want to stay here instead?’

‘I don’t want to impose.’

‘You save Fred from drowning and cook me dinner and you’re worried about imposing on me?’

He made a face. ‘I didn’t save…’

‘Oh, shut up, yes you did.’ He made no response, so she added, ‘The fold-out’s comfortable, I promise.’

He remained silent.

‘Look, please don’t be an arsehole about this,’ Miller pinched the bridge of her nose. ‘After everything you’ve done today, just let me offer you a free bed.’

At last, Hardy grunted his assent.

‘Thank you. Bloody hell, it’s like pulling teeth with you,’ she griped. ‘How far along are you with dinner?’

‘The sauce needs to simmer a little longer. Maybe half an hour more.’

‘Do you need help with anything?’

‘Nah. It’s mostly done.’

She patted the back of a chair awkwardly. ‘I didn’t ask… how are you coping with everything that happened today?’

He turned away evasively. ‘M’fine.’
‘Because I know… I know you don’t like the water.’ Her hand trailed the back of the chair as she walked slowly to the other side of the table. ‘And I know… what happened with Pippa, so I wanted to make sure.’

‘Miller. I’m fine.’

She came to halt beside him. Without the table to separate them, he seemed supremely vulnerable. Folding her arms, she said, ‘You’re a shit liar.’

It failed to provoke a response. He kept his eyes downcast. A little more gently, she said, ‘Talk to me. No secrets, remember?’

A heavy sigh escaped him, rattling him like a storm-tossed craft. ‘I thought of her,’ he admitted at last. ‘Her, and Danny too. And when I jumped in all I could think was the way she looked… and felt… all bloated and…’

It hurt Miller to even think of Fred like that. Her eyes prickled.

He turned to her, his expression soft. ‘But when I grabbed hold of him, he didn’t feel like her. I knew he was alive, and I knew he’d be okay. And that you’d be okay. So I’m okay.’

Her eyes drifted over his careworn face. She was about to say something when Tom appeared in the doorway, sniffing loudly. ‘What smells so good?’ he asked.

Hardy glanced at him. ‘Spaghetti. It’ll be ready in a bit.’

Tom grunted, looking lean and hungry. ‘How long?’

‘Half an hour.’

‘Oh.’

‘Tom’s going through another growth spurt,’ Miller explained as Tom skulked inside the dining room, still sniffing. ‘He’d eat the furniture if I let him.’

‘It’s not my fault you don’t buy enough food.’

‘You ate a whole loaf of bread in one sitting yesterday! How am I supposed to keep up with that?’

They began to bicker. Hardy smoothly withdrew into the kitchen to monitor his sauce. He hoped they would like it.

* *

Hardy’s spaghetti was every bit as delicious as Miller feared it would be. With equal parts envy and gratitude she ate two helpings. Tom wolfed down four bowls and was only dissuaded from a fifth when he was told there were chocolate puddings for dessert.

Fred, who seemed remarkably unfazed by the day’s events, woke in time for dinner and joined them, using his hands to dig greedily into the pasta. Red sauce smeared all over his face and freshly cleaned clothes. As he grew full he became bored of eating and flung a handful of food at his brother, cackling maniacally.

‘Oy!’ Tom said, flicking some back.

‘Tom!’ Miller said.
‘What? Fred started it!’

‘Yes, and he’s a toddler, not a teenager!’

Fred threw another handful at Tom’s head. ‘He did it again!’ Tom said indignantly. He picked up the clump of spaghetti Fred had thrown and tossed it back.

‘Tom! Stop it! Fred, that’s enough!’

But she could not prevent the onset of war. Sauce and pasta flew in all directions. One of Tom’s wayward fists hit a spoon and sent a glob of sauce splattering against Hardy’s face.

‘Tom!’ Miller scolded.

‘Mum!’ Tom protested.

‘Fred!’ exclaimed Fred.

Dully, Hardy wiped the sauce from his cheek.

‘Apologise, Tom,’ Miller demanded.

‘Sorry Alec,’ Tom mumbled. Peevishly, he added, ‘But Fred did start it.’

On that fortuitous note, dinner was concluded. Tom tucked three pudding cups under his chin and scurried into the lounge to watch television. Hardy and Miller stayed behind to clean up.

‘Sorry about all that,’ Miller said as she wiped Fred’s sticky fingers. ‘It was a lovely dinner. Thank you.’

‘You’re welcome.’

He cleared the table and took the dishes into the kitchen.

‘You can have a shower if you like,’ Miller suggested. ‘Get cleaned up. I’ve left a spare towel in there for you. And if you need any pyjamas or anything, I can get you some.’

He ran his hands through his hair. It was still stiff with salt. ‘Might do that. I need to wash the ocean off me.’

She nodded and he left the room. Once she’d cleaned Fred sufficiently, she let him join his brother in the lounge while she went upstairs and changed into her nightie. Returning downstairs, she set to work cleaning the kitchen. She had only just started on the dishes when Hardy wandered up behind her, clad in a pair of his comfortable pyjama pants and a grey t-shirt. His hair was wet and slicked back, his body pink and warm from the hot shower.

‘Feeling better?’ she asked, depositing a soapy bowl on the sink.

‘I can do that.’ He stepped forward and tried to take dirty dishes from her. She smacked his hand.

‘Not on your life. The cook doesn’t clean up after himself. We have rules in this household.’

He considered it for a moment. ‘You clean, I dry?’

‘Deal.’
He picked up a tea towel and busied himself putting away the dishes. As he brushed past her, Miller sniffed suspiciously. ‘You got into my lavender body wash, didn’t you?’

‘Well, with everyone calling me Mr. Stinky…’

She laughed and flicked soap bubbles at him. ‘We were only teasing. You smell good.’

‘I smell like you,’ he remarked, sniffing his arm. ‘Think I used too much.’

‘Thank you again,’ Miller said, scrubbing a bowl. ‘For dinner. It was really nice.’

‘It was just spaghetti. You don’t need to keep thanking me.’

‘I can’t remember the last time I had a home-cooked meal like that,’ she said, placing another dish on the sink. The way she stared at the grey dishwater told him that she remembered exactly when she’d last eaten a meal like that, and who had cooked it.

‘So,’ he said briskly. ‘How’s work been treating you? Life of a rural DS and all that.’

‘Things are finally starting to go back to normal,’ she said, resuming scrubbing. ‘It was awkward for a while, but it’s getting better every day. Though I dunno if I’ll ever get used to the new bloke they got in as DI. He’s always so kind and polite. Smiles all the bloody time. It’s unsettling.’

‘Bastard,’ Hardy spat, and Miller giggled.

‘Are you going to come back on active duty?’ Cutlery clattered onto the sink.

‘Erm… I dunno,’ Hardy replied. ‘The teaching job I’ve got is shite but at least it’s close to Daisy. I’d rather that than a proper job somewhere far away from her. Or from you.’

Miller’s cheeks grew warm. She told him about some of the cases she’d been working and he offered his insight as they cleaned. Once they were done, they wandered into the lounge. Tom had claimed the recliner, so they sat side by side on the couch while Fred scribbled happily on the table in front of them. Tom was flicking between an action movie and an old sitcom. The programs did not hold much interest for either Hardy or Miller. They chatted quietly to each other instead.

After a time, the action movie ended and Tom stood up. ‘I think I’m gonna go to bed,’ he said.

‘To play video games, more like,’ Miller said. ‘Don’t stay up too late.’

‘I won’t.’ Spontaneously, he kissed her on the cheek. ‘Goodnight, Mum.’ Kneeling in front of Fred, he said, ‘Goodnight, Fred.’

Fred, who was busy scribbling, did not reply. ‘Say goodnight, sweetheart,’ Miller urged.

Fred looked up and blinked his long lashes. ‘Night-night,’ he said.

‘Good boy,’ Miller said, smiling fondly as Tom gave his brother a cuddle and a kiss. He sauntered out of the room and Fred returned to his drawings.

‘Might make a cup of tea,’ Hardy said. ‘Do you want anything?’

‘Mm. Chamomile, if there’s any left.’

Hardy nodded and went into the kitchen. Filling up the kettle, he switched it on and dumped tea bags into separate mugs. Just as he was leaning up against the counter to wait, Tom padded into the room.
‘Tom,’ he said in surprise. ‘Did you want something? I’ve just put the kettle on. I could make you a hot chocolate if you like.’

‘No thanks.’ He shuffled from foot to foot. ‘I actually… I just wanted to come and say thanks for tonight. For dinner. It was really good. You should come and cook for us again some time.’

‘Anything to keep your mum out of the kitchen.’

He smiled. ‘Listen… in a few weeks we’re having a mini football tournament for all the local kids. Mark, Olly and I put it together. For Danny. He always used to complain there weren’t enough football games in the summer holidays, so…’ the smile slipped from his face and his expression became wistful. ‘Anyway, I was wondering if you wanted to come and watch me. Mum is always super embarrassing when I play. If you come, maybe you’ll be able to keep her under control.’

‘I very much doubt I’m capable of that,’ he remarked wryly. ‘But yeah. I’d love to come and watch you play. What position are you?’

‘Centre back, usually, ‘cos I’m so tall.’ He brightened. ‘We could have a kick one day, if you like. Just you and me.’

Hardy blanched. ‘I was never much good at football. Maybe I should stick to watching.’

‘It’s all right. I can teach you. It’d be nice to have someone new to practice with.’

Hardy hesitated. Then he relented. ‘All right. One day. Just promise not to laugh when you see how bad I am.’

He beamed. ‘Okay. I promise.’ He started back towards the stairs and paused on the step. ‘Goodnight. Thanks Alec.’

‘Goodnight, Tom.’

The kettle made a whining noise. Steam billowed from the spout. Hardy turned and poured two cups of tea.

‘Here,’ Hardy said, walking into the lounge and proffering a cup to Miller. She was leaning on the arm of the couch and sat up straight to take it from him.

‘Ta. Did I hear Tom just before?’

‘Yeah. I think I may have agreed to play football with him one day.’ He took a sip of scalding tea and winced. ‘I can’t play football.’

‘You can’t be any worse than me.’

‘You’d be surprised.’

‘Football was never my thing,’ Miller said. ‘I used to be really good at hockey, though. I was captain of the girls’ team at school. Now that was a vicious game. Just a bunch of furious pubescent ladies hacking each other in the shin with sticks.’ She blew on her tea. ‘Those were good times. What was your sport?’

‘ Didn’t have one.’ He dunked his teabag a few times, then took it out and placed it in one of Tom’s empty pudding cups.

‘None at all?’
‘I was… erm, more of a bookish boy.’

‘You mean you had no friends?’

He sighed and she prodded him with a grin. Fred sat up triumphantly, clutching his drawing in his hand. ‘Done!’ he announced.

He shuffled on his knees towards Hardy and Miller and held up his masterpiece to them.

‘What’ve you drawn, Fred?’ Miller asked, setting her mug down and leaning forward. ‘It looks like…’

She froze.

It was a drawing of a family. A man, a woman and two boys.

On the left was a sulky teenage boy she recognised as Tom. Then came herself, distinguished by her orange coat and curly hair. Then came Fred, holding her hand and rendered with a big, happy smile.

And on the end, holding his other hand, was Hardy.

Miller stopped breathing. Hardy did not move. Fred looked between their stunned faces and made a concerned noise. ‘Bad?’ he asked.

‘No!’ Miller exclaimed. The word was half a sob. Trying to keep her voice steady, she said, ‘No, Fred, it’s not bad. It’s beautiful. I love it. In fact, I love it so much, I’m going to put it on the fridge right now.’

Fred lit up and bounced happily. She led him into the kitchen, Hardy following behind them, and pinned it to the fridge, where it took pride of place among all his other drawings. He had only recently mastered the art of rendering humans, and compared to his cruder scribbles that were barely more than jumbles of lines, it truly was a masterpiece.

‘I think it’s the best one he’s drawn yet,’ Miller said softly.

Hardy’s gaze drifted along the four lumpy figures and the yellow sun smiling in the corner. ‘It’s beautiful, Fred,’ he murmured. ‘I love it too.’

They returned to the lounge and sat side by side once more, drinking their tea in languid sips. Miller flicked through the channels, and at Fred’s gleeful shout she paused on a nature documentary about the ocean. Clambering into Hardy’s lap, Fred settled himself down and was soon mesmerised by the brightly coloured fish and anemones.

‘Of all the things he had to watch,’ Hardy said. ‘The ocean.’

‘He loves the ocean,’ Miller murmured. She drew closer to Hardy. ‘I guess he still does, even after what happened today.’

She leaned into him, laying the side of her body flush against his while she stroked Fred’s hair with one hand. When Hardy made no adverse reaction, she relaxed against him and rested her head on his shoulder.

Hardy did not move a muscle. His gaze was fixed on the television, but he was only barely aware of the flickering screen. All his attention was riveted on the feeling of the little toddler clasped in his lap and the woman cuddled against him. It all felt so familiar, and so far away. He remembered another
time, another child, another woman, a lifetime ago.

Turning his head, he rested his cheek on Miller’s head. Her curly hair tickled him. She smelled like lavender.

After an eternity, he felt Fred yawn violently.

‘Uh-oh,’ he murmured. ‘Miller, I think Fred’s getting tired.’

She stirred. ‘I’m not surprised. It’s been a big day.’ She stroked Fred’s cheek and he jerked sleepily. ‘What do you think, sweetheart? Ready for bed?’

Fred nodded and buried his head into Hardy’s chest. ‘All right then. Come on, my wee lad,’ Hardy said. He hefted the boy in his arms and stood up. ‘Off we go.’

Miller got up and followed him. Together they wrestled him into a pair of pyjamas and helped him brush his teeth and use the potty. Then they lay him in bed next to his favourite teddies.

‘Can’t forget these,’ Hardy said, tucking two stuffed bunnies in with Fred. ‘These ones are especially good at scaring monsters away. Bunnies are always better than teddies at that sort of thing. At least, that’s what a little girl once told me.’

Fred nodded seriously. Hardy was about to stand when Fred stopped him.

‘Kiss,’ he said, sitting up and grasping for Hardy with his fingers. ‘Kiss.’

Hardy hesitated a moment before he leaned forward. The boy grasped his neck and gave him a sloppy kiss on the cheek. ‘Night-night,’ he said, patting Hardy’s beard. He turned to Miller. ‘Mum. Kiss.’

Miller swooped in at once and covered him with kisses until he gave a sleepy laugh. ‘Goodnight, darling. I love you so much. So, so much. Even more than chocolate.’

She gave him one more kiss for good measure. ‘Night-night,’ Fred said, settling back. ‘Love you.’

Hardy and Miller tiptoed out, shutting the door behind them. ‘Come on,’ Miller said. ‘I’ll set up the fold-out for you. I think we should have an early night too.’

As they walked downstairs, Hardy touched his cheek. ‘Your boys,’ he said quietly. ‘Tom and Fred. They’re… good boys.’

Miller lingered on the final step, her fingers tapping the balustrade. ‘Yes,’ she agreed.

Hardy frowned, frustrated that he could not express himself more clearly. Miller went to one of the cupboards, pulled out some spare bedding, and brought it into the lounge. They moved the table back and pulled the fold-out free.

‘There’s… something I’ve been meaning to ask you,’ Miller said as she smoothed the mattress down. ‘Would you - and you can say no if you like – but would it be okay if we arranged regular visits so you could hang out with the boys?’

‘Hang out?’ Hardy echoed, looking confused.

‘Well… with Joe gone, they need a father figure around. Mark’s been doing his best but he’s got a brand new baby of his own to look after. And besides, Fred doesn’t like him nearly as much as he likes you.’
Hardy looked stunned. Disheartened by his silence, Miller hurried to justify her position. ‘I don’t expect you to do anything you’re not comfortable with, and I don’t want you put yourself out for our sake. I know you’re busy with work.’

‘I’ll do it.’

‘- and you’ve got your own daughter to look after, but Daisy will always come first, of course, I know that. Weekly is probably too much of an ask, but even a regular fortnightly or monthly’

He cut her off. ‘Miller. I said I’ll do it.’

She blinked in astonishment. ‘You will?’

‘I’d be honoured.’

‘Oh.’ A sob escaped her and she clamped down on it. She covered her mouth with her hand. ‘Thank you. I… I’m so happy you said yes.’

He tilted his head at her. ‘Did you think I wouldn’t? I love you and Fred and Tom.’

‘Love?’

The word hung between them. Hardy looked embarrassed. ‘You know what I mean.’

He turned away and busied himself with the bedding. In his t-shirt, the muscles on his brown arms stood out. She trailed the sight of them from the bicep to the soft hair covering his forearm, and his long fingers. Colour rose to her cheeks.

‘Let me help,’ she said, trying to distract herself.

‘Thanks,’ he said quietly, and she went to the other side of the foldout to tuck in the blankets. Thinking of what Tom had told him earlier that day, he could not stop himself from asking, ‘Does Fred miss his dad?’

Miller grew still. ‘Yeah. Joe used to be with him more often than I was. Course he misses him. Poor little thing. Doesn’t even understand why his dad’s gone.’ She convulsed with a sob. ‘How am I going to explain it to him when he’s older? And God, with Joe found not guilty, there’s the possibility he could sue for custody. I don’t know what I’ll do if that happens. I can’t let that man near them. I can’t. I can’t.’

For the umpteenth time that day, she began to cry. Hardy spasmed slightly, wringing his hands as he wrestled with the impulse to hug her. Finally, as before, he laid an awkward hand on her shoulder. To his surprise, she rushed into his arms and pressed herself against his chest.

‘It’s all right,’ he said.

‘I’ll kill him,’ she said. ‘I’ll kill him if he ever comes near them.’

‘Don’t say that.’

‘I mean it,’ she whispered into his heart. ‘I’m capable of it. But God, what would happen to the boys if I did that?’

‘It’ll be all right Ellie.’ He folded his arms around her. ‘Whatever happens, we’ll get through it. Together.’
Tentatively, Ellie wrapped her arms around his waist.

He was so warm.

‘You called me Ellie,’ she murmured.

‘Is that okay?’

‘Yeah,’ she managed after a pause.

He dared to stroke her hair. ‘I’m sorry I made you cry.’

‘You’re not the one who made me cry.’ She exhaled and turned her head to the side, leaning in to his long-fingered caress. ‘You’ve never made me cry. You just have a habit of being there when I do.’

‘I’m glad,’ he said. ‘I mean… I’m glad that I’m there. I’m glad I can be there for you. Here for you. I’m glad I’m with you.’

The indelicate way he tripped over his words made her smile. ‘I’m glad too.’

‘And you don’t need to worry about Joe,’ Hardy continued. ‘He’s not a threat to you.’

‘What makes you so sure?’

‘I’ve got people watching him.’

The gentle harmony shattered like a glass rose. ‘And you didn’t think to tell me?’ Ellie demanded, breaking free of his touch and shoving him in the chest.

He staggered back, gripping his heart. ‘I’m telling you now.’

She put her hands on her hips. ‘What people? What have they been saying? How did you even do this?’

‘I have a lot of people on the force who owe me favours,’ he said evasively. ‘Last I heard, he’d moved across to Ireland. They’ve lost sight of him since then, but the minute he tries to re-enter the U.K. we’ll know about it.’

Ellie glared at him, her hands on her hips. ‘He has family there,’ she said grudgingly. ‘He must have gone to them for help.’

‘So you’ve got nothing to worry about,’ Hardy continued. He took a step towards her, trying to bridge the chasm she had created. ‘He’s not in the country. And if he does come back, we’ll be able to trace all his movements. You’re safe, Ellie. Nothing will happen to you or Tom or Fred. I promise.’

He tried to touch her but she pulled violently away. ‘It would have been nice to know this a lot sooner,’ she said. ‘All those weeks spent looking over my shoulder, jumping at shadows… God, you are so annoying sometimes.’

Suddenly a twinge went through Hardy and he clutched his chest.

‘Ahh,’ he hissed.

Ellie’s fury dissipated at once. ‘What? What is it?’
‘My medication,’ he said. ‘I forgot to take it today. I left it in my jacket pocket.’

‘In the car? I remember you taking it off when we went to the beach today.’

‘Yeah.’

‘I’ll get it for you.’

Ellie retrieved her car keys and went outside. She found the jacket in the back seat of the car and shook it until she heard the distinctive rattle of pills. Fumbling in the pockets, she pulled the medication out and went inside again.

He wasn’t in the lounge. Doubling back, she went into the kitchen and found him standing in front of the fridge, looking contemplatively at Fred’s drawing. Taking a glass from the cupboard, Ellie filled it with water. Touching Hardy’s shoulder to get his attention, she handed him the water and two pills.

‘Ta,’ he murmured.

‘I’m sorry I pushed you,’ Ellie said, abashed.

‘S’ok. Wasn’t you. I just get twinges sometimes if I don’t take my meds.’ He threw back both pills at once and swigged from the glass. Ellie took it from him and placed it on the sink. When she returned to his side, Hardy was still looking at the drawing.

‘It’s looks like…’ Hardy paused. ‘It’s almost like…’

‘Like we’re a family,’ Ellie finished quietly.

‘Yeah.’

‘All that’s missing is Daisy.’

He looked sharply at her.

‘When are you going to bring her to visit? You did promise.’

‘I know.’ He ran his hand over his beard. ‘But you’re only free on weekends, and Tess only lets me take Daisy on weekdays in the summer. As she keeps reminding me, she still has a career, so I have to work around her.’

Ellie considered it. ‘I could always bunk off one day and come visit you. What days do you get Daisy?’

‘Tuesdays and Wednesdays, if I’m lucky. Those are the days Tess works late.’

‘Well, what if we came up and stayed with you Tuesday night?’

‘All of you?’ he hesitated. ‘I don’t know. The place I’m renting is tiny. There’s barely enough room for Daisy and me most days. I’d rather come to see you.’

‘All right. Then one Tuesday I’ll take the day off and you can both stay here.’

He looked around the kitchen with its red walls, and at the lounge, bright yellow and cozy. Everything about the house was eclectic, inviting, and a little messy. His gaze rested on the drawing again. ‘I think she’ll like it here,’ he murmured.
'Good. That's settled,' Ellie said. 'I can't wait to meet her.' Hardy made no response so she headed towards the door. 'I'll go get you some more blankets.'

‘Ellie,’ Hardy said. ‘Wait.’

She turned to him. His mouth was set in a hard line, his expression unreadable.

‘What?’

He looked away. ‘Nothing. It doesn’t matter.’

‘Go on. What is it?’

A painful aspect gripped his countenance. ‘We could be, if you wanted,’ he blurted. ‘We could be a family.’ He took a step towards her. The words tumbled out in a flood. ‘I like visiting you. I like spending time with you. And Tom. And Fred. And I…’ He took a deep breath. ‘And we… could be…’

His courage dissolved like a mermaid with a broken heart. Air rushed out his nose and he seemed to deflate. He stood before her, his hands empty, painfully aware that he had nothing to offer her but himself, broken and damaged as he was.

Ellie looked at him in astonishment, her lips parted slightly. Lowering her head, she closed the distance between them and groped for him, touching his elbow and sliding her hand down his arm to grasp his empty palm. ‘I think,’ she said. ‘We already are. I consider you family. And I…’

She looked up at him. His eyes were dark, dark enough to drown in. Gently, so gently, she touched his lips.

He collided with her, wrapping his arms around her and pressing his hot mouth against hers, kissing her, drinking her with all the desperation of a marooned sailor who has found fresh water after endless days surrounded by the mocking salt sea. One hand tangled in her hair, the other grasped at her breasts. His narrow hips ground against her, his beard burned the edges of her mouth.

She could not be close enough to him.

He lifted her atop the kitchen counter, raining hard, insistent kisses on her, and rucked up her nightie to shove his hand down her knickers. He pressed a finger inside of her and a tremendous jolt of desire ran through her. Wrapping her legs around him, she moaned into his mouth.

Just then, a tiny voice interrupted them. ‘Mu-um.’

It was Fred, calling for his mother.

Hardy looked at her, aghast, and pulled away at once. Her pulse accelerating wildly, Ellie slipped off the bench and tugged her nightie down.

‘Coming sweetheart!’ she said, trying to disguise the tremor in her voice.

Fred appeared at the top of the stairs, rubbing his eyes and clutching his toy bunny in his hand.

‘Yes, darling, what is it?’ she asked when she approached him.

‘Thirsty,’ Fred said with a yawn.

She could feel Hardy’s gaze on her. Keeping her head down and trying to ignore the throbbing in
her core, she got a glass of water and hurried upstairs to put Fred back to sleep.

Mercifuly, the boy drifted off again without a fuss. If there was one thing about him she was especially grateful for, it was that he was a good sleeper. Closing his door quietly, she skittered across the landing to her bedroom and sealed herself inside. There she sat on the bed and ran her fingers absently over her lips. Her skin still tingled where his beard had scraped her. Flushed, she threw herself backwards on the bed and groaned, covering her head with her arm, her mind swarming with conflicting feelings of guilt and reckless desire.

She was not sure how long she lay there. The pad of Hardy’s footsteps suddenly brushed her ears and she scrambled upright, her heart hammering. The footsteps paused outside her door. She waited expectantly, but they receded again. She heard them reach as far as the stairs. After a long moment, they returned to her door.

A gentle rapping greeted her.

‘Miller? I – erm… I wanted to… I wanted to apologise. Will you open up?’

She took a moment to compose herself, then opened the door. He stood there looking sheepish, his hands clasped behind his back. ‘I… erm, I won’t be able to get to sleep until I say this, so… I’m sorry. About before. We’re both in a… vulnerable place. I shouldn’t have…’

Ellie seized the front of his shirt and brought his mouth crashing down to meet hers. ‘Don’t call me Miller,’ she hissed as she bit his lower lip.

It took him a moment to process what was happening. Then his body responded to her touch and he kissed her back. Before things could go further, he pulled away, arresting her arms.

‘Wait,’ he said. ‘Wait, are you sure about this?’ His brown eyes were huge, full of concern. ‘I don't want you to regret this.’

She considered his words. In the past few months he had been coming to visit her, she had indulged in fantasies of kissing him and touching him. She had dreamed of those long fingers and his hot mouth and wondered what it might be like to feel him on top of her, around her, inside her. Now that she had him in her grasp, all she regretted was not acting sooner. She was just so tired of being in pain. She was sick of the fear and the horror and the loneliness that beat upon her like an unceasing rain. Maybe it was selfish, but just once she wanted to feel something other than grief and loss. Her fingers picked at the fabric of his shirt and smoothed across the shape of the pacemaker beneath his skin.

If today had proven anything, it was how fragile life could be, and how quickly things could be snatched away. Winding her arms around him like lascivious ivy, she drew him close.

She wanted this. She wanted him, for however long fate would let her have him.

‘I’m sure,’ she replied. Her voice was steady.

His eyes changed when she spoke those words. He kissed her hard, his tongue pushing deep into her mouth. Kicking the door closed behind them, Hardy lifted her and deposited her on the bed, pushing her legs apart and grinding against the front of her knickers. She hooked the bottom of his t-shirt and pulled it over his head, revealing his hairy, brown torso. She ran her hands over him, pinching his nipples.

‘We have to be quiet,’ she said as Hardy rucked up her nightie. Her voice was hushed. ‘We have to be…’
Hardy knew the arrangement. He remembered well the short and hasty moments of pleasure stolen in those crucial moments when Daisy was asleep. The hushed whispers, the muffled moans. The clandestine nature of it all. Oh yes, he knew the drill perfectly.

He pushed her nightie above her waist. Stretch marks lined her belly and thighs like streaks of silver glistening in the bedrock of a river, like petals on a snowy bank. A caesarean scar slashed across her middle. He laid his hands on the scar, smoothing it with his fingertips, and his hands travelled upwards to pinch her dusky nipples. Everything about her body – soft and scarred and breathing – filled him with desire.

‘Wait,’ Ellie gasped, tugging at the nightie. ‘Let me just…’

She tried to pull it over her head. After a few moments of struggling, she grew still.

‘Are you stuck?’ he asked in disbelief.

‘Yep,’ she replied, her voice muffled behind a layer of fabric.

She started giggling, and the two of them burst into nervous laughter.

‘Hang on,’ Hardy said. He grasped the edges of the nightie and eased it over her head, pulling it down her arms.

‘This is the least sexy thing in the world,’ she complained as her head popped free.

He flung the offending article aside and looked down at her, flushed and embarrassed, her hair a mess. Smoothing down the wayward strands, he smiled, lost in her brown eyes. ‘Ellie,’ he said fondly. He cupped her head and kissed her again.

She trailed his chest, his abdominal muscles, his biceps. He was lean all over, almost unhealthy, the muscles sculpted and hardened only by an absence of fat. That thick beard of his hid the gauntness of his cheeks, but without a suit to conceal his body it was obvious how unwell he was. Her nails scraped over the scar above his heart, still fresh and vivid.

In the time she’d known him he had often appeared half-dead to her, like a ghost tethered to earth only by unfinished business. She had hoped the operation would bring him back to life, but it was clear now that the operation had not been enough. Fixing his body was not the same as fixing his soul.

Her hand slipped under his waistband and grasped his cock. He jerked and moaned. She stroked up and down, getting used to the feel of him. He was about an average size, but thicker than she was used to. She cupped his balls and fondled them gently, then resumed stroking. He pushed her down hard, crushing her into the mattress and pressing all his weight upon her. He kissed her hard and broke it to leave a trail of hickeys on her neck. Then he pulled back and she helped him tug his pyjama bottoms off.

Once this was done he swiftly pulled her knickers down and she wiggled her legs, kicking them off with her feet. His palm rubbed against her mound, making a path between her dark hair. His palm was calloused and rough but his touch was gentle. The heel of his hand hit her clitoris as his fingers parted the fleshy folds. He pressed one finger inside of her, then another, moving in and out. She hooked a leg around him, her toes curling against his calf.

He kissed his way down her body, exploring every scar and crevice with his tongue, his hands roaming freely. Finally he settled between her thighs. Swinging one of her legs over his shoulder, he bent his head to adore her.
‘Oh,’ was all she could say.

He kissed and sucked gently. He remembered this. He was good at this. It had been so long that he had given up wanting it, but his body remembered. Like riding a bicycle, he thought as he began long, broad strokes with his tongue. He doubted Ellie would appreciate the comparison.

He worked languorously at first, listening to her whispered instructions and experimenting with a few different moves. Soon he settled into a rhythm and her body danced with gentle gasps.

A particularly dexterous movement made her back arch violently. He glanced up at her, his face framed by her thighs. The feel of his beard scraping soft flesh made her quake. His fingers played with her opening. ‘You like that,’ he said, sounding pleased with himself.

‘Don’t be a smart-arse,’ she groaned.

He almost smiled. One hand slid up and down her torso as he lowered his head to continue his ministrations. He grasped a nipple and squeezed it hard, rolling it between thumb and forefinger just as his tongue flattened against her clitoris. Her knee fell away, dropping to the mattress, and she had to bite down on her fist to stop herself from crying out.

From the moment he had pulled Pippa Gillespie’s body from the river, there was a part of him that was always drowning, always dying. He had left a little piece of his soul in that river, and when he’d discovered Danny’s body on the beach, the ocean had claimed another piece. The water had stolen so much from him – heart, health, sanity, family. It had turned him into a living corpse, the perpetually drowning man walking dripping among the bluebells, only able to experience the world as drowners do – in memories, in glimpses of the past, in flashes of pain and pleasure long gone that smother any hope for the future.

As Ellie squirmed under the pressure of his tongue, he mused that of all the things the water had stolen from him, it was the little pleasures he’d missed the most. The taste of ice cream on a hot day. The peal of a child’s laughter. The sun on his skin. The smell of lavender. A hug from someone he loved.

His mouth closed around her. And this, he thought. He had missed this, too. The taste of a woman. The soft, breathy moans of love, and the knowledge that all those sighs were for him.

Even after all the horrors of today, it made him realise how much good was still in the world, and how much worth living for.

‘Alec,’ she whispered, tugging his hair. ‘I want you inside me.’

She dragged him forward and kissed him hard, sucking the juices from his beard. Her tongue drove deep into his mouth, dragging along the crenellations lining the roof of his mouth. His hands left damp smudges on her body. Settling on top of her, he grasped his cock in his hand and used it to tease her entrance, sliding back and forth around her opening before pushing inside her. She moved her hips in discomfort, trying to get used to his girth. He pulled back, then pushed in again, just burying the tip. She let out a small hiss of pain and he immediately tried to withdraw, but she stopped him. She looked into his eyes, willing him to trust her, and guided him forward with her own hand.

It hurt. God, it hurt, but the pain was worth it. He slid deep inside her, then pulled back and thrust in again, even deeper. Words lost all meaning. She twitched and clenched around him, her muscles fluttering in distress, her breath catching in her throat. Her fingers dug into the hard muscles of his arm.
‘Oh fuck,’ he groaned. ‘Ellie…’

She was so hot and slippery it was unbearable. He buried his face in her collarbone and bit her clavicle. She hooked her legs around him and he pulled out and pushed all the way in again, slowly, trying to loosen her up. She was trembling like a flower. He sought her hand and gripped it tight.

They moved back and forth like a beating tide. Unable to cry out, Ellie muffled her moans in his skin and clawed at his back. The nails scraped across him, dragging harder the deeper he went.

Her muffled gasps were music to him. All he wanted was for her to be safe and happy. The idea that he might be the one to make her safe and happy – the one who might even be privileged enough to give her this kind of pleasure, astonished him. He smoothed her damp hair off her face and ran his fingers across her lips. She caught his index finger in her mouth and bit down gently, sucking on the tip and tasting herself.

He lowered his hand to fumble between her thighs. The added friction, clumsy though it was, made her gasp. He knew she was close.

‘Alec,’ she managed, shaking. ‘Alec… I…’

He canopied her world like the sky. With one final thrust, she was gone. Her hand clawed at the bed, clutching emptiness. The other raked across his back as the warmth radiated over her, spreading like ripples in a pond.

He had no idea how he’d held out for this long, but the sight of her panting and breathless, so sweetly contented, so full of tenderness, broke the last of his resolve. He bit down hard on her shoulder to stifle his groans, and was swept away as though in a flood.

But it did not feel like drowning.

It felt like living.

He fell, trembling, and she caught him. They rolled onto their sides and lay facing each other, both limp and exhausted, the humid air sticking to their sweaty bodies. Drowsily, Ellie kissed his forehead and folded him against the swell of her breast. Knotting her fingers in his hair, she massaged his scalp and neck in slow circles. They lay together, both broken, both whole, their straying, wounded souls having found at last a home in each other.

What would happen now, she wondered? Where did they go from here?

Maybe this had been selfish. Maybe it was stupid and ill-advised. Maybe it would prove to be the worst mistake she’d ever made.

Time would tell. But for now, her whole world was the gentle pulsing of Hardy’s clockwork heart, and the warmth of his breath against her skin.
An errant bolt of sunlight woke Ellie early the next morning, streaming in through a gap in the curtains and hitting her square in the eyes. Hardy was turned away from her, sleeping on his stomach, his brown hair a tousled mess on his pillow. She yawned and rubbed the sleep out of her eyes, blinking in the light.

The movement made Hardy stir. He turned his head so that he was facing Ellie, but did not open his eyes. She smiled faintly at him and spent the time waiting for him to wake up by counting all the freckles spattered across his face, half-hidden by his hair and beard. Slowly, he moved again, this time rolling all the way onto his side to face her. Peering out through half-lidded eyes, he mumbled: ‘Mornin’.’

‘Good morning.’

‘Time is it?’

‘Five-thirty.’

‘A.M.?’

‘Mm-hmm. No point going back to sleep, though. Fred’ll be up in about an hour.’

He groaned and passed his hands over his face, rubbing his eyes. ‘Early.’

Ellie shuffled closer to him and gave his bum a cheeky squeeze. He stirred more willingly at that, and put his arms around her. She responded likewise and pressed her forehead against his while he rubbed noses with her.

‘You snored,’ she informed him.

‘Did I? Mm.’

She tangled her legs with his. He made a face.

‘What?’

‘Hurts,’ he muttered.

‘What does?’

‘My knee,’ he grunted and moved the blankets to look at it. A greenish lump the size of an egg stood out, capped with a small, deep gash. ‘Must’ve hit it on the rocks yesterday. I didn’t even notice it.’

‘I got cuts all over my feet too.’ She touched his injury lightly. ‘That’s probably going to scar.’

‘I’ll add it to my collection.’

They settled back under the blankets once more and Ellie traced the slash under his collarbone. Hardy’s hands began to roam across her body, stroking up and down her torso. One came to a rest on her stomach, lying flat across her navel. Absently, he brushed her caesarean scar with his thumb, loving the feel of the hard, knotty tissue. Ellie shifted uncomfortably.
‘Don’t,’ she said, pushing his hand away.

‘Am I hurting you?’

‘No. I just don’t want you touching it is all.’

‘Both boys?’

‘What?’

‘Did you need a c-section for both boys?’

‘Yeah,’ she sighed. ‘Tom was a week overdue and huge. Couldn’t get him out any other way. By the time Fred came along I was in the “high-risk” age bracket. Caesarean was the safest option.’

‘Mm,’ he said. He placed his hand back on her stomach and resumed stroking it. She gave up and let him do it. ‘Daisy was born that way too. Tess always hated the scar. Dunno why.’

‘Take a wild guess.’

‘But we got something so beautiful out of it. We got Daisy. I don’t know why she’d think it was ugly. I never did.’

Ellie contemplated his words. ‘I guess some scars are worth it,’ she mused, ‘for what you get out of them.’

His hand swept up from her belly, over her breasts to her neck and back again. ‘I wish Tess had felt the same. It was the main reason we didn’t have any more children. She didn’t want to go through that again.’

‘Did you want more?’

‘Yeah. I was an only child, and all I ever wanted when I was growing up was a baby brother or sister. I wanted to give Daisy that. Always thought three would be good number. But in the end, she was enough.’

‘You have to bring her when you come back. Promise.’

‘I will,’ he said, aggravated.

‘Good.’ She stroked his hair. ‘Do you think she’ll like me?’

A broad smile formed across his face. ‘Yeah. She’ll love you. You and Tom and Fred. Especially wee Fred. She loves kids. Even been doing some babysitting lately to earn pocket money.’

‘You know she’d be welcome to stay here whenever she likes,’ Ellie said. ‘Any time she wanted to visit you.’

‘Visit me? Here?’

His hand settled on her throat, warm and slightly damp. He laid it flat across her neck and cheek, his thumb tracing the outside of her lips in lazy circles. ‘Why would she be visiting me here?’

‘I assume,’ Ellie said, biting down gently on his thumb before moving his hand away from her mouth, ‘because you’ll be coming to live with us.’
He moved closer to her. ‘Is that an invitation?’

‘Who else is going to put up with you?’

She ran her fingers down his hairy chest to his torso, finding a crooked appendectomy scar.

‘Who indeed?’ he agreed, kissing her sweetly.

She could spend her whole life like this, lying here with him, touching his body and counting his scars, feeling his beard scratch against her palms, feeling him harden against her. As she roamed his body, something twinged and she rubbed her shoulder and twisted her neck to look at what was causing her discomfort. ‘You bit me,’ she accused.

‘I think I’m going to win that particular round of misery poker,’ Hardy said, rolling forward and tapping his back to draw attention to the scratch marks she had left on him.

‘No!’ Ellie’s eyes were wide, embarrassed. ‘Turn over.’

Hardy obeyed her command with a grunt and turned all the way over so his back was facing her. Ellie came closer and traced the long scratch marks with her fingers. He shivered.

‘Blimey,’ she breathed into his ear. ‘Sorry. Does it hurt?’

‘No,’ Hardy muttered. The light strokes of her fingers made him break out in goosebumps and he quivered. ‘Ticklish,’ he grunted.

‘Oh are you?’ Ellie said, and applied her touch to his ribcage. He spasmed involuntarily and an undignified giggle escaped him. Smothering her laugh in his shoulder, she clasped her arms around him and squeezed him tight.

They lay like that for a long moment, their chests rising and falling in unison. Ellie printed tiny kisses along his shoulderblade. Finding a large patch of scar tissue under his arm, she asked, ‘How did you get this?’

‘Breaking up a bar fight in Glasgow,’ he replied. ‘First week on the beat. I saw three guys laying into some poor kid. Thought I’d be a hero. Didn’t notice the fourth sneaking up behind me with a broken bottle.’

She kissed it. ‘What about this one?’

She was tracing a small nub on his shoulder. ‘Grazed by a bullet,’ he said.

‘Seriously?’ Her eyes were wide. ‘Glasgow again?’

‘Aye. Working a drugs bust. We weren’t expecting any of them to be armed. Luckily, he was terrible shot.’

She rubbed the scratches she’d carved on his back and was grateful they were only temporary. The two of them might bruise and scratch and wound one another, but the marks they left would always heal without a trace.

She played idly with his nipple, flicking it when it hardened at her touch.

‘Oy,’ Hardy muttered. Forming a chicken wing, he trapped her arm under his own and placed his hand atop hers, flattening it to his chest to stop the abuse.
‘I can feel your heart beating,’ she said after a pause.

‘I can feel yours.’ His hand manacled her wrist, his fingers pressing down on that little hollow beneath the thumb. He drew her hand up to his mouth. There was a little circle of pale skin around her ring finger that marked where her wedding band had once sat. He kissed it. Then he inhaled deeply, pressing his fingers to his nose.

‘I smell of you,’ he said with satisfaction.

She pulled out of his grip. ‘You wanker,’ she said, smacking him.

He rolled over, a sly smile on his face, and placed his hands around her waist. His thumbs pressed hard against her hipbones and rolled her towards him. Catching her when she came close enough, he kissed her.

Ellie opened her mouth to admit him and swept her tongue across the inside of his lips. She ran a hand down his chest and cupped his balls, rolling them in her palm before grasping his penis and coaxing him into full erection. He moaned into her mouth, holding her close.

Pushing a hand between her dark curls, he gently parted the fleshy folds. She was wet and tight. He eased one finger inside her, then another, and massaged her gently until she loosened up enough for him to fit a third finger in.

‘Roll over,’ he whispered, withdrawing his hand.

She did and he pulled her hips hard against him, grinding his erection against her arse while his fingers found her clitoris. After a little more stimulation, he took his penis into his hand and guided it inside her. They struggled to get the position right, but after a few failed attempts he managed to sheath himself completely in her wet heat.

Ellie made a small, strangled noise at the back of her throat. He slid one arm under her ribs and lifted her slightly, the other alternating between her hip, to give traction, and her clitoris. She felt so completely possessed like this, so helpless. He nipped at her ear and kissed her throat hungrily as his hips rolled, pushing in and out of her, his fingers making slow circles on her clit.

After minutes of slow build-up, her breathing became so quick and ragged she was almost hyperventilating. Responding to her body’s signals, Hardy quickened his ministrations, holding her so tight she was unsure where she ended and he began. His breath on her neck was scalding.

‘Come for me,’ he growled, and thrust hard inside her. He nipped and sucked at her neck. ‘Come for me, Ellie.’

And she did. She arched her back and came with a muffled scream.

‘That’s it,’ he crooned. ‘There we go.’

He sounded so smug she almost wanted to hit him. She could feel him smiling into her neck, clearly satisfied with himself.

With her needs taken care of, he took her hips with both hands and fucked her hard. Within the minute, he spilled over inside of her with a seemingly endless groan.

‘Oh, Ellie. I love you.’

He grew very still and panted into her back, his forehead pressed against her shoulder.
Hot and damp and breathless, they did not move for a long time.

‘My arm’s asleep,’ he murmured.

She let him pull his arm free and rolled over so they were facing each other again. Ellie reached out and stroked his face, running her fingers across his hard stubble.

‘Alec?’ she said.

‘Hmm?’

‘I love you too.’

He gathered her into his arms and printed soft kisses on her hair.

Ellie jerked awake and looked around wildly. Hardy was gone; his side of the bed was cold. Sitting up, she pushed her messy hair out of her eyes and glanced at the clock. It was seven-thirty already. Fred always woke her before seven. She pulled a pair of jeans and a t-shirt on, idly wondering what had happened.

As she padded downstairs, the smell of cooking eggs greeted her. She could hear Fred nattering away and the clatter of plastic crockery.

‘I know,’ Hardy was saying sympathetically. Fred babbled at him. ‘I know, just wait a minute.’

She came into the kitchen and was greeted by the sight of Fred in his high chair eagerly accepting spoonfuls of food from Hardy’s patient hand. A frying pan full of scrambled eggs steamed atop the oven.

‘Mornin’.

‘What’s all this?’ Ellie asked.

‘Fred came into your room and announced that he was hungry. You’d fallen asleep again, so I thought I’d take care of things.’

‘Fred!’ Fred agreed.

Ellie wandered over to Hardy and rubbed his back as she bent over him to kiss Fred’s forehead. ‘Good morning, darling. How are you feeling?’

Fred bobbed happily at his mother’s touch. Hardy fed him another spoonful.

‘He’s eating avocado,’ Ellie marvelled as she sat down. ‘He never eats avocado. He hates it.’

‘You have to pretend to sneeze it out your nose,’ Hardy replied. ‘Observe.’

Secreting some avocado mash in a small bowl, Hardy brought it up his nose, covered it with his hands and let out a tremendous fake sneeze.

‘Oh, gross!’ he said, pretending to wipe his nose and showing Fred the green paste in the bowl. ‘Look at that!’

Fred squealed with delight and clapped his hands.
'Guess there’s only one thing to do with it,’ he said, and fed it to him.

’If he starts eating his boogers again, I’m blaming you,’ Ellie said. She rested her head on her hand and smiled at him, her eyes soft.

’That trick used to work wonders on Daisy,’ Hardy explained as he scraped the bowl. ‘She hated peas when she was little. Do you want some toast? There’s plenty of eggs too.’

’I usually just have cereal,’ Ellie said. Hardy’s face fell, so she amended, ‘but eggs sound nice.’

He got up and plunged some bread in the toaster. ‘I was thinking,’ he said as he put the frying pan on a low heat to warm the eggs, ‘that it might be nice to do something fun today. After yesterday’s… mishap, we should do something. Go somewhere. I don’t need to leave until this afternoon so we’ve practically got the whole day.’

’That’s if we can drag Tom out of bed. He usually doesn’t get up until noon.’ She pilfered some avocado from Fred’s plate.

Hardy used a spatula to push the eggs around a little. After a while, he spoke. ‘What you said earlier, about me coming to live with you…. did you really mean that?’

Ellie flushed crimson. ‘Only… only if you want to. I mean, we probably shouldn’t rush into anything. Just because of last night doesn’t mean we’re…’

’No. No of course not.’ He kept his back to her, his gaze fixed on the sizzling eggs. ‘Unless you wanted to be.’

The toaster popped. Hardy placed the slices on a plate and piled it high with scrambled eggs.

’Do you want to be?’ she asked. ’Together?’

Hardy set the plate next to her, handed her a knife and fork and seated himself opposite her. With considerable effort, he nodded. ‘Yeah.’

’Good. Right. So… does this make me your girlfriend?’

He grimaced. ‘No. Don’t like that term.’

’Partner?’

’Too formal.’

’What, then?’

His hand crept across the table. He laced his fingers through hers. ‘My other half,’ he suggested.

Fred decided he’d had enough of avocado and upset his bowl, sending flecks spraying everywhere. ‘Fred! Look what you’ve done,’ Ellie scolded.

’S’ok. I’ll get it,’ Hardy said. He stood and busied himself cleaning up the mess. ‘I think it’s time we moved onto bananas now anyway. How about that, Fred? Bananas?’

’Nanas,’ Fred agreed.

’He likes them mashed with a bit of cream,’ she informed him as she dug into her eggs.
Hardy obliged and busied himself preparing it. At the same time, he put the kettle on.

‘Do you have any green tea?’ he asked as he rooted through the cupboard.

‘Up the back.’

He seized upon the box and made two cups, green for himself and English Breakfast for Ellie. He set her cup in front of her and she murmured a thank you. Then he turned his attention to Fred. ‘Ready for the main course?’

Fred bounced and eagerly accepted a mouthful. Intrigued by his enthusiasm, Hardy tried the banana mash himself. ‘Mmm. That’s tasty.’ He ate another spoonful and Fred babbled angrily. ‘All right, sorry. Here you go.’

‘Is there anywhere in particular you want to go today?’ she asked, watching them.

‘Erm… I dunno.’ He picked up a tissue and wiped the dribble from Fred’s mouth. ‘Is there anywhere close by?’

‘There’s the arcade,’ she suggested, taking a sip of tea. ‘Tom’ll say he’s too old for it though.’

‘I was hoping for somewhere a little more spectacular.’

‘We could go for a drive. Next town over’s got some beautiful gardens and nature walks.’

‘Yeah. It might be nice to see more of the local area.’

Hardy’s phone went off. Setting down the bowl of bananas, he groped for it and squinted at the caller ID.

‘It’s Tess,’ he said. ‘Do you mind if I…?’

‘Take it,’ Ellie said, waving nonchalantly.

‘I’ll be right back.’

He started out of the room, but seeing the frown on Ellie’s face made him double back. He stooped and surprised her with a conciliatory kiss before hurrying out again. Ellie ran her tongue over her lips, tasting bananas.

‘Nanas,’ Fred said. She jerked from her reverie and picked up the bowl.

‘You like him a lot, don’t you Fred?’ she mused as she fed him. ‘That’s good. I like him too. He might be Mr. Stinky, but he’s our Mr. Stinky.’

Just as she scraped the bowl clean, Hardy came back in the room. His countenance was troubled, a sky blotted with storm clouds.

‘What’s wrong?’ she asked, suddenly gripped with dread.

‘Tess just told me,’ he said, a tremor in his voice betraying the panic simmering inside him. ‘Daisy’s missing.’
Ellie called her sister. Lucy complained bitterly at the early wake-up, but soon hurried over once she realised how serious the situation was. The moment she arrived to take Fred and Tom, Hardy all but manhandled Ellie into the car and they began the long journey to Sandbrook.

Ellie gripped the steering wheel hard and accelerated a little more. Next to her, Hardy was frantically calling Daisy’s friends one by one, as well as some of his mysterious informants on the force.

After a particularly heated call, he hung up with a heavy groan and passed his hands over his face. Ellie glanced at him. ‘So? What news?’

‘No-one’s seen Daisy since late yesterday. She left Tess’ and said she was going to a friend’s, but that friend never saw her, never even made plans to see her. She lied. She lied about where she was going. Why would she lie?’

He drummed his fingers against his thigh in agitation.

‘She must have been going to meet someone Tess wouldn’t approve of,’ Ellie supplied. ‘Is she allowed to have boyfriends?’

The thought of Daisy meeting a strange boy in secret sent Hardy practically into a frenzy. He raged and ranted and swore, bellowing like a wounded bull.

‘You have to calm down!’ Ellie said. ‘We’re not going to find her unless you think about this rationally! Now come on, you know her better than I do. Where would she go?’

‘I don’t know,’ he muttered. ‘I don’t know. She’s not like this. She’s never done this.’

Ellie’s phone went off and the noise set Hardy’s teeth grinding. Regardless, Ellie said, ‘Can you answer that? It might be Luce.’

Hardy pulled it out. ‘It’s Olly,’ he said.

‘Answer it,’ she urged.

He complied unwillingly. ‘What?’ he barked.

‘Oh!’ Olly sounded startled. ‘Oh, Alec is that you? I was expecting Auntie Ellie to answer. Is she there?’

‘She’s driving. What do you want?’

‘Well, actually, it’s… about you, Alec. Your daughter’s here at the Echo. Daisy, that’s her name, right?’

Hardy was floored. ‘What?’

‘What?’ Ellie said. ‘What’s happening? What did he say?’

‘What the bloody hell is she doing there?’ he cried. ‘Is she safe? Is she okay? Is she hurt?’

‘Yes, yes, and no,’ Olly replied. ‘She’s fine. But… um… she knows.’
‘What’s happening?’ Ellie interjected again. ‘Is he talking about Daisy?’

Hardy ignored her. ‘Knows what?’

‘Oh God. I wanted you to hear this from Ellie… look, you can’t blame me, all right? I didn’t want to tell her. I tried not to, but she made me. Promise you won’t maim me, okay?’

‘I’m not promising you jack shit. What did you tell her?’

‘About Sandbrook. Alec, she knows you covered for your wife.’

They were back in Broadchurch within half an hour. Hardy bailed out of the car before it had come to a complete stop and practically sprinted into the Echo’s office. Ellie turned the engine off, fumbled with her buckle, and quickly followed. A dreary rain was falling, rather inclement after yesterday’s beautiful weather, and Ellie pulled her orange coat tight around her as she hurried into the building.

‘Where is she?’ Hardy was demanding.

Ellie entered behind him and caught sight of Maggie sitting with a teary teenage girl clutching a steaming cup of tea between her hands. She stood up with surprise and set the cup down upon seeing her father, and Ellie only got a brief glimpse of her face before he enveloped her in a hug.

‘You all right?’ Hardy murmured, pulling back and checking her all over. ‘Are you hurt?’

‘No,’ came the sullen reply.

‘Good,’ he said. ‘Then what the bloody hell were you thinking? Coming out here all alone? No note, no text, not answering your phone -’

‘What was I thinking?’ the girl demanded. Her streaky face flashed with sudden rage. ‘What were you thinking?’

She seized a newspaper from Maggie’s desk and slapped it against his chest. He caught it with surprise and looked at it. It was his Sandbrook confessional.

‘I found this,’ she said. ‘One of the newspaper clippings in your file on Sandbrook. Did you think I was stupid? That I wouldn’t see it? That I wouldn’t figure it out? You say,’ she punctuated this by stabbing at a line on the newspaper, ‘that one of the DSes on your team fucked up and lost the evidence because they were having an affair, and that you covered for them. Did you think I wouldn’t realise that meant Mum?’

Hardy stared into his daughter’s defiant eyes. Seeing the pain in them was like a knife twisting in his side. He rounded on Maggie, who had been watching the exchange with a troubled expression. ‘Did you tell her?’

‘We tried not to!’ Maggie said, taking a sharp step backwards. ‘She rang up the other day asking us if the article meant your wife, but we didn’t tell her anything.’

‘So I came here to see them,’ Daisy finished, smouldering. ‘I came here to get the truth out of them.’

Olly chose that moment to sidle up. ‘We could hardly deny it straight to her face,’ he said sheepishly.

Hardy rounded on him and held up a finger. ‘I will deal with you in a minute.’
‘Oh, knock it off, Dad!’ Daisy shouted. ‘Don’t blame them! You’re the one who lied! You and Mum! How could you?’

Hardy’s Adam’s apple quivered. ‘It was for your own good,’ he began.

‘My own good?’ she burst out. ‘It was good to lie to me? To make me think my dad was a coward who ran out on his family, when really mum was just a slag all along?’

‘Don’t talk about your mother that way!’ he roared.

‘I’ll talk about her any way I want!’ she roared back. ‘She fucked Dave from the station while she had that little girl’s pendant in the seat of her car!’

‘That’s enough!’

‘And then she let you take the blame!’ Fresh tears flooded down her cheeks. ‘She let me hate my Dad for three years! I hate her! I fucking hate her and I hate you for lying!’

Ellie could stand it no longer. ‘All right,’ she said, stepping between them. ‘That’s enough. Daisy, love, I want you to come with me.’

Daisy blinked in confusion at the stranger in the bright orange coat. ‘What?’

‘Miller,’ Hardy said, his voice dangerously sharp. ‘This doesn’t concern you.’

Miller, she thought. The switch, imperceptible to all but her, hurt more than she thought possible. How far away those sleepy moments of dawn seemed now. ‘It concerns me plenty.’ Turning back to Daisy, she said, ‘My name’s Ellie. Ellie Miller. It’s nice to finally meet you.’

‘Yeah, you too,’ Daisy sniffed, wiping her nose. ‘I’ve heard about you. Why do you… where are we going?’

‘We are going across the road to get you some breakfast,’ Miller said. ‘And a hot chocolate too. Local bloke called Barry makes them. They’re the best you’ll ever have, I guarantee. And he’s always generous with the marshmallows.’

Daisy still looked confused. ‘I don’t understand.’

‘Did you travel all night to get here?’

‘Yeah.’

‘Have you eaten at all in the last twelve hours?’

‘No.’

‘Then you must be starving. Come on.’

Hardy caught her arm, smouldering with resentment. ‘Miller. You can’t just -’

‘Your father will join us shortly,’ she continued firmly, staring him down, ‘after he has called your mother and informed her you are safe and well. Then we can all sit down and talk through this like sensible people.’

Daisy looked between the two of them, then bowed her head and went with Ellie to the door, sniffing loudly.
'Wait right here sweetheart,' Ellie said. 'I’m just going to have a quick word with your dad.'

She left Daisy at the entrance and doubled back to speak quietly to Hardy. 'Call Tess,' she advised. 'Take a minute to calm down. Give Olly a bollocking if that helps.' She ignored Olly’s indignant yelp. ‘You’re too emotionally wound up to think straight just yet.’

Hardy was still swimming with fury. ‘Miller,’ he said, dangerously low, ‘that is my daughter. Don’t you dare presume to know better than me.’

‘I don’t. All I know is she’s a teenage girl who needs feeding.’ She touched his arm, gently. ‘We’ll be right across the road.’

His brows, pulled into a ferocious black knot, slowly relaxed. At last, he nodded. Ellie gave his arm a slight rub, then left to escort Daisy to the café. Pulling out his phone to call Tess, Hardy fixed Olly with a deadly stare. ‘Go away,’ he hissed.

Olly almost fell over himself in his haste to obey.

* *

Daisy was hesitant about eating, but after some coaxing from Ellie, she was persuaded to order something and was soon shovelling pancakes into her mouth as fast as she could. Ellie smiled, watching as she downed it with thick gulps of hot chocolate.

‘Your appetite’s almost as good as my boy Tom’s,’ she said, mildly impressed.

‘You were right about the hot chocolate,’ Daisy mumbled. ‘It’s the best I’ve ever had.’ She looked over at where Barry was whistling and cleaning cups and nodded at him, a gesture the cheery bearded man returned.

‘Are you feeling better?’ Ellie asked.

‘ Loads,’ Daisy said. ‘Still ready to strangle my dad though.’

‘ He has that effect on a lot of people.’

The doorbell tinkled and Hardy entered the café, his phone held to his ear. He lowered it as he approached the table. ‘Daisy? Erm, your mother would like to speak to you.’

He held out the phone. ‘Well I don’t want to speak to her,’ Daisy snapped.

‘I said you’d say that, but she’s insisting.’

‘Then tell her to piss off.’

Hardy replaced the phone next to his ear. ‘Yeah, she’d rather not speak to you.’

Whatever Tess said next made him wince. Pinching the bridge of his nose, he exited the café to resume the conversation where Daisy could not hear.

Daisy scowled and sawed off another mouthful of pancakes with pronounced vigour.

‘It looks like he’s going to be a while,’ Ellie said gloomily as she watched Hardy pace outside the window. She turned back to Daisy. ‘You’ve got a little syrup on your chin.’

Daisy wiped her chin with the back of her hand. ‘Gone?’
Ellie nodded. ‘So… if you don’t mind me asking, how exactly did you get here?’

‘Combination of train and walking,’ Daisy replied. ‘I googled the address of the newspaper, told Mum I was staying at Penny’s house, then bought a train ticket. Had to walk from the station. I got here about six in the morning.’

‘But it’s five miles to the station,’ Ellie said incredulously. ‘Mostly on dark backroads too. Weren’t you scared?’

‘I had to find out,’ Daisy said savagely. ‘I had to hear it from them. They wouldn’t tell me anything over the phone, and it’s not like I could trust Mum and Dad to tell me the truth if I asked them, so…’ she shrugged, and there was something about the determined set of her shoulders, the grim curve of her mouth and the defiance blazing in her eyes that reminded Ellie so much of Hardy that her heart ached.

‘You are your father’s daughter,’ was all she could say.

Daisy’s lips twisted. ‘Don’t you dare say that.’

‘No, you are,’ she insisted. ‘Travelling halfway across the country, alone, at night, just to solve a mystery? To follow up on a lead? That’s him all over.’ Daisy sat back and glared at her. ‘Not to mention the stupidity,’ Ellie continued, her tone a little more serious. ‘What is it with the Hardys and endangering their lives for no good reason?’

‘I had to know,’ she repeated stubbornly.

‘It’s not my place to give you a bollocking, sweetheart, but you had to know how dangerous this was. Travelling late at night, not telling anyone, no-one knowing where you are, not answering your phone…’ she could see tears pricking Daisy’s eyes. ‘Your dad’s going to have a heart attack when he hears.’

‘I had to know.’

‘It wasn’t worth putting yourself in danger.’

‘Yes it was! You don’t know anything! None of you do! None of you know how I feel!’ The fork clattered onto the plate and she bunched her hands into fists. ‘I hate them. I hate them both. How could they lie to me?’

Gently, Ellie said, ‘For what it’s worth, I think it was wrong.’

Daisy eyed her suspiciously. ‘You’re not gonna say it was for my own good?’

‘Nope,’ Ellie replied. ‘It was a bloody shit idea and I think your father was a daft prick for doing it in the first place.’

Daisy looked at her in genuine surprise.

‘But even so, don’t be too hard on him, okay?’ Ellie went on. ‘His heart was in the right place, even if his head wasn’t. Everything he’s ever done was for you, you know. You’re everything to him.’

Two tears tracked down her face. ‘For so long I thought… I thought he ran out on us. I thought he abandoned mum. I thought he abandoned me. I thought…’ she paused and took a deep breath to steady herself. ‘I thought he didn’t love us anymore. And all the times he called me and said he loved me, I didn’t believe him. I kept thinking to myself, if you really loved me, you would have stayed. I
thought…’

Ellie looked at the girl with mounting sympathy. ‘Well, you were wrong,’ she said briskly, ‘Because that man loves you more than anything else on this earth. You’re all he ever talks about. Seriously. I mean, it was cute at first, hearing him getting all excited about his darling little girl. But then he started telling me about your favourite breakfast cereal, and I had to put my foot down.’

Daisy’s eyes crinkled up. ‘He didn’t!’

‘He did. Cheerios with warm milk, right? I remember that because of how weird it was. Honestly, who the hell eats Cheerios with warm milk?’

‘I do!’

‘It’s weird!’

‘Nuh-uh. It’s the best! It’s all warm and sweet…’

‘But the warm milk’d make it go soggy! You’d lose all the crunch!’

‘You just wait until you try it. You’ll be eating your words.’

‘Don’t bet on it.’ She sat back and shook her head with mock disgust. ‘Cheerios with warm milk. I feel like that should be a biblical sin.’

Daisy laughed, a high clear sound like a bell, just as the door clanged and Hardy entered, stuffing his phone into his pocket. He approached the table haltingly.

‘What are we laughing about?’ he asked.

‘Cheerios,’ Ellie replied.

Looking mystified, Hardy let the matter drop. Clasping his hands behind his back he turned to Daisy and spoke. ‘Daisy. I – erm, wanted to apologise for yelling at you earlier. I shouldn’t have spoken to you like that.’

Daisy looked on silently, waiting for him to continue.

‘And…’ A gust of wind escaped him. ‘I’m sorry for lying to you. About everything. I was only trying to do what was right, but I -’ he paused again. ‘I understand if you hate me, but I…”

Daisy’s expression changed at those words. Standing up, she pulled him into a hug. ‘I don’t hate you, Dad,’ she whispered. ‘I’m angry, and I’m hurt, but I don’t hate you. I never hated you. Not really.’

Hardy swept her up and squeezed her hard, burying his face in her sweet brown hair.

‘Not so tight,’ she complained.

‘Sorry,’ he mumbled, but he did not let her go.

‘I do hate Mum, though,’ Daisy went on peevishly.

Hardy released her. ‘Don’t say that.’

‘I do,’ she insisted, dragging a sleeve across her face. She slid into the booth and Hardy followed,
seating himself at her side and placing his arm possessively along the back of her chair.

Sensing things were about to get rather more serious, Ellie said, ‘I should give you two some privacy.’ She shuffled along the seat to get up.

‘No, it’s okay,’ Daisy said.

‘Stay,’ said Hardy simultaneously.

‘Are you sure?’

‘Yeah. You bought me pancakes. Course you can stay.’

‘Oh, pancakes. Of course.’ Hardy said. ‘Just like when you were a kid. Did you get ‘em with strawberries?’

‘Duh,’ Daisy said, spearing one off her plate and waving it at him.

Hardy cheekily ate it off the end of her fork.

‘Oi! Dad!’ she complained, whacking him.

‘You’re still in trouble for running away,’ he said mildly as he chewed.

‘You’re still in trouble for lying to me for three years.’

‘Touché.’

‘Ellie said she agrees with me,’ Daisy added.

‘Did she now?’

‘She called you a daft prick for lying.’

He rounded on her. ‘Oh, so we’re using words like that in front of my daughter, are we?’

‘So what? She’s fifteen, not ten.’

That set Hardy and Ellie bickering. Daisy looked between them with an increasingly amused smile. At a lull in the argument, she said, ‘So... are the two of you... are you guys...?’

Ellie glanced at Hardy, her breath catching in her throat.

‘We’re partners,’ Hardy said definitively after a pause. ‘Friends,’ he amended. ‘We were detective partners, now we're just friends.’

Ellie deflated like a balloon and put on a false smile to conceal the wound he had made. Daisy looked unconvinced, but before she could question them further the door clanged open and Lucy barged in with Tom and Fred in tow. ‘Olly just texted me,’ Lucy said, waving her phone. ‘What the bloody hell’s going on?’

‘We found her,’ Ellie explained. ‘Lucy, this is Daisy.’

‘Oh. Nice to meet you,’ Lucy said.

Daisy mumbled a reply. Most of her attention, however, was riveted on Fred. He babbled happily when he saw his mother, and Ellie automatically got up to say hello and give him a hug.
‘Who is this?’ Daisy asked, her eyes shining.

‘His name’s Fred,’ Ellie said.

‘Fred. Of course! Dad told me about him.’ She looked up. ‘And you must be Tom,’ she said to the teenager, who responded with a monosyllabic grunt.

Hardy let Daisy out of the booth and she went up to Fred. ‘Hello darling,’ she cooed. ‘I’m Daisy.’

Fred hung warily behind his mother’s legs, blinking at Daisy with his wide blue eyes. ‘He’s a little shy around strangers,’ Ellie explained. ‘But give him some time and he’ll warm up to you. He never used to like Alec, and now they’re as thick as thieves.’

‘Really?’ Daisy turned to her father.

As if on cue, Fred darted from behind Ellie’s legs and ran to Hardy. ‘Awec!’

‘Hello, my wee lad,’ Hardy said.

‘Does someone want to tell me what the bloody hell is happening?’ Lucy demanded.

‘Everything’s all right now, Luce,’ Ellie said. ‘False alarm.’

‘But I thought the two of you were heading off to look for her in Sandbrook? What’s she doing here?’

Ellie glanced at Hardy and Daisy. ‘It’s a long story,’ she shrugged.

‘I’m sure Olly will be able to fill you in on the details,’ Hardy said darkly.

Sensing she was unwelcome, Lucy sniffed. ‘Well, as long as she’s all right, I suppose. I’ll see you later, then.’

‘Thanks Luce,’ Ellie said. ‘Sorry about all this. Now Tom – do you want a hot chocolate or something while we’re here?’

Lucy heard Fred interrupt with a little shout as the door banged shut behind her. Olly and Maggie were standing apprehensively outside the newspaper. Becca Fisher was with them.

‘Do you guys know what’s going on?’ Becca was saying. ‘I heard all this shouting…’

‘Just what I’d like to know,’ Lucy said, storming up. ‘What have you done now, Oliver?’

‘Why is everyone blaming me?’ Olly squawked. ‘I didn’t do anything!’

‘Hush, petal,’ Maggie said, and she filled Becca and Lucy in on the details.

‘Poor girl,’ Becca said. ‘It must have been a terrible shock.’

‘She’s taken it hard,’ Maggie said. ‘It’s a shame. She’s a good girl, really. Though she has inherited her father’s temper.’

‘So what do the three of you make of all this?’ Lucy asked.

‘All what?’ Olly asked.

‘All… this.’ Lucy gestured at the café. They could see the five of them – Hardy, Ellie, Tom, Fred,
and Daisy – sitting together, sipping hot chocolate and talking. Daisy said something and Hardy smiled without warning, a sight so rare it sent shivers down their spines.

‘They look like a family, don’t they?’ Olly said. The women murmured in agreement.

‘He has been coming to visit an awful lot,’ Lucy said. ‘I’ve had to babysit for her many a time so they could catch up.’

‘And… as long as we’re talking about it,’ Becca said, ‘I mean, I don’t want to gossip, but… Alec did have a room booked with us last night, but he never showed up.’

‘That’s because he stayed over at Ellie’s house,’ Lucy said. ‘I found him there this morning. He’d cooked breakfast and everything.’

The four of them glanced at each other.

‘I’m saying nothing,’ Maggie said.

‘Well, if it’s true, good for them,’ Becca said. ‘I think they’ll be good for each other.’

‘Others might have a problem with it, though,’ Olly warned.

‘Like who?’ Lucy asked.

‘Well, everyone knows what happened with the trial,’ Olly said. ‘You know… the accusation that they were having an affair. And now that Joe’s got off, people are starting to think that maybe he wasn’t the killer after all. They might think Alec and Ellie really did try to frame him all along.’

Lucy scoffed. ‘He’s guilty, we all know it.’

‘No we don’t,’ Maggie said. ‘Not everyone. Olly’s right. Plenty of people are convinced the real killer’s still out there.’

‘And there’s Mark and Beth to consider,’ Becca said. ‘How will they feel about it?’

A feeling of unease drifted through them. At that moment, the five exited the café, Tom clutching a take-away cup in one hand and three marshmallows in the other. Ellie was talking to Daisy and pointing to different parts of the street.

‘Up,’ Fred was saying, reaching for Hardy. ‘Up.’

Hardy looked down at him for a moment, then sighed. ‘All right,’ he said, and in one fluid, practiced movement he swept Fred onto his shoulders, keeping a firm grip on his legs while Fred’s fat arms rounded his temples like a crown.

‘You are getting too big for this,’ they heard him complain with a grunt, and Fred giggled and slapped his face. ‘Agh!’

Daisy looked thoroughly amused by the sight. As they set off together, she walked close by her father, leaning into him and elbowing him teasingly in the stomach. Ellie stood on the other side, her shoulder brushing his as they walked. They wandered down the street together, heading invariably towards the ocean.

All roads led waterward in Broadchurch.

‘They’re shagging. Calling it now,’ Olly said, interrupting the silence.
‘Oi!’ Lucy clipped him around the ears. ‘We don’t know for certain. So don’t you breathe a word about it, all right?’

Olly rubbed his head and scowled. ‘Not a word,’ Maggie agreed. ‘Now come on. There’s work to be done. Tomorrow’s paper isn’t going to write itself.’

With a nod of understanding, they went their separate ways.

* *

After showing Daisy around Broadchurch, they returned to Ellie’s house that afternoon.

‘I’m not going back,’ Daisy grumbled as they went inside. ‘I don’t want to see her.’

‘If we don’t go back, your mum will just drive here to get us,’ Hardy explained patiently. ‘There’s nothing for it, darlin’. We have to talk this out eventually, might as well do it sooner rather than later.’

Looking supremely dissatisfied, Daisy did not argue further. She kicked her shoes off in the hall and looked down at some different streaks of paint that lined the wall.

‘What’s this?’ she asked, pointing at the splashes of colour.

‘Oh, Tom and I are repainting the house,’ Ellie explained. ‘We’re trying to pick a colour for the hall.’

Daisy looked at the different streaks. ‘I like the orange one,’ she said.

‘Yeah?’

‘Yeah. Matches your coat.’

She flashed Ellie a cheeky smile. ‘That one’s my favourite too,’ Ellie said. ‘Tom disagrees.’

‘It matches her coat,’ Tom said sullenly.

They couldn’t help laughing at that. ‘We’ve only done my bedroom and Tom’s so far,’ Ellie went on. ‘But we’re going to do the whole house eventually. All different colours. We’ll get new furniture and paintings too, once we can afford it.’

Daisy wandered into the dining room, then the lounge. ‘This is a nice house,’ she called, inspecting some of the different knick-knacks.

‘You think so?’

‘It’s cosy. No wonder Dad likes visiting.’ She picked up a clay elephant and turned it over in her hands. ‘You should see the flat he’s in. It’s rubbish. He doesn’t even have proper windows.’

Hardy made an exasperated noise and Daisy replaced the elephant, wandering through to the kitchen.

‘It’s still a few hours until the evening train,’ Ellie said. ‘You can have a sleep if you want. You must be exhausted after last night. I’m sure Tom won’t mind giving you his bed.’

‘Mu-um,’ Tom complained. ‘Do I have to?’

‘That might be nice,’ Daisy agreed. The bags under her eyes became decidedly more pronounced. ‘I
would like to see more of the town, but…’ she broke off with a huge yawn. ‘If Tom doesn’t mind…’

‘He doesn’t,’ Ellie interjected, while Tom grumbled.

‘Okay.’ She caught sight of Fred’s drawings on the fridge. ‘Aww! Did wee Fred draw these?’

‘Yep,’ Ellie said.

‘Fred!’ exclaimed Fred as he raced through the kitchen.

‘These are really good,’ she said. ‘I babysit for two boys about Fred’s age and neither of them can
draw as well as he can. All they can do are scribbles. But look!’ she pointed at one in delight. ‘He
can draw people! That’s Dad, isn’t it?’

‘That’s him,’ Ellie said, casting a smile at Hardy, who remained grim. ‘Fred drew another portrait of
him, too. It was amazing. He had a little frown and his arms crossed. He’d even drawn stink lines.’

‘They weren’t stink lines,’ Hardy said tiredly.

‘They totally were stink lines. Mr. Stinky, we call him now.’

Daisy gave a little peal of laughter. ‘Mr. Stinky. I love it.’ She bent over the fridge and moved some
aside to get a clearer look. ‘These drawings really are quite good. Your Fred might have a gift,’ she
said, straightening and looking at Ellie with a smile.

Ellie brightened enormously at that. ‘You think?’

‘He’s certainly better than you were at his age,’ Hardy broke in, his voice a low rumble. ‘I remember
we bought you an extra nice set of crayons for your second birthday, but you were always more
interested in shoving ’em up your nose than drawing with ’em.’

‘Dad!’ Daisy said, mortified.

‘Oh aye. Twice – no was it three times? – we ended up at the emergency room to get ’em pulled out.
One time you managed to get three up there!’

‘Oh my God, Dad –’

‘And the red ones,’ Hardy went on. ‘It was always the red ones. I don’t know what it was about
them that did it for you, but…’

Tom doubled over laughing. ‘Well at least it was only up her nose,’ Ellie remarked. ‘This one here
used to shove lego up his arse.’

Tom stopped laughing abruptly. ‘Mum!’

‘Oh, some things went up there as well. I seem to remember a Barbie doll…”

‘I’m leaving,’ Daisy said loudly, throwing up her hands.

‘Me too,’ said Tom. ‘Come on, Daiz, I’ll show you where my room is.’

The teenagers hurried upstairs while the adults laughed at them.
'Kids,' Hardy murmured, trailing Daisy with his eyes as she disappeared. Shaking his head, he pulled out his phone and squinted at it, then placed it on the counter and scratched his beard.

'Quite a day, huh?' Ellie said, breaking the silence. 'How are you coping?'

'M'not,' he said, looking haggard.

'Do you want a hug?'

'No. Erm… Miller, what I said before about us just being friends... I don't think now is a good time... I mean, I think we might need to put this – us – on hold for a while.'

'Of course, yeah,' Ellie said breezily, waving her hand in pretended nonchalance. 'I understand. Daisy's had enough shocks for one day.'

'I don’t know that we really considered all the consequences… or the difficulties.'

'It’s fine. You don’t have to say anything. This isn't about us anymore. It’s about Daisy. Once that girl’s safe and happy, once you’ve worked everything out with Tess, then… if you want… we can worry about us.'

'Ellie…' he began, and the name switch ignited something in her. But Hardy could not give voice to whatever he was feeling, and so they simply stared at each other in twinned helplessness, bound together and lashed apart all at once, drifting to and fro like weeds combed by waves. Fred interrupted with an announcement that he was hungry, and Ellie broke free from the spell of his eyes to fulfil her son's loud demand.

Tom came booming energetically down the stairs. 'Daisy’s asleep,' he announced. 'She pretty much passed out. Can we go to the skate park now?'

'It’s still a bit wet, sweetheart,' Ellie said with a glance at the grey sky through the window.

'I don’t mind. Please?'

'Oh, all right,' she relented. 'Go and get your board.'

Tom grinned and ran upstairs. Hardy’s phone buzzed on the kitchen counter where he’d left it and Ellie retrieved it for him. As she glanced at the screen, she noticed Hardy’s wallpaper was a picture of a young Daisy, no more than nine or ten, blowing out birthday candles.

Hardy took the phone from her and read the message. Almost immediately, he sighed and rubbed his eyes.

'Tess?' Ellie said.

'Yeah. Threatening to come here again. I’ll need to call her and talk her out of it.' Even the prospect made him weary.

Tom barrelled back into the kitchen. 'Ready!' he exclaimed.

'Coming!' Ellie replied. She picked up Fred, who was munching happily on an apple, and bounced him in her arms. 'You okay to stay here with Daisy?' she asked.

Hardy nodded. 'You three have fun.'

Tom was already out the door. 'Bye Alec!'
‘Bye Tom.’

Ellie started to the door, then doubled back, chewing her lip. ‘You know,’ she said. Fred was fussing in her arms and she bounced him to keep him quiet. ‘Whenever you talked to me about Daisy, you always told stories about when she was little. For some reason, even though I knew she was fifteen, it made me picture her as a kid. And on your phone, your wallpaper’s a picture of Daisy as a little girl.’

Hardy looked at her, uncomprehending. She shifted Fred and hooked him onto her hip. He played with the zip on her orange coat, smearing it with sticky residue. ‘You can’t keep living in the past, Alec. Daisy’s not a little girl anymore. She’s a young woman. I know you miss your old family, and how she was, and how everything was back then, and you’re sad that you missed out on the past three years with her… but if you keep looking to the past, you’ll miss out on her now.’

‘Mum! Come on!’ came a distant shout.

‘Daisy’s a wonderful girl,’ Ellie went on, ignoring Tom’s belligerent command. ‘A little too much like her dad, if I’m honest, but no-one’s perfect. So make sure you cherish her for what she is, as much as for what she was.’

Hardy made no reply, and his stoic face gave no clues as to how he had received her words. She stepped closer and touched his elbow. ‘You have a future now. With Daisy. With all of us, if you want us. Don’t waste it looking at the past, because you won’t find us there.’

‘Mum!’

Hardy remained insensible to her touch. ‘Go on,’ he said, inclining his head. ‘Tom’s waiting.’

Ellie left him without another word, and it was up to Fred to call out cheerfully, ‘Bye-bye Awec!’

‘I don’t want to go back,’ Daisy repeated.

It was dusk, and they were standing under the eaves of the train station, sheltered from the rain. In the grey twilight, Ellie’s orange jacket was conspicuously bright.

‘We have to,’ Hardy said, as patiently as he could. ‘You can’t avoid her, Daiz.’

‘Yes I can.’

He gave an aggravated sigh and let the conversation drop. Daisy kicked angrily at a puddle, while Tom wandered off with Fred to play on a nearby seat. Ellie, however, stayed fixed to Hardy’s side, her fingers plucking at his sleeve.

‘There it is,’ Daisy said upon hearing a distant whistle. The headlights beamed through the dark.

‘Stand back from the edge a bit, Daiz,’ Hardy said.

She threw him a withering look. ‘I’m not five.’

‘All the same.’

Glowering, she made a big show of taking a single step backwards.

‘Thank you, darlin’.’
As the train rolled into the station on a cloud of noise and mist, Ellie gripped his sleeve a little harder, her eyes downcast. She wanted, desperately, for him to stay. Ever since Joe had pulled the columns of her life down around her, she had lived in constant fear of losing everyone and everything she loved. She feared loss, felt it at every turn. It had almost been Fred yesterday, and now she was set to surrender Alec too, so soon after loss and love and comfort had cleaved their splintered souls together.

'Call me tonight,' Ellie said, chewing her lip. 'Call me once you've spoken to Tess.'

'I will,' he replied.

'And... come back,' she added. Her hand slipped down his sleeve and caught his fingers. 'Come back soon, okay?'

'I will,' he repeated, squeezing her hand hard. 'I promise.'

In the gloom, standing in her orange jacket, she was a bright beacon, bright enough to call a ship home from sea.

He started towards the carriage and his fingers slipped from her unwilling hand, taking a piece of her with him. Straightening, trying to keep her face neutral, Ellie turned to Daisy. 'Daiz. Come here. You're not getting away without a hug.'

'Honestly, you're just as soppy as Dad,' she complained. But she went into her arms anyway, and her embrace was tight.

'Thanks for everything today,' she murmured furtively.

'Come back and visit, won't you?' Ellie said.

'Definitely.'

They said their final goodbyes. Daisy blew kisses to Fred and he giggled and flapped his arms. 'Bye-bye,' he said. 'Bye-bye Daiz. Bye-bye Awec.'

Ellie and Hardy fixed their eyes upon each other and exchanged a final, wordless farewell before Daisy bundled him into the carriage. The doors banged shut and the train pulled away from the station, leaving them alone.

Bereft, Ellie clung to Hardy's final words like a lifeline. He would come back, she told herself. He would come back, just like he always did, just as he had promised. Like swallows on a sailor's arm, his oath stained him, and it would deliver him home soon.

* *

Inside the train, Hardy and Daisy shook themselves off, stowed their luggage and settled into their seats. The train was only half-full, giving them ample privacy.

'I like her,' Daisy declared, brushing her hair from her eyes.

Hardy leaned back in his seat and looked at her. 'Yeah?'

'Yeah. She's funny. And I've never seen anyone tell you off before. Except for Mum.' After a moment, she added, 'Does she always wear that orange coat?'

'Always.'
Daisy giggled. ‘Does she know it looks daft?’

‘I don’t think she cares. She’s always telling me how warm it is. And how many pockets it’s got.’

‘Maybe you should get one.’

He called her bluff. ‘Oh? Well maybe I will.’

‘Don’t you dare.’

He smiled. Daisy couldn’t help letting out a chuckle. She settled down and rested her head on his shoulder. ‘Why did you lie to me, Dad?’ she asked quietly.

‘I thought it was the right thing.’ He heaved a sigh. ‘You were only twelve and your mother was your hero. I couldn’t bear the thought of you finding out about that.’

‘So you let me think my dad was a coward instead? That he was the one who balled up the case and ran out on his family?’

He did not have the strength to justify his position anymore. ‘Tell me how I can make it up to you,’ he implored.

Daisy sat up and looked him straight in the eye. ‘Promise me. Promise me one thing.’

‘Anything.’

‘Promise you’ll never lie to me again.’

She glared at him, her brows pulled hard together and her nostrils flaring. ‘I promise,’ he acquiesced.

‘Cross your heart?’

‘And hope to die,’ he finished, marking his chest with an x.

Daisy nodded with satisfaction. ‘Good.’ She settled against him once more and closed her eyes.

As Daisy drifted off to sleep on his shoulder, a twinge went through Hardy and he reached for the medication in his pocket. Subtly, so as not to wake her, he tugged the bottle free. A slip of paper came with it. Laying the bottle in his lap, he curiously unfolded the paper.

It was Fred’s drawing. The infamous Mr. Stinky.

He’d forgotten he had pocketed it. Looking over the crude, childish scribble, he sighed, quietly folded it and replaced it in his pocket.

Daisy stirred next to him. ‘Go to sleep,’ he urged, kissing her head. ‘We’ll be there before you know it.’

She grew still once more. Dry-swallowing two pills, Hardy laid back.

His dreams were full of colour. Bright orange, like Ellie’s jacket. Dark red, like the walls of her kitchen. Apple-pink, like the blush of Daisy’s cheek resting on his shoulder.

And gold. Gold like the sun in the sky, glittering across the waves of the great salt sea, or dappling a pillow with gentle morning light.
Hardy called Ellie late that night. She answered on the second ring.

‘Alec?’ she mumbled.

There was a fuzzy edge to her voice that made him suspect she had fallen asleep with the phone still clutched in her hand, waiting for him to ring.

‘Yeah.’ Checking that Daisy’s door was closed, he folded himself into his tiny, cramped recliner. ‘Sorry. Did I wake you?’

‘Nope. No,’ Ellie lied. ‘Was just resting m’eyes.’ A huge yawn gripped her. ‘What news? What happened?’

‘Just had a big row with Tess,’ he said. ‘Daisy’s still crying.’

He sounded exactly as burned out and broken as he felt, and Ellie picked up on the seriousness of the situation immediately. ‘Tell me everything.’

‘Daisy was still tired when the train pulled in, so I decided to take her back to my place. Let her rest. I told Tess that we’d come to see her first thing tomorrow instead, but she… erm, didn’t like that. She showed up at the flat around eleven demanding to be let in. There was nothing else for it, so I let her up. She and Daisy started going at it. Then Daisy told her she wanted to live with me now, and…’ He trailed off with another groan.

‘I gather she didn’t take it well?’

‘She’s threatening to sue for full custody,’ Hardy finished.

Ellie was stunned. ‘You mean she’s going to force Daisy to live with her?’

‘And stop me from seeing her,’ Hardy said. ‘She’s convinced I told Daisy about the affair to drive a wedge between them. Swore she’d get back at me for it.’

‘Do you think she’s serious?’

‘I don’t know,’ Hardy said. ‘Things were… heated. I’m hoping she was just angry. Not thinking straight. But the way she said it, and the way she stormed out of here…’

‘Tess is a reasonable woman,’ Ellie argued. ‘I’m sure she won’t go through with it. And if she does, well… we’ll just ask Jocelyn to represent us in court. I’m sure she’d be happy to.’

‘It’d be just our luck if Tess got Sharon in as her representative,’ Hardy muttered.

‘Oi. Happy thoughts, now. Think positive.’

‘I can’t lose her,’ Hardy said desperately. ‘I can’t.’

‘You won’t. Tess is just hurt and angry, I’m sure of it. She’ll see sense. It’s awful to hear your kid say they don’t want to live with you anymore.’

‘This is exactly what I wanted to avoid,’ he groaned. ‘From the very start, this is what I tried to prevent. Tess is Daisy’s hero, always has been. I don’t want her to hate her mother. And much as I love the thought of her living with me, I hate the thought of her avoiding Tess. I want them to make up, but…’
‘Well, taking you to court isn’t going to solve anything,’ Ellie said. ‘She must know that. This isn’t about her or you or your marriage. This is about a teenage girl who’s had a terrible shock and who needs time to heal.’

‘That’s what I tried to tell her,’ Hardy said in frustration. ‘I tried to tell her, but she just shouted over the top of me. And that made me start shouting and then it was all…’

He broke off with another groan. In the ensuing silence all he could hear was Ellie’s breathing.

‘I wish you were here,’ he said at last. ‘You’d’ve known exactly what to say to her.’

‘Something like, “Sod off you heinous cow and stop shagging other blokes when you’re married?”’

‘That actually sounds a lot like what I said.’ He paused. ‘Listen, Ellie… about us -’

She cut him off. ‘You don’t need to say anything. Daisy comes first, that’s what we agreed. Worry about your daughter. Then you can worry about us.’

He hesitated. ‘All right,’ he said, dropping whatever he was about to say.

‘Get some sleep,’ Ellie urged. ‘You and Daisy both. There’s nothing more to be done tonight. You can speak to Tess in the morning and sort it all out.’

‘Yeah. Okay.’

‘Call me once you’ve spoken with her.’

‘I will. Goodnight then.’

‘Goodnight. Give my love to Daisy.’

‘I will.’

‘Bye.’

He hung up and replaced his phone on the table. Passing his hands over his face, he let out a huge groan. Distantly, he could still hear Daisy sobbing.
Late the next night, just as she was leaving the station, Ellie’s phone rang. She answered it at once.

‘Alec,’ she exclaimed. ‘What’s happening? Why haven’t you called? I’ve been worried sick all day!’

‘Calm down. It’s good news,’ came the reply. ‘Tess said she won’t sue for custody anymore.’

‘Oh, thank fuck for that,’ Ellie said, a little too loudly. Two of the officers stared at her. She ducked behind her desk. ‘What did you say to her?’

‘I didn’t say anything. It was all Daisy. I think Tess realises that getting the courts involved isn’t going to solve anything. She agreed to let her stay with me for the rest of the summer. But once school starts, she has to go back.’

‘So in seven weeks, then,’ Ellie calculated. ‘Do you think that’ll be enough time?’

‘Daisy’s not happy about it. She swears she won’t go back, but I think she’ll come around.’

‘And if she’s still refusing to go back by the end of summer? Will Tess follow through on her threat?’

‘I don’t think so. Daisy was really laying into her today. Left her in tears, in the end. All the anger that was fuelling Tess is gone. She’s just sad.’

‘God, I feel sorry for her now.’

‘Aye. Me too. We spent the day packing up all of Daisy’s stuff to take it to my flat. The look on her face when we left…’

‘What are you up to now?’

‘Daisy’s still setting up her room. All her shitty band posters are going up. She’s playing some music I don’t understand. There’s make-up everywhere in the bathroom.’ Ellie could almost hear him smiling. ‘It’s starting to feel like home.’

‘Wish I could see it,’ she said.

‘The only thing wrong is it’s a wee bit cramped. Now that she’s living with me permanently, I’ll probably need a bigger place.’

The notion hung tantalisingly between them for a moment. ‘Listen,’ Ellie said, ‘Beth and Mark are having a little get-together this Saturday. I was talking to them, and they said you and Daisy would be more than welcome to come along.’

Air hissed through Hardy’s teeth. ‘You mean… like a party?’

‘Hardly a party. It’s just a small group of friends having dinner together.’

‘At their house?’

‘For God’s sake, Alec, it’s nothing fancy. Nige is cooking a roast. Beth’s making cheesecake, and there’ll be a load of kids running around.’
Hardy did not reply, and she could visualise his panic-stricken face as clearly as if he were stood in front of her.

‘Chloe will be there,’ she said, changing tack. ‘She’s just Daisy’s age. It’ll be nice for them to meet.’

‘What do I bring?’ he asked abruptly.

‘I don’t know. Nothing. Box of chocolates, maybe.’

‘Wine?’

‘Oh God. Please don’t show up with an entire gift shop under your arm like you did with me.’

He burbled something and fell silent.

Firmly, she said, ‘I’ll pick you and Daisy up from the train station that morning, then?’

Another grunt, which she took as a yes.

‘Good. That’s sorted.’ Ellie said with satisfaction. ‘Oh, I meant to tell you. I took Fred back to the doctor this morning. Just as a precaution.’

‘And?’

‘He’s been given the all-clear.’

‘Oh, that’s good.’

‘He’s even been asking if we can go back to the beach. Wants to expand his shell collection, I think.’

‘Who’d’ve thought wee Fred was so fearless?’

‘Yeah,’ she murmured, feeling a sudden, unbearable rush of affection for the man on the other end of the line. ‘He misses you already. Keeps saying your name.’ She cleared her throat. ‘Anyway, I should probably get going. Can’t keep the childminder waiting. Will you call me tomorrow? Tell me how Daisy’s getting on?’

He agreed with a grunt.

It was Saturday, and Hardy was standing in Ellie’s kitchen, harmlessly complaining about the amount of cheese in the house, when Ellie walked in, looked at his outfit and with words, ‘Is that what you’re wearing?’ forced him to reconsider all his life choices and capabilities as a human male.

He looked down at himself. ‘What’s wrong with it?’

‘It’s a suit.’

‘So?’

Ellie sucked in a deep breath and closed her eyes. She exhaled very slowly. ‘This isn’t anything fancy. It’s just a casual get-together with friends.’

‘Yes,’ he agreed, still not seeing what the problem was.
She sighed. ‘Daisy. Come in here and help your father.’

Daisy walked into the kitchen. ‘Bloody hell Dad, you can’t wear a suit.’

‘That’s what I told him. Take him upstairs and find something for him, will you, love?’

Caught between the two women he loved most in the world, Hardy was left with no choice. Daisy grabbed his arm. ‘Come on. I know I packed jeans for you.’

‘Try to make him look as much like a human being as possible,’ Ellie called.

‘I’ll try, but I’m making no promises.’

The sound of distant arguing filled the house. Daisy came back down the stairs.

‘I’ve sorted it. He’s getting changed now,’ she said smugly.

‘Good.’ With a glance upstairs to make sure he was out of earshot, Ellie took Daisy’s elbow and discreetly pulled her aside. ‘Daisy, love, I’m sorry to do this, but I have a favour to ask.’

‘Follow Dad around tonight and make sure he doesn’t say or do anything embarrassing. Got it,’ Daisy replied.

Ellie was taken aback. ‘How did you know that was what I was going to say?’

‘Mum’s been getting me to do it since I was eight.’

Ellie printed a kiss on her forehead. ‘You’re a lifesaver.’

Daisy shrugged her off with a smile.

Hardy came stomping down the stairs wearing a pair of dark blue, almost indigo, jeans and a crisp grey polo shirt.

‘Here he is! Our very own belle of the ball!’ Ellie exclaimed.

He threw her a pained look. Ellie did not realise it was possible for a human to look so miserable. Every part of him seemed to sag. His arms hung at his sides and his mouth was locked in a deep frown beneath his thick beard. It was as though gravity had increased tenfold around him, pulling every part of him down into the carpet.

‘I look stupid,’ he grumbled.

‘You look fine. Jeans suit you.’

‘They’re too tight.’

‘You’re fine, Dad,’ Daisy said. She started texting on her phone and wandered into the lounge. ‘Are we leaving soon?’

‘Soon,’ Ellie replied. Once Daisy had left, she approached Hardy and printed a surreptitious kiss on his cheek. ‘You look fine,’ she assured him, grasping his hand with a smile. ‘More than fine, in fact. You scrub up well.’

Shuffling his feet, Hardy muttered, ‘You look nice too. Don’t think I’ve ever seen you in a dress.’
Ellie looked down at herself. She was wearing a pretty orange sundress, one that she hadn’t worn since Fred was born. ‘Yeah, well,’ she said flippantly, ‘My shorts are in the wash and it’s hot as balls out. Had to wear something light.’

‘You’re terrible at taking compliments.’

‘You’re terrible at giving them.’ She could not resist giving him one more kiss, this time on the lips. ‘I’m gonna go wrestle Fred into some trousers. We’ll go soon, okay?’

He nodded and Ellie went into the lounge, where Fred was sat on the floor wearing only his pants and scribbling away with crayons. On hot days it was always difficult to get him to wear clothes, and today had been a scorcher.

‘Fred,’ she said, and Fred looked at her. Sensing her intent, he sprinted from the room. ‘Oi!’ she yelled, chasing after him.

After a great deal of struggling, Fred was forced into some clothes. Holding him tight in her arms to prevent him from stripping and running away again, Ellie walked into the kitchen.

‘Right. Are you ready?’

‘Almost,’ Hardy replied as he placed a piece of bread atop a painstakingly assembled salad sandwich.

‘What the hell are you doing?’ Ellie said.

‘Making a sandwich.’

‘Right before dinner?’

‘I’m gonna take it.’

Ellie took a moment to process what he had told her. ‘You’re going to bring your own food – just enough for yourself – to our friends’ dinner?’

‘I can’t eat red meat so I thought I’d just take a salad sandwich. Make things easier.’

‘You are not taking that sandwich.’

‘I can’t eat the roast!’

‘So just eat vegetables then! You can ask for a serving without the meat!’

‘I thought this’d be easier!’

‘For God’s sake, Alec, you are not smuggling contraband sandwiches to our friends’ dinner!’

Daisy heard the commotion and came into the kitchen. ‘Bloody hell Dad,’ she said again, and Hardy was firmly persuaded to leave his sandwich behind. After much bickering, Tom was roused from his place in front of the Xbox and Ellie forced the crowd out the front door.

‘This is going to be a disaster,’ she groaned to herself.

It was just past five and the worst of the summer heat had faded. The sky was splashed with
lemonade, all pink and orange and fizzling with bubbly clouds on the horizon. The kids were walking in front of them, Daisy and Tom holding Fred’s hands and swinging him back and forth, to his unbridled delight. As they got closer to the gate, Hardy started to pull nervously at his collar, and shifted the box of chocolates under his arm.

‘I don’t like this,’ he said, his breathing ragged.

‘It’s fine.’

‘No. I’m not good at these things.’

‘But you can’t be completely hopeless. You must have done this before. It’s not like Tess kept you at home in a jar with holes poked in it.’

‘She took me to social things, yeah. It was all right when Daisy was a kid, because then I could just stay with her the whole night. Play with her, look after her. But then she got too big for that, so I used to just… stand.’

‘Stand?’

‘Stand around. While Tess flirted.’ He stared morosely into the distance. ‘Sometimes I’d look in on the other kids. I always found it easier to be around the kids than the adults.’

Ellie grasped for a thin ray of hope. ‘Well, at least you know everyone here. It’s not like you’re meeting a bunch of strangers.’

‘Yeah? And how many of them have I arrested? How many have I pissed off?’

‘You piss me off, and things have still worked out with us.’

‘I notice you used present tense, not past tense.’

She smiled at him and tentatively reached for his hand. Too cautious to seize it outright, she looped their pinky fingers together and gave his hand a little shake.

‘It will be fine,’ she repeated.

‘Oi oi! Here they are!’ Mark exclaimed, greeting them at the gate. Baby Lizzie was bouncing in his arms. Ellie abruptly withdrew her pinky finger from Hardy’s and they shuffled apart. ‘Here’s Tom and Fred, the two champions!’

He ruffled Tom’s hair and looked up at Daisy. ‘You’re Daisy, then, eh? Hardy’s girl? Nice to meet you, I’m Mark.’

He offered his free hand to Daisy and she shook it. ‘Nice to meet you too,’ she said, all her attention fixed on little Lizzie. ‘Is this Lizzie?’

‘It surely is,’ Mark replied. The fat, milky infant, swathed in hideous pink patterned clothing, gurgled softly.

‘Oh, she’s beautiful,’ Daisy breathed. ‘Hello!’ she waved. ‘Hello pretty girl.’

‘You like kids, do you?’ Mark said.

‘Yeah,’ Daisy replied. ‘I babysit a bit back home.’
‘Do you want to hold her?’

Her eyes shone. ‘Can I?’

‘Yeah. Course.’

He passed Lizzie into her reverent hands. The baby let out a complaint and started to cry.

‘Shh, shh,’ Daisy said. ‘It’s all right.’

‘Support her head,’ Ellie said, coming up behind her and fixing Daisy’s posture. Once she was holding her properly, Lizzie quietened and stared up at Daisy with her big blue eyes.

‘She’s gorgeous,’ Daisy whispered, mesmerised.

‘You can come and babysit for us one day, if you like,’ Mark said. ‘Our Chlo always seems to have too much on to do it.’ He looked up at Hardy. ‘Alec. Or do you still prefer DI Hardy?’

At a prompt from Ellie, he muttered, ‘Alec is fine.’ He thrust the box of chocolates into Mark’s hands. ‘I brought you these.’

‘Excellent!’ Mark crowed. ‘Beth’ll love you forever now.’ He took Hardy’s hand and shook it. ‘It’s good to have you over, mate,’ he said sincerely. ‘We never did get a chance to thank you for everything you’ve done for us.’

Hardy pulled a face. Sensing he was about to argue the point, Ellie said loudly, ‘Shall we go inside then? It’s too hot out here to talk.’

‘Yeah, come on in.’

Mark took Lizzie back from Daisy and they went inside, where they were greeted enthusiastically by a number of Broadchurch residents. Lucy, Olly, Nige and Paul were all there, among others. People were milling around the kitchen and living room, but most were in the backyard, enjoying the sunset.

Tom and Fred peeled off from the group and ran outside to play. Daisy caught sight of Chloe and Dean and immediately gravitated towards them. Hardy, on the other hand, stuck to Ellie like a limpet the entire time, hovering behind her and greeting people with an unenthusiastic grunt or a nod. He stood a little straighter when he said hello to Beth, but she was the only person he appeared willing to make an effort for. The rest he endured with glum forlornness.

Olly and Lucy watched the pair as they made their rounds. ‘Bloody hell, they do look like a couple, don’t they?’ Lucy said. ‘Tell you what - twenty quid says I can get Ellie to admit they’re shagging.’

‘Twenty quid says I can get Alec to admit the same,’ Olly said.

‘You’re on.’

‘Rules?’

‘We can’t ask them directly,’ Lucy said. ‘Let’s make it interesting and try to force it out of them.’

‘Deal.’

They shook hands and parted.

Alec left Ellie’s side for a few seconds to get a glass of water from the kitchen. As he was turning to
leave, Nige cornered him.

‘All right, mate?’ the bald-headed man said.

He grunted. ‘All right, Nige. If you’ll excuse me, I need to…’

He tried to sidle past him, his gaze fixed on Ellie as she wandered with Beth into the backyard, seemingly oblivious that she had lost her hanger-on. Nige blocked him.

‘Listen, mate, I was wonderin’ if I could have a word wiv you. You’re a policeman, yeah?’

‘That’s what it says on my badge,’ Hardy said testily.

‘I’ve got a problem. You remember that Susan Wright woman? Well, she’s been harassin’ me these past few weeks.’

‘Harassing you how?’

‘Following me. Trying to talk to me. She’s been scaring my mum too.’

‘Any explicit threats?’

‘No, she’s just… always there. It’s bloody stalking, mate! It’s harassment!’

‘Have you spoken to Ellie about it?’

‘Yeah! Loads of times! I’ve rung up the station heaps, but they won’t do nothing. They say they can’t arrest her because she ain’t done nothing wrong, officially.’

Hardy stared through the window, trying desperately to catch Ellie’s attention so she could rescue him.

‘Can’t you help me out, mate?’ Nige implored. ‘Can’t you do something about it? Have a word wiv her, maybe? Or at least talk to Ellie and see if you can convince her it’s serious. I know you two is tight.’

‘I’m not on active duty at the moment. There’s really nothing I can do. I’ll speak to Ellie, though,’ he said, and tried again to brush past him, but Nige thwarted him again.

‘You’ve got to! You’ve got to help me out. She keeps telling me she’s got cancer, and only about a year to live, so she won’t stop until I see her. I don’t even know if I believe her, but if it is true, then what’s she capable of, eh? She’s a dead woman walking, so what might she do to Mum or me?’

‘I suggest,’ Hardy said firmly, ‘that you take up the issue through official channels. Speak to the police again, and if there’s nothing they can offer you, go to Jocelyn or Ben and ask them for legal advice.’

‘You ain’t gonna help me then? You’d scare her off, I know you could!’

‘I am… flattered,’ Hardy said. ‘But there is really nothing I can do.’

With that, he scuttled from the kitchen. Before he could reach Ellie, however, he was accosted by a grinning Olly.

‘Oh, Christ, here we go again,’ he groaned.
Outside, Beth and Ellie were sipping their drinks and talking. ‘Thanks again for letting Alec and Daisy come,’ Ellie said.

‘Don’t worry about it. It’s nice, what you’re doing for them. Olly and Maggie told us about the row they had last week. And how you saved the day.’

‘Hardly. That man would do anything for his little girl. He’d’ve sorted it out without my help. I just greased the wheels with some pancakes.’

‘We had no idea,’ Beth went on, ‘about the whole Sandbrook thing. God, his wife cheating on him and losing the evidence, and him taking the blame for it all… I take back all the bad things I said about him.’

‘How many people know all the details?’ Ellie asked, her eyes wide with alarm.

‘Just me and Mark, I think, unless they’ve told more.’

‘Um… I think he’d rather keep the whole part about him being cuckolded a secret,’ she said. ‘He’s still… rather sore about it.’

‘I know how he feels,’ Beth said glumly. ‘Do you think him and his wife will ever patch things up?’

Ellie choked on her drink. ‘They better bloody not,’ she said, coughing. ‘I mean… well, let’s just say she’s not good for him.’

‘How’s Daisy taking the split?’

‘Hard,’ Ellie said. She fixed her gaze on the lanky, vivacious girl at the other end of the garden. She was talking to Chloe and Dean, flipping her brunette hair across her shoulders as she laughed. ‘She took it hard from the start, but finding out about the lie… well, I think it will be a while before she recovers fully. She won’t let on how bad she’s hurting, of course. You know how teenagers are. But at least now that she knows the truth she can start to heal.’

‘You mentioned she’s only living with Alec now?’

‘Yeah. Refusing to speak to her mother.’

‘That must be hard.’

‘She’ll come around eventually. She just needs time. Til then, we just make her as safe and happy as we can.’

‘My Chlo seems to like her,’ Beth observed after a pause.

‘And Daiz seems to like her. Didn’t I say they’d get on?’ Her eyes bulged suddenly. ‘Oh Christ, Fred’s stripping off again. Hold my drink,’ she said, and went into the fray.

Hardy, who had finally managed to free himself from Olly’s clutches, shambled outside and was tackled by a semi-naked toddler.

‘Awec!’ Fred said in terror, clapping his knee.

‘Fred!’ Hardy said in exasperation. ‘Where’s your shirt?’

‘Scary Mum!’
Hardy looked up to see Ellie storming across the garden, Fred’s cast-off clothing in her hands. Fred huddled behind Hardy’s legs.

‘Scary Mum indeed,’ he agreed.

Ellie gave Fred a scolding and Hardy helped her wrestle him back into his clothes.

‘I’ll stay with him,’ Hardy volunteered when they were done. ‘Make sure he doesn’t get into any more mischief.’

‘Sure?’

‘Yeah. Go on, be with your friends.’

He took Fred under the blessed shade of a crab-apple tree and there sat playing with him, far from the threat of adults and their endless conversation.

Ellie returned to Beth and recovered her drink. ‘Didn’t realise he was good with kids,’ Beth remarked.

‘Who do you think raised that girl of his?’

‘I know, but he’s so… I mean, he’s…’

‘An arsehole?’ Ellie supplied, sipping her drink. ‘A grumpy bastard? A frustrating, unsociable loner who wouldn’t know good manners or social etiquette if they kicked him in the balls?’

‘Your words, not mine.’

‘He’s all those things,’ she sighed, watching as Hardy played with her son, the two of them dappled by the dusky light drifting between the leaves. ‘And yet…’

‘Oh, he’s not all that bad,’ Beth said, mistaking Ellie’s meaning and rising to his defense. ‘Honestly, El, you’re too harsh on him sometimes. By the way, I meant to ask – how’d it go with that florist bloke I set you up with the other week? Did you hear back from him?’

‘Oh – him. No. He… well, he sort of took fright when he found out who I was. Who Joe was, anyway.’

‘I’m sorry, El,’ Beth said sympathetically.

‘Don’t worry about it. I didn’t really fancy him anyway. Horrible breath.’

‘Well, I do know this other guy who I think -’

‘Stop right there – if you’re trying to set me up on another date, forget it. I’ve had my fill of dating for the moment.’

‘Don’t say that, El. I know you’ve been on some shockers, but this one’s…’

‘No,’ Ellie said firmly. ‘I’m taking a break from dating right now.’

Beth pursed her lips and let the matter drop.

With both Ellie and Daisy busy socialising, Hardy was left relatively defenceless. Even his care of Fred could not keep the wolves at bay for long, and he found himself roped into a game of football.
‘Come on!’ Tom had begged. ‘We need a fourth player for equal teams!’

The next thing he knew, he and Tom were squaring off against Olly and Mark. A tiny bush and an old deck chair served as the goals.

Left to his own devices, Fred immediately stripped and ran off again. Swearing, Ellie chased him while he cackled madly, his face smeared with stolen chocolates. As she stuffed him back into his clothes and cleaned the sweets off his face, she looked around in annoyance, wondering what had become of Hardy.

Then she saw it.

‘Oh Christ,’ she groaned.

Hardy trying to play football. The sight was so absurdly pitiful that she had to close her eyes for a moment. He was standing there like a stunned mackerel, barely moving, while Mark, Olly and Tom raced around him, and he made only the slightest attempts to kick. His expression was one of utter misery.

Ellie went to find Daisy at once. She and Chloe had moved into the kitchen and were evidently oblivious of the catastrophe taking place in the backyard.

‘Daiz,’ she said with a sigh, ‘Go and get your father, please.’

Daisy looked around in confusion just in time to see Hardy attempt a kick. The ball hit the side of his foot and skittered slowly away while he stared at it. ‘Oh God,’ Daisy said, and ran to collect him.

While Ellie swiftly knocked back the rest of her drink, Daisy led her father away on some excuse and took him aside. She stayed with him for a little while, chatting and laughing at him, until Chloe tentatively came up and absconded with her. Adrift, Hardy went in search of an anchor.

‘Ellie,’ he called, rushing to her. ‘Thanks for sending Daisy to get me.’ He shuddered. ‘I told you I was bad at football.’

‘I believe you now. I think Tom does too. You’ve scarred him for life.’

‘Oi, Alec!’ Nige shouted. He was unloading some bags of ice and taking them inside. ‘Come and give me a hand, will you?’

Hardy groaned. ‘Go on,’ Ellie said with an amused smile.

‘You owe me for this, Ellie.’

She shook her head fondly at him. Lucy appeared next to her, seemingly out of nowhere.

‘Since when does he call you Ellie?’ she asked.

*Since he saved my son from drowning and shagged me rotten*, Ellie thought. ‘Oh, I think Daisy had a word with him. Told him it was a bit weird to call me Miller.’

‘Oh yeah?’ Lucy watched as Hardy helped Nige carry the ice in. ‘His arse looks good in those jeans, don’t it?’

‘Luce!’

‘What? You telling me you haven’t noticed?’
‘That is not appropriate,’ she hissed.

‘I’ve half a mind to ask him out,’ Lucy went on.

‘Don’t you dare.’

‘Why not? He’s single, I’m single, what’s the harm in it?’

Ellie fumed. ‘You’re not his type.’

‘I’m just looking for a decent shag, not an ‘usband. What do you reckon he’s like in the sack?’

‘I don’t –’ Ellie puffed her cheeks out and bit down on whatever she was going to say. ‘You just leave him alone.’

‘Oh, Alec!’ she called.

‘Luce!’ Ellie gripped her arm.

‘Need a hand with that?’ she asked, wrenching free of Ellie’s iron grip and approaching him with a twinkle in her eye.

Hardy looked up in surprise. Ellie could only seethe as Lucy began to flirt in the most outrageously obvious manner possible. Still, Hardy appeared oblivious to her intentions, and answered her in the most deadpan terms possible. Making some excuse, he extricated himself from the exchange and hurried away.

Lucy followed him. They disappeared behind a bush and Ellie heard a scream. Seconds later Hardy came racing back, looking around wildly. Seeing Ellie, relief washed over his face and he flew to her side. Lucy watched him go, cackling, her eyes trained on his retreating arse.

‘Ellie,’ he said feverishly when he had reached her side. ‘I think your sister is coming on to me.’ He lowered his voice. ‘She grabbed my arse.’

‘Was that the only thing that gave it away? She practically had her knockers in your face before.’

‘Can you have a word with her?’

‘Just stay by me. She won’t try anything if you’re with me.’

‘I don’t think I can do this.’

‘Be strong, Alec.’

Daisy came up to them. ‘Dad,’ she said excitedly. ‘Chloe just invited me to a beach party. She and Dean are gonna leave soon. Can I go?’

‘No,’ Hardy said vehemently, still sweating.

‘Da-ad!’ she protested.

‘Oh, let her go,’ Ellie said. ‘It’ll be a great chance for her to meet some more kids her own age.’

He frowned. ‘Will there be boys there?’

‘Yeah.’
‘Then absolutely not.’

‘Alec,’ Ellie said warningly. ‘Of course you can go, love.’

‘No, she can’t,’ Hardy said.

‘Ellie said I can!’

‘Ellie is not your mother! I have the final say!’

‘Please!’ she begged. ‘I’ll be good, I promise. I won’t stay out too late or anything.’

‘Is there gonna be alcohol?’

‘No.’

‘You’re lying.’

‘Oh, come on, Dad, please!’

‘Alec! Go on.’

He grunted. ‘How late does it go?’

‘Midnight, I think.’

He folded his arms and considered it. ‘You can stay until nine,’ he relented at last.

Daisy decided to cut her losses. ‘Thank you!’ she said, and kissed his whiskery cheek.

‘But no boys,’ Hardy said, touching where she’d kissed him. ‘And no alcohol, you understand? I will be checking.’

‘Yes, Dad,’ Daisy said, running off to find Chloe.

‘I’m a policeman,’ he called after her. ‘And I will arrest anyone who brings so much as a drop!’

‘Okay.’

‘Ellie will be with me!’ he said a little more desperately. ‘Two police officers will be checking in on you! Make sure everyone knows!’

‘Yes, Dad.’

‘And absolutely no later than nine!’ he bellowed after her, but she had already disappeared.

Ellie elbowed him in the stomach, grinning. ‘I am loving this,’ she said. ‘The look on your face…’

‘I don’t like it,’ he muttered. ‘I don’t like this.’

‘Will you relax? Chloe’s a good girl. She’ll look after her.’

‘Isn’t she the one that had the cocaine under her bed?’

‘Well, that was really Becca’s fault…’
Mark volunteered to drop Daisy, Chloe and Dean off at the beach party. Hardy let Daisy go only after he’d bestowed upon her a kiss, two hugs, and three I love yous. He stared after her as she left, then moped around the kitchen like a forlorn whale.

Mark soon returned; the rest of the children were relegated upstairs, and the dinner party began. Nige brought out his beautiful roast, which Hardy sighed at as everyone else cheered. As they chatted among themselves, he picked morosely at the sheets of beef piled high on his plate.

‘So Alec,’ Olly said after a while. He was sitting down the other end of the table and had to raise his voice to be heard above the clamour. ‘You been seeing anyone lately?’

Hardy threw him a sour look as all eyes turned to him in anticipation. Apparently feeling safe with five feet of wood separating them, Olly flashed a toothy grin while his mother snickered next to him, tipsy from too much wine.

Ellie stomped surreptitiously on Hardy’s foot to prompt an answer.

‘No,’ he grunted.

‘Why not? Handsome single man like yourself.’

‘You coming on to me, Oliver?’ Hardy asked, his voice dripping with an equal measure of sarcasm and disdain.

Ellie snorted and a few people around the table tittered too.

‘You’re probably too busy to date, eh?’ Mark said, coming to the rescue. ‘Taking care of a teenager’s pretty stressful, innit?’

Hardy agreed with a nod.

‘Why don’t you tell us a little more about Daisy?’ Beth prompted kindly.

He lit up at once. His entire countenance changed like the ocean illuminated by the moon. Ellie watched proudly as he conversed with confidence, speaking earnestly about his darling girl. The whole time, Lucy and Olly watched Ellie watching Hardy, and nudged each other.

‘So what happened wiv you and your wife to make you fall out, then?’ Nige interrupted from the end of the table.

The effect was like snapping a music box violently shut. A chilly silence descended on the table, and Ellie shot Nige a look of pure contempt.

‘M’going to the bathroom,’ Hardy said. His chair scraped loudly on the floor.

As soon as he was gone, Beth hit Nige.

‘Ow! What’d I do?’

A little later on, Ellie went upstairs.

‘It’s only me,’ she said, knocking softly on the bathroom door.

Hardy let her in. She closed the door behind her, shutting out the noise and laughter from below.
‘You okay?’ she murmured.

‘Sometimes it all gets a bit much,’ he explained with a sigh, leaning back against the sink. ‘Socialising. Need to recharge.’ He paused, trying to read her face for clues. ‘Tell me, have I made a complete twat of myself?’

‘Not a complete twat,’ Ellie smiled. ‘Come here.’

She wrapped him up in her arms and hugged him tight. He breathed her in, relaxing at once.

‘I think they’re warming to you,’ she told him. ‘They’re definitely starting to see you more as Alec than DI Hardy.’

He grimaced into her skin.

‘It was Daisy that did it. She’s like your human credential. Proof that you’re not a robot.’ She began to nibble on his ear. ‘Course, I get to rely on a different kind of evidence.’

He drew back in surprise. She smiled at him, oddly beautiful under the harsh, bright lights. Then she kissed him, and he reciprocated gladly. His wiry arms gathered her up. One hand found its way up her dress and squeezed her thigh. His boldness surprised her but she did not resist it. She stroked his hair and kissed him a little harder. The scrape of his beard across her mouth made her knees tremble.

Pining for what she had never known was one thing. Craving what she had tasted once and yearned to have again was another. Reason almost threatened to abandon her, but at last she pulled back.

‘Okay,’ Ellie murmured, patting his cheek. ‘That’s enough. Let’s… um, let’s save the rest for later, okay?’

He opened his eyes reluctantly and drew back. He refused to surrender her hand, though, and held it tight.

‘Come down in a bit, won’t you?’ she said, brushing his hair with her free hand to flatten it down again. ‘We’re getting into cheese and chocolates. Nige is drunk and telling stories. Olly and Mark are threatening to have a dance-off.’

He could only hold her hand and regard her with his tawny eyes, his mouth a hard line.

She understood. It was her world, not his.

‘Would you rather stay up here with the kids?’ she asked, not unkindly.

‘Please.’

‘I’ll make excuses for you. Say that Fred was being fussy or something. He’s just asleep in the next room, if you want to sit with him.’

She discreetly opened the bathroom door. At once the noise and light and laughter from downstairs assaulted him.

‘Come down when you’re able,’ she said. She could not resist giving him one more kiss, slower this time. She sucked his bottom lip and her thumb stroked the hollow beneath his ear.

Then she was gone, departing to join the merriment. Hardy flicked off the bathroom light and stood in the dark, leaning against the doorframe.
Beth went upstairs with a sigh, arching her back until it cracked. Her breasts were aching badly and she considered, not for the first time, whether she should start weaning little Lizzie.

She entered her bedroom and was surprised to find Hardy standing inside with his back to her. He was rocking from foot to foot, humming softly.

‘What are you doing?’ she demanded.

Hardy turned around. Lizzie was in his arms, a cherub on a pink cloud of fluffy blankets. ‘I heard her crying,’ he explained guiltily, inclining his head towards the crib. ‘I was just trying to…’

‘She’s sleeping,’ Beth said in hushed tones, approaching him.

He nodded. ‘I got her off. My Daiz, she was a terrible sleeper. Never nodded off unless someone was holding her. Liked the comfort, I suppose.’

‘Sorry. Didn’t mean to snap at you,’ Beth said. ‘Just a bit of a shock to walk in and see a strange man in your bedroom.’

‘Strange?’

‘Well, you do look strange to us without your suit on,’ she joked.

‘Ellie’s idea. She wouldn’t let me wear it.’

He looked down at the baby in his arms and a rare smile bloomed beneath his rough whiskers, tender and nostalgic. ‘I miss Daisy being this small. They’re so nice at this age. The way they look up at you, and you know you’re their whole world.’

‘And the smell,’ Beth blurted. ‘The smell of your babies. There’s nothing better.’

‘And the touch. Their grabby little hands.’

‘Their little feet,’ Beth laughed, her eyes suddenly becoming misty.

‘Every little bit of them. They’re angels.’ He touched Lizzie’s tiny, button nose. ‘She’s a beautiful baby, Beth. You should be proud.’

A knock interrupted them. They turned in unison, hissing, ‘Shh!’

Ellie opened up slowly, her expression baffled. Then she saw Hardy cradling Lizzie and froze. She stared at him like she was thunderstruck, and it took her a moment to collect her thoughts.

‘Erm – sorry, didn’t mean to interrupt,’ she said, still blinking at Hardy and Lizzie. ‘Only – it’s quarter to nine. Alec, I thought maybe you wanted to come pick up Daiz with me.’

‘Are you going now? It’s a bit early,’ Beth said. ‘We told Chloe and Dean they could stay until ten.’

‘I told Daisy nine,’ Hardy said.

‘Over-protective dad, you know how it is,’ Ellie said, waving her hand.

‘I am not an over-protective dad,’ Hardy growled as he clutched the tiny, pink infant close to him.
‘Couldn’t you let her stay until ten? Then you could pick up Chloe and Dean at the same time,’ Beth said.

Hardy made a sound that communicated he was not happy with that plan at all.

‘Tell you what,’ Ellie said, ‘how about we go and check on them now, and once you’ve satisfied yourself that Daisy’s all right, we can let them have another hour and bring them all back together.’

He grumbled. ‘All right.’

Very carefully, with a parent’s practiced hand, he passed Lizzie to Beth. The baby stirred slightly, but once she was in her mother’s arms, she went back to sleep.

‘Cherish her,’ Hardy said. ‘They don’t stay that little forever.’

Beth rocked her baby and smiled down at her. Ellie and Hardy departed quietly.

* *

‘There,’ Ellie said, pointing. ‘There she is. Perfectly safe.’

Ellie and Hardy were standing on a low cliff overlooking the ocean. On the beach, a number of teenagers were gathered around a small bonfire. Daisy was sitting by Chloe and talking to two other girls.

Hardy frowned, raking his eyes over the different teenagers surrounding her.

‘I know these kids,’ Ellie said. ‘And their parents. They’re good kids. Most of them, anyway. Let her stay another hour. Go on. She’ll love you for it.’

His resolve crumbled. ‘Fine. One more hour. But that’s it.’ He kicked a loose piece of limestone off the cliff. ‘What’ll we do now, then?’

‘I want to show you something.’

She drove them to a high part of the cliffs, up a deserted path to an old, overgrown lot surrounded by trees that had once served as a lookout, but which had been abandoned and forgotten about long ago. Ellie parked by the edge and got out of the car, walking to the very brink. Hardy gingerly followed her.

‘I love this place,’ Ellie said, smiling. Far below, the waves were wrestling with the rocks. The crash and slap of their brawling was unmistakable. ‘Isn’t it beautiful?’

Hardy could only shudder at the sound. The difference in the way they looked out from this spit of mainland upon the sea marked the differences in their very souls. This place was Ellie’s home. From the moment her eyes had opened, they had taken in the shapes of the jagged cliffs and the roiling ocean and the never-ending sky. Her whole being was permeated with Broadchurch; her earliest memories were shaped by its winding streets, its slantways houses, its rolling green cliffs and the ever-present wink of distant blue sea. The rockpools had been her nursery; the beach her sandbox; the gnashing ocean her playground. The people had been her first society and company; here there were no strangers. In short, her vision of Broadchurch was all his hates and grievances translated into loves. He wished he could see this place as she did, embrace the blue of the sky and walk without fear through the waves, but he feared he never would.

‘I love coming here.’ The crisp, briny smell made a thousand different memories bloom in her. ‘By
car, or walking, doesn’t matter. It’s the best view in Broadchurch. In the whole world.’ She closed her eyes and let the wind wash over her. The night was warm, still bearing the heat of the sun like hot coals carrying the memory of a fire, but the Atlantic wind was still enough to make her shiver. She retreated to the car and jumped onto the hood, leaning up against the windscreen and kicking off her shoes so she could comfortably rest her legs. Hardy joined her, clicking into place at her side, and looked up at the sky.

‘There’s Orion,’ Ellie said, tracing him with her finger. ‘Bright as ever.’ She drew her finger across the sky and came to a halt close by. ‘And look! There’s Gemini.’

She named some of the other stars for him, explaining that she used to come here to stargaze when she was a child.

‘Brought a big library book with me, “Stars of the Northern Hemisphere,” and a telescope I’d nicked from my cousin,’ she said. ‘Nearly froze to death on more than one occasion, trying to get a good view of an eclipse.’

‘We didn’t get stars where I’m from,’ Hardy said. ‘Light pollution.’

‘You missed out.’ After a moment, she added, ‘I snogged my first boy here. Took him here to stargaze. Ended up jumping him. Harvey Johnson.’ His name was a sigh. ‘I loved him.’

‘How old were you?’

‘Nineteen.’

‘Bit old for your first kiss.’

‘Well, when did you have your first kiss?’

He was silent for a moment. ‘Twenty.’

‘Loser.’

He sighed. ‘I had… problems talking to girls.’

‘I never had any problems talking to boys. It’s just that none of them interested me that way before Harvey.’ Her expression turned wistful. ‘He had this black hair. Twinkly eyes. I liked him as soon as I saw him. We spent the whole summer together, riding on his motorbike, drinking too much, swimming in the ocean. I used to spend hours peeling the sunburnt skin off his back.’

Hardy made a discomfited noise at the back of his throat.

‘He broke my heart in the end,’ she continued musingly. ‘When summer was over, he left and never came back. That’s the thing about love, isn’t it? So beautiful when you’re in it, but when it’s gone…’ She glanced over at him and leaned back against the windscreen. ‘So who was your first?’

‘Let’s not.’

‘No, go on,’ she urged. ‘I told you mine.’

Reluctantly, he said, ‘Annabelle Shore. She was a few years older than me. One of the PCs at the station. She was never a girlfriend or anything. But we… had arrangements.’

‘Did you cry the first time?’
He looked unimpressed.

‘Well? Did you?’

‘Only a little.’

‘I bloody knew it.’

‘Did you?’

‘Yeah. Only because it hurt like the dickens. He was gentle, but I was just too nervous. Couldn’t relax. There was more blood than I thought there would be.’

He looked mildly uncomfortable. She continued, ‘Who was your first proper girlfriend?’

‘Linda Avery. A waitress I had a crush on. I used to go to the café where she worked every chance I got. Took me six weeks of drinking shit coffee to pluck up the courage to ask her out.’

‘What was she like?’

‘Sweet. A little stupid, but kind. I remember she had a birthmark shaped like a strawberry on her thigh. And she used to hum the Ode to Joy when she was nervous.’

‘You must have been an odd couple.’

‘We lasted a year. We had a dog. It was nice, for what it was.’

She said, ‘I never thought I’d have to date again, after I married Joe. It was awful for a while, trying to get back into the dating scene. I had some shockers. Made some terrible mistakes, the least of which was asking out Brian.’

‘Dirty Brian?’ he looked disgusted. ‘You didn’t.’

‘I did. Could you imagine the two of us?’

‘Breeding a legion of tiny, grubby children.’

She laughed, looking up at him through her lashes. He managed the tiniest of smiles and her expression changed. ‘It’s different with you,’ she said.

‘How so?’

‘I don’t know. There’s something about you. It just feels…’

‘Right?’

‘Familiar.’

He tweaked her brown hair and stroked her cheek. Leaning forward, he pressed a gentle kiss on her lips. Within moments their hands were all over each other.

‘I feel like a randy teenager,’ Ellie moaned.

And with that she kicked off her knickers and clambered into his lap.

‘What, are we doing this now?’ he asked as Ellie unzipped his fly.
‘Do you have a better idea for how to waste the next hour?’

He was speechless. Just the way she liked him. She pulled down his jeans and he squawked when his bare arse hit the cold metal, making her laugh so hard that she nearly fell off the car.

He caught her shaking body and steadied her. ‘You sure about this?’ he asked. ‘We’re very… exposed.’

‘No-one ever comes here. Trust me.’

She wrapped a hand around his cock and he groaned. ‘Okay.’

Abandoning inhibitions, he kissed her, tasting of passion and futility and desperation. His hands were everywhere, his tongue pushing deep into her mouth. He hissed when she stroked his cock and left her mouth to nip and bite her throat. As he dragged her closer, their foreheads accidentally knocked and Ellie laughed.

She laughed a lot during sex, he noted, but from the way she was trembling he guessed it was more from nervousness than genuine mirth. As he ran his hands up her dress, he idly wondered if she had worn it in anticipation of this moment, just to make it easier to fuck him.

Her body was still foreign to him, and he could not touch her without a troubled crease forming between his brows. Parting her dark hair, he slid one finger inside her, then two, before drawing back and circling her entrance, trying to accustom himself to the feel of her. Sitting up a little straighter, he pulled her forward and unzipped the back of her dress. She slipped her arms through the holes, yielding her breasts to the ocean air, and he smoothed one hand across her tanned, pigmented back before cupping one of her breasts and kissing the dusky nipple while his thumb pressed hard against her sternum.

It amazed her how hot and alive he felt, how warm and vital and vicious, even as the wind accosted them. The muscles slid beneath his sinewy arms, and his beard scraped across her敏感的乳头 as he pressed his fingers inside her again. He made a slow, languorous crooking motion as he kissed her collarbone and she moaned. Her fingers tangled in his hair, her mouth pressed at his forehead as she ground against him. Then she pushed him down until all his upper body was braced against the windscreen. Her thighs pinned him in place. Drawing back so she could see his eyes, she grasped his cock and slowly slid him inside of her.

She was still unused to his girth and it took some struggling to accommodate him, but with a sudden feral growl and a sharp pull of his hands on her thighs he drove deep inside of her. Ellie shook for a moment, impaled, before a rolling, upward thrust jerked her to action. Bracing one elbow against the windscreen, she leaned over him.

Both trembling, they began to move.

Sliding her fingers up his neck, she wound them through his hair like honeysuckle and tugged hard as she kissed him, rolling her hips back and forth. He broke free and panted against her collarbone, nipping her throat as he kept her steady with his hands on her thighs and arse.

The wind from the sea, cool and fragranced with salt and sand, blew between them, mixing its own tender kisses with Hardy’s hot, insistent ones. She shivered violently.

Joe had been a vanilla lover, and his lovemaking had always been devoid of Alec’s desperate, reckless passion. Joe had approached lovemaking a little like a chore, as though it were simply routine task that needed to be done. But he’d always got the job done, and she’d never been
particularly adventurous in the bedroom herself, so she hadn't dwelt on it. Now she knew the awful truth, and she knew exactly why he'd never been passionate. He had simply used her body to push down his true desires, and the thought made her sick.

She didn’t want that kind of lovemaking again. She didn’t want that simple vanilla sweetness. She didn’t want the safety and security. But nor did she want the loveless, pointless rutting of a one night stand.

What she wanted was this. Alec’s desperation, his wild, almost animalistic need, the drag of his teeth across her skin, the way he said ‘I love you’ with every glance, the hoarse way he whispered her name, like it was a prayer he did not fully understand yet.

He pulled her down hard onto his cock, his fingers tight against her buttocks, and she arched her back with a soft cry. Oh God yes, she wanted this. Absurd and dangerous and stupid and nonsensical as it was, this half-clothed painful fucking on top of a car overlooking the endless ocean, she wanted it.

They knocked foreheads again as they moved together and Hardy ran his fingers under her dress to fumble at her entrance. After some struggling, he found her clitoris and she gasped, clenching around him. At his insistent touch she moved a little faster.

‘Alec,’ she whispered. ‘I’m close.’ Her breath came in shallow draughts. ‘Can you feel it?’

He shifted in his seat and began to stroke in circles. She caught his other hand, threaded her fingers through his, and pinned it beside him, squeezing in time to the rhythm she wanted. He picked up on her instructions, and then her orgasm overcame her. He smothered her hot exhalations with his kisses.

Grasping both of his hands, she pinned them to the windscreen. Her legs spread wide apart, searching for better leverage. Hardy braced his feet on the car and thrust roughly upwards until she cried out, and then she was riding him hard and fast. The car squeaked and bounced dangerously beneath them, and a loud clang told them they had made a dent in the metal.

And then it was over. Hardy came with a strangled shout and fell back, panting, against the windscreen. Destroyed, breathless, he stared at her, almost in disbelief. Her thighs quivered around him and she sat up straight, throwing her head back and closing her eyes, breathing hard. Her dark locks danced in the wind, and starlight glistened on her damp skin. Opening her eyes, she looked down at the man between her legs.

Slowly, Hardy opened his mouth.

‘One of the windscreen wipers is poking me in the arse,’ he said.

She laughed so hard she tumbled off the hood.

‘You okay?’ he asked, peering at her sprawled body in the grass.

‘Fine.’ She lay there for a little while, breathing hard. Then she sat up. ‘Oh look, I found my knickers!’

She tugged them on in a most undignified manner and pulled her dress back into place before leaping up to join him once more.

‘Christ, my legs,’ she complained, massaging her bruised knees. Then she turned her back to him. ‘Zip me up?’
He did, and she settled back against the windscreen.

‘That was… quite an experience,’ Hardy said, swallowing hard as he pulled up his trousers.

‘Never done it outdoors before?’

‘Not like that.’

‘A shooting star!’ Ellie exclaimed, pointing. A streak of blue light shimmered across the horizon. ‘Make a wish.’

‘It’s just a bit of rock burning up in the atmosphere. S’not gonna do anything.’

‘You’re no fun.’

Against his better judgment, he made a wish.

He hoped Ellie’s was the same as his.

After a moment, he said, ‘We have to tell them, sooner or later.’

‘I know.’

A cool wind blew in from the sea, teasing her hair. She shivered, and Hardy opened his arms.

Gladly, she scooted across to him and snuggled into his embrace, resting her head on his chest. She ran her bare feet up and down his legs.

‘I always knew you were a cuddler,’ she said as he twisted some of her hair around his finger.

‘There’s the pot calling the kettle black.’ He sat up suddenly. ‘What’s the time?’

She checked her watch. ‘Nine-forty.’

He relaxed and leaned back, his chest forming a pillow for her head. She traced shapes on his stomach. ‘We should tell the kids first,’ she said. ‘Once we know they’re okay with it, we can work our way up to telling the others.’

‘I think Daisy already knows,’ Hardy admitted.

‘With two detectives as her parents, I’m not surprised,’ Ellie said. ‘Has she let on how she feels about it?’

‘She hasn’t said anything against it, and believe me, she’s the kind of kid who’d let me know if she had a problem.’

‘I’m worried about telling Beth and Mark,’ Ellie confessed. ‘I think Tom and Luce – and Fred – will be fine with it, but… oh God, how am I supposed to tell Beth? After everything that happened with Danny and in court, with Sharon accusing us of having an affair -’

His grip tightened. ‘Don’t overthink it. All we do is tell them the truth.’

‘I’ve only just got them back,’ she agonised. ‘They’re only just back in my life. Chloe and Mark and Beth and little Lizzie. What if I lose them again?’

‘You won’t.’
‘But what if I do?’

‘You won’t, Ellie.’

She stewed quietly against him. Chewing his bottom lip, he added, ‘But if… I mean, if you don’t think it’s worth the risk, we can… I mean, we don’t have to… we don’t have to be together.’

She lifted her head and looked up at him. Painted cerulean blue and silver by the ocean twilight, his eyes shone lambent, dusky, beautiful. Unbelievable as it was, this grumpy, skinny Scottish bastard had become the star around which all her dreams could crystallise.

Family. Happiness. Security. A life shared, a love doubled. All those promises and more lay before her, wrapped in the cradle of his eyes.

She kissed him sweetly. ‘It’s worth the risk. You’re worth it.’ She settled back down and placed her ear over his heart. ‘It’s not just Beth and Mark, though, is it? It’s everyone in town. Everyone at the station. They all know what Sharon said.’

‘Fuck what Sharon said,’ he said with sudden passion. ‘We tell them the truth. That’s all we do. We were partners, then we were friends, and now we’re… and if they want to believe her horseshit about framing Joe and committing adultery, then fine. We know the truth.’

His fingers were tight around her, as though he were afraid she would turn to foam and disappear if he let her go.

‘Are you going back to Sandbrook tomorrow?’ she asked.

‘Aye.’

‘If you talk to Daisy and Tess, I’ll talk to Tom and Luce. Once I’ve got their support, I’ll speak to Beth.’

‘If they say no?’

‘Well… I suppose we’ll work something else out.’

‘And if they say yes?’

She considered it. ‘Do you still want to come and live with us?’

‘Can Daisy come too?’

‘Absolutely. We’ll just need to turn the study back into a bedroom. Do you have a spare bed?’

‘Think I’ve got a mattress somewhere.’

‘Well. There we are then.’ She drummed her fingers on his chest. ‘Are you okay with… living with us?’

‘What do you mean?’

‘Living here,’ she qualified, gesturing to the cliffs. ‘In Broadchurch. I always thought you hated this place. Couldn’t wait to leave.’

‘I get to live with Daisy and you. Location doesn’t matter.’
‘Why do you hate Broadchurch so much?’

The distant, rhythmic crashing of the waves filled the silence and Hardy closed his eyes. Even before Pippa and Danny, he had feared the water, carrying the dread rattle of the waves in his skull like an old seashell teeming with ocean sounds and secrets. ‘I nearly drowned here,’ he told her. ‘When I was a kid. Beneath those bloody cliffs.’

She was stunned. ‘When you came on holiday here?’

‘Aye. I couldn’t have been more than nine or ten. My parents never had a good relationship, but during this holiday they were… fighting constantly. I went to the beach to get away from them. Used to sit under the cliffs for hours, watching the water. One day I decided to go swimming.’ He swallowed thickly. ‘The current pulled me under, and…’

His throat closed over. Ellie squeezed him and he lowered his head to her hair. The smell of her opened his lungs and he sucked in a gulp of lavender-scented air.

‘Coastguard pulled me out,’ he grunted. ‘The water was… all over me. In me. In my lungs. I couldn’t…’ he broke off with a shudder. ‘Been afraid of the water ever since.’

‘I’m so sorry. That sounds awful,’ she said.

‘Dunno how Fred does it,’ Hardy said with false jocularity. ‘He nearly drowns, he’s right back on the water the next day. Me, I still get sick even thinking about it. Perks of being a Broadchurch native, I suppose.’

‘I’m sorry,’ she said again. ‘If I’d known your fear was this bad, I wouldn’t have…’

‘No, it’s fine,’ he cut her off. ‘I’m getting better. ‘I want to be able to enjoy Broadchurch. And the ocean. With Daisy, and Fred, and you.’

He stroked his thumb back and forth across her shoulder. She was oxygen to him, he mused. With her by his side, he did not need to fear the water. He could always breathe when they were together.

Ellie kissed his neck, his clavicle, and settled back on his chest. He was warm, she marvelled as the wind keened around them. He burned hot, constantly. She wondered how she could have missed that. He had always seemed cold to her, but now it was clear how he truly smouldered and raged, like a star burning up too quickly, consuming itself to give warmth and light to others.

She pushed a hand up his grey shirt and threaded her fingers in his dark chest hair, coming to rest across the left side of his chest, across the lump that marked his pacemaker. She pitied that heart of his, so tender and warm, and mourned that its velvety chambers were so cruelly transfixed by a metal splinter. And yet, she thought to herself as she pressed it lightly, there was something hopeful about it too. It was a reminder that he had cheated death, that he was so hot and bright and stubborn a whole ocean could not extinguish him.

The minutes slipped through their fingers, and after a little while they departed, leaving the cliffs and the stars behind.
‘So when are you gonna tell me about you and Ellie?’

Hardy, who was drying and putting away dishes as Daisy washed, lost his grip on a plate, fumbled desperately for it, and flinched when it smashed on the floor.

‘Soon,’ he replied, staring at the plate. ‘It was gonna be this week, in fact.’

Daisy placidly continued washing dishes while her father hastened to clean up the shattered pieces.

‘I thought you agreed not to lie to me anymore.’

‘I didn’t lie.’

‘But you were keeping secrets.’ She dumped a bowl on the counter and watched the suds drip down its side. ‘How long has it been going on? All the time you’ve been going to visit her?’

‘No.’ He retrieved a dustpan and swept the smaller pieces of ceramic up, careful to collect even the barest speck for fear of Daisy treading on one. ‘It’s… erm, still quite new.’ He dumped the broken pieces in the bin. ‘What do you think?’

‘I think you should have told me sooner.’

‘We only… we only got together properly the night you ran away,’ Hardy said. ‘Telling you the very next day, while you were still in shock, didn’t seem like a good idea.’

Daisy scrubbed a cup in contemplation, and her silence told Hardy that she had accepted his explanation.

‘So?’

‘So good,’ Daisy replied. ‘I’m glad.’

‘How would you feel about moving in with her? Moving to Broadchurch?’

Daisy put down the dishes and turned to him. ‘Seriously? Like a free beach holiday?’

It was not quite the response he had hoped for. ‘Well… it would be rather more serious than that.’

‘When can we go?’ she demanded.

‘Ellie says as soon as possible. She just needs to sort some things.’

Daisy clapped her wet hands together. ‘The sooner the better!’ she exclaimed. ‘I can’t wait to get out of this shitty flat. And I’ll get to be by the beach all summer! And I can see Chloe again, and Fred!’

She kissed Hardy on the cheek, wiped her sudsy hands on his sleeves, and ran into her bedroom to call her friend Shannon and tell her the news.

Hardy leaned against the sink. A large soap bubble popped next to him.

‘How come you’re wearing your collar up?’ Lucy asked. ‘You never wear it buttoned up, much less
in this heat.

Ellie was sitting in the dining room and drinking tea with her sister. A carnation blush spread across her cheeks. ‘No reason.’

‘So why don’t you let it down?’

‘I can’t. I don’t want to.’

‘Can’t or won’t?’

‘Both.’

‘Let me see your neck, El.’

‘No! Bugger off!’

‘Let me see it!’

Lucy pounced on her little sister and grappled with her, just as they had done thirty years ago when they were children. Ellie screeched for her to get off, but presently the buttons popped and Ellie’s empurpled neck was laid bare for the world to see.

‘Ah-ha!’ Lucy said triumphantly. ‘I bloody knew it. You’re shagging DI Alec Hardy, aren’t you? Admit it!’

‘No!’

‘Who gave you them love bites then? The postman?’

‘No – I -’ she broke off and hastily buttoned up her collar. The flush deepened to scarlet.

‘Bloody hell, it looks like he gave you a good time,’ Lucy laughed. ‘Look how many you’ve got!’

Ellie folded her hands into her lap and kept her head down. ‘It’s still… very new,’ she said in a small voice.

Lucy cackled at the admission and immediately pulled out her phone.

‘What are you doing?’ Ellie asked.

‘Texting Olly. He owes me twenty quid.’

After her ignominious confession to Lucy, Ellie decided she could waste no more time in telling Tom. When he bounded through the door after spending the day with his friends, Ellie asked him to sit down with her. Looking concerned at her grave expression, he quietly did as he was bid.

‘Tom,’ she began, taking a deep breath. ‘You know Alec’s been coming to visit us a lot recently…’

And she explained the situation to him, as gently as she could, then informed him that Alec and Daisy would, in all likelihood, move in with them. Tom bore everything else with equanimity, but he squinted at the last clause.

‘Do I need to give up my room?’ he asked suspiciously.
‘No, sweetheart. We’ll put Daisy in the study.’

He relaxed. ‘Oh. Okay. Cool. She said she’d bring her Wii and her PlayStation next time she was down. It’ll be good if she’s living here; I’ll be able to play them all the time.’

Ellie had, it seemed, misjudged Tom’s priorities.

‘You understand, this would be very serious,’ she went on, trying to impress the gravity of the situation. ‘It would be permanent, in all likelihood – if everything works out, I mean.’

‘Fine,’ Tom shrugged. ‘He’s fine. As long as I don’t have to give up my room.’

‘No-one’s touching your room, sweetheart.’

When he shrugged his assent, she kissed him and told him she loved him, even more than chocolate.

* *

‘So when are you and Alec going to come over for dinner?’ Beth asked. ‘We should definitely have a double date one night.’

They were at a café, and Beth was spoonfeeding Lizzie while Ellie wrestled with Fred, trying to convince him to eat avocado. She did not register what Beth had said for a moment.

Then the spoon and a lump of avocado clattered to the floor.

‘How did you know?’ Ellie asked in a low voice as Fred followed her example and enthusiastically hurled the rest of the avocado to the floor. ‘Fred!’

‘For God’s sake, El, it’s not subtle.’

‘Does everyone already know?’ she asked as she quickly cleaned up Fred’s mess.

‘You know how quickly gossip spreads in this town.’ Beth wiped the spittle from Lizzie’s chin.

Evidently, Maggie, Olly, Lucy and Becca had been about as retentive as leaky pipes.

‘And we all saw how you behaved towards each other at the party,’ Beth said. ‘And we know how long he’s been coming to visit you.’

The knowledge that everyone was already aware of their relationship was a singularly mortifying experience for Ellie. She pushed her chair back, slunk away to the bathroom, and sat down on the toilet to think.

She returned a little later, looking sheepish.

‘I was going to tell you,’ she said. ‘You and Mark – just today, I was going to tell you.’

‘It’s all right, El.’

‘I didn’t want to keep it a secret. It’s just that – well, it’s still new, and with all the trouble with Daisy, we couldn’t…’

‘El. You don’t have to explain it.’

‘Nothing happened until a few weeks ago,’ she went on desperately. ‘You have to believe me. All
that stuff about us committing adultery – it’s not true, I swear. I didn’t even look at him like that until after the trial, after we’d gotten rid of Joe and he and I solved that Sandbrook case -‘

‘Ellie.’ Beth’s voice was firm. ‘I believe you.’

Ellie fell silent and sat back.

‘Did you really think I’d believe you and him were getting it on all this time without us knowing? You’re a terrible liar; you’d never be able to keep it a secret.’

Ellie managed a smile.

‘So when did it really start?’

‘About two weeks ago.’

‘Which is when the rumours started. Christ, you are terrible at keeping secrets. Is he going to move in with you?’

‘We’d like that.’

‘So soon?’

She nodded. ‘So… how do you feel about it?’

Beth shrugged. ‘Does he make you happy?’

Ellie’s bottom lip trembled. ‘Yes.’

‘Then I’m okay with it. The circumstances are… strange... but I think he’s a good man.’ She added, ‘Tom told us about how he saved Fred.’

‘He did?’ Ellie could not remember if she had asked Tom to keep it a secret, but it felt like something private, and she disliked having it out in the open.

‘Yeah. Pretty scary stuff.’

As a woman who had actually lost her child, Beth did not need to offer anything more conciliatory than that; Ellie understood how deeply she sympathised with her. Just then, Fred started clutching at his mother’s trousers. She pulled him onto her knee, kissed his head, and rocked him back and forth.

‘Tom was very admiring of the whole thing,’ Beth continued. ‘He seems to quite like Alec. Even if he is rubbish at football.’

Ellie smiled. ‘Fred likes him too.’

‘Fred!’ said Fred.

‘So what made you change your mind about him? For so long you seemed to hate him.’

‘I never hated him. Not really. He frustrates me and there are times when I want to strangle him, but…’ she paused. ‘I suppose it was when the trial started. I was alone. Really alone. All I had was Fred. All my friends, my home, Tom… Joe, too… everything was gone. But he was there. No matter what I did or said to him, he stayed with me. I mean, we fought like cats and dogs a lot of the time, but he was… he was just this rock for me.’ She shifted Fred’s weight to her other knee and raised her eyes heavenward, blinking the tears away. It was impossible to describe all the myriad
experiences they had gone through together during that trial, so she said instead, ‘He’s like a part of me, Beth. My other half. I don’t want to be without him.’ She regarded her friend pensively. ‘Do you hate me?’

‘Of course I don’t. I’ve wanted you to find someone new since the trial ended. I wasn’t expecting it to be him, but if he makes you happy…’

‘He does,’ Ellie said. A tear rolled down her cheek and Fred grasped at her face in concern. ‘He really does.’

Beth pulled out her phone and tapped away on it. ‘Who are you texting?’ Ellie asked.

‘Mark,’ she replied. ‘He owes me twenty quid.’

News always spreads fast in small towns, and very soon after Ellie confirmed her relationship with Hardy to Beth and her sister, whispers and stares began to follow her with more regularity than usual. They trailed after her as she walked down the street, and, worst of all, dogged her at the station.

‘So is it true?’ Brian asked bluntly one day as he went over some evidence with her.

‘Is what true?’ Ellie asked as she leafed through his write-up.

‘That you and Shitface have shacked up.’

Ellie put the papers down and turned to him, suddenly looking as harsh and hazardous as the cliffs she’d grown up by. ‘First,’ she said in sharp voice. ‘I am your superior officer. Don’t presume to address me in such an impertinent way. Second -‘ she took a step towards him and jabbed a finger into his chest, ‘- don’t you dare call him Shitface again. Ever. That goes for all of you.’ She raised her voice and looked around the office, aware that everyone was listening in on them. ‘I know he might’ve been moody and difficult to work with, but none of you have any idea how hard he works, or what he did for the Latimers, or the Gillespies and those murdered girls. He is a good man and great detective and a bloody human being, so why don’t you treat him with a little respect!’

Out of breath, she glared at Brian, who slowly collected his jaw from the floor and managed a nod.

‘Right. Good.’ Ellie stalked towards the door. ‘And yes,’ she added before she left. ‘We are going out. He’s moving in with me this weekend.’

As soon as she was gone, a low murmuring broke out, and a lot of money changed hands.

Ellie borrowed a small trailer from one of the boys at the station and early Saturday drove down to Sandbrook to collect Hardy and Daisy. Lucy was busy that day, so Tom and Fred had to come with her. They protested vehemently at the early wake-up, and were only pacified when she bought McDonald’s for breakfast.

They arrived at Hardy’s miserable flat in Sandbrook and packed up the gear. Daisy’s possessions were meagre, since she had left the larger articles at Tess’ house, and Hardy’s possessions even scantier. He had forfeited most of his belongings when he left Tess, apart from the clothes on his back, and had in the meantime lived in furnished hotels and flats. It made for easy work, which Ellie was glad of.
With everything packed up in good time, they began the long drive back to Broadchurch. Everyone in the car had bags bundled onto their laps and were hemmed in by various articles. Poor Fred was crushed in up the back, and about an hour into the journey he vomited violently onto a bag full of Hardy’s clothes.

To a chorus of screams, Ellie pulled over. Fred, who felt immediately better after ejecting his breakfast, watched on in high spirits as the rest of them groaned and complained and wondered at how such a small boy could produce so much vomit, or expel it with such force. While Hardy cleaned the car as best he could, Ellie stripped Fred of his soiled clothes and dressed him in one of Hardy’s t-shirts; then she left his outfit and the bag of clothes he had ruined on the side of the road, to Hardy’s loud protestations, flatly insisting that she wasn’t driving anywhere with those stinky clothes in her car, the law be damned. With all four car windows open, and the occupants sticking their heads into the breeze to clear the sickly smell from their nostrils, they completed the journey to Broadchurch.

Upon arrival they all bundled out with shouts of relief. Fred galloped around in a tizzy, still swimming in Hardy’s enormous t-shirt, the hem of which tripped him up more than once. While Hardy and Tom unpacked the trailer, Ellie took Daisy upstairs.

‘Here it is,’ she said, opening the door. ‘I hope it’s not too cramped.’

Daisy walked inside and surveyed the room. It was small and devoid of furnishings. Deep trenches in the carpet marked where the furniture had once sat. Motes of dust floated listlessly in the sunlight streaming through the window.

‘It’s perfect,’ she said, already visualising where her bed and posters would go.

‘Not yet it isn’t,’ Ellie said. She went outside and came back, holding up a large paintbrush. ‘It needs repainting.’

She tossed the brush and Daisy caught it in surprise. ‘Are we gonna do it now?’

‘You bet we are. We’re going to the paint shop, and you can pick out any colour you want for your new room.’

Daisy lit up. ‘Honestly?’

‘Yep. Any colour you want. This room is yours now, Daiz. I want you to make it your own.’

Hardy and Daisy’s various articles were unloaded and scattered around the bottom floor of the house, waiting to be taken upstairs once the painting was done. Ellie drove them to the paint shop and the kids ran around excitedly, inspecting all the different colours.

‘What do you think?’ Ellie said. She held up two different shades of purple to Hardy, one lilac and one amethyst.

He surveyed the choices, then reached behind her and picked up a different colour swatch. ‘This one,’ he said. ‘Lavender.’

Daisy chose a hideous green and dark purple colour combination for her room, electing to paint the walls in alternating colours. Orange was settled on for the hall, lavender for the living room, and Daisy and Ellie vetoed Tom by selecting pink for the bathroom over blue.

‘None of these colours match,’ Hardy said dubiously as Ellie dumped the cans on the counter. He was used to Tess’ finicky home decorating and her insistence that everything, down to the pillows,
‘Who cares?’ was Ellie’s reply. ‘Oh – by the way, you’re paying.’

With that, she and the kids fled, leaving Hardy standing alone at the counter with the bill.

They got back home and set to work. Between the five of them – for Fred insisted on helping too – they finished Daisy’s room in no time at all. Then they moved downstairs, and while Tom, Daisy and Fred painted the hall, Hardy and Ellie began on the living room. They wore loose, baggy clothes, and their unskilled, haphazard manner soon meant they were covered in splashes of paint. Ellie had tied all her hair back and was singing along to the radio as she worked, smiling all the while.

‘What colour should we paint the kitchen?’ she asked. She and Hardy were standing by the fridge, drinking cold glasses of water and taking a well-earned break from their labours.

Hardy looked along the red walls. ‘I kind of like it like this,’ he said. ‘The red. It’s nice.’

‘So you think leave it?’

‘If you’re comfortable with it. I dunno, I just like this colour.’

She shrugged. ‘All right. You’re going to be spending more time in here than me anyway.’

‘Is that an order?’

‘More a prophecy.’

‘Uh-oh,’ they heard Daisy say in the hall. Tom made a similar noise.

The adults walked out to see what the problem was and found that Fred had plastered two bright purple handprints on the new orange wall.

‘Bad Fred!’ Daisy scolded. She looked up in fear. ‘I’m sorry Ellie, I know you told us to watch him…’

‘We only looked away for a second!’ Tom blurted.

They waited with bated breath to see what her reaction would be. She regarded the handprints and Fred’s cheeky, paint-smeared face with a blank expression. ‘You know,’ she said slowly. ‘I actually think it looks rather good.’

And with that she slapped her own hand against the purple paint tray and plastered her handprint next to Fred’s.

Tom looked at his mother as if she’d gone mad.

‘I reckon it could do with another one. What do you think, Tom?’ she asked.

The invitation to vandalise the wall roused him from his shock. ‘Hell yeah,’ he said. He chose green for his handprint, and stuck it just above his brother’s.

‘How about you, Daiz?’

‘Awesome,’ Daisy grinned, and added dark purple to the mix. The four of them stood back and looked expectantly at Hardy, who was frowning at them with his arms crossed.
‘Come on,’ Ellie said. ‘This house belongs to all of us. You, me, Tom, Daisy and Fred. It won’t be complete without you.’

Hardy’s brows and arms uncrossed at the same time. He slapped his hand decisively onto the lavender tray and pressed it against the wall, his huge handspan making for an impressive addition to the assembled prints.

He turned to Ellie, looking pleased. She responded by wiping her wet hand on his shirt.

‘Oi!’ he said, and wiped some on her in return.

Within seconds, a paint war had broken out. The kids went screaming through the house, chased by their bespattered parents.

Later that day, Hardy and Ellie sat on the sea wall with their children, a large paper bag of fish and chips set beside them. Flecks of paint were still stuck to them, and it was plain that the family had ganged up on Hardy. Spots of orange and lavender peppered him like kisses.

‘These are the best chips I’ve ever had!’ Daisy exclaimed, stuffing her face.

‘Try the fish,’ Tom urged. ‘It’s even better!’

Fred burped loudly and they all laughed at him. Eventually, the kids were enticed away by the lulling ocean and ran off to play in the surf. Hugging one arm around the left side of his chest, like someone trying to shield a candle from the rain, Hardy squinted querulously at the waves.

‘We’ll have to get some new furniture,’ Ellie mused as she munched on a chip. ‘A bigger couch. More chairs. Maybe some nice silly things, like paintings.’

‘We could have a look next weekend,’ he said. ‘Go for a drive.’

‘What’s your income like? Can we afford anything fancy or should we go to IKEA?’ She sat up straight. ‘That reminds me. What about your job?’

I’ve put in for a transfer to the local area,’ Hardy said. He sucked the salt and grease off his thumb and dusted his hand on his trousers. ‘The super says I have to wait six months after the operation before she’ll clear me. Can’t go back on active duty until then, so I have to keep going with teaching.’ He looked gloomy at the prospect. ‘Anyway, until the transfer goes through I’m gonna commute for a little while. Only three days a week, so that helps.’

‘I wish you could come back and work with us,’ Ellie said. ‘Our new DI is an idiot. He never gets anything done. You might’ve been a bastard but at least you were good at your job.’

‘Thanks,’ he said dryly.

‘You should come in one day,’ Ellie suggested. ‘Maybe in the evening, when everyone else has gone home. I can let you look over some of our cases.’

‘It’d be good to do some proper work again,’ he said wistfully.

They fell silent, both of them watching Fred intently as he ran around the beach. He had reached that age when children have difficulty sorting up from down, and their arms from their legs, and so often attempt to walk in both directions, and with all limbs at once. Ellie loved coming to the beach with
him since the golden sand formed a soft pillow onto which he could fall harmlessly whenever equilibrium was lost.

And so it was that, inevitably, the excited toddler soon tumbled headlong into the grit. Sitting up with an alarmed expression, he stared dubiously at the sand, then at the sky, as quizzically as Isaac Newton might have once looked at the apple that fell upon his head, before he leapt to his feet and left off his contemplation of life’s mysteries in order to chase the foamy waves that sprang against the shore.

‘Fred!’ Tom called. ‘Come play with us!’

Tom was bouncing his faithful rubber football around. He passed it to his brother, who missed the point of football by picking it up with his hands.

While Tom and Fred passed the ball back and forth, Daisy ran back to the wall to get a drink. As she drew gulps of icy water from the bottle that Ellie had shrewdly packed, she rested next to her father and stared at the orange sun glittering across the waves. ‘It’s so beautiful here,’ she sighed. ‘Look at that view! I could stay here for hours.’

She pulled out her phone and started snapping pictures of the sunset, and of the Jurassic cliffs looming like rugged giants. She turned to Ellie and her father. ‘Smile!’ she said.

Ellie smiled. Hardy did not.

‘Looking good, Dad!’ Daisy laughed. She lowered her phone, her attention drawn by something in the distance. ‘Hey - who’s that?’ she asked.

Ellie and Hardy turned in the direction she gestured. Further down the beach they saw a woman watching them. A bright spark lit up her face now and again, the signature glow of a cigarette drag. A brown dog sat next to her.

‘Is that Susan Wright?’ Ellie asked.

‘Must be,’ Hardy said.

She watched them for another long moment, then flicked her cigarette into the sand, turned around, and walked back along the beach.

‘Nige has been saying she’s stalking him,’ Ellie said.

‘Aye. He told me that too. Any truth to it?’

‘Well it sounds like she’s just been doing a lot of that – standing in the distance and staring. Can’t really arrest someone for it. I told Nige to talk to Jocelyn about a restraining order if he’s worried.’

‘I told him that too.’ He turned to Daisy. ‘Stay away from that woman, all right Daiz? She was a suspect in the Broadchurch case. Dunno what she’s capable of.’ He recalled how she had threatened Maggie and shuddered. ‘Promise you won’t go near her.’

Daisy shrugged. ‘Okay, I promise.’ She snapped a few more pictures of the beach on her phone. ‘Hey Dad – selfie!’

She squeezed in close with him, held her phone at arm’s length, and took a picture of the two of them.
‘Not bad,’ Daisy said, inspecting it. She had a big grin on her face and Hardy, though vaguely surprised, had managed a smile too. The bright cliffs hung in the background.

‘Not bad at all,’ Hardy agreed quietly. ‘Can you send that to me? I’d like to have it.’

Daisy did so. ‘We should go for a walk along the cliffs one day,’ she said, putting her phone away. ‘I bet the view’s fantastic. I’d love to get some more pictures.’

‘Absolutely,’ Ellie promised. ‘I’ll show you all the best spots.’

She ran back into the waves, and Hardy’s phone dinged as the message came through. He opened it and immediately set the photo as his phone wallpaper. Ellie leaned over to have a look.

‘You can see the paint on your face,’ she laughed, poking him in the cheek.

Just then, Paul Coates and Becca Fisher came walking along the beach. Becca had her arm knotted through Paul’s, and she whispered something in his ear when she saw Hardy and Ellie together.

‘All right, Ellie? Alec?’ Paul said, nodding at them. He glanced over at the children in the water, then back at the two of them. A knowing smirk played on Becca’s face.

Ellie exchanged niceties with the vicar while Hardy stared at his shoes. He had not recovered from the embarrassment of being rejected by Becca, and so he avoided eye contact with her at all costs.

At length, Becca and Paul passed on. ‘See you later, then,’ Paul said.

‘Bye Alec!’ Becca said cheerily. Faintly, they could hear her hiss to Paul, ‘I told you so!’

Hardy grunted. His brows pulled together. ‘Alec,’ he said in distaste, plainly disliking how many people knew him by that appellation now.

Ellie glanced at him. ‘Why do you hate your name so much?’

He inhaled and exhaled slowly. Ellie kept her eyes on him, waiting patiently. ‘M’dad,’ he muttered at last. ‘It was m’dad’s name. And my mother… that was the name I heard her yell when he was hitting her, or shouting at her. I hate it. I hate him. I hate the name, I hate the sound of it.’

Ellie blinked in shock. ‘I didn’t realise their fighting got that bad,’ she said softly.

‘Miserable coward, picking on women and kids,’ he spat. ‘I swore I’d never be like him, and I swore I’d never let any bastards like him get away with what they did. It’s one of the main reasons I joined the force, and having his name just…’ he paused and pressed his lips together. ‘I’ve been fighting all my life not to be him. I swore that when I had a family of my own, I’d never hurt or mistreat them, that I’d look after them, even if it killed me. Even after he died, I said over and over that I would never be like him.’ He sighed. ‘Ballsed that one up, didn’t I?’

‘You gave yourself heart arrhythmia protecting Daisy and Tess after Tess cheated on you,’ Ellie said softly. ‘I wouldn’t call that failure.’

His gaze was fixed on his new family playing in the water. Daisy picked up Fred and swung him around with a delighted shriek. Water droplets sprayed everywhere, splashing Tom, who shouted with annoyance.

Ellie took his hand, still greasy from the fish and chips, and squeezed hard.

‘Should I not call you Alec anymore?’ she asked.
‘Bit weird to call me Hardy now,’ he said, though in truth he would have found that preferable.

Ellie played with his hand, circling the soft hair on his knuckles. ‘The reason I’m repainting the house is because I want to reclaim it from Joe,’ she said, voicing what he already knew. ‘I don’t want it to be his house anymore. I want it to be ours. So I’m recolouring it all, making it something that’s not tainted. Somewhere we can make all new memories, and a whole new life. Maybe you could do the same with your name.’

He looked up at her and she smiled kindly. ‘It’s not his name anymore,’ she told him. ‘He’s dead. It’s your name now, and you’ve made it a name that women and kids say because they love you, not because they’re afraid of you. Be proud of it. Make it yours, and let the past go.’

‘My name,’ he murmured.

‘Mum! Alec!’ Tom shouted in the distance. ‘Check it out!’

He pointed to where Daisy was bouncing the rubber football from knee to knee. ‘Twenty-three, twenty-four, twenty-five!’ she counted. She reached thirty before it glanced off her knee and skittered away from her. ‘Champion!’ she said triumphantly, raising her hands.

‘She’s better than both of you!’ Tom said, giving Daisy a high-five.

Ellie stuck her tongue out at him. Tom responded in kind and Ellie pulled an even uglier face, laughing. She turned back to Hardy, her face positively luminescent. He was rigid, but she could tell he was affected by what he saw.

‘You okay?’ she asked.

His Adam’s apple quivered. ‘I love you, Ellie,’ was all he could say.

‘Oh gross,’ Tom complained. Hardy and Ellie were snogging passionately on the rock wall. Daisy glanced up and made a face.

‘Get a room!’ she yelled.

The couple made no sign they had heard.

‘Geez, Dad uses a lot of tongue,’ Daisy remarked, her lip curling in distaste.

Tom cupped his hands around his mouth. ‘You’re a couple of sluts!’ he yelled.

That broke them up. ‘Don’t swear in front of Fred!’ Ellie roared.

‘Fred!’ yelled Fred, running across the sand to meet them. Suddenly feeling buoyant, Hardy jumped off the wall, growled like a monster, and ran at the boy. Fred squealed and giggled as Hardy swept him off the ground and swung him around. He raised him at arm’s length and smiled softly as the orange sunset glowed behind the boy, making an aureole of his curls.

‘Awec,’ Fred laughed, reaching for him. He drew him close, and Fred patted his whiskers.

‘Alec,’ he agreed softly, kissing Fred on the cheek.

On Monday morning, Alec wandered into the room, his face smeared with thick white foam. ‘You seen my bag?’ he asked, rummaging in the corner.
Ellie sat up a little straighter, the sheet slipping from her body. ‘Behind the door,’ she yawned, and Alec alighted on the bag wedged behind it. ‘Are you actually going to shave?’

‘Mm.’

‘So what is this? You start having regular sex and suddenly have the urge to clean yourself up?’

He tried to give her an admonishing look, but with his face slathered in foam it only made her laugh.

After a few minutes, he came back into the bedroom, wiping flecks of foam from his face with a towel. Ellie was dressing and she stopped dead when she saw him, midway through pulling her trousers on.

‘I don’t like it,’ she said, eyeing his bright, clean-shaven face with a blend of distaste and mild fear.

He wrapped the towel around his neck and put his hands on his hips. ‘What’s wrong with it?’

‘You don’t look right. You don’t look like you. You’re all… smooth.’

‘Does it look bad?’

She quickly buttoned her trousers on and crossed to him. ‘Well… not bad… here, let me see if I can just…’

She clapped her hands over his cheeks and pursed her lips. He frowned at her. ‘It’s not working,’ she said. She re-positioned her hands, covering his whole mouth.

‘Stop,’ he said, muffled behind her fingers.

He extricated himself and went downstairs, with Ellie hot on his heels, and walked into the kitchen. Fred screamed at the sight of him and fled from the room. Daisy looked up and spilt some of her milk from shock. Tom wandered in to see what the commotion was and dropped the yo-yo he was playing with.

‘Get it out,’ Alec sighed as the children screamed. ‘Get it all out of your system.’

‘It’s been so long since I’ve seen you without a beard,’ Daisy said, shaking. ‘I don’t like it.’

‘That’s what I said,’ Ellie remarked.

‘Here, let me see if I can cover it.’ Daisy clapped her hands over her father’s cheeks.

‘I already tried. It doesn’t work,’ Ellie said as Alec scowled.

Daisy picked up a napkin from the table and tried plastering it on his face.

‘Get off,’ he said in a resigned voice.

‘Ooh, maybe we could cut some of his hair and glue it on!’ Tom suggested.

‘Good idea. Ellie, do you have any superglue?’

‘I can check upstairs if you like.’

‘I’m leaving,’ Alec said. ‘I’m going to work. I will see you all tonight.’

He kissed Ellie on the cheek, then Daisy.
‘It didn’t even tickle,’ Daisy said, mortified.

‘No scratch at all,’ said Ellie.

Fred inched warily back into the room, but fled again with an unholy shriek when he found Alec’s face remained as smooth and polished as before.

‘You’re all terrible,’ he shot over his shoulder, stomping out.

‘Hurry up and grow that thing back!’ Ellie called after him.

‘Goodbye.’

*

Three days later, Alec was sitting in a chair reading a book, when Ellie came up behind him and slipped her arms around his shoulders.

‘Mmm,’ she said, leaning over and rubbing her face against his rough stubble. ‘Fuzzy.’

He turned his head and kissed her.

‘Don’t ever shave again,’ Ellie moaned as she rubbed her thumb back and forth along his whiskers.

He promised he wouldn’t.

*

Ever since his wife had left him, Alec had weathered badly. Loss, loneliness, and the murders had set upon him like he was a ship in a gale, ripping his sails, shattering the tackle and splintering the mast. In the calm that followed he had done his best to mend himself and had managed to limp stubbornly on through the sea. The operation had mended him physically, but without love it was hopeless, for a heart without love is no more use than sails without wind. He could only drift and wait for the right gusts to bear him.

And then there was Ellie. She filled him with breath, life, wind, oxygen. She had pushed him onwards to the mainland. And now he had his beautiful, beloved Daisy back, and the unlooked for bonus of wee Fred and Tom, a family that made him as brimful of love as sails bursting with the cold northwest wind.

He hadn’t really understood what Ellie meant when she had called their relationship familiar, but he understood it now. Living with Ellie – being with her, being with her family - did not feel strange or unexpected or unnatural in any way. He felt as though he had known her forever, and that his home had always been with her.

One morning, as Ellie poured his tea, he murmured, ‘Thanks, love.’

The pet name startled her, and she accidentally slopped water on the table. He calmly mopped it up with a napkin and carried on as normal. It was a full thirty seconds before he realised what he had said.

It had slipped out, as easy as breathing.

And Ellie, despite her shock, did not mind in the slightest. It was strange and wonderful how they fit together, how easily the little things slid into place.
When they walked together, Alec pushed Fred’s pram. Ellie would always walk on his right side. She was still too timid to hold his hand in public, but she liked to loop her arm through his as he pushed, and lean into him.

Sometimes Alec fell asleep in the recliner when they were watching one of Tom’s action movies; Ellie always woke him with a kiss on the forehead before she led him away to bed.

Ellie had a nervous twitch that happened when she was apprehensive or excited, a gentle tapping of the foot that he habitually stilled by placing a firm hand on her knee.

Alec liked to cook, and Daisy liked to help him. He could only cook savoury things; she could only cook sweet things. Between the two of them, they managed to cover all the meals needed. It became his favourite thing in the world to stand in that little kitchen, with its red walls like the chambers of a heart, and cook with his daughter, calmly chopping while Fred and Tom fought over who would lick the spoon, and Ellie pilfered bits of pastry and batter from under them, only to be swatted by a sharp tea-towel flick from Daisy.

His heart had never felt so full. A warm bed and children to kiss goodnight - it was all he had ever wanted. The glorious monotony of the everyday was an indescribable blessing, and simple familial love caused him to tread a line between the earthly and the divine.

One weekend, Alec and Ellie decided to take the kids on a picnic and show Daisy around the cliffs. Alec took it upon himself to prepare the food for them.

‘All right, Tom,’ he said. ‘What would you like on your sandwich?’

He was standing in the kitchen with a mountain of fresh food next to him: scrambled eggs, chopped spinach and lettuce, onion, tomato, cucumber, carrot and cheese. Ham and turkey breast were packaged beside him as well. Recently he’d been trying to introduce fresh foods into their diet, including salads, vegetables, lean cuts of meat and fresh fish. This had, of course, made him wildly unpopular, and there was a certain amount of resistance to his healthy regime.

Tom surveyed his choices. ‘Ham,’ he said.

‘And?’ Alec prompted.

‘Ham.’

‘So you want a sandwich… just with ham on it?’ Alec asked, suddenly looking a lot greyer than before.

‘Yep.’

‘What about some nice salad too? I’ve got scrambled eggs or -’

‘Nah. Ham’s good.’

Alec let out a deep sigh. ‘So it’s ham for you, then.’ He slapped a few pieces of ham onto the bread. ‘What about you, Ellie?’

‘Cheese and tomato,’ she responded, bouncing Fred on her hip.

‘That all?’
‘Yes thanks.’

Ellie and Tom grinned at each other, amused by Alec’s irritation. Daisy chose egg and carrot; he made egg and salad for Fred, and one with the lot for himself. Carefully, he packaged each one in a paper bag.

‘Right. Tom, can I get you to label these so they don’t get mixed up?’

Daisy rolled her eyes, obviously used to this level of fussiness. Tom fixed him with a querulous look.

‘Please?’

‘Fine,’ he huffed.

‘Right, so that one’s Fred’s… that’s yours, that’s your mum’s and this one here’s mine.’

Tom wrote the names on each of them in order. Then he came to Alec’s and a huge grin split his features. He scribbled something on the bag. Ellie, still bouncing Fred on her hip, saw what he had put down and snorted.

Alec turned around to see Ellie and Tom in silent hysterics. ‘What?’ he demanded.

‘Nothing,’ Ellie said. She nudged Tom with her shoulder and he stacked up the sandwiches, placing Alec’s on the bottom, and handed them to him.

Alec eyed them suspiciously but said nothing. He packed the sandwiches in the carefully assembled picnic basket and they left.

They went to Ellie’s favourite spot, the deserted lot overlooking the sea. Alec threw out the picnic blanket and pulled out the spread. He’d made potato salad and coleslaw, and had packed hummus, eggplant dip and dry crackers. Fresh fruit was piled high, and whipped cream.

Ellie’s contribution was fizzy drink and crisps, and it was this that Ellie and the kids immediately pounced on and devoured while Alec ate his saltine crackers and hummus and scowled disapprovingly at them.

‘Look at you. Unless it’s deep fried or full of chemicals you won’t touch it,’ he said.

‘Salads are gross, Dad,’ Daisy said, and Tom and Ellie nodded sagely, as though she had just pronounced a piece of Aristotelian wisdom.

‘At least try the potato salad. I spent all morning making it.’

They firmly demurred.

The time came for the sandwiches, and Alec eased his masterpieces free with a careful hand.

‘So, we’ve got one for wee Fred,’ he said, handing him the egg and salad sandwich with the crusts cut off. Fred immediately started pulling it apart, picking out all the vegetables and only stuffing the egg into his mouth. ‘And one ham sandwich for Tom, cheese and tomato for Ellie, carrot for Daisy…’

Tom and Ellie started laughing again. They stifled their mirth and watched as he pulled out the final sandwich.

He looked down. In place of his name, Tom had labelled Alec’s sandwich with a crudely rendered
drawing of a farting bum.

‘Tom,’ Alec said in a resigned voice. ‘Did you do this?’

‘You said to label it with your name,’ Tom said innocently.

‘Mr. Stinky,’ Daisy whispered.

Ellie barked with laughter and clapped her hands over her mouth. Tom looked very pleased with himself.

‘Ellie, you’re encouraging him,’ Alec complained.

‘Oh come on, you big grump. It’s funny.’

‘He’s a regular comedian.’

Fred flung the remains of his sandwich into the grass and approached Alec, grasping at his trousers with sticky fingers. He babbled something and clambered into Alec’s lap, seating himself directly on top of Alec’s own painstakingly assembled sandwich. He sighed.

Later, while Ellie and Tom ran around kicking their football back and forth and Daisy snapped pictures of the soaring gulls, Alec stretched himself along the rug and closed his eyes, trying to soak up some of the sunlight. Fred sat next to him, ripping up handfuls of grass and sprinkling them on his face.

No-one touched the potato salad.

* *

Tom and Daisy liked to play video games together. They had not quite mastered the art of conversing easily with each other, but they could play happily together. One day, as they played Mario Kart on the Wii, they made the mistake of inviting their parents to join them.

Daisy went as Yoshi; Tom picked Mario; Alec settled decisively on Princess Daisy, and Ellie chose Bowser. They set the course to random, and the heavens decreed that Rainbow Road would be their battlefield.

Some twenty minutes later, Daisy and Tom were sitting back and groaning, their heads in their hands, as their stubborn, overly competitive parents furiously battled it out for second-last place, all other competitors having crossed the line aeons ago.

‘Did you just fucking blue shell me?’ Alec roared.

Ellie cudgelled him with the Wii remote. ‘Don’t swear in front of Fred!’ she roared back.

Fred, who was scribbling with crayons in the corner, looked up. ‘Fred!’ he said.

Ellie ran off the road for the umpteenth time. ‘I did not fall off!’ she shouted. ‘I turned! I turned! Why isn’t this remote working?’ She shook it in indignation.

‘A poor workman always blames his tools,’ Alec said primly as he zoomed past her, only to fall off at the next turn. ‘Fuck!’

‘Fuck!’ Fred said.

Ellie screamed and Alec screamed back, but the two of them were too absorbed in their struggle for second-last place to discipline him. At long last Alec puttered across the line and threw up his hands in triumph. Ellie raged and ranted and spat, and immediately demanded a retrial.

Tom and Daisy refused vehemently, pushed them both out of the room, and decreed that they were banned from the Wii forever.

Hours later, Ellie was still in a foul mood, and they were still bickering. Ellie threatened to throw Alec out of the house twice.

‘Fuck!’ yelled Fred as he ran through the kitchen.

Ellie was squirming and gasping, her hand tight against the hair of the man between her thighs. She arched her back and clawed the mattress.

A call interrupted them.

‘Mu-um.’

Ellie propped herself up on her elbows, her chest heaving. Alec grew still between her legs and looked up at her.

‘Mu-um,’ the plaintive wail came again.

‘That’s Fred,’ she hissed.

There was a mad scramble as the two of them hastily sought for their pyjamas.

‘Coming sweetheart!’ Ellie said as she tugged her nightie on backwards. Alec looked frantically for his shirt and Ellie threw it at his head.

A definite sound of crying greeted them. Alec wrestled the shirt from his face and pulled it on just as Ellie opened the door to admit a teary-eyed Fred.

‘Bad dream,’ the little boy said, rubbing his face.

‘Oh, sweetheart,’ Ellie said. She drew him into a big hug and kissed his dark curls. ‘I’m sorry.’ She rubbed his eyes and nose with the hem of her nightie. ‘Are you okay?’

Still panting, Alec surreptitiously passed a hand over his face, wiping away the moisture clinging to his beard.

Fred made it clear he wanted to sleep with Ellie that night. Clutching his bunny toy to his chest, he pleaded with his huge blue eyes.

Ellie looked over at Alec, who was leaning against the nightstand and trying to appear as casual as possible, his face flushed.

‘Of course you can sleep with us,’ Ellie relented with a smile. She rubbed his back and Fred clambered into bed.

Fred positioned himself in between the two of them, occupying a shockingly large amount of space.
for such a small child, and effectively took both of them hostage. As he drifted off to sleep, his arms positioned at odd angles, Alec and Ellie stared at the ceiling and contemplated what they would rather be doing.

‘Well. Goodnight, love,’ Alec said with a sigh.

They tried to reach for each other for their customary kiss goodnight, but Fred rolled over and unconsciously kicked Alec square in the genitals. He doubled over and bit his fist to stop himself from crying out, tears streaming from his eyes.

Ellie laughed so hard she cracked her head on the bedframe.

*Daisy’s sixteenth birthday loomed large. Alec fretted and fussed over the prospect, and in the week before it he became hugely depressed over a grey hair he’d found in his fringe.

They bought her a professional camera for her birthday. She was ecstatic when she unwrapped it, and kissed her father so vigorously he was liable to have a heart attack, before she ran out to take pictures on the cliffs.

Daisy flatly refused to see her mother, though she did, encouragingly, entertain a short phone call. Because of the continuing hostilities, Daisy’s friends from Sandbrook were obliged to visit her in Broadchurch; so it was that Ellie found her home overrun with teenage girls – Daisy, Chloe, and four strangers from Sandbrook.

Daisy’s room was too small to fit them all, so they took over the living room. Thoroughly alarmed at the sight of so many girls, Tom barricaded himself upstairs and refused to come down. Fred was shy at first, but their excited coos and adoration won him over and he was soon sitting on Daisy’s lap and giggling as they painted his nails and tied ribbons in his curls. Daisy considered her father too embarrassing to allow his presence in the living room, so he was confined to the kitchen, where he was permitted to make snacks and drinks for them, but not to speak.

Ellie, on the other hand, was deemed "cool" and was invited into the sacred circle, where she sat braiding a girl’s hair and gossiping loudly.

‘That was nice,’ Ellie said the next day, after they had dropped off the girls at the train station. Her nails were painted bright orange, and her hair still bore traces of glitter. ‘We should have them around more often!’

Tom and Alec shuddered.

*D

One night, Ellie was working late, trying to figure out the source of a sudden spike in cocaine usage in the area. Alec, pricking up at the conundrum, volunteered to help her.

Daisy protested that she was more than qualified to babysit on her own, but for safety’s sake Alec called in Lucy to look after the kids. True, he did not trust or esteem Lucy very much, but even an incompetent adult was better than none.

‘Bloody hell,’ Lucy said when she arrived. ‘What's all this?’

It was the first time she had been to Ellie’s house since Alec and Daisy had moved in, and she was shocked by how different it was. They had attempted to weed the garden and plant some flowers, but
Ellie had become bored with the task, and Alec had given up when Fred ripped the plants out for the third time, so the lawn was a mess of holes, scattered dirt, and massacred plants.

Inside fared no better; the walls were an eclectic mix of colours; handprints marked the entrance hall, and odd paintings and furnishings were hung crookedly on the walls. A half-assembled IKEA cabinet stood mournfully in the living room, which Ellie had broken beyond repair in a fit of fury and frustration; they now hung wet clothes on it. Daisy’s photography obsession had also made its mark, and her photos were stuck proudly all around the house. Alec had at first protested at the amount of ocean and cliff scenes, but it was Ellie’s opinion that as long as they were paying to get them printed, they might as well make the most of them. Mixed in with her landscape shots were family photos, some framed, some stuck up with blu-tac, in which Alec was often a disgruntled and unwilling participant, surprised into a selfie or photographed while doing something embarrassing, like napping next to Fred with his mouth wide open.

The kitchen was in an abysmal state; Daisy had attempted, unsuccessfully, to cook soufflés and had not bothered to clean up; Fred’s prized drawings were too numerous to all fit on the fridge, and now covered the front of the cabinets as well.

‘Excuse me, this is our house,’ Alec said indignantly, who was rather proud of their chaotic little domicile.

Lucy only shook her head in amusement, and Alec kissed Daisy goodbye and went to the police station.

Ellie was outside waiting for him. ‘We think the drugs are being produced in Broadchurch,’ she explained, pushing the door open. ‘We’ve questioned a few low level dealers, and we’ve got a few suspects lined up, but it’s slow going.’

She explained a few more of the particulars to him and introduced him to everyone at the station. He recognised some of their faces, but their identities largely remained a mystery and he could not for the life of him remember their names, even after Ellie told him for the second time. Most of them looked puzzled and nervous by his arrival, but as they settled into the swing of things it soon became clear that he was anything but a liability to their cause.

Alec swelled in confidence. Soon he and Ellie were moving like fencers in a ring, dancing back and forth, thrusting and parrying, their blades firing sparks where they kissed and sprang apart. He would strike; she would deflect. She would attack; he would retreat. Back and forth the ideas went, faster and faster.

The other policemen could barely keep up with the speed of their deductions, nor their heated arguments. Unable to get a word in edgeways, except to answer hastily snapped questions about time and date, they gave up and departed one by one. Neither Alec nor Ellie noticed until Nish coughed loudly and told Ellie she was going home.

‘Kay,’ Ellie said, still fixated on the board. As Nish’s footsteps receded, she looked around. ‘Wait, is that everyone gone?’

Alec checked his watch. ‘It’s 1 AM.’

‘Is it? God, I didn’t even notice.’

‘So if we look at these receipts here,’ Alec continued, barely missing a beat, ‘we can now use the time of purchase to prove they were in the area…’
Ellie uncapped a highlighter and leaned over him, circling something else on the board.

On and on it went. Alec threw off his jacket and rolled up his sleeves, pacing in a circle with his hands on his hips, while Ellie remained by the board, looking at the wall of evidence they had constructed, offering insight after insight, which Alec caught and toyed with before throwing away.

Finally, almost an hour later, Ellie hit upon the right observation and they stood back triumphantly.

‘Oh, that’s it, Ellie!’ Alec exclaimed. ‘We’ve done it! We’ve got them! All we need to do is a search of the house and I guarantee it’ll give you all the proof you need. Who handles the paperwork for the search warrants here? Is it still that awful bald man? Jackson?’

‘Jeffreys,’ Ellie corrected. ‘And yes.’

He sprang from side to side, spirited and energetic. ‘Outstanding! Out-bloody-standing! Oh, Ellie, you are a genius.’

He printed a kiss on her forehead and sprang back, jumping from foot to foot.

‘That’s cheered you up,’ Ellie remarked.

‘Feels so good to be on the job again,’ he said. He looked at her, his eyes intense, his manner fervent. ‘God I missed working with you,’ he said.

‘I missed working with you too,’ Ellie said with equal passion. She took a step forward and Alec slid his arms around her waist. She seized his neck and pulled him into a kiss. He returned it hungrily and pinned her against the desk, forcing her legs apart and grinding their hips together.

‘Our DI is a moron,’ Ellie groaned as he kissed her neck and popped open the buttons on her blouse. ‘Too nice. Too deferential. Every time I make a suggestion he just agrees with what I say.’

‘What a bastard,’ he growled, ripping her shirt open and sucking the nipple of her exposed breast.

‘No arguing. No contradicting me. No fighting. We’ll never get anything solved at this rate.’

She shrugged off her jacket and managed to fend off Alec just enough to tug her blouse free too. As she tossed it aside, he seized her lips once more. She wrapped her legs around him and he picked her up effortlessly in his wiry, dark arms. Marching into the DI’s office, he kicked the door closed behind him, and promptly deposited Ellie on the desk inside.

Sweeping the innumerable articles off the desk with one hand, he pushed her down, bearing upon her with all his considerable weight. Ellie had never felt her heart beat so fast. Her bra came away and flew across the room. She caught hold of Alec’s tie and used it to pull him towards her, kissing him and sucking his bottom lip as she pulled it free and let it drop to the floor like a coiled black snake. His shirt went next, then Ellie tugged his undershirt over his head so she could press her milky skin to his coppery. He felt firm and robust against her. Gone was that wan gauntness; gone was that rake-thin frame. He was so solid and healthy and alive now.

Alec tugged down her trousers and fell to his knees, pulling them away with her knickers and shoes in one swift movement. He kissed his way back up her legs, dragging his beard across her skin as he went, groping and massaging her soft thighs and digging his fingers into the silvery stretch marks he found there.

She was already wet when he drove his fingers inside her, and she wrapped her legs around him in a gesture of urgency as she pulled his pants down and fondled his erection. His cock twitched in her
palm, leaking from the tip, and she smoothed the fluid over the head with her thumb, making him shudder. Scooting forward on the desk, she drew him closer with one leg curling against his calf, and without further ado he thrust inside her.

Ellie hissed in pain and quaked all over, though she kept her legs fast around him. Her hands moved to his arse and she pulled him forward, edging him deeper inside until his hard abdomen was flush against her belly, soft and scarred like a trodden lily petal. He began to pump in and out, but his fervour caused him to mistime a thrust and he accidentally slipped out of her.

She made a disappointed noise, but it barely fazed him. Seizing her arm, he turned her roughly around and spread her legs apart with his knee. Thrusting inside her from behind, he bent her over the desk. Ellie half cried out, half moaned, and placed a hand on the desk to steady herself. Alec clapped his own hand over the top and laced his fingers through hers, squeezing as he fucked her. His other hand pulled on her hip, keeping her steady.

Ellie raised a knee onto the desk, changing the angle of penetration, and he slid deeper inside of her than he thought possible. Her back arched up and he looped his arm around her waist, fastening her close. Sliding up her caesarean scar, her soft stomach and her breasts, his hand closed around her throat. His grip tightened subtly and he forced her head back and to the side so he could kiss and suck her neck. She could feel each individual whisker of his beard pricking and scraping her skin.

He massaged her throat gently, the palm of his hand flush against her windpipe, feeling every one of her moans as a sonorous vibration, while his thumb found her jugular, and drank in the traitorous ecstasy of her hammering heart.

‘Oh Ellie,’ he said, his voice somewhere between a hiss and a growl. His accent had thickened considerably, as it always did when he lost control. ‘Fuck… Ellie… I love you.’

Throwing up one arm, she grasped the back of Alec’s neck and drew him close, encouraging his kisses and his urgent, filthy whisperings in her ear. Keeping her pinned with one hand, he used the other to stroke and rub her clitoris. She shook all over, standing on tiptoe and braced against the desk as he used all his strength to fuck her.

Her breath came in short, shallow gasps. Sliding his hand up her throat, he cupped her chin and inserted his index finger into her mouth. She sucked on it and moaned, catching the knuckle between her teeth and biting down.

Then his hand slid back down her body, leaving a damp smear of saliva on her skin. Seizing her hip, his other hand continuing to make circles on her clitoris, he thrust harder and harder until she screamed.

Afterwards, they dressed together in a shared state of silence, shock, and mild horror.

‘Well,’ Alec said, buttoning up his trousers. ‘That was…’

‘Yes,’ Ellie agreed as she retrieved her bra from where it had landed on the door handle. ‘That was…’

They both stared straight ahead, blinking slowly.

Shaking her head to clear it, Ellie pulled her trousers over her unsteady legs and looked around for her shirt.

‘Did you see where the rest of my clothes landed?’ she asked.
‘Think they’re outside.’

Opening the door, Ellie briefly checked that the coast was still clear, and retrieved her shirt and jacket. She pulled the shirt on but left it unbuttoned.

Alec was quietly buttoning up his own shirt when she went back into the office. The sweaty, sticky, cloying smell of sex was everywhere.

Picking up his tie from the floor, Ellie turned his collar up and flung it around his neck. As she tied it for him, he stared at her, and she dared to meet his eye. Still too embarrassed to speak, he lowered his head and busied himself buttoning her shirt for her.

‘Fucking hell, Alec,’ Ellie said at last, in a low voice.

‘Yeah,’ he agreed.

‘You done that before?’

‘At work, you mean? Tess and I did work together for a long time. When we first got together, we sometimes…’ he trailed off.

‘I’ve never done anything like that,’ she admitted, tugging his tie through the knot and straightening it.

‘Says the woman who jumped me on top of a car.’

‘I know, but… at work… I’ve never… I don’t even know what came over me.’

She turned his collar down and smoothed her hands over his chest. He regarded her intently and leaned down, cradling her face as he kissed her, his fingers coiling in her curls.

‘Your hair’s getting long,’ he remarked as he pulled back.

‘Yeah, well, you know what happened with the last hairdresser I went to.’ She touched it self-consciously. ‘Do you think I should get it cut?’

‘No. I like it. Gives me something to grab onto.’

He tugged her hair to make his point and she laughed and smacked him in the chest. ‘You’re disgusting.’

He kissed her again, his arms tight around her. Her hands curled into fists against his heart. His lips slid away with a gentle pop and he rested his head on top of hers.

‘Alec,’ Ellie murmured, nuzzling him with her nose. ‘Come back on active duty soon.’

As summer wore on, the time came for Tom’s football tournament. It was a bright and beautiful day, warm but not overly so, and a cool breeze was blowing. In short, it was perfect. Tom shook with excitement as he laced his shoes up, and he chattered non-stop the whole way there.

When he saw his team, he ran over to them and they cheered. He was easily a foot taller than the other boys, and, Alec suspected, their best player.

The games began, and Ellie went overboard, just as Tom had warned Alec she would. She was as
loud and supportive and fussy as she was aggressive towards the other mothers. Alec soon got into the habit of placing himself bodily between her and the parents of the children on the other team, and once had to physically restrain her when a boy tripped Tom.

‘Control your damn hooligan child!’ Ellie yelled at the boy’s mother as Alec wrestled her away, muttering that it wasn’t worth it.

The referees were no safer. Alec had to talk her out of impounding the car of one who gave a penalty against Tom.

Beth and Mark came with Lizzie to support Tom and oversee the games. Daisy went around snapping pictures on her new camera, and ran into Olly, who told her about the article he was writing and gave her some photography pointers while Alec bored holes into his back.

Mark and Ellie stuck together, shouting encouragement to Tom as he whizzed around the grass, though curiously it was to Alec that Tom looked whenever he made a great play. He knew he had his mother’s unquestioned support, and Mark’s, so he considered his efforts to impress as lost on them. It was the reserved and taciturn Alec’s attention and approval he craved.

‘You were brilliant, Tom!’ Ellie gushed when the game ended, Tom’s team having won 3 – 1. ‘Just brilliant!’

‘Ain’t he a champion?’ Mark said, tousling his hair. ‘I always said so, didn’t I?’

Tom grinned and waved them off. He looked up at Alec, his face round and pink and sweaty, shining with hope.

‘Well done,’ Alec managed.

Tom beamed.

While Alec and Mark helped Tom get ready for the next round, Ellie went to find Beth. She was sitting under the shade of a poplar, discreetly breastfeeding Lizzie and watching the crowd of boys with a wistful expression. Ellie sat down next to her.

‘You okay?’ she asked.

‘Alec seems to be fitting in well,’ Beth remarked.

Ellie glanced over her shoulder. Tom was trying to teach him how to fistbump, unsuccessfully. ‘Like a duck to water,’ Ellie said. ‘If the duck were petrified of water and a terrible swimmer.’

‘How’re things between you?’

‘Good. Great. The boys love him. And that daughter of his is a joy. The house seems so full now. There’s always a line for the bathroom.’

Ellie thought she saw a tear glistening in the corner of Beth’s eye.

‘Beth?’ Ellie said.

‘It’s strange to see the two of you,’ Beth admitted. ‘It’s so strange to see you together. It only just really dawned on me that the two of you… if Joe hadn’t killed my son, you wouldn’t be together.’

Ellie felt as though a bucket of ice water had been dropped over her. She swallowed hard. ‘I… believe me, Beth, I know. I know how fucked up this all is. But… we’re just trying to make the best
of a bad situation. We have a second chance with each other and…’ she left off her justifications, suddenly feeling monstrous. ‘I’m sorry,’ she said. ‘Would you rather we weren’t together?’

‘No,’ Beth said hurriedly. ‘No. I meant it when I said I was fine with it. It’s just…’

‘You’re my friend,’ Ellie said. ‘You’re my friend, Beth, and Broadchurch is my home. If it hurts you to see us…’

‘Ellie, it’s okay. I’m just thinking out loud. It’s strange is all. I don’t want to break you up or anything, and I’m not trying to make you feel guilty… it’s just funny how life works, isn’t it?’

Ellie did not know how to respond. ‘Are you sure you’re all right with us together?’ she asked. ‘Because I’d rather you were honest and told me.’

‘Yes, Ellie, for God’s sake, I was just thinking. It might take a bit of time to get used to, but it’s all right. Really.’

She seemed disinclined to say more, so they watched the crowd of boys in silence.

* *

Tom’s team won the day and they bought fish and chips and ate them on the pier as a treat. Olly advised Daisy to see Maggie with her photos, and she earned a cool twenty quid for them, along with the hint that she might have need of her photography skills again someday. Alec objected to the idea of his daughter working as a journalist, even on such an innocent and casual basis, but Daisy’s excitement made her deaf to his misgivings.

Their spirits were so high that no-one noticed Ellie was slightly subdued. It was only that night, after a vigorous lovemaking session with Alec, that she said anything.

The space between her legs burned, and as the dreamy fog cleared from her mind she found that the kernel of guilt, once smothered and only chafing lightly at her insides, continued to rub her raw now.

Alec was dozing next to her, his head tucked against his shoulder, his eyelashes fanning over his freckled cheeks. Ellie stared at the ceiling and bit her lip.

‘You’re thinking,’ Alec mumbled.

‘I don’t think Beth approves of us,’ she confessed.

‘What makes you say that?’

‘She said as much today. I don’t think she’s comfortable with it all.’

She rolled onto her side, away from Alec, and curled into a ball. He shifted and rose up behind her, propping himself on his elbow, and stroked her hair with his free hand. ‘Is it a problem?’

‘She said she’d need time to get used to it.’

‘Then give her time.’

He continued to stroke her hair, smoothing the curls behind her ear.

‘Did we do the right thing?’ Ellie asked.

‘It feels right to me.’
'I worry we’ve rushed into things.’

Alec settled behind her and draped his arm around her. He kissed her shoulder. She placed her arm over his and gripped it hard, encouraging him to hold her tight.

‘Maybe this was selfish,’ she murmured. ‘I just didn’t want to be alone anymore.’

He was already asleep. She could do no more than close her eyes.

She tried to bury the guilt, but she found it was a seed, and it grew and grew in the furrows of her happiness, watered by the shadows her late husband cast across her life.
Summer drew to a close at last. Those bright, long days that had seemed so endless dwindled until only a handful were left.

‘I don’t want to leave,’ was Daisy’s plea.

‘You have to, darlin’,’ Alec said. ‘That was the agreement.’

‘But I like it here,’ Daisy implored. ‘I like it in Broadchurch with you and Ellie and Fred and Tom. I was about to join the surf club. Chloe said I could go on her rowing team once they started up again.’

‘I want nothing more than for you to stay.’ His voice cracked slightly. ‘But you can’t avoid your mother forever. And your life is in Sandbrook. Your school.’

She scowled. ‘My school’s shit.’

‘Your friends.’

Daisy paused at that. ‘I do miss them,’ she said quietly.

‘And your mum?’

She scowled again. ‘No.’

‘You won’t be able to get out of this, Daiz.’

‘Do you think she’ll really take you to court if I don’t go with her?’

‘Honestly? I don’t know.’

She sighed. ‘S’pose I have to. But I’m coming back here,’ she declared. ‘Every weekend. I’ll leave Friday after school so we can have all Saturday and Sunday together. Sod what mum says. I’m not staying a minute longer in her house than I need to.’

With as much equanimity as he could muster, Alec told her he liked that idea very much.

* *

Tess herself came to collect Daisy, arriving in a sleek black car and stepping out wearing a crisp pantsuit, her wispy hair pinned neatly in place. She knocked on the door and stood back, waiting.

The faint sound of a child screaming could be heard. It grew closer and closer until the door was flung open, revealing a bedraggled Ellie and a howling Fred in her arms. The remains of Fred’s breakfast were tracked down her crumpled t-shirt.

‘Tess!’ Ellie exclaimed. ‘You’re early.’

‘Nice to see you again,’ Tess said. She held out her hand and Ellie took it. When Tess pulled away, she found her hand was sticky.

‘God, sorry,’ Ellie said. Fred’s wails subsided to sobs and he buried his face in her shoulder. ‘Fred threw a bit of a tantrum. There’s banana and orange juice everywhere. Oh no, I even got some on your nice clean blouse!’
Before Tess could stop her, Ellie whipped out her hanky, spat on it, and wiped at the spot on Tess’ shirt.

‘No, I don’t need - ’ Tess began.

Ellie frowned. ‘It’s just spreading.’ She rubbed harder. ‘I’ve made it worse!’

‘Ellie,’ Alec called from the other end of the hall. She turned to him and he raised an eyebrow.

‘Right, sorry.’ She put away the hanky and stood aside. ‘Do come in. Mind the skateboard.’

Tess stepped gingerly over the skateboard and the piles of shoes at the front door. Her gaze fell on the handprints and her face twisted slightly. Alec motioned for her to follow him into the dining room.

‘Sorry it’s so messy,’ Ellie said. ‘I’ve been sick as a dog all morning, so I didn’t get time to clean, and Alec’s been fussing with Daisy the whole time…’ Suddenly, she bellowed, ‘DAISY! YOUR MOTHER’S HERE! COME DOWN!’

Everyone in earshot of her Mum Voice flinched. Fred burbled into her shoulder and she rocked him,

‘This is an… um… eclectic house,’ Tess said delicately as she looked around at the mismatched walls and various knick-knacks. She alighted on one of the family photos and surveyed it with pursed lips.

‘You like the photos?’ Ellie asked. ‘Daiz took them. She took all of them. Your girl’s a real whiz with that camera of hers. It’s sending us broke, one colour print at a time, but it’s worth it. Look at these ones!’

She gestured to a cluster of landscape shots with homemade paper frames that Daisy had put together with Fred. They’d glued sand and little shells to the bottom of the cliff photos, and Fred had coloured the frames with purple and pink crayons.

Tess said nothing. While Ellie fussed with Fred, she turned to her ex-husband. Alec had donned his armour in preparation for the encounter, and was in a black suit. He clasped his hands in front of him.

‘Quite the little home you’ve got here,’ Tess said. ‘How have you been?

‘Fine,’ he replied. He glanced at Ellie.

Ellie looked blankly between the two of them. Then she got it. ‘Oh – right. Um, I’m just gonna take Fred and get him cleaned up. See if I can wrangle Daiz too. So I’ll just…’

She hurried from the room and left them alone.

‘You two didn’t mess about, did you?’ Tess observed. ‘Can’t say I’m surprised you ended up together, but I didn’t expect you to be playing the family man again so soon.’

He frowned. ‘Playing?’

Tess picked one of the family photos from the wall and ran her finger across the five figures rendered there. Daisy had set the camera on a timer before rushing over to join them, so none of them had been quite ready. Tess’ fingernail scraped the tiny smile on Alec’s face before tracing his arms, one of which was placed on Daisy’s shoulder, the other around Ellie’s waist. Fred was in Ellie’s arms,
and Tom was next to his mother, pulling a face. Daisy’s birthday cake sat in front of them.

‘She had a good birthday, then?’

Alec nodded. ‘We went out together during the day, and she had her friends over that night.’

‘Looks like you’ve set up quite the happy little life here.’ Tess roughly replaced the photo. ‘Just what you’ve always wanted, isn’t it? A big family?’

Her hostility made him sag. ‘Don’t tell me you still believe I told Daisy about you and Dave.’

‘Well, it’s all very convenient, how things have worked out for you.’

‘For God’s sake, Tess, I nearly killed myself keeping that secret from her!’

‘And yet you left your Sandbrook case files, complete with that newspaper clipping, just sitting in your flat!’

‘Why would I think she’d go through them? She’s never expressed any interest in our work before!’

Tess took a step towards him and opened her mouth when Fred suddenly went racing half-naked through the dining room, chased by his mother.

‘Oi!’ Ellie yelled, brandishing his pants. ‘Get back here!’

Alec and Tess bit their tongues and stood apart. Alec shoved his hands in his pockets and groaned. They heard the distinct sounds of struggling in the next room, and Fred started wailing.

‘Alec!’ Ellie called in exasperation. ‘Can you…?’

‘Be right back,’ he muttered, and went into the kitchen. Ellie emerged into the dining room, looking frazzled.

‘Kids,’ she shrugged to Tess, plucking some mashed banana from her curly hair.

Tom sauntered into the room, bouncing his football from knee to knee. ‘Oh,’ he said when he saw Tess. ‘Is this Daisy’s mum? The one who had that affair?’

‘Tom!’ Ellie scolded.

‘That would be me,’ Tess said with a thin-lipped smile.

‘Don’t be so rude!’ Ellie went on. Tom was about to apologise when he mistimed a kick and sent his football crashing through a vase. Ellie immediately escorted him from the room by his ear, shouting, ‘how many times have I told you not to kick your football in the house!’

‘Ow! Mum!’

Daisy came down the stairs. ‘What’s he done this time?’ she asked Ellie.

‘Broke a vase and insulted your mother.’

‘Really? I’d say only one of those things deserves punishment.’

She convinced Ellie to let Tom off the hook, and the three of them entered the dining room just as Alec came in, holding a very cranky, but mercifully clothed, Fred.
‘Well someone’s in a bad mood!’ Daisy said, ignoring Tess and looking at Fred. ‘Someone’s in a very bad mood! Aren’t you? Aren’t you, Fred?’

She teased the boy and pulled faces at him as Alec bounced him gently. Slowly, Fred’s sour mood abated, and Daisy tickled him until he squealed.

Once order had been restored, Daisy turned to her mother.

‘Hi, Daiz,’ Tess said.

Daisy lowered her gaze. ‘Lo.’

‘Look at you,’ Tess said, her eyes misting. ‘You’ve grown so much.’ She took a step closer. ‘Can I have a hug?’

Keeping her head down, Daisy nodded reluctantly and entertained a short, limp hug.

‘You’ve even got a tan,’ Tess remarked.

‘She spends all her time at the beach,’ Ellie put in. ‘We’re starting to think she’s part dolphin.’

‘Daiz,’ Fred said, reaching with his hands. ‘Daiz.’

Daisy turned and took Fred into her arms. He gleefully began stroking and pulling her long brown hair.

‘It’s… erm, not been the same at home,’ Tess said, trying to keep her voice steady. ‘The house seems so empty without you.’

Daisy’s eyes were cold. ‘Does Dave still visit you?’

‘Daisy,’ Alec cautioned.

‘What? I’m curious. Tell me, how does his wife feel about him “working late” with you?’

Tess’ face fell.

‘That’s enough,’ said Alec, stepping forward.

Unapologetic, Daisy kissed Fred’s curly hair and rocked him, glaring at her mother over the top of his head.

‘Um… maybe we should leave,’ Ellie said. Taking Tom’s arm, the two of them retreated. Daisy put Fred down and he toddled off to join them. As they left, they heard Tess say:

‘I’ve got all your school stuff ready for you,’ she said. ‘Your uniform’s all laid out, and I’ve bought all your books…’

Daisy made another acerbic remark and Alec scolded her. That set them bickering, and a heated discussion filled the house.

‘Geez. Now I know why Daiz is so good at video games,’ said Tom. ‘That’s a lot of pent-up rage.’

It took some time, but at last Daisy and Tess were reconciled enough for them to leave.
‘I’ll be back on the weekend,’ Daisy promised, kissing Ellie and Fred, and fistbumping Tom. ‘Every weekend. We’ll go fishing, like we said we would.’

‘Thanks for letting me keep the PlayStation,’ Tom said.

‘Just as long as you don’t touch my Skyrim character.’

She came to her father. He gathered her up in a big bear hug and kissed her hair and her temple over and over.

‘Scratchy beard,’ she complained.

‘I love you, darlin’,’ he said between kisses. ‘I love you more than anything.’

‘God, do you have to be so soppy?’ she said, wrinkling her nose as she extracted herself from his grip.

‘Call me after your first day back at school,’ Alec said. ‘Tell me everything.’

‘I will.’

‘I love you.’

‘I know, Dad.’

‘We’ll miss you Daisy,’ Ellie said. ‘It won’t be the same without you here, microwaving your cheerios every morning.’

Daisy pulled a face at her. Ellie pulled one back and they laughed.

‘Bye-bye, Fred!’ Daisy said as she got into the car. ‘Bye!’

‘Bye-bye!’ Fred said.

She slammed the door shut, and waved at them from inside. Alec and Tess exchanged a frosty nod, and the car rumbled to life and pulled away.

They watched her go until the car turned a corner and was out of sight.

‘All right,’ Tom said, clapping his hands together. ‘I’m gonna go play Skyrim.’

He went back inside, leaving the door swinging on its hinges. Ellie glanced up at Alec. He was immobile except for his quivering Adam’s apple.

‘I miss her already too,’ Ellie said, slipping her arm around his waist. He stayed still a moment longer. Not trusting himself to speak, he printed a kiss on top of her head.

Fred looked up. When he saw Alec and Ellie were crying, his face screwed up and he began wailing too. Tom paused as he was crossing to the stairs with a glass of water.

‘What wrong with you guys? She’ll be back next weekend.’

Having pronounced this wisdom, he burped, scratched his bum, and ascended the stairs.

* 

September drew to a close and autumn manifested itself in Broadchurch, alighting on polar winds
and twirling a reddish mantle. Swallows began to gather on power lines, long rows of disgruntled faces peering at the world over their red bibs. Groups of youngsters, still unused to the world, fluttered restlessly together. One by one, they began to depart, leaving in search of fairer weather and kinder skies. By the time October acceded, none were left.

True to her word, Daisy stayed with Alec and Ellie every weekend. Fridays soon became Alec’s favourite day of the week, and Sundays his least favourite, since the one heralded his daughter’s arrival, and the other her inevitable departure. The arrangement seemed to be taking a toll on Daisy, however, and one Saturday Alec had been innocently asking her about schoolwork when she’d snapped angrily at him and stormed outside.

Alec stared after her, bewildered. ‘Let me talk to her,’ said Ellie, touching his shoulder.

She went outside and found Daisy sitting morosely on Fred’s tiny swingset. Alec had put it together, meaning that it was, unsurprisingly, lopsided and unsafe. It creaked and sagged alarmingly under her weight.

‘You okay, Daiz?’ Ellie asked. ‘Is there something you’d like to talk to us about?’

‘It’s school,’ she muttered. ‘It’s shit.’

‘I believe that’s the definition they put in the dictionary.’

Ellie sat on the swing next to her. The whole thing groaned and slumped inwards, but just managed to hold together.

‘Go on, love,’ she said when Daisy stayed silent. ‘What is it?’

Sighing, Daisy listed all her grievances with her school one by one, from her poor grades to her harsh teachers and all the pressures of schoolwork. Ellie listened patiently, then stood up.

‘All right. Get your coat,’ she said.

As Daisy got changed, Ellie went to see Alec. He was in the kitchen with Fred, looking worried as the toddler eagerly clambered up his legs. He started when Ellie came in.

‘She okay?’ he asked.

‘Alec,’ Ellie said. ‘I need some money.’

He automatically pulled out his wallet. As he opened it he paused and looked at her. ‘For what?’

‘It’s for Daisy.’

‘Okay.’ He pulled out two twenty pound notes, then paused again. ‘Why?’

Ellie snatched the notes. ‘I’m taking her shopping. Retail therapy.’ She examined both notes. ‘Fifty quid would be better.’

‘Okay,’ he said again, clicking his tongue as he patted himself down and checked his pockets. He found another twenty pounds and Ellie took it.

‘Cheers,’ she said, heading to the door, where Daisy was waiting. Alec stared after her.

‘Can I come?’ he asked plaintively.
‘Sorry. Girls’ day out,’ she said. She joined Daisy and showed her the money. They both giggled.
‘Look after the boys while we’re gone,’ Ellie called. Oh, and the swingset broke again!’

The door slammed shut. Looking lost, Alec put his hands into his pockets.

Fred tugged at his trousers. ‘Poop,’ he told Alec. ‘I need to poop.’

‘You could always switch schools,’ Ellie suggested as she and Daisy walked along the pier, licking ice creams. A shopping bag hung from Daisy’s hand; she had found an old Polaroid camera while looking through a secondhand shop, and purchased it immediately. She’d also found some animal toys for Fred. Ellie continued, ‘there’s one here in Broadchurch that might suit you. Chloe goes there, and your Dad and I would be thrilled to have you stay with us.’

‘Mum wants me to stay at the posh school,’ Daisy replied, picking the chocolate flake from her ice cream. ‘It’s the best school in our county, she says. She had to pull some strings to get me in. And Dad’s always going on about how he’s got a big nest egg saved for me, so I can go to any university I want. I know he’s hoping I’ll get into Oxford, and I can’t do that unless I’m at the best high school.’

‘Nest egg?’ Ellie frowned. Alec had never mentioned having a stash of money. She made a mental note to interrogate him later, thinking, with some annoyance, of the cheap IKEA cabinet she had purchased on the assumption they could not afford anything else. ‘Well, the Broadchurch school won’t be as fancy as your current school, but that doesn’t mean you can’t get good grades there.’

‘That’s not what Mum said. I mentioned it to her and she blew a fuse about it. Said she wouldn’t stand for me giving up a good education to go to some backwater Dorset school.’

‘Hey, I went to that school!’ Ellie said indignantly. ‘She makes it sound like a Borstal.’

‘But the thing is, I don’t even know if I care about all that,’ Daisy went on. ‘I don’t even know if I want to go to university. They expect me to, and they expect me to get good grades, but I’m not…’ she sighed. ‘I don’t know.’

‘Well, you don’t need to go to uni. Your Dad and I never did, and look at us.’

Daisy glanced at her. ‘The worst cops in Britain?’

‘Oi. Cheeky,’ Ellie cautioned, and Daisy grinned. Through a mouthful of ice cream, Ellie asked, ‘so what do you want to do?’

‘I don’t know,’ Daisy said again. ‘I like photography, and I’m good at art. I like kids, too. I could do something with that?’

Ellie appealed for her to switch to the Broadchurch school again. Daisy’s mouth twisted. ‘All my friends are in Sandbrook, though,’ she said. ‘Friends I’ve known since I was little. Can I really leave them behind?’

‘You’ll have Chloe here,’ Ellie reminded her.

‘But I’ll get better marks at my posh school,’ Daisy said. ‘I wouldn’t have as many options or resources in Broadchurch. What if I decide I do want to go to uni, and being here does affect my chances, like Mum says?’
Ellie pursed her lips.

‘And then there’s Mum. She might not let me leave, even if I wanted to,’ Daisy went on gloomily. ‘And Dad, of course. He’s always thought I was so smart. He’d have kittens if he found out how bad I’ve been doing lately.’

Ellie spoke sympathetically. ‘I can’t tell you what’s right, or what you should choose. That’s up to you. But I can tell you that no matter where you choose to live, or which school you want to go to, your father and I will support you. Your Dad doesn’t care about your grades, he cares that you’re happy. And so do I.’

Daisy paused, staring at the cracks in the wooden boardwalk. A tendril of melted ice cream dripped over her index finger and she sucked it contemplatively.

‘He’s not gonna care about your grades, Daiz,’ Ellie reiterated firmly. ‘He just wants you happy. Whatever you choose, we’ll support you, and if it means taking your mum to court so be it.’

Daisy smiled at her. ‘Thanks Ellie.’

Ellie licked her cone and made a face. ‘Blech. I usually love ice cream, but it’s making me feel sick today. Tell you what – how about we get chips on the way home? We can bring some back for the boys too.’

Daisy agreed, and told Ellie she would give switching schools some more thought.

Alec awoke suddenly to find Ellie’s lips around his cock.

‘Good morning,’ he groaned.

She sucked gently, licking and teasing until he was hard and throbbing against her lips. Fondling his balls in one hand, she drew herself upright and turned Alec onto his back. Holding his shaft with one hand, she straddled him and slid herself along his length.

Still half in the clutches of sleep, Alec let out a ferocious groan. His body bucked and he propped himself onto his elbows, his eyes finding Ellie’s. She twisted his nipple and pushed him back down. Alec could only grit his teeth and hold her as she fucked him, pinned down and helpless beneath her weight, totally and utterly under her control.

She loved how helpless he looked when she had him like this, how adoring, how trusting. She squirmed and bucked atop him, twisting and settling around every inch of his cock, dragging herself along his length until her whole body was afire.

Leaning all the way over him, she kissed him and tangled his hair in her fingers. Nipping his bottom lip, she straightened again and arched back, driving herself down hard until he gave a hoarse shout. His hand ran up her soft abdomen as she leaned back, the fingers digging into the white skin of her plump belly. She took his hand and guided it lower. Their hands moved together, the fingers circling and stroking. She ground herself more insistently against him, desperate for the friction she needed.

As he felt her muscles twitch and contract, he obligingly moved faster and let her fingers guide him to where he was needed.

She was dripping now. Their hands were soaked. Then Alec found just the right spot and she froze for just a moment, a soft growl tearing at her throat. He repeated the circling movement and yes, yes, yes, there he watched, barely coherent, as she threw back her head and cried his name, and the way
she said it made him forget he ever hated the sound of it.

Her thighs trembled and she slumped over him. Printing fuzzy kisses on his lips, she continued to grind against him. He shuddered, his abdominal muscles seizing up and making him curl forward. His forehead bumped hers and, panting, she lifted herself almost all the way off his cock before driving herself back down with a subtle twist.

‘Ellie,’ he whispered. Waves of heat spread all over him, and he came with a shallow gasp. ‘Ellie!’

They allowed themselves a short reprieve afterwards, and sleepily kissed and cuddled one another. Duty called, however, and they had to prepare for work.

They dressed in silence. As Alec buttoned his shirt, he glanced over at Ellie. He was frowning, and appeared troubled.

‘El,’ he said, ‘what contraception do you use? I always thought you were on the pill, but I just realised I’ve never seen you take it.’

‘I’m not on anything. The pill plays havoc with my skin. Horrible acne. You seen my socks?’

He handed them to her. ‘You’re… not on anything?’ he repeated.

‘Nope.’

‘Ah.’ He paused. ‘We’ve been having sex a lot.’

She rolled her eyes. ‘I don’t need birth control. Do you remember how I said Tom was a week overdue and I had to get an emergency caesarean? He did some damage while he was in there. Blew out the whole region, essentially. Why do you think it took us so long to have Fred?’

She struggled with her socks, and leaned on Alec for support.

‘And then after Fred the doctor said the chances of us conceiving again were almost impossible,’ she went on.

‘Impossible or almost impossible?’

She retrieved his blue tie for him and flung it around his neck. ‘Almost.’

‘And almost impossible for you to conceive, or impossible for you and Joe?’

‘Well, Joe did have some fertility issues of his own…’

He made eye contact with her. ‘When did you last get your period?’

‘I don’t remember. A while ago.’ He raised an eyebrow at her and she grew defensive. ‘It doesn’t mean anything. They’ve been irregular since Fred was born.’

‘El.’ His mouth was a firm line. ‘I think you should take a pregnancy test.’

She couldn’t help laughing at that. After so many years of trying for Fred, enduring disappointment after disappointment, the idea of becoming pregnant accidentally was too absurd to contemplate.

‘It’s impossible,’ she told him.
Yet, once the idea had been planted, Ellie had to concede that it made sense. It explained a lot of odd occurrences, both to her disposition and her body in general.

A week after Alec made the suggestion, halfway between dread and disbelief, she took the test.

She immediately went back to the store and took another. Then a third.

Finally, she sat back on the toilet, her arms sagging by her sides, and stared at the ceiling in defeat.

After years of trying in vain for Fred, she had taught herself to ignore any supposed symptoms, to pin down any shred of hope, to lock herself in a safe prison of denial and firmly tell herself that she wasn’t pregnant, so that when the test or a doctor said the same thing, the blow would hurt less. Dashed hopes brought pain, but if she expected nothing but bad news, then bad news could not trouble her, and good news only cheer her. Thanks to this learned defense mechanism, she had not even noticed all the symptoms creeping up on her, and even with an infernal plus symbol dangling from her fingertips, she could not quite accept the truth of it.

This, coupled with a swirling undercurrent of fear and guilt at the thought of having a child by Alec Hardy, the man whom she had only come to love in the aftermath of Danny’s death – at her husband’s hands, no less - made for a potent brew. One part of her whispered that she could not be pregnant; another wished vehemently that she was not.

Without telling Alec, she went to the doctor. He confirmed the result, and a combination of her track record and the fact she had no idea how far along she was convinced the doctor that it was best to book her in for an ultrasound right away, just for safety’s sake. It was scheduled for the following Saturday, and she went home in a quiet stupor, still not quite able to believe what was happening to her.

She told Alec. His initial reaction was one of surprise and joy, though he quickly became subdued when he saw how troubled she was. He tried to talk to her about it but she was not forthcoming.

‘Let’s just wait,’ she told him. ‘Let’s just wait and see.’

The sonographer squirted gel onto Ellie's belly and she gasped. Gritting her teeth, she closed her eyes, and did not open again until she heard a sound like the thundering of hooves.

Alec stared in wonder. He was holding Ellie’s hand, and he squeezed unconsciously, his eyes wide. Ellie sucked in a sharp breath and exhaled slowly, the last dregs of denial slipping from her clutches.

Oddly, it was not joy or relief she felt, as she had when she’d finally heard Fred’s tiny heartbeat for the first time. A sinking feeling of dread and apprehension accompanied the sound instead, and her whole body went limp.

‘So. It’s true,’ she murmured.

Alec couldn’t resist kissing her temple, and nudged her with barely concealed excitement. She hardly registered his touch.

The sonographer, a rather simple soul who was new to her trade, said, ‘well, the good news is you’re not having a baby.’

‘What?’
’Excuse us?’

’You’re not having one baby,’ she continued. ’You’re having two babies. Congratulations, miss! You’re having twins.’ And she smiled at them, looking pleased at her joke.

Both of them froze. ’But… but that can’t be right,’ Ellie said, struggling to comprehend what she had just heard. Her world threatened to crumble around her once and for all. She seized on a tiny thread of hope. ’Twins don’t run in my family. Nor in Alec’s. Right?’

Alec’s face was ashen. Ellie stared at him. ’Mum,’ he mumbled.

’What?’

’Me mum was a twin.’

’Oh.’

’They’re both healthy and strong,’ the woman went on. ’You’ve got quite an oven, if I do say so.’ She seemed satisfied that the doctor's fears were unfounded. ’Let’s see… two arms, two legs each… the best number to have.’

She turned her round face to them, hoping they would laugh, but they were rigid with shock.

’Twins, Alec,’ Ellie said in stormy tones.

’I heard her.’

’Twins.’

’Ellie, you’re hurting me!’ Alec tried to extricate his hand from her vice-like grip.

’Twins.’

Her grip became tighter. He struggled to free himself, now thoroughly alarmed. ’Let go! Are you trying to break my hand?’

’I’ll break more than that in a minute!’ she shouted.

The sonographer observed them with a knowing smile. ’I take it this was unplanned then?’

’You’re bloody right it was unplanned! Oh God. Oh my God. Oh God.’ Ellie began to rock back and forth. All this time trying to ignore the truth of her pregnancy, and now not just one but two heartbeats were skittishly hammering away before her.

Alec’s attention was riveted on those beats. He stared at the screen with a dopey, lopsided expression that could almost be termed a smile.

’Would you like to know the sex?’ she asked. ’It's a bit early to tell definitely, but I think I can make out at least one of them…’

’Yes,’ Alec said.

’No,’ said Ellie abruptly. ’No, I don’t want to know. I don’t want to know anything. Forget it, I don’t want to do this. Just get it off, get all this shit off me!’

The sonographer drew away in fright and Ellie seized a towel and started wiping away the gel. Tears
dripped down her face.

‘Ellie,’ Alec murmured, his tone a mixture of alarm and disappointment. He reached for her hand again, but she snatched it away.

‘I’m going. I have to go. I need the toilet.’

She fled in distraction, pulling her shirt over her belly.

After some time had passed, Alec decided he could wait no longer. He fished a ‘Cleaning in Progress’ sign from the Cleaner’s cupboard, set it outside the ladies’ toilet, and went inside.

‘Ellie.’ He rapped on the door of a closed cubicle.

‘Go away.’ The voice was sullen.

‘We need to talk about this.’ There was no answer. ‘You can’t run from this anymore, El. Come out.’

Very slowly, Ellie emerged. She was clutching her bag to her chest like a safety blanket, and her face was raw from crying. She squinted in the harsh light and shuffled to a halt near the sinks, opposite Alec.

‘I thought I wasn’t,’ she said. ‘I didn’t believe it. I couldn’t.’ She wiped her drenched cheeks. Her skin looked as delicate as tissue paper. ‘It wasn’t supposed to happen!’ she burst out. ‘It should be impossible! All those years of trying for Fred, and the doctors saying we’d never have another, then you come along with… with your super sperm… and now there’s two… oh God, what are people going to say?’

She hiccoughed and broke off, burying her face in one hand. Alec tried not to look too alarmed at the term “super sperm.”

‘Ellie.’ He swallowed, trying to find the right words. ‘Ellie, it’s okay. This isn’t a bad thing.’

‘Isn’t it?’ her head shot up. ‘What part of this fucked up situation seems good to you?’

He frowned. ‘What part of it seems bad to you?’

Her eyes flashed. ‘How did we meet?’ she demanded, taking a step towards him.

He hesitated. ‘It was at work.’

‘Where?’

‘On the beach.’

‘When? What was the moment?’

He folded his arms and ran his tongue over his teeth. ‘It was when we found Danny,’ he conceded.

‘We met over his body.’ Tears threatened to fall again. ‘We met over the body of my best friend’s son, whom my husband had murdered! If he hadn’t killed Danny, we wouldn’t be together. If my husband hadn’t murdered an eleven-year-old boy, these… things wouldn’t be here!’

‘Ellie…’ he took a step forward.
‘They shouldn’t be here!’ she cried. ‘These things inside me, they shouldn’t be here! You shouldn’t be here! Danny should be here! Danny, and my husband Joe!’

He kept his voice low. ‘Don’t call them things.’

‘Why not? They’re nothing to me! I don’t want them. I can’t keep them. I can’t. Not when…’

He tried to reach for her but she recoiled.

‘Don’t touch me!’

‘El, please…’ His hand brushed her shoulder.

‘I said don’t touch me!’ she took another step back and knocked against the sink. She sagged lifelessly against it. Her trembling hand hit the tap, and water began dribbling into the sink. The feel of it flowing across her fingers roused her somewhat.

‘Beth,’ she mumbled. ‘I have to find Beth. I need to talk to Beth.’

Leaning heavily on the sinks for support, she tottered to the door. He followed.

‘Do you want me to drive you?’

‘No. I need to go alone. I need to…’

Looking as anguished as a rag doll pierced with pins, she staggered out the door. He let her go, staring after her with a pained expression.

*B*

Beth had just put Lizzie down for a nap when she heard a rapping at the front door. Wondering whom it might be, she answered it.

‘El!’ she said in surprise. ‘God, you look terrible. What’s wrong?’

Ellie stared at her friend’s sweet face. Her mouth hung slack, and she trembled. ‘Beth.’ Her voice was hoarse. ‘I’m pregnant.’

Beth blinked at her.

‘You and Alec…?’

Ellie’s teeth began to chatter. ‘Yes.’

Beth recognised the wild desperation in her eyes. She had seen those eyes staring back at her from the mirror, not so long ago. ‘Come inside. My God, look at you! You’re shaking all over!’

She seated her friend on the couch. She had the heater running, and it was warm in the living room. Ellie tugged her coat off and wiped away the bullets of sweat forming on her brow.

Beth sat opposite her. ‘Are you really pregnant?’

Ellie nodded.

‘But I thought… didn’t you say you couldn’t?’

‘I thought so. Turns out to have been more Joe’s problem than mine.’ She was silent for a long
moment. ‘It’s twins,’ she blurted, and it came out like the confession of a sin. Her cheeks burned with shame. ‘We’re having twins.’

There was something about having twins that made the whole situation worse to her, as if one baby could be forgiven, passed off as an accident, but to buy the lives of two children with Danny’s death smacked of abomination. She kept her face downcast.

Beth was astonished. ‘El… you seem so upset about it.’

‘Because it’s like you said,’ Ellie muttered, staring into her lap. ‘If Joe hadn’t killed Danny, Alec and I wouldn’t be together. If he hadn’t killed Danny, these… things wouldn’t be here. I can’t… oh God, Beth, I’m so sorry…’

‘Is that why you’re here? To apologise to me?’

‘I’m sorry,’ Ellie repeated. ‘It’s all wrong… everything’s wrong…’

‘Don’t apologise.’ Beth stood up, her eyes flashing. ‘Don’t you dare apologise.’

Suddenly fierce, she knelt in front of Ellie and gripped her hands. ‘What did I say when we kicked Joe out of Broadchurch?’ she demanded. ‘What did I say to him?’

Ellie looked at her friend through viscous eyes. Beth’s grip tightened.

‘We all get to live,’ she pronounced. ‘That’s what I said. We all get to live. The only guilty person in all this is Joe, and he don’t deserve life for what he did. But the rest of us, we get to live. That includes you and Alec.’ She put one hand on Ellie’s belly. ‘And it includes them, too.’

Ellie’s breath caught in her throat and she stopped breathing for a moment. ‘Beth…’

‘Do you want them?’ she asked.

Ellie’s façade crumbled. Her eyes screwed up and her lip flattened and trembled. ‘Yes,’ she sobbed. ‘Yes. Yes, I want them.’

She wiped her face with her palms. Beth sat beside her and calmly embraced her. Her body was soft, and she smelled faintly of sour milk and talcum powder.

‘For God’s sake, El.’ Beth squeezed her and rubbed her back. ‘You’re pregnant. You ain’t committed a crime.’

‘I feel guilty,’ she whispered. ‘I feel so guilty.’

‘How do you think I felt with Lizzie on the way so soon after Dan?’

They broke apart and Ellie let out a whoosh of air.

‘What a fucked up mess this is,’ she said.

‘Isn’t it?’ Beth agreed. ‘I hardly know how to deal with it half the time. How to rebuild. How to move on, or leave the past behind… even whether I should leave the past behind. You and Alec are just one more weird piece of the puzzle. But I know this: we need to live. We just have to keep living, even when it hurts so much that we feel like we can’t.’

Ellie studied Beth’s face. The corners of her mouth twitched upwards. ‘You’re so strong, Beth. It still amazes me.’
Beth gave Ellie’s hand a little shake. ‘Just think,’ she said. ‘Now Lizzie will have two little playmates!’

A grateful laugh escaped Ellie. ‘I bet Lizzie’ll be the boss of them.’

‘I doubt that. Those kids are a cross of you and Hardy. I dread to think what their tempers will be like.’

‘Or their manners,’ Ellie said, a touch gloomily. ‘A mix of him and me. God, they’re doomed, aren’t they?’

Beth laughed, and she hugged Ellie for a second time and told her to blow her nose.

Alec pottered around the house in an agitated state. Tom and Daisy were playing video games and scarcely noticed him. Fred was asleep, so not even his shenanigans could distract him. He sat abstractedly in a chair, tapping his foot, then got up and walked around again. He came to rest in the kitchen and stood staring at one of Fred’s drawings on the fridge.

A man, a woman, two teenagers and a toddler, rendered in a rainbow of crayons. Their family, complete.

At length, Daisy came into the kitchen to get a drink of water. She turned on the tap and looked over at her father.

‘You okay, Dad?’ she asked.

‘Not really, darlin’,’ Alec said in a low voice, still staring at Fred’s drawing.

‘What’s wrong?’

Alec’s brows pressed together. He looked up at Daisy and was suddenly struck by how beautiful she looked, tall and slender as a lily stem, her brown hair set aflame by a careless shaft of sunlight.

‘Can I have a hug?’ he asked.

Looking profoundly troubled, Daisy set her glass down and approached him. He enveloped her and squeezed her tight.

‘I love you, darlin’, he said. ‘I love you so much. More than anything in the whole world.’

He kissed her head three times before she pulled away. ‘What’s happening?’ she demanded, now frightened. ‘Dad, what’s going on?’

He stroked her hair. ‘I promised I wouldn’t lie to you,’ he said, ‘so will you do me a favour and just ask me that question again in a few hours?’

She agreed, still looking fearful. He told her he had to go out, and that she was in charge until he got back. He kissed her again and walked out.

Alec was too embarrassed to enquire directly as to whether Ellie was still with Beth, so he surveyed her house instead. A conspicuous lack of Ellie’s car in the driveway, and the sight of a solitary Beth watering the garden, convinced him that Ellie was not with her.

He called Lucy.
‘She ain’t with me,’ Lucy replied. ‘What’s happened? Is something wr - ’

He hung up before she could complete the sentence. Tapping his phone against his chin, he tried to think of where else Ellie would go.

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It was sunset, and the day had reached that violet hour that turns the ships towards the mainland and brings the sailors home from sea. Ellie had gone to her familiar haunt at the deserted lookout, and she stood on the cliffs, gazing upon the waves with soft, contemplative misery. She resembled that traditional caricature of a widow whose husband has been lost at sea, but who remains tethered to the shore, waiting for a sail she knows will never come.

Were it not for the wind ruffling her hair, one might swear her vigils had turned her to stone.

Presently, Alec came up behind her.

‘I thought I might find you here,’ he said.

Ellie neither moved nor spoke. Alec ascended the rest of the way until he stood just behind her. He put his hands in his pockets and tapped one foot in agitation.

‘Did you speak to Beth?’ he asked.

Her lips parted. ‘Yes.’

He prompted, ‘and?’

‘Live.’ She shrugged. ‘She said we need to live.’

She said no more and he grimaced, unsure of what to make of her words. ‘Okay. Ellie,’ he took a deep breath. ‘I need to say something.’

She turned to him and watched as he fumbled in his pockets for something. He pulled out a crumpled piece of paper, unfolded it, smoothed out the creases, and cleared his throat.

Ellie’s eyes widened. ‘Have you written a speech?’

‘I need to say this right.’ He looked down and scanned the first line. ‘Ellie. When we first met I -’

The wind snatched the paper from his fingertips. It raced upwards like a soaring gull and blew out to sea. Hardy could only watch morosely as it flung itself into the water and was swallowed by the waves. ‘Bollocks,’ he said.

Despite everything, Ellie found herself laughing, ‘Can you remember it?’

‘No.’ His eyes were fixed on the taunting waves and their exultant spray of bubbles. ‘All right,’ he said with a sigh. ‘Never mind.’ He turned to Ellie and grasped her hand. ‘The old-fashioned way, then. Ellie… I know we didn’t meet under the most… fortuitous circumstances. And I know that this is all… strange. But I need you to know,’ he paused to clasp both of his hands around hers, ‘that I… I love you. And that… my life, my whole life, whatever’s left of it - I want to spend it with you.’

His hands were so warm. ‘And I want to spend mine with you,’ she whispered.

‘I want you. Forever.’ He took a step forward and placed his hand over her belly. ‘And I want them, too.’
A tear trickled down her face. The corners of her mouth tweaked upwards as she studied his sweet, earnest face. ‘So do I,’ she confessed.

There was a sharp intake of breath and his grip on her hand tightened. ‘I couldn’t be happier,’ he admitted, a stupid giggle escaping him.

Ellie pulled him into a hug and buried her head into the alcove beneath his chin. His woollen sweater scratched her cheek. ‘What a time for them to come along,’ she said. Tears slid down her face.

Gently, he pulled her back so he could look at her. Swiping at the tears on her cheek, he said ruefully, ‘I’m sorry. I promised myself I’d never make you cry. I’ve already cocked that up.’

‘It’s all right,’ she said. ‘I’m crying because I’m happy.’

‘Yeah?’ His thumb stroked her cheek.

‘Twins, Alec.’ Her eyes gleamed.

‘Yeah,’ he agreed, kissing her on the lips.

‘Twins.’ She pressed against his chest once more and sighed.

They rocked back and forth in time to the swelling tide below them, and forgot the rest of the world, just for a moment.

* * *

They told Daisy first.

‘Is that what this is all about?’ she cried. ‘Oh my God. I thought someone was dying! I thought your pacemaker had stopped working or that Ellie had cancer! This is seriously what you’ve been so upset over? Babies? That’s fantastic news!’

The full weight of the situation hit her and she began to jump up and down.

‘Babies. Oh my God, babies! Twins! Two of them! Two little brothers! Two little sisters! Maybe a brother and a sister!’ She continued to jump up and down and hugged her father, then Ellie. ‘I’ve always wanted a baby brother or sister, and now I’ve got two? This is the best day of my life! Can I pick the names? Please? Can I?’

She was positively vibrating with joy. Her cheeks glowed.

‘I think we’ll probably pick the names, Daiz,’ Ellie said in amusement.

‘How far along are you?’ Daisy loomed forward suddenly and put her hand over Ellie’s belly. ‘Can you feel them yet? Do you know the sex?’

‘Fifteen weeks, they think,’ Ellie replied. ‘I won’t feel anything for a while. We didn’t ask for the sex.’

‘You have to! Promise me you’ll find out, I can’t wait a whole other five months! I want to know now!’ She continued to bounce, then she stopped short with a gasp. ‘I have to come and live with you. I have to switch schools!’

‘Are you sure, Daiz? I know you were thinking about it, but are you sure that’s the best plan?’ Alec said.
‘Are you kidding? Yes! All my life all I wanted was a baby brother or sister!’ Daisy exclaimed. ‘I’m not missing out on this for the world! Not a single second of it!’

She dashed upstairs. ‘I’m going to ring Mum! Sod whatever she says, it’s decided! I’m staying with you guys!’

‘Daisy, wait, we haven’t told anyone else yet,’ Alec began.

Tom appeared on the stairs, his hair a mess. ‘Told anyone about what?’ he asked.

‘Ellie’s pregnant!’ Daisy bellowed from her room.

‘What?’

Both Ellie and Alec cringed.

‘Tom,’ Ellie sighed. ‘Will you come here, love?’

Tom went and sat next to them. ‘Is it true?’

‘Yes, love, it’s true. We didn’t mean for it to happen, but it has. We’re still in shock, but… we’re a little bit happy about it too.’

Tom stared at her, agog. ‘I thought you said you couldn’t have any more after Fred?’

‘That’s what I thought. Turns out not to have been true.’ Ellie smiled adoringly at her son. ‘You know it doesn’t change anything, though. Just like with Fred, it doesn’t mean I’m going to love you any less, or that you won’t be just as important to us.’

Tom considered it. ‘So… I’m gonna be a brother again?’

He looked pleased at the prospect. At his reaction, Ellie nodded and hugged him hard. He returned the embrace gladly.

‘I love you,’ she said.

‘More than chocolate?’

She kissed him. ‘Even more than chocolate.’

When they pulled apart, Tom said, ‘I hope it’s another boy.’

Daisy appeared at the top of the stairs and leaned over the railing. ‘They’re having twins!’ she roared.

Ellie and Alec sighed again. ‘Alec, can you…?’

Alec nodded and ascended the stairs to calm his daughter down. Ellie stayed with Tom and did her best to soothe his astonished shouts.

Once their kids were reconciled to this advent, Ellie finally allowed herself to accept the babies inside her once and for all.

* *

She told Lucy next, and they sat privately discussing it at a crowded barbecue with the Latimers.
'Twins.' Ellie shook her head. 'How did this even happen?'

Lucy considered the question seriously, evidently having taken it as literal and not rhetorical. ‘It’s probably all that dirty sex you two have been having.’

‘Luce!’

‘What? You think we haven’t noticed you sneaking off all the time? “Luce, come and babysit while we work!” Yeah right. I know exactly how much work goes on at those late night detective sessions of yours.’

Ellie went bright pink. ‘Sometimes it’s hard to get some privacy,’ she said as primly as she could. ‘With three kids in the house, we have to take opportunities where they arise.’

‘So you decided to take your filthy sex life to work with you. Ooh, Harder, Hardy!’ Lucy mocked, pantomiming a thrusting motion.

‘Why do I even tell you anything?’ Ellie sighed. She looked over at where Alec was struggling to hold a conversation with Mark. Her gaze alighted on his arse and she smiled faintly.

‘So what is he like in the sack?’ Lucy asked.

Ellie jumped and blushed guiltily. ‘You can’t just ask that!’

‘I can, and I have,’ Lucy rejoined. ‘So? Go on!’

‘What we do in the bedroom is between me and him.’

‘And everyone else in Broadchurch,’ Lucy said, poking her belly. ‘Seeing as how you’re carrying his bastards and all.’

Ellie glowered.

‘So?’ Lucy prompted.

Her fury dissipated. ‘Well… he’s… um… he’s very – ah… generous.’

‘How d’you mean generous? He give you his credit card afterwards or summat?’

‘No,’ Ellie said delicately. ‘No, I mean, he’s very… he takes care of me.’

‘Gets the job done, then?’

‘Yes. No complaints there. But what I mean is, he…’

Lucy showed no sign of clueing in to her suggestive looks, so she sighed, leaned in, and whispered something.

‘You dirty bitch!’ Lucy exclaimed with delight, loud enough for everyone to hear.

‘Shh!’ Ellie said desperately.

‘Oh, my sweet baby sis!’ Lucy cackled. ‘You’ve gone and hit the jackpot! Oi, Beth! C’mere! You’ll never believe what El just told me!’

In no time there was a small crowd of women around Ellie. She sat in the middle, her head in her
hands, as Lucy gossiped loudly.

Oblivious to the subject of their conversation, Alec approached them.

‘I brought you your jacket,’ he said, laying it around Ellie’s shoulders. ‘Thought you might be cold.’

Ellie kept her head in her hand and let out a muffled thank you. The crowd of women stared at him with a measure of lust that even he could not miss. The air was thick with oestrogen. Alec was loath to leave her side, but the atmosphere alarmed him.

‘M’gonna go back and check on Fred,’ he said, backing away slowly. ‘I think it’s time for his nap.’

One of the women moaned audibly. ‘Kay,’ Ellie said, still not looking up.

Within minutes, the women had made it so that ‘Alec Hardy – Fantastic at Oral’ was as much in the running to serve as his epitaph as ‘Alec Hardy – The Worst Cop in Britain.’

*

To Tess’ consternation, Daisy followed through on her plans to move back to Broadchurch. Tess and Alec had a dreadful row that lasted over a week and spanned many heated phone calls and face-to-face conversations. When Daisy made it plain, however, that nothing would stop her from being there when her new siblings were born, Tess gave in. Daisy agreed to fortnightly visits; weekly, if her mother was the one who travelled to see her.

Alec fretted and fussed like a mother hen, and took it upon himself to secure the school transfer. He bought all her new textbooks and took her uniform shopping, even going so far as to tour the school himself to ensure it was adequate after all. Soon, Daisy’s awful music was blaring from her little bedroom again, and she and Tom were walking to school together each morning, Tom kicking his football while she texted on her phone.

She was in the same grade as Chloe and she already knew a few other kids, so she settled in well. She had also, thankfully, inherited none of her father’s awkwardness and all her mother’s social charms and graces. Her wit, athleticism and beauty won her much esteem, and soon she was thriving.

Daisy came home one day with her nose in a book. When Alec kissed her hello, she didn’t look up, and when Ellie got home from work she was still reading.

‘Watcha reading, Daiz?’ Ellie asked. She dumped her bag on the desk and sniffed her way over to a simmering pot of soup. Alec swatted her when she tried to lift the lid, insisting it wasn’t ready.

‘Tess of the d’Urbervilles,’ Ellie said. ‘We have to read it for English. It’s really good.’

‘Ahh, Thomas Hardy! Dorset’s most famous son! I’m not surprised. I had to read him when I was your age. Don’t tell me Mrs Mullins is still the teacher?’

‘Yeah!’ Daisy said. ‘Was she your teacher too?’

‘Yup. She must be nearing eighty now. She still got that wart on her chin?’

‘Is it a wart? I thought it was a mole.’

‘I’m sure it was a wart.’

‘It’s got a hair coming out of it. It has to be a mole.’
‘Stop,’ Alec begged. ‘You’re making me feel sick.’

‘Hey, he’s got the same last name as you,’ Ellie said suddenly. ‘Hardy! Can’t believe I didn’t notice.’

‘Yeah! Not only that, there’s a character in here called Alec, too! Alec and Tess, just like mum and dad!’ Daisy paused and frowned at the book. ‘They’re really not good for each other.’

Daisy continued to read throughout the night, not even bothering to put it away during dinner. She was an expressive reader, and she gasped, cried out, and started in horror at various moments. At one point she screamed ‘No!’ and Fred fell off the couch with fright.

It was midnight, and Ellie and Alec were fast asleep when Daisy suddenly burst through their bedroom door, waving the book in the air.

‘Tess stabbed Alec through the heart!’ she wailed. ‘And Tess… Tess! And Angel - I hate him – and – and, oh God, her little baby, Sorrow!’

She threw herself on the bed and started to cry. Ellie, who had been through it all before, rubbed her back sympathetically. ‘It’s okay. Let it out.’

‘It was so sad!’ Daisy wept. ‘I hate it!’

‘That’s Thomas Hardy for you.’

Alec blinked wearily. ‘What?’ he mumbled.

Daisy wept a little longer. Ellie waited patiently. ‘Would you like to read some more of his books?’

Daisy sat up at once, her eyes bright and hungry. ‘Do you have more?’

‘I’m from Broadchurch. Of course I do. Everyone around here reads Thomas Hardy.’

She went to her cupboard and retrieved three books: Far from the Madding Crowd, The Return of the Native and Jude the Obscure.

‘Start with this one,’ Ellie said, pointing to Far from the Madding Crowd. ‘I think you’ll like it the best.’

Daisy thanked her, took the books, and scurried back to her room.

‘It’s a school night,’ Alec called after her. ‘Don’t stay up reading!’

The door slammed shut. Ellie looked at him and smiled. ‘Suppose it’s nice that she’s enjoying her schoolwork.’

Alec picked up the copy of Tess Daisy had left behind. ‘Tess stabs Alec through the heart, huh? Why does that sound familiar?’

He opened it to the first page. Ellie rolled over and pulled the pillow over her head. ‘Turn off the lamp when you’re done,’ she said as Alec retrieved his glasses and settled back.

Ellie remembered how happy her life with Joe had been, and how they had been the perfect family unit. She’d gone to work, and Joe had looked after the kids. The house had been neat and orderly.
Joe had been kind and conscientious. Unlike most husbands, he preferred to stay at home with his boys than go out drinking with mates. They rarely fought, or had any troubles at all. Their life was perfect, and Joe the perfect husband. She had loved him.

She looked back on those seemingly blissful days with a mixture of horror and revulsion now, a revulsion so strong it brought bile to her throat. In hindsight it was plain how impossible that perfection was, how artificial. Joe had not been real, and the perfect husband whom she had loved so well had never existed. Her life with him had been one enormous, hideous lie, and Joe had used her to keep his own true nature hidden, as one might conceal a poisoned blade in perfumed silk.

Life with Alec was different. There was a rougher edge to it, one devoid of any dreamlike quality. It was messy and loud and chaotic. It was filled with bickering and arguments. It was passionate and intense. It rattled her like wildfire, shook her like a swell. Something as simple as a discussion of Tess of the d’Urbervilles could escalate into all-out war. Where she had loved Joe, or his mirage, from the moment she met him, her love for Alec had taken time to manifest, growing by degrees with each new revelation about his character until it became apparent that his poor, broken heart was a mirror image for her own. Their romance was rooted in indescribable loss and sorrow, and it had flowered in harsh reality and adversity.

Their life together was far from perfect, she conceded that. But it was warm, and most importantly it was real, and Ellie would not have traded their messy, imperfect family for anything.

Finding Alec, Ellie brought him upstairs, for Fred refused to sleep now unless he had received his customary goodnight kiss from both of them. They kissed the boy and told him they loved him, then exited his room. Ellie ran her thumb over the knob as she pulled the door shut, a crease forming between her brows.

‘We need to start thinking about the future,’ she said. ‘About what we’re going to do when they come along.’

Alec scratched his beard. ‘Biggest concern: where are we going to put them?’

‘I was thinking of emptying out the storage room.’

‘We can’t put them in storage!’

‘It’s bigger than it looks,’ Ellie assured him. ‘We can put Fred in there, and the twins can share his room. Only problem is, the storage room’ll need some doing up.’

‘And where will all the storage go?’

‘Garage. Or the tip. There’s a lot of shit in there I meant to clean out after Joe left.’ She brightened. ‘We can burn anything that belongs to him. Save ourselves a trip.’

Having no better plan, Alec agreed. That weekend, the five of them set about cleaning out the storage. The contents were separated into three distinct piles: Garage, Donate, and Burn.

After a time, a fourth pile was added. ‘I didn’t realise I’d kept so much of your baby stuff!’ Ellie exclaimed, pulling out a small pile of clothes. ‘This’ll come in handy!’

Tom and Daisy had fun looking through all the weird items, but balked at the useful task of carrying them outside. Ellie promised them fish and chips and a trip to the beach if they helped, and they agreed; but they proved poor workers nonetheless, and Ellie had to break them up when they started swordfighting with pool noodles.
'Daisy!' she scolded as the teen clubbed Tom over the head. 
Daisy twirled her noodle. ‘You wanna take his place?’
Ellie’s eyes narrowed. ‘Gimme that woggle.’
Alec walked in to find Ellie, Tom and Daisy engaged in a vicious pool noodle battle.
‘An intruder!’ Tom yelled, pointing at him.
‘Get him!’ yelled Daisy.
The three of them turned on Alec and started beating him with pool noodles.
‘Stop,’ he sighed as the foam bounced harmlessly off him. ‘We still have a lot of work to do. Ellie - Ellie, stop hitting my shins!’

It took them most of the day, but at last the storage was cleared. Alec questioned Ellie’s tendency towards viciously hoarding everything, and Ellie questioned why he had to be such a fuckwit as she primly seized an incomplete chess set and a boomerang back from the Donate pile.

They vacuumed and dusted the now empty storage room. Tom, Daisy and Fred again proved to be more of a hindrance when Tom chased Daisy with a dead spider he’d found, and Fred tried to eat some brittle moth carcasses. With a sigh, Ellie gave them ten quid and told Daisy to take the boys to get chips.

Now left alone, Alec and Ellie cleaned up quickly and began painting the walls custard yellow, which was Fred’s favourite colour.

As they rolled the paint on, Ellie said, ‘we should start thinking about money, too.’

Alec grunted.

‘I lost all my savings in the past year, what with having to move and taking that shit job in Devon. And your teaching job pays peanuts, so I’m guessing you haven’t got much in reserve.’

Alec grunted again.

‘Unless you’ve got something saved that I don’t know about?’

He glanced at her.

When he said nothing, she put it bluntly: ‘Daisy told me you have a nest egg saved somewhere.’

Alec faltered. Shuffling uncomfortably, he nodded.

‘When were you planning on telling me?’

‘I wasn’t.’

‘Considering our situation, I think you should have.’

Alec put down his brush. ‘It’s my inheritance,’ he said. ‘Me Dad left all his money to me when he died. But… I didn’t want his money. I didn’t want anything from him. Daisy had just been born, so I decided to put it away for her. Let it gather interest. Keep it for when she starts university. But I’ve never used a cent of it myself.’
Ellie bit her lip. ‘How much?’

‘A lot. It’s been a while since I checked the balance.’

Ellie seemed to be staring into a futurity etched on the half-painted wall in front of her. Visions of a new car and extensions to the house floated tantalisingly.

‘Forget it,’ she sighed, slapping the roller on the wall. ‘Forget I brought it up. We don’t need it. We can get by without his money.’

‘You’re sure?’

‘Positive. Keep it for Daisy, like you planned. I won’t take money from her, and I sure as hell won’t take money from that bastard father of yours.’

Alec looked relieved. ‘Thank you.’

‘We can take care of these kids by ourselves. But that does mean you’ll need to get a better job.’

He brightened at that, and relished the thought of providing for his new family without his late father’s help. ‘I’ve been cleared to go back on active duty. I’ve been looking, actually. It’s just hard to find somewhere local.’

They continued working. Ellie unwisely crouched down to paint the skirting board, and when she stood up her knees cracked tremendously, her back spasmed, and she let out a groan. ‘Christ, my back,’ she said. ‘These little bastards are playing havoc with my spine already.’

‘Bastards?’ Alec echoed. ‘I suppose they are, technically.’ He fidgeted with his paintbrush and looked at her. ‘Do you think we should get married?’

Ellie stared at him, sweaty and bewildered. ‘Did you just propose to me?’

He made a noise at the back of his throat.

Her initial astonishment gave way, and sadness cast shadowy tendrils across her face. ‘I can’t,’ she said softly. ‘Joe never… I never officially got divorced from him. I tried. But…’

‘Doesn’t matter,’ Alec said abruptly. ‘Forget I said anything.’

He went back to painting, but Ellie stayed still, her expression glum. Alec nudged her.

‘It’s okay. It doesn’t make a difference. It might’ve been nice, but I’m quite happy living in sin.’

That won a tiny smile from her. ‘Yeah. Me too.’

* *

Ever since Alec had undergone his pacemaker surgery and started living with Ellie, he’d developed a tendency to take naps in the middle of the day. Perhaps it was his body’s way of making up for all the sleep lost when he’d had insomnia; perhaps it was because he no longer suffered from nightmares; or perhaps his transfixed heart simply needed more rest than normal. Whatever the reason, Alec was exhausted by the time they finished painting and ended up napping on the couch, while Ellie read a book in their bedroom.

When she walked downstairs, she saw that the kids had returned, and that they were busy stacking all manner of objects on Alec’s prone form.
‘What the hell are you kids doing?’ Ellie demanded.

‘Shhh. We’re playing a game,’ Tom whispered.

‘It’s called Stack Dad,’ Daisy said.

‘It’s where we stack as many things as we can on Alec before he wakes up.’

‘The person who adds the piece that wakes him up loses.’

‘Oh.’ Ellie considered it. ‘Room for another player?’

Tom and Daisy agreed eagerly, and she added *Tess of the d’Urbervilles* to the assembled pile. Alec did not stir in the slightest.

The game continued, and they went hunting in the next room for increasingly bizarre things to add to the pile. Within minutes they were giggling so hard they could barely keep it together.

‘Wait. Wait. Shh,’ Daisy said. Carefully, she took a pink clip out of her hair and used it to clip Alec’s hair, creating a comical tuft above his hairline that was only exaggerated by his open-mouthed, drooling expression.

‘Sleeping Beauty,’ Tom whispered.

‘Get the camera,’ Ellie hissed.

Daisy did; she returned and lined up the shot. The flash went off and the shutter clicked, and Alec awoke with a start.

‘Wha – huh?’ he mumbled. Toys, books, various items of fruit, a vase, picture frames, crayons, and a hundred other items scattered everywhere as he sat up. ‘What the hell - ? Is this an egg?’

Tom, Daisy and Ellie groaned. ‘You just ruined it!’ Ellie said.

‘Now we don’t know who lost!’ Daisy said.

‘Yes we do. You lost,’ Tom said.

‘Nuh-uh!’

‘Yu-huh! You woke him up, that means you lost!’

‘No way! The rules say you only lose if you stack something on him that wakes him up!’

The kids started bickering over the semantics. Alec stared at the pineapple in his arms and looked up at Ellie in distress.

A few hours later, they piled up the last of Joe’s possessions from the storage cupboard and made a bonfire with them. As the items turned to ash and smoke, Ellie let out a faint sigh and closed her eyes. Sparks danced around her, and she felt as though she had at last exorcised Joe’s ghost from her house.

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Ellie was twenty weeks now, and due for another scan. After some sweet-talking, and by briefly mentioning they were both policemen, Alec and Ellie convinced the sonographer to let all the kids
into the room with them.  

The gel went on Ellie’s belly. ‘God that’s cold,’ she shuddered. ‘Okay. Has everyone placed their bets?’

‘Think so,’ Alec said. ‘Final call - Ellie, you’re saying two boys. I’m saying two girls. Daisy’s going with a boy and a girl, and Tom, are you still sticking with – what was it? – boy and horrific genderless squid monster?’

‘Otherwise known as Cthulhu,’ Tom said helpfully.

‘All right. All bets are down. No more changing your mind. Here we go.’

Alec held Ellie’s hand and they waited, staring at the blobby apparitions on the screen.

‘I think I see a tentacle!’ Tom shouted, pointing.

‘Please don’t touch the screen,’ said the sonographer, who was rather a more serious character than the other one.

Daisy crouched next to Fred. ‘Look, Fred! You’re going to be a big brother!’

Fred was more interested in some wiring he’d found on the ground, however, and Daisy had to stop him from chewing on them.

The sonographer went over some of the particulars, checking carefully for any irregularities. Limbs and organs passed inspection; one twin was bigger than the other, though she assured them this was normal.

‘You know, I ate my twin when I was in the womb,’ Daisy said.

‘Gross!’ said Tom.

‘You didn’t eat your twin, Daiz,’ Alec sighed. ‘You absorbed it in the first few weeks.’

‘It’s more common than people realise,’ the sonographer said. She rotated her wrist and frowned at the monitor.

‘Does that mean the bigger one’s gonna eat the smaller one?’ Tom cried. He bent over his mother’s belly and shouted, ‘you leave him alone, Cthulhu!’

‘Tom!’ said Ellie. ‘Behave!’

‘Please,’ the sonographer said. ‘This is serious!’

They quietened and let her continue her assessment. She seemed pleased by how healthy they looked, and at last said, ‘ah! There’s the money shot. He just opened his legs. Congratulations, you’re having a boy and a girl!’

Three of them groaned. ‘Ha! Told you!’ Daisy said gleefully. ‘Pay up, chumps!’

Conceding defeat, they all handed over five pounds.

‘That toothless psychic woman I met as a teenager lied to me,’ Ellie grumbled. ‘She said I would only have boys.’
Tom protested. ‘Well, she’s a girl now, but she might grow up and decide to be a horrific genderless squid monster.’

‘And if she does, we’ll love her all the same,’ Alec assured him.

‘Now pay up,’ Daisy grinned, and Tom slapped the money into her hand.

While they were distracted, Fred managed to get his hands on some of the gel and started eating it.

‘Oh my God!’ the sonographer cried.

‘Fred!’ Ellie scolded.

‘I’m on it,’ Tom said. As he ran at his brother, he tripped on one of the wires connected to the monitor and crashed heavily to the floor, taking some of the equipment with him.

The five of them were escorted from the building, and Alec and Ellie were firmly instructed to leave their children at home next time, no exceptions. They headed back to the car, Fred riding on Alec’s shoulders and pulling on his beard as he complained, while Daisy and Tom bickered and slapped each other.

Oh yes, Ellie thought, their family was far from perfect.

And she wouldn’t change a thing.
‘Dad!’ Ellie heard Daisy yell excitedly as her father came in from work. ‘Dad! There you are! Have you read any more of Far from the Madding Crowd?’

‘Not yet, darlin’,’ he said. ‘I’ll read it tonight.’

‘You have to!’ she insisted. ‘I want to talk to you about it! Then you have to start on The Return of the Native, okay? I’m nearly onto Jude already, so you have to catch up!’

Alec promised he would, and asked where Ellie was. Daisy pointed him to the kitchen, and Alec found her there making a cup of tea. She had poured an extra one when she heard him come in, and slid it across the counter.

‘Everything all right?’ she asked.

Alec ignored the tea. ‘Ellie,’ he said. ‘Can I take the car on Monday?’

She blew on her own steaming cup. ‘What for?’

‘I need it.’

Ellie repeated her initial question. After some needling and a great deal of evasiveness on Alec’s part, she got the truth out of him.

‘Plea hearing,’ he grunted. ‘Lee and Claire.’

She put her hands on her hips. ‘And you were going to go without me?’

‘I thought it’d be best,’ he said, gesturing to her belly, ‘because of…’

‘What the hell does that mean? Afraid my delicate constitution can’t take it?’

‘No. I just want to keep it a secret. And us a secret. From them.’

‘What does it matter? They’re behind bars.’

‘It might not stay that way.’

‘They’re hardly going to get off.’

‘We said the same about Joe.’

Ellie looked grim. ‘I’m still not letting you go alone. You’ll need me. And I need to hear them admit it.’

‘Ellie…’ he took a step towards her and placed his hand over her belly. Air blew through his nostrils. ‘Are you sure?’

‘Positive.’

‘All right, love. We’ll go together.’
They got out of the car at the Sandbrook courthouse and were immediately accosted by Olly.

‘Aunty Ellie!’ he called, running over.

‘Olly!’ Ellie hissed. ‘For God’s sake, what are you doing here?’

‘Waiting for you,’ he panted. ‘You wouldn’t answer your phones, so…’

‘Cut to the chase, Oliver,’ Alec snapped.

‘Well, I – I was hoping you’d give me an interview. Just a few words on how you’re feeling.’

‘No,’ Alec said, relishing the word.

‘We won’t be speaking to the press today,’ Ellie told him. ‘Go and talk to Tess Henchard and the South Mercier Police instead.’

‘They’re not the ones who solved the case, though, are they?’ Olly protested as they strode past him. ‘Please. You know the press is going to be all over you anyway. If you talk to me, at least you know I won’t screw you over.’

Ellie glanced at Alec, but he kept moving at a blistering pace, and she had to jog to keep up with him.

‘Please!’ Olly called forlornly.

They approached the courthouse. A flock of reporters recognised them and swarmed on them at once.

‘No comment,’ Alec said in aggravation, pushing past them to create a path for Ellie. ‘No comment.’

‘Back off,’ Ellie said explosively. ‘Lenses down! Get that camera out of my face!’

She swung at a reporter. ‘Ellie,’ Alec muttered, and she reined herself in, fuming.

They made it inside and took their seats in the courthouse. Tess and several other officers were there, including Dave. Alec hissed when he saw them and stared at the wall in determination.

They were instructed to rise. The judge entered. They sat down again, and the defendant was called in.

Alec started to hyperventilate. Ellie put her hand on his knee and squeezed. Lee’s identity was confirmed. The charge was read.

‘Lee Richard Ashworth. You are charged with murder contrary to common law. The particulars of the offence…’

Alec placed his hand on top of hers and gripped it so hard it hurt. The charge continued, and he did not breathe once as it was read.

‘…you murdered Pippa Gillespie…’

A humming noise rose in his ears, as though his ears were filled with water. His vision clouded. Ellie threaded their fingers together.

‘How do you plead?’
Lee rocked back and forth on his heels. His impassive gaze flicked over the assembled crowd. He saw Alec and something flashed within him, just for a moment.

‘Mr Ashworth?’ the judge prompted sharply.

Lee said one word.

‘Guilty.’

Alec let out a shuddering breath and clung to Ellie with both hands.

‘It’s okay,’ she said, soft enough so that only he could hear. ‘Breathe.’

He sucked in a few ragged gulps of air and looked up. The judge nodded once, and pronounced that he would adjourn the sentencing and leave it to a higher court to decide his fate.

Lee was led away. He threw a glance at Alec and Ellie over his shoulder before he was ensconced in darkness once more.

In the ensuing chaos, Alec and Ellie slipped out the fire escape to avoid the press and the other policemen, and sat in the dark stairwell, holding each other. Alec was curled against Ellie, his ear over her heart.

‘It’s all right,’ she said. She rested her head against his and stroked his hair. ‘It’s all right.’

‘It’s not all right,’ he mumbled.

‘Yes it is,’ she replied. ‘You’re with me. You’re okay.’

Alec began to sob, first gently, then violently. It was the first time he had wept in front of someone since Tess. Every bit of protracted, pent-up grief, every piece of sorrow and horror and loneliness, every last drop of that infernal river, sluiced from his eyes. He cried for Pippa Gillespie, he cried for Lisa Newbery, he cried for Daniel Latimer, and he cried for himself until his whole body was wracked with painful spasms.

But most of all, he wept for Pippa.

‘She was so small, Ellie,’ he whispered against her chest. ‘God, she was so little. But the water made her so heavy.’

Ellie despaired that she could do nothing but hold him and tell him it was all right, unaware that to Alec, that was everything.

* *

After some hours had passed, the time came for Claire’s plea. Alec composed himself as well as he was able, and they went inside.

Claire, too, spoke a single word in response to her charge, and her sentence too was adjourned.

Feeling as though great stones had been lifted from their shoulders, Alec and Ellie finally felt the courage to speak to the other officers.

‘Two guilty pleas,’ said Tess. ‘Got to be pleased with that.’

‘It’s not over until Ricky pleads,’ Alec said shortly.
'That’s true. So. How’s Daisy?’ Tess asked.

‘Good. She’s loving her new school. Really been enjoying her English class, actually. We’re reading some of her books together.’

Tess frowned. ‘That’s a surprise. She’s always hated English.’ She gestured to Ellie, whose swelling bump was disguised by a large coat. ‘And what about…? Still keeping it a secret?’

‘Trying to. Daisy’s a bit of a blabbermouth, and Ellie’s friends and some of her co-workers know. But we thought it best to keep it away from the press.’

‘Probably a good idea,’ Tess agreed.

After a time, Cate Gillespie came up to Alec. ‘So,’ she said, her eyes red-rimmed from crying. ‘It’s done. They’ve admitted to it.’ She looked at him haughtily. ‘I suppose I should say thank you. For finding out the truth about what happened to Pippa.’

‘You don’t need to thank me,’ Alec said.

She told them some of the particulars she had learned about the case. Apparently Claire had told Lee she was going to plead guilty, thereby taking him down with her. A not guilty plea became unfeasible for him, so Lee had plead guilty first to win a less severe sentence.

‘Ricky’s plea hearing is in two weeks,’ Cate went on. ‘Part of me wants it not to be true. Part of me thinks it isn’t true. Part of me wants him to plead not guilty.’ She sighed. ‘And part of me wants him to be locked away to rot forever.’

‘If you ever need help,’ Ellie said, ‘you know you can come to us. I know how hard this must be.’

Cate scoffed. ‘You don’t know anything,’ she said, and left them alone.

They emerged from the courthouse and were accosted by reporters. A familiar face was at the front of the pack.

‘Oh God,’ Alec groaned.

‘Alec! DI Hardy!’ the woman called.

It was Karen White. She had a recorder clutched in her hand.

‘How are you feeling after the hearing? What’s it like to know you got the culprits at last?’ she asked.

The rest of the reporters shouted similar questions and snapped pictures.

‘No comment,’ Alec said tiredly, forging ahead. ‘No comment.’

Tess and the South Mercier police emerged behind them and began fielding questions. Immediately, the reporters gravitated to them. Karen White, however, dogged Ellie and Alec.

‘Surely you must have something to say,’ Karen said. ‘After all these years. After all those mistakes, how do you feel knowing that the killers will finally pay for what they’ve done?’

Alec stopped. He turned on his heel and took a single step towards Karen. His countenance was
‘After all these years,’ he said, ‘I have nothing to say to you.’

He reached protectively for Ellie’s arm and gently pushed her in front of him, placing his own body between her and Karen as they walked. Karen was taken aback by the intensity of his rebuff, but a career in journalism had taught her nothing if not persistence.

‘Please,’ she said. ‘I know I was never friendly to you, but you came through for Cate Gillespie. I want to do right by you for that.’

Her attention was suddenly drawn by the familiar way Alec touched Ellie’s elbow and she frowned. Neither of the detectives responded to her, though she continued to question them until they reached their car. Karen looked at Ellie with renewed suspicion. ‘Did the two of you come here together?’

Karen’s gaze fell to Ellie’s belly, and Ellie self-consciously pulled her coat tighter around herself. Without making a sound, they got into the car, slammed the doors shut, and drove away.

To herself, Karen mumbled, ‘you have got to be kidding me.’

Without wasting another second, she went in search of someone.

As Ellie drove out of the carpark, the last thing she saw when she glanced in her rear view mirror was Karen speaking to Olly.

* *

CS Jenkinson called Alec in the next day.

‘The bosses are pleased,’ she told him. ‘Two guilty pleas in a high profile case – they’re very pleased indeed, and relieved that they can finally stop worrying about Sandbrook. You’ve done well, Alec. You and Ellie both.’

‘It’s not over yet,’ Alec said grimly. ‘We’re still waiting on Ricky’s plea hearing. And the sentencing.’

‘Two guilty pleas from Pippa’s murderers is enough to satisfy the media, though. Pippa’s death was always far more sensational than Lisa’s.’ She gestured to the papers spread across her desk.

Alec shifted uncomfortably. ‘What did you call me here for?’

‘We’d like to offer you a job,’ Jenkinson said. ‘DI, here in Broadchurch.’

Alec was stunned. ‘You’ve already got one.’

‘DI Kevins is quitting. His mother has cancer. He wants to move up north to be with her, so we need a replacement, and we need one fast.’

‘Offer it to Ellie.’

‘We’re offering it to you,’ she rejoined coolly. ‘You’ve got experience. You’re living in the area. You’ve apparently been coming in to help recently, and most of the boys seem to have warmed to you. On top of that, you solved Sandbrook.’

‘I didn’t,’ he said shortly. ‘Ellie did. Offer it to her. You know she’s the best person for the job. She knows this area and these people like no-one else.’

‘With DI Kevins quitting so suddenly, we need someone who can take the helm right away. To put it
bluntly, someone who won’t be flitting away on maternity leave in a few months.’

Alec folded his arms. ‘You know I could take you to court for discrimination over what you just said.’

‘I know. But you won’t.’ Jenkinson stood up and walked to the other side of the desk. ‘Much as you and I hate to admit it, Ellie’s not in a good place to take over as DI for the first time.’

Alec’s mouth set in a hard line. ‘She’d never forgive me if I did.’

‘That’s something the two of you will have to work out,’ Jenkinson replied. ‘But really, you ought to think of the future. Think of how this arrangement will benefit you, and your new family.’

Alec stared at the floor, a troubled crease between his brows.

‘Again?’ Ellie was apoplectic. ‘You’ve gone and stolen my job again?’

‘No,’ Alec replied quickly. ‘I don’t want it. I turned her down.’

Ellie put her hands on her hips. ‘Why you?’ she demanded. ‘Why you and not me?’

Alec nodded at her belly.

‘Seriously?’ Her jaw dropped. ‘Because I’m pregnant? Isn’t that discrimination? Can’t we sue?’

‘We can try if you want.’

Ellie started pacing in agitation. After a time, she ground to a halt and pulled her hair. ‘She’s right,’ she growled. ‘The annoying thing is, she’s right. I’m probably going to need a caesarean for them. That’ll put me off duty for at least six months.’ She paced and fumed and fretted for a little while. ‘It took me so bloody long to recover from Fred’s caesarean. I remember her getting annoyed about it, and I just know that’s why...’

She paced up and down for several more minutes while Alec watched on with mounting concern. Once she had trodden the fury out of her system and considered it from all angles, she looked up at him and said:

‘Take it. Take the job. Ring her up and say you’ve changed your mind. Much as I hate to say it, it’s the best option for us.’

‘You’ll never forgive me,’ he pointed out.

‘No I bloody won’t,’ she replied. ‘But we need the money right now, and I can’t think of any other arrangement that would suit us better.’

‘It should be you, Ellie,’ he said softly. ‘You solved Sandbrook. You know this town. This job is yours by rights.’

‘I know,’ Ellie sighed. ‘But that’s how life is sometimes. Shitty and unfair.’

He tried to kiss her, but she firmly declined.

‘Not so fast. I’m still mad at you.’
‘You’re gonna be mad until the day I die.’

‘I’d kill you myself here and now,’ she said, cocking her head to one side, ‘but then that’d mean I’d be stuck with all the kids, and if you think I’m raising five all by myself…’

Alec looked amused. ‘Four,’ he reminded her. ‘Daisy’s not yours, remember? She’d go back with Tess.’

‘Like hell she would. Daisy’s my babysitter. I’m not giving her up.’

Alec dared to put an arm round her waist. ‘Guess you’ll have to let me live, then.’

‘For now.’

Once he had secured a kiss and a cuddle and assured himself that all was well between them, he rang Jenkinson and told her he wanted the job after all.

* *

Some ten days later, during which time Alec settled comfortably back into the position of DI, and Ellie forgot her resentment in the pleasure of working with him once more, they headed back to Sandbrook together.

‘I got the latest word from Jocelyn,’ Ellie said, glancing in her mirror and hitting the indicator, ‘Ricky was meant to have his plea hearing before Lee and Claire, but he pushed it back to see how they’d plead. He apparently started working out a deal when he heard they’d gone for guilty. All signs point to another guilty from him.’

‘God I hope so,’ Alec sighed, fiddling with his tie. ‘You were meant to turn left there,’ he added quietly.

‘Ahh, shit,’ said Ellie, and looked for somewhere to turn around.

They arrived at last and parked a block away from the courthouse, wary of reporters. As Ellie got out, she pulled on her coat and buttoned it up.

‘Does it show?’ she asked, turning in a circle.

‘Yeah,’ Alec said. ‘Maybe leave it loose.’

Ellie fixed it. ‘Better?’

‘It’ll have to do.’

Ellie took his hand. ‘Once more unto the breach, once more,’ she said.

Alec did not smile. He kissed her hand, released it, and they walked towards the courthouse.

As they neared, a swarm of reporters accosted them. Karen White was in the lead, and above the din she shouted a single question.

* *

Nish dumped another paper on Alec’s desk, making five in total spread in front of him. His eyes were fractured by the light reflecting off his glasses, and Nish could not quite make out her boss’ mood.
‘There’s another one, sir,’ she said. ‘That makes all the main papers.’

Alec leaned forward. This paper featured a picture of himself and Ellie. A large red arrow pointed to the obvious bulge beneath her coat, and the headline declared Secret Affair – Police Cover Up Sex Scandal.

Alec removed his glasses and tossed them on the desk. The words BROADCHURCH SEX SCANDAL: Detectives Frame Joe Miller to Conduct Secret Affair were refracted through them. His own face stared back at him, caught in a dozen different photographs. His eye seemed particularly drawn by one that simply said: The Worst Cops in Britain?

He pinched the bridge of his nose and massaged his eyelids.

‘Where’s Ellie?’ he asked at last.

‘Toilet,’ Nish said.

Alec went to find her. She was indeed in the ladies’ toilets, standing with her hands braced on either side of a cubicle door as she viciously kicked the door in. It would fly inwards, bang loudly, and ricochet back into place. When it did, Ellie would kick it again.

‘Bastards.’

Kick.

‘Bastards.’

Kick.

‘El.’ He put a hand on her shoulder. She stilled for a moment and let the door swing closed unmolested. ‘There’s another one,’ he said. ‘Nish says that’s all the main papers now.’

‘I know,’ Ellie said through gritted teeth. ‘Maggie just called me.’

She gave the door one final kick and turned around, her brown eyes burning like coals.

‘The story’s the same in all of them,’ Alec went on. ‘The same story Sharon told. That we had an affair and tried to frame Joe to get him out of the way. Only the latest one adds the detail that the police covered up the scandal for us, and that’s why I got the job as DI here again. Courtesy of Karen White.’ His lip curled in disgust.

‘Who must have got wind of this story courtesy of Olly,’ Ellie said. ‘Lucy and Maggie are stringing him up as we speak. I can’t believe he told them about us. He must have known that the papers would twist it!’

‘And in all this, not one word about Lisa or Ricky,’ Alec said, looking wounded. ‘Pippa and Lisa – all three of their killers have plead guilty and are waiting justice, and that’s only in there as an afterthought. Those girls -’ Alec broke off, suddenly too emotional to continue. ‘People should know they’re getting justice. But they’re more interested in spreading this horseshit…’

‘It’ll blow over,’ Ellie said, more to herself than to Alec. ‘It has to.’

‘Do you think anyone at the station believes it?’ Alec asked.

‘They’ve seen all the tapes and the evidence. They know Joe’s guilty. And they know us. They won’t believe it. They can’t.’ She reflected for a moment. ‘Have you heard anything from
‘She’s coming in this afternoon. She’s not happy. I think she and the powers that be were hoping that’d be the end of scandals from me.’

The fury fueling Ellie began to wane, and she paused to wipe a tear from her eye. ‘The worst part about all this is reading the papers and hearing the way they talk about the pregnancy. Like it’s something to be ashamed of. One of them said that the only reason you got together with me properly was because you’d knocked me up.’ She curled her fingers protectively across her belly. ‘It breaks my heart,’ she said in a low voice. ‘The whole world hates them and they’re not even born yet.’

She leaned against Alec’s shoulder and her tears soaked into his blue suit.

‘Is it selfish?’ she whispered. ‘Is it selfish to bring them into a world that doesn’t want them?’

‘We want them. That’s all that matters.’

‘It took so long for me to want them. To accept them. To stop feeling guilty for wanting them. And now this. I can’t…’

‘It will blow over,’ Alec said firmly, echoing her earlier hope. ‘All of this will be over soon.’

But neither of them believed it.

Tom was sitting beneath the cliffs and staring out to sea, his chin resting on his knees. His patched, faded, faithful football sat beside him and he rolled it under his fingers. It was bitterly cold, and the steely sky watered like an abscessed eye.

As he continued to roll his ball back and forth on the sand, a brown dog ran up to him and jumped on him with an excited bark. Tom started, and a wide smile spread across his face.

‘Vince!’ he exclaimed, cuddling the dog.

‘What are you doing out here?’ a voice said.

Tom looked up. It was Susan Wright, dressed warmly to combat the chill wind. There was a grey pallor to her skin and a yellowness to her eyes that was more pronounced than he remembered. An empty lead hung from one hand, and she put the other on her hip.

‘It’s a school day,’ she went on. ‘Ain’t you meant to be in class?’

Tom’s gaze dropped to the sand. Vince nuzzled him and he rubbed his ears with a troubled expression. ‘I cut,’ he admitted. ‘I cut class.’

Susan’s expression remained neutral. ‘That’s no good,’ she said. ‘A boy your age, not going to class. Why’d you do that, then, and come all the way out here?’

‘Just wanted to be alone,’ Tom shrugged.

Susan studied him for a few moments. Then she insisted that he shouldn’t stay out in the cold. Tom agreed, and soon they were sitting in that familiar caravan of hers. As he fed Vince some treats, Susan heated up a can of baked beans on the stove.
‘Did you read the papers today?’ Tom asked.

‘I saw ‘em in the window,’ she replied. ‘Don’t really follow the news much.’

‘There’s an article in there about my parents. About my mum,’ he amended. ‘She’s started dating Alec Hardy. You know, the detective?’

‘I know him,’ Susan said. ‘He arrested me. So’d your mum, come to think of it.’

She continued to stir the beans impassively, her face expressionless.

‘Oh. Sorry. Well, anyway, we all live together now. It’s been great, the five of us. Me, mum, Alec, Daisy and Fred. Only, mum found out she was pregnant, and when she and Alec went to see the Sandbrook trials, some journalists noticed. They’re trying to say that mum and Alec have been having an affair from the start, and that they tried to imprison Dad to get him out of the way. They think the babies are their secret love child.’

Susan turned to him, frowning. ‘Babies?’ she echoed.

‘They’re having twins,’ Tom qualified. ‘Boy and a girl. Only don’t tell anyone, I’m not supposed to let on.’

Susan watched him for a long moment, her eyes narrowed. She returned at length to stirring. ‘S’pose I should say congratulations.’

‘We’re all happy about it. We were. But today…’

He broke off and looked down. His hand settled on the scruff of Vince’s neck and the dog licked a tear from his cheek.

‘The other kids were asking me about it,’ he sniffed. ‘Asking if it was true. They’d only just stopped asking me about my Dad being a murderer, and now they’re asking if it’s true that my Mum framed him so she and Alec could…’ He rubbed his face on his shoulder and sniffed again. ‘Two older boys threw me against a locker. That’s why I came to the beach.’

Susan dumped a plate full of baked beans onto the tiny table in front of him. ‘Eat,’ she said. ‘They’re nice and hot. You’ll feel better.’

Tom slowly picked up the plate and stared at them.

‘Eat!’ she commanded. ‘Go on! Before Vince steals them off you.’

The dog was looking at the beans with such intensity that Tom didn’t doubt her. He took a bite.

‘Thanks,’ he mumbled.

‘Do you think there’s any truth to it, then?’ she asked after he’d half-finished the plate.

‘Truth?’

‘That your dad’s innocent.’

Tom set the fork down. ‘He can’t be,’ he said quickly.

‘He were found innocent, weren’t he?’ Susan pointed out.
‘I know, but Mum – Mum and Alec – they’d never frame him like they’re saying…’

‘How do you know?’

Tom was floored. He had believed in his father’s innocence for so long, had clung to the delusion for months before he’d finally let it go. Suddenly having the possibility dangled in front of him again was too much to bear.

‘There’s plenty of others what could have done it,’ Susan went on.

‘They wouldn’t lie,’ Tom said, shaking his head. ‘Mum and Alec aren’t like that.’

‘Neither was your dad.’

In the ensuing silence, he noticed that Susan’s breathing sounded laboured. He looked up at her and saw that she was grimacing with pain. One hand rested on her diaphragm.

‘Are you okay?’ he asked.

A hideous coughing fit suddenly seized her. She doubled over as she heaved and hacked. After some thirty seconds, the fit subsided.

‘Hey - are you okay?’ Tom said again. He got up and retrieved a glass of water for her. ‘Here,’ he said.

She took the glass and swigged. Now restored to equilibrium she sat back with a throaty sigh.

‘That sounded bad,’ Tom said pensively.

‘Been a bit sick lately,’ Susan replied. ‘Nothing to worry about, though. I’m sure it’ll clear up soon.’

She forced a smile, but it failed to reassure him.

‘You finish up your beans,’ Susan encouraged. Tom obeyed, and she went on, ‘and if you ever need to get away from them boys again, you’re welcome to come here. I know Vince likes it when you visit.’

Vince wagged his tail.

* 

Early one morning, just two days later, Ellie’s phone rang. She was standing in the kitchen in slippers and pyjamas, sipping from a mug as she stared abstractedly out the window. Pulling the phone out, she squinted at the screen. She did not recognise the number. ‘Hello, Ellie speaking.’

‘Ellie Miller? Listen, please don’t hang up -’

Ellie snatched the phone away from her ear at once and jammed the red button. The voice, forever burned into her brain, had belonged to none other than Sharon Bishop, the barrister who had been the cause of so much grief. Shaking with sudden rage, she placed the phone on the counter and wrapped both hands around the mug to steady them.

Presently, the phone rang again.

‘I don’t want to speak to you,’ Ellie said firmly when she answered it.
'I know,’ Sharon said hurriedly. ‘I know I’m the last person you want to hear from right now, but please, it’s important.’

Ellie glowered. ‘Talk fast.’

‘It’s… well, there’s no easy way to put this. Ellie, your husband is back.’

Ellie froze. The whole room seemed to fill with water. Her lungs stopped up and her vision clouded blue.

‘He came to me. He wants to sue for custody of your sons, and he wanted me to represent him.’

The mug shattered on the floor. Hot water splashed over her slippered feet.

‘Ellie? Ellie, are you there?’

Faintly, she said, ‘yes. I’m still here.’

‘I refused him,’ she went on. ‘But I thought I should tell you. And Ellie… he’s seen the papers. He knows about you and Alec, and he knows you’re pregnant.’
Ellie arranged to meet Sharon face-to-face. At first Sharon was unwilling to come all the way to Broadchurch, but Ellie’s flat and furious insistence soon convinced her.

Alec bellowed like a wounded bull when he found out and called all three of his useless informants to berate them.

‘What is the point of you, Craig?’ he shouted. ‘I told you to tell me the instant Joe Miller set foot in the UK! The instant! Not the next morning, the instant he came back!’

If nothing else, the ranting and swearing was at least an effective way to exorcise his frustration.

They went, oddly enough, to Jocelyn’s house for the meeting. Sharon was already inside waiting for them, and Maggie had put on a fine little spread of biscuits and sandwiches. She poured the tea, eager to keep busy, while Alec and Ellie sat down.

‘I’m surprised you asked us here,’ Ellie said to Sharon, nodding around Jocelyn’s home. ‘I thought you and Jocelyn were mortal enemies.’

The walk up the hill had been freezing, and Ellie was sitting on her hands to warm them, her orange coat ballooning around her swollen tummy. Noticing how cold Ellie looked, Alec grabbed one of Jocelyn’s throw rugs and placed it over her knees before he sat next to her, and she muttered at him not to fuss.

‘We’ve worked things out,’ Sharon replied. Jocelyn seated herself at Sharon’s right hand, and she continued, ‘Jocelyn’s been helping me with an old case. My son.’

‘In prison on trumped up charges,’ Jocelyn supplied. ‘The appeal’s in a week. It’s very likely to be successful.’

There was a pause.

‘I didn’t realise,’ Ellie said shortly, ‘about your son.’

‘We’re not here to discuss that,’ Alec interrupted. His arm was spread protectively along the back of Ellie’s chair. ‘We’re here to talk about Joe Miller.’

Sharon nodded and explained the situation. Joe had returned to the UK the instant he’d seen the articles about them, and Sharon noted that he seemed unbalanced by the news.

‘He hated the thought of you being a father to his boys,’ Sharon said. ‘And of you taking over his life the way you have. There was something in his eyes when he spoke about it all, especially the pregnancy…’

She went on to say that he had pleaded for her help in getting custody of his sons. He had saved some money during his time in Ireland, but not enough to pay her legal fees, and it was on these grounds she had refused.

‘That was the reason I gave him,’ she said. ‘But… speaking honestly to you now, I don’t think he should be allowed near those children.’

‘Would’ve been a lot better if you’d thought of that before you took his case,’ Alec snapped.
Sharon bristled. ‘I was only –’

‘Doing your job,’ Ellie finished, her eyes flashing. ‘Yeah. We know. We’ve heard it all before.’

‘Every accused person has the right to a defence,’ Sharon objected.

Ellie almost exploded. ‘You know he’s guilty!’

Sharon studied her face. ‘I do,’ she conceded, backing down. ‘Ellie, I’m sorry for everything that’s happening to you. Truly I am. I’m a mum too. I know how awful this must be.’

‘Shut up!’ Ellie put her hands over her ears. ‘Just shut up! I don’t want your pity and I don’t want your fucking apology! What I want is Joe Miller behind bars and as far away from my children as possible, and you ruined my only chance of that happening!’

‘Not your only chance,’ Jocelyn put in. ‘Remember, if new and compelling evidence comes to light, Joe Miller may be trialled again. As detectives, the two of you are in prime position to find that evidence.’

They considered her words, and felt as sailors in shark-infested waters upon glimpsing a distant beacon.

‘I know you don’t want my apology,’ Sharon went on. ‘But I am sorry for what the papers are doing to you.’

‘It’s your lie they’re spreading,’ Ellie snapped. ‘Your bullshit about us having an affair. I could handle it if it weren’t for…’

She broke off with a grimace of pain and rested a hand on her belly. Maggie, who had been lingering on the sidelines, glided forward. ‘About that… Ellie, I’ve been speaking to Olly and he swears it wasn’t him who told.’

Ellie scoffed. ‘I saw him talking to Karen White. There’s no-one else it could be.’

She seemed disinclined to say more on the subject, so Maggie let it slide. ‘Well, whatever the case, I have a proposal for you. Talk to me at the Echo. Give us an interview. We can put forward your side of the story. Get the truth out there.’

They refused vehemently. ‘Anything we say will get twisted,’ Alec said. ‘I know how you people work. I see how you’ve trained Oliver.’

‘Now, now,’ Jocelyn said. ‘We didn’t come here to trade insults. Ellie, Alec – we want to help you. You, and your children, and the new ones on the way.’

Sharon said, ‘Jocelyn and I have agreed. If Joe Miller sues for custody of your sons, we’re going to defend you in court. Free of charge.’

Ellie squinted. ‘Both of you? You’re not pulling our leg, are you?’

‘We are deadly serious,’ Jocelyn said. ‘And believe me, between the two of us there’s not a lawyer alive who can take us.’

Ellie looked between them, her suspicion fading by degrees. ‘Thank you,’ she murmured. ‘That’s…’

‘The least you could do, really,’ Alec said coldly, glowering at Sharon.
They discussed a few more things with the barristers before they stood up to leave. As they did, Sharon held out her hand. Neither of them shook it, but Ellie did say over her shoulder:

‘I hope your son’s appeal goes well.’

And that was as amicably as they were able to part.

* *

‘Daisy,’ Alec said when they got home, ‘I don’t want you working at the Echo anymore.’

‘What?’ Daisy cried. ‘But I have to! I promised Maggie I’d be her photographer this weekend!’

For all her protests, Alec was uncompromising, and when Daisy pleaded with Ellie for support, she received nothing.

It was not in Daisy’s nature to obey her father when she had set her mind to do otherwise: so it was that Saturday morning, Alec walked into her bedroom to find it empty.

‘For God’s sake,’ he growled. ‘Ellie!’

Ellie immediately drove them to the Echo’s office. They found Daisy inside, safe and unharmed, but they rankled when they saw her talking to Olly.

‘Daisy!’ Alec thundered. ‘Get away from him. You’re coming home with us right now.’

‘No, Dad!’

‘Daisy, listen to your father,’ Ellie said.

‘No! Why don’t the two of you listen to Olly instead!’

They frowned at her, then at Olly. ‘Aunty Ellie,’ Olly said quickly. ‘I know you blame me for what the papers are doing, but I swear, I didn’t tell them. I didn’t have anything to do with it.’

‘Cut the crap, Oliver. I saw you talking to that Karen White,’ Ellie snapped. ‘I can’t believe you would sell us out like that!’

‘I didn’t!’ Olly squawked. ‘She asked me about you two, but I didn’t tell her anything!’

‘Oh yeah?’ Alec folded his arms and tilted his chin upwards. ‘Then who’d she hear it from? Huh?’

‘I don’t know! Plenty of people in Broadchurch know! She could have gotten it off anyone!’

Alec and Ellie wore twin expressions of contempt on their faces.

‘He’s telling the truth, Dad,’ Daisy said. ‘I believe him.’

Alec’s gaze flicked to Daisy, then back to Olly. ‘I swear,’ Olly went on. ‘I didn’t tell. I want to get ahead in journalism, sure, but those are my little cousins Ellie’s carrying. Do you really think I’d do something that might put them in danger?’

Ellie studied Olly’s expression. All her instincts, both as a detective and an aunt who had known that cheeky face since he was a baby, told her he was being honest. Her arms dropped to her side and she sighed.
'Fine. Fine, then if it wasn’t you, who the hell was it?'

Alec suddenly sagged next to her. He nudged her shoulder and dragged his feet over to a nearby filing cabinet. Ellie followed him and he spoke in a low voice.

‘Tess.’ He rubbed his eyes. ‘It was Tess.’

‘No!’ Ellie breathed. ‘She wouldn’t!’

‘She was there. She’s heard all about the Broadchurch case. She knew everything Sharon said. And she knew about the babies. It must have been her.’

Ellie tried to defend her, but each defense became weaker the more she dwelt on the possibility. Alec added, as the final nail in the coffin:

‘She swore she’d get back at me for taking Daisy away,’

Ellie put her head in her hands. ‘I don’t believe this.’

Alec rubbed her shoulder. ‘Don’t tell Daisy,’ he implored.

They emerged. Maggie was standing with Olly and Daisy.

‘Is he forgiven?’ she asked.

‘Yes,’ Ellie sighed. ‘We believe you, Olly.’

‘An apology would be nice,’ Olly sniffed.

‘Don’t push your luck.’

‘So can I stay on at the Echo?’ Daisy asked.

‘Do say yes,’ Maggie said. ‘She’s the most reliable photographer I’ve had in years.’

‘Fine,’ Alec relented. ‘Fine. But only on weekends.’ Daisy clapped her hands in delight and threw her arms around him. ‘You’re still in trouble, Daiz,’ he growled.

‘I know,’ she replied, and kissed his whiskery cheek.

* *

They went to see the Latimers next. Ellie had wanted to go alone, but Alec insisted on accompanying her.

‘We’ve just heard from Sharon Bishop,’ Ellie said, and the barrister’s name was like a knife twisting in their sides. ‘Joe’s back in the country.’

Mark and Beth stared at her in silent horror.

‘Is he in Broadchurch?’ Beth asked faintly.

‘Not to my knowledge, no. We think he’s in London still, looking for a lawyer who will agree to represent him. He…’

She could not finish the sentence. Alec said, ‘he wants to sue for custody of Tom and Fred.’
'Oh God, Ellie -' Beth began. She seized her friend at once and hugged her.

Mark’s hands were bunched into fists on his knees. He glanced over at the playpen where Lizzie was sitting, chewing on a large alphabet block. ‘He can’t,’ he said shortly. ‘He can’t be allowed near those boys. Nor any of our kids. If he sets one foot in Broadchurch…’

Grimly, Alec said, ‘we want you to know there’s still hope. Ellie and I are working as DI and DS. We’re going to reopen the case, start investigating again. Jocelyn’s advising us, and as soon as we have sufficient evidence, we’re going to go for a retrial.’

‘We’re going to get him, Beth,’ Ellie said. ‘We’ll get that bastard once and for all. Promise.’

Alec clasped his hands in front of him and spoke earnestly. ‘I failed you once. I will not fail you again. We will get you justice.’

‘If there’s anything you need us for,’ Beth said, ‘I want you to tell us. Because we’ll do whatever it takes, too.’

* *

At the station, Alec assembled his team around him and delivered a measured speech.

‘Right. I gathered you all here to talk about what’s being said about us in the papers. I know you’ve all seen it,’ he looked around at the team, and they stared at their shoelaces by way of confirming his statement, ‘and I know you’re all talking about it. So we’re here to tell you now: it’s not true. Not a word of it is true.’

‘Alec and I got together after we solved the Sandbrook case,’ Ellie said, ‘long after the investigation and Joe’s trial too. Sharon Bishop, his barrister, accused us of having an affair during his trial to throw doubt on the case, and now that accusation’s stuck since we got together. But you know us. You know it’s not true.’

The assembled officers shuffled their feet.

‘You’ve all seen the tapes,’ Alec said. ‘Joe’s confession, the evidence against him, all of it. Sharon managed to play the system to get him off, but the proof is there. Joe Miller killed Daniel Latimer,’ he pronounced the words as he turned in a half circle, projecting the statement so that it hit everyone in the room.

‘Officially, Danny’s murder is unsolved,’ Ellie said. ‘We’re going to reopen the investigation now, but as far as we’re concerned, we only have one suspect. Our efforts will be directed towards compiling enough evidence against Joe Miller to apply for a retrial.’

A low muttering swept through the room, and many looked askance at Ellie’s swelling midriff.

‘Joe moved to Ireland when the trial was over,’ Alec continued. ‘Our sources tell us that he’s moved back to the UK and it’s very possible that he may come back to Broadchurch. If that happens, we have to be on alert, as much to protect Mr. Miller as to look for new evidence against him. There are people here who want Mr. Miller dead,’ he stared at the ground as he said this, but all his attention was fixed on Ellie at his side, ‘we may need to save people from themselves, as much as from him.’

Nish put her hand up.

‘Yes, Nish, you don’t need to raise your hand,’ Ellie sighed.
‘Oh – sorry,’ Nish said, quickly lowering it. ‘Um – just to clarify – so we’re not considering anyone else in Danny’s death? No-one at all?’

‘Joe Miller murdered Daniel Latimer,’ Alec repeated with cold conviction.

In the end, their speech, which had been intended to allay fears, only stoked them. The officers went away, murmuring:

‘Strange that they won’t consider anyone else.’

‘I know there’s a lot of evidence against Joe, but it almost feels like Ellie and Hardy really are trying to imprison him just to get him out of the way…’

‘Well, they’ve been together for about as long as Ellie’s been pregnant… maybe they did have an affair, and they really did only get together because of the pregnancy…’

Locked away in his office, Alec stayed above idle gossip, but Ellie heard it following her every step she took, clinging to her until the weight was almost too much to bear.

* *

A week passed and their situation showed no sign of improving. Ellie retreated, as she so often did, to her deserted lookout by the sea. The wind rinsed her clean, and its sharp, cold sting on her face revitalised her. Snug in her orange coat, scarf and gloves, she barely felt the bite of winter, and was able to lose herself in a thousand comforting childhood memories. The grass nodded and waved at her feet, and the cliffs glittered in the orange sunlight. She knew every crack and jagged bump in those cliffs; as a Broadchurch native, they were as old friends to her, with lined and wrinkled faces. She stood upon their hunched backs and they bore her as a patient, bow-legged grandfather will endure the weight of a grandchild.

‘I can’t wait to show you this place,’ Ellie said quietly. ‘Best view in the world, right here on this spot.’

She had her hands in her jacket pockets. Hidden from view, they were pressed against her belly.

‘Your dad still doesn’t like it here much,’ she went on. ‘I see it in the way he looks at the ocean and the cliffs. But it’s growing on him. We’ll make a native of him yet, won’t we?’

She continued to speak in a low voice, detailing all the things she wanted to with them when they were born.

‘I can’t wait to meet you,’ she whispered, and fell silent.

The orange sun crouched behind the ocean and became choked with rainclouds. Icy, grey-blue fingers stretched across the sky, and Ellie heard footsteps behind her.

It was the heavy tread of a man; Alec, she thought, come to fetch her home.

‘I thought I might find you here.’

The voice sent a rat scuttling down her spine. She whirled around at once, her eyes wide with fear.

Dread suffused her. Her mouth trembled and closed into a tight bud.

For there, in the gloom, was Joe, wearing a blue coat and walking towards her with a smile on his face.
‘Surprised to see me?’ he asked.

‘Stay away from me,’ Ellie croaked. Rage began to replace her shock and she pointed at him with one gloved finger. ‘You stay away from me!’

She took a step backwards, and her world span. The waves roared below her, as though they were shouting a warning, and she immediately planted both feet back on the clay, acutely aware of how close she was to the precipice.

It occurred to her, suddenly, that she was trapped.

Joe continued to climb the hill. He stopped about ten metres away from her. The wind slithered between them and icy drops of rain cut their cheeks.

‘You always did love coming here,’ Joe went on. ‘We went on one of our first dates here, didn’t we? A picnic, if I remember right.’

In a hoarse voice, Ellie said, ‘what do you want?’

‘I want to talk to you,’ Joe said. ‘That’s all.’

‘I don’t. I don’t want to talk to you.’

Ellie’s body language showed exactly how angry and afraid she was. She curled inwards, trying to make herself concave, trying, somehow, to get her babies away from him. Her arms were up, ready to attack.

‘You can relax. For God’s sake,’ he said, a sudden bolt of anger flashing through him. ‘I’m not going to hurt you, El. What sort of person do you think I am?’

‘I know exactly what sort of person you are,’ she replied. At his tone of voice she adopted a more defensive stance. ‘And don’t call me El. Don’t you ever fucking call me that again.’

Joe lowered his head and swallowed his anger. When he looked up, he wore the smiling mask of the husband she had loved for so long.

‘It feels good to be back here,’ Joe said. ‘It’s been hard, these past few months. When Paul dropped me off at Sheffield I had nothing. No money, no possessions, just the clothes on my back. Some Christian charity, huh?’

Ellie kept her gaze fixed on him, watching every single movement he made, alert for any sign of danger and searching for any clues. As she studied his hands she saw that he was still wearing his wedding ring, and her heart went cold.

‘I made it across to Ireland and my brother took me in. I’ve been working all these last months, trying to earn enough money to come back. A part of me hoped,’ he took a step forward, making her flinch back towards the precipice, ‘that when I returned, you and I could work things out.’

While he was distracted, she slowly began reaching for the phone in her trouser pocket.

‘Work things out?’ she echoed.

‘I missed you, Ellie,’ he said. ‘And I missed our sons.’

She started violently at that. Her teeth set on edge, and clouds of mist billowed from her nostrils. But she kept herself in check; she needed him to keep talking. She inched the zip down.
‘You will never see them again,’ she said through her teeth. ‘Either of them.’

‘No,’ he reflected. ‘I suppose I won’t, thanks to Alec Hardy.’

She froze.

‘Imagine my disappointment,’ he said, ‘when I learned the two of you had got together. That he had moved in with my wife and sons.’

‘I am not your wife!’

‘You are,’ he replied. ‘I never signed the papers. You’re mine, El.’

She began to grope a little more desperately for her phone.

‘And yet here you are,’ he said in distaste, ‘carrying Alec Hardy’s bastards. That makes you an adulterer, doesn’t it? A lying whore?’

There was real hatred in his eyes. It set her whole body trembling.

‘Is it true?’ he demanded. ‘What they’re saying? What Sharon said?’

‘What?’ she scoffed, trying to disguise the tremor in her voice. ‘That we framed you to have an affair?’

Her hand closed around her phone. Too late, she recalled with a stab of despair that she was still wearing gloves. The smartphone was unresponsive to her sheathed fingers. All she could do was grip it and try to stop herself from shaking.

‘You got together awfully fast after I was gone,’ he said. ‘Tell me. I need to know.’ He took another step forward. ‘Did you have an affair while we were together?’

‘Do you have to ask me that?’ Ellie said. She released the phone, her last hope, and pulled her hand out of her pocket, raising two fists. ‘Do you have to fucking ask me that? You sick, fucking -’

Perhaps sensing their mother’s distress, the babies starting kicking, and the sensation brought her reeling to a halt. She ground her teeth together.

‘Well. I suppose it doesn’t matter. I’ve lost you. But I still want to see my sons. You know I have a right to that.’

‘A right?’ she screamed, taking a step forward. ‘You don’t have right to fucking anything! You gave up your rights when you murdered a child!’

‘I was found innocent.’

‘Is that what you tell yourself, is it? Is that what lets you sleep at night?’

He ignored her. ‘You have no right to stop me from seeing them.’

‘I have every right!’

‘You cannot stop me from seeing my sons!’ he roared.

They faced off, she with her back to the sky and the crashing waves, he with nothing but solid ground around him. The earth shifted beneath her weight and she stumbled slightly as a piece of
limestone slipped away. It fell into the ocean and was devoured by the gnashing water.

He breathed heavily, his hot breath clouding the air. A light drizzle began to fall.

‘I will see my sons,’ Joe said quietly. ‘If we can’t work something out between us, I will find a way to get them.’

Having pronounced these words, he departed at once, his blue coat melting into the twilight.

Ellie’s head rang with ocean sounds. She trembled like a broken windchime, all movement and no music, and sank to the ground.

Alec was frantic when she told him what had happened. He wanted to keep her at home, but she insisted on reporting the incident immediately. After some convincing, he agreed, and packed off all three kids to Lucy’s house, along with a squad car to observe them in case Joe showed up.

Meanwhile, he took Ellie to station, and she made an official statement. They filled out the paperwork and meticulously recorded everything about the encounter.

When they were done, Ellie considered what they had.

‘No admission of guilt,’ she said. She scratched a line in the table with her fingernail. Alec had her wrapped in a blanket, and a steaming cup of tea was in her hands. ‘And no threats were made, either. Nothing indictable. Nothing much we can use as evidence. Just a man telling his estranged wife he wants to see his sons. Perfectly ordinary.’

She brought the chamomile tea to her lips with trembling hands. Alec sat with her and adjusted the blanket around her shoulders. He could not stop himself from touching her and checking her all over.

‘Perfectly ordinary,’ he muttered. ‘Perfectly ordinary to corner a pregnant woman on top of a cliff and tell her she’s a whore.’

He kissed her temple with feverish lips.

‘I wanted to kill him, Alec,’ she said in a low voice. She stared at the ripples in her cup of tea. ‘As soon as I saw him… this urge just came over me. I think… if it weren’t for…’ she paused and stroked her stomach, ‘I would have attacked him. I would have killed him. Or he would have killed me. One, or both of us, over that cliff.’

Karen White loitered in the stairwell of the Trader’s Hotel, flicking through some photos she had surreptitiously snapped of Ellie and Alec on her phone. Her boss had been impressed by the Broadchurch scoop, and promised that if she could dig up anything else on the sex scandal she would be promoted for sure.

As she considered how best to proceed, Becca approached her.

‘Sorry – I just wanted to check – you’re Karen White, aren’t you? Journalist?’

Her Melburnian accent was distinctive, and almost soothing in its broad, flat tones. Karen replied, ‘yes, that’s me. How can I help?’

‘It’s about Ellie and Alec,’ Becca said, and Karen pricked up immediately. ‘Listen – I read what you
wrote about them, and I thought you should know – it’s wrong. All of it. DI Hardy was staying at this hotel the whole time the scandal was meant to have been going on, and I can assure you,’ she paused to laugh, ‘he wasn’t getting any. Believe me.’

‘And how do you know that?’

‘He went to his hotel room alone. Every night. No-one else in or out.’

‘The barrister mentioned an incident,’ Karen said, ‘the night Joe Miller was arrested. DS Miller stayed with him for two hours.’

‘That’s right,’ she conceded, ‘but that was the only time. And all they did was talk. I – um…’ she lowered her voice, ‘I was curious about the case so I eavesdropped on them. Just for a little bit. They were only talking. Ellie was saying how upset she was, and Alec was trying to comfort her. That’s all.’

Karen had clearly lost interest already.

‘So – are you going to take a quote from me? Retract the article?’ Becca prompted.

‘I don’t think so.’

‘But it’s not true. I’ve just told you, the whole thing’s not true. They didn’t get together until long after the trial. You can ask anyone around here and they’ll tell you the same.’

‘Just because he didn’t bring her here doesn’t mean they couldn’t have conducted the affair elsewhere,’ Karen said with clinical coldness. ‘And frankly, how do I know you’re not just lying to cover for them?’

Becca seemed genuinely stunned by her reaction. ‘Have I missed something? Is this a personal vendetta, or do you just not care about the truth?’

Karen said, ‘DI Hardy failed two families. First the Gillespies, then the Latimers. It took years for Cate Gillespie to find out what happened to her daughter and her niece, thanks to his incompetence. And then he and DS Miller botched the case for the Latimers. There’s evidence of intimidation and police brutality. Frankly, I wouldn’t put it past DI Hardy to frame Joe Miller to save his own career, especially if he was fucking his wife, too.’

Becca was incredulous. ‘I think,’ she said, ‘you should probably leave my hotel. If you’ve come here just to dig up dirt on Alec and Ellie, then you can get out now. The two of them have suffered enough, and I won’t let you torture a pregnant woman just so you can sell some goddamn newspapers.’

An hour later, Karen was on the street, clutching her bag in her hand. Unsure of where else to go, she headed towards Olly’s house, hoping her former lover might assist her.

When she arrived, however, she was astonished to find a squad car was parked out the front. She could distantly hear Olly’s mother shouting – ‘Fred, will you get them coins outta your mouth!’

Wondering what was happening, she hung back, staying out of sight of the officers in the car.

To her surprise, she discovered she was not the only one watching the house.
Maggie woke Ellie up at dawn the next morning. She sloughed off Alec’s arm around her body and reached for the phone.

‘Lo?’

‘Ellie,’ Maggie said. ‘I think you and Alec had better come in straight away.’

Ellie stormed around the Echo’s office, trashing anything she could get her hands on. Alec simply sat down and stared at the newspaper on the desk in defeat.

FRAMED, the newspaper declared. A smaller headline said, Joe Miller Speaks Out. A large picture of Joe occupied most of the page, looking for all the world like a wronged and innocent man, his head bowed slightly and a light crease above his blue eyes. Alec’s attention was particularly drawn by a tiny piece of script that simply said, By Karen White.

A filing cabinet drew Ellie’s rage, and she kicked it and slapped it until she calmed down.

‘Read it,’ she croaked at last, pressing her head against the cool metal. ‘Read it out to me.’

Alec sighed and leaned forward. Olly and Maggie watched on, worried, as he read the article in his thick Scottish brogue.

It detailed Joe’s version of events – or rather, the version of events Sharon had invented for him. He spoke of how his wife had cheated on him with DI Alec Hardy and how he was “devastated” when he found out. It mentioned Alec’s need to find the killer and prove himself after he’d failed the Sandbrook case; his failing health; the fact he had been set to clear his desk the very day he’d arrested Joe. It detailed how Joe was a loving family man, and that everyone considered the murder supremely out of character.

“I did not kill Daniel Latimer,” ran one of the quotes.

Karen put the pertinent question to him: “If you didn’t kill Danny, who did?”

And it supplied Susan Wright’s evidence about Nige Carter and Sharon’s concocted tale of Mark murdering Danny and Nige dumping the body, going so far as to implicate Mark’s affair with Becca as further proof.

Finally, Karen asked Joe what he wanted. He replied “Justice.” He claimed he wanted to see his sons again, decried Ellie for barring him access, and said he wanted to sue for custody in court.

Alec read it all, but he paused when he reached the last paragraph. It ran: When asked if Mr. Miller had anything he wanted to say to his sons, he said this: “That I love them, and that I’ll be coming home soon.”

Alec wisely chose to leave those words unspoken. Thinking all was revealed, Ellie groaned and hit her head repeatedly against the filing cabinet.

‘El,’ Alec said, starting up. He pulled her away from the cabinet and she rested her head on his shoulder instead.

‘We have to see Mark and Beth,’ she mumbled, sniffing. ‘The press… they’re going to think Mark did it. We… we have to see Mark and Beth.’
‘Amazing, isn’t it?’ Mark said. He was numb to it all now, and seemed eerily calm. ‘Our son gets murdered, and this is what happens to us. Our lives, smeared all over the tabloids. Every detail. Every mistake -’

He broke off and glanced at Beth. She was slumped at the table and her head was in her hands. Slowly, she looked at Ellie.

‘Isn’t there…’ she wet her lips. ‘Isn’t there anything we can do?’

Her eyes pleaded with her friend to offer some shred of hope.

‘Don’t talk to the press,’ Alec advised. ‘Stay inside for a little while. Let us deal with the media.’

Mark’s phone started ringing. ‘It’s Nige,’ he said, and answered. ‘Nige – I know, calm down, mate, I seen it. Just -’

Sighing, Mark walked out of the room, the phone pressed to his ear.

‘What did we do, Ellie?’ Beth asked. Her eyes were dry but her face was a perfect oval of misery. ‘What did we do to deserve this?’

Ellie had no answer.

The people of Broadchurch discussed the story with merciless intensity, passing judgement and conjecture at every turn. Some vehemently protested that Joe had to be the killer. Some believed that Mark had murdered his son. Some blamed Alec and Ellie. Some sympathised with Joe and hoped he would get his children back, and some simply scoffed at the state of the police force and shook their heads in contempt.

Alec assembled his officers and gave another speech, telling them their priority was now to protect the Latimers from the media swarm that had descended on Broadchurch. They would continue to investigate the Broadchurch case until they had found enough evidence to put all doubts to rest.

CS Jenkinson came in to see him.

‘What a goddamn mess,’ she said. ‘Have you seen what they’re saying about the force? That we’re imprisoning and brutalising innocent men and then covering up for the officers responsible. The bosses are furious.’

Alec was hunched over a number of press releases, and did not look up.

‘However,’ she sighed, ‘much as we’d like to, we can’t fire you. The media would take that as an admission of guilt. So instead, we’re asking you to take leave.’

‘No.’

‘Just step down for a few weeks,’ Jenkinson insisted, ‘until this all over.’

‘None of this will be over until Joe Miller has been convicted,’ Alec said with finality. ‘Not for Ellie and me. Not for the Latimers.’

‘I’ve seen the evidence. It’s plain as day you got the right man. But he got off. We need to think
about minimising the damage now. If the press discovers we’re continuing to pursue an – officially – innocent man…”

But Alec was uncompromising. He and Ellie would continue to work on this case. Joe Miller would be convicted. There was nothing to negotiate.

Eventually, Jenkinson gave in.

Alec went with the PR team and gave an interview and a statement to the press. Reporters hounded him with personal questions about his relationship with Ellie, and a few comments about the pregnancy set a vein throbbing in his forehead, but he had enough experience with such matters to keep himself in check and answer calmly. Some superior officers deflected accusations of incompetence and police brutality, but overall the feeling was that the nation was outraged on behalf of Joe Miller, and sympathetic to the indignities he had suffered at the hands of the police.

The next day, Sharon called Ellie.

‘I have some bad news,’ she said. ‘Abby, my junior, is taking Joe’s case pro bono.’

Ellie put the phone on speaker and motioned Alec over so he could listen.

‘Thanks to all the media attention this is getting, she thinks it could help her career,’ she went on, ‘the lawyer who reunited an innocent man with his children. She’s also convinced him to sue the police for damages.’

Alec let out a tremendous groan and started pacing in a circle.

‘There’s more,’ Sharon said. ‘People have started sending in donations to Joe to help him out. I worry that with the publicity this is getting, Joe may have the upper hand after all. The judges are likely to be sympathetic.’

‘Delay,’ was all Ellie said. ‘Just - as soon as Abby tries to arrange a court hearing, delay it. Block it, stall it, push it back, do whatever you can to stop us from having to be in court with him. Just buy us some more time, until we can find more evidence against him.’

Sharon agreed, and told her to meet with Jocelyn for more information.

Ellie leaned against the desk, her arms folded, all her thoughts drawn inwards. She sniffed. At almost seven months, and with her belly sticking out like the hull of a ship, the rude inevitability of her pregnancy became achingly apparent to the both of them. It was the winding down of a clock, one that would herald danger and further grief rather than joy.

‘I’m such an idiot,’ Ellie said softly. She wiped her nose. ‘I can’t believe…’ she huffed and leaned back, looking at her lover. ‘I was so happy, Alec,’ she whispered. ‘I was so happy with you. I was looking forward to the future. Seeing what Daisy would do when she finished school. Watching Tom in his big football tournaments. Little Fred going to school…’ a hazy smile drifted over her features. ‘I thought about taking the twins to the beach when they were born, and how much they’d love the rockpools. I thought we could go on a picnic, up on the cliffs. Let them watch the sunset for the first time.’ She clamped down on that gentle hope and refused to let herself consider it more. ‘I thought - maybe Joe hadn’t been convicted, and maybe justice hadn’t been served, but that wouldn’t have mattered. Because I would have had you, and our crazy little family. I’d have my friends, and my home, and Joe wouldn’t be there, and he’d never come back, and that was all that mattered.’ She shook her head. ‘Stupid. Stupid. So fucking naïve…’

‘We can still have all that,’ Alec assured her. ‘We can be happy again. You and me and all our kids,
we can still be happy here in Broadchurch.’

‘It all seems so far away now,’ she said, anguished. ‘I don’t even… oh God, Alec, I don’t even want to give birth anymore. How can I bring them into this world? As long as they’re in here, I can protect them, but what happens in two months? With – with a fucking murderer haunting us, and the press using them as proof that we’re monsters? “Whose baby bump reveals the truth of their ongoing affair,”’ Ellie quoted bitterly.

‘We keep working,’ Alec said. ‘All we do is keep trying. Keep searching for something to get him convicted.’

‘We’ve hit a brick wall,’ she said in a low voice. ‘The team’s not convinced Joe did it. They’re stalling, uncooperative. There’s nothing else to investigate. I don’t know what else to do.’

‘That’s what I said about Sandbrook,’ Alec said. ‘And you still solved it.’

‘We solved it together.’

‘That’s right. And we’ll solve this, too. Together.’

‘He’s not taking my sons from me,’ Ellie burst out suddenly. ‘He’s not getting visiting rights, he’s not getting jack shit from me, I don’t even want him looking at my boys!’

‘Take the afternoon off,’ Alec advised. ‘Go and speak to Jocelyn. Get her opinion. I’ll stay here and keep working.’

Ellie nodded, and Alec kissed her forehead.

* 

‘Abby wasted no time in contacting us,’ Jocelyn said, pulling out her reading glasses and perusing a sheet of paper. She frowned and blinked several times, waiting for her vision to clear. ‘If she’s to benefit from media attention, she has to conduct the hearings while there is media attention. Maggie speculates that won’t be more than a few weeks unless they can add something big to the fire.’ She held the paper at arm’s length. ‘It’s quite amusing, really, to see Sharon so furious at her junior going rogue. Almost a bittersweet revenge.’

She gave up on reading the document and placed it aside. ‘I think you’re right to say we ought to delay. It would be unwise to take Joe Miller in court now, when the entire nation believes he is an innocent man. He – and please don’t react too strongly to this – he wants sole custody of your sons.’

At Ellie’s inevitably strong reaction, Jocelyn held up her careworn hands, ‘now – please – he is not likely to get it. Sole custody can only be obtained if the courts believe that the child is in immediate danger with the other parent, whether of physical or sexual assault, or simply of neglect. You, Ellie, are an excellent mother, and even with the media smearing your name it can’t be proved that you have ever mistreated your boys.’

‘There’s a “but” coming, isn’t there?’

‘But,’ Jocelyn went on, ‘no matter when we confront him, he is very likely to get custody rights of some kind. This country is very protective of a parent’s right to see their children, for good or ill, and officially Joe is an innocent man. He has a right to see them.’

‘That can’t happen,’ Ellie said flatly. ‘He can’t be allowed near Tom or Fred. Not for a single second, do you understand?’
‘I know,’ Jocelyn continued, ‘and Sharon and I will fight to get you sole custody, I promise. But in my opinion, what you really need to do is search for more evidence to see Joe trialled again. We will do what we can if it comes to a custody battle, but your best option is to see him jailed. I’m sorry to say it, but it really is up to you and Alec.’

‘Business as usual, then,’ she sighed.

‘If only I’d won the case, none of this would be happening to you,’ Jocelyn said morosely.

‘S’not your fault.’ Ellie rubbed her nose. ‘Alec and I balled up evidence. I broke Joe’s rib. And Sharon was… Sharon. You did your best.’

‘I couldn’t get justice for Danny,’ Jocelyn went on, ‘but I will do everything I can to protect your boys from that man.’ She couldn’t help asking, ‘by the way, how far along are the little ones?’

‘Seven months, almost,’ Ellie said.

‘Goodness. What a time for all this to be happening. May I ask, do you know the sex?’

‘Yeah. Boy and a girl.’

‘Ah,’ said Jocelyn. ‘Maggie and I had a bet. She said two boys. I said two girls. Looks like both of us were half-right.’ She studied Ellie’s round belly. ‘I should dearly love to meet them some day,’ she admitted, and her frankness surprised Ellie. ‘Maggie, too. She hasn’t said anything, but she’s tickled about them. Perhaps, after they are born, you might like to bring them here? Maybe for lunch? Your whole family would be welcome, of course.’

Ellie looked at her posh surroundings. ‘You sure about that? Our kids tend to wreck everything they touch. You should see our house. I dread to think of what would happen if we set them loose in here.’

‘Well, that’s the risk you take with children, isn’t it?’ Jocelyn felt for a small angel statuette on the table next to her and picked it up, turning it over in her hands. ‘I admit I’ve never had much in the way of maternal instincts, but now that Maggie’s dragged me kicking and screaming back into the world, I find myself wanting contact with the younger generation.’

‘Well I think it’s a wonderful idea,’ Ellie said, and her buried excitement at meeting her new babies surfaced painfully. ‘We’ll bring them all, once they’re born. I know Alec will enjoy it. He won’t admit it, but he likes you. And that’s saying something, because he tends to hate everyone.’

‘He and I have that in common,’ Jocelyn smiled.

‘He likes Maggie, too,’ Ellie went on. ‘He acts like a prick around her, but he trusts her with Daisy, and I know that’s the highest compliment he can give. He just hates her profession. And yours, come to think of it.’

‘This is going to make for quite an interesting get-together,’ Jocelyn said. ‘I look forward to it.’

Ellie got up to leave and pulled her orange coat on.

‘Look after your boys,’ Jocelyn said, ‘and your sweet babies. I dearly hope nothing happens to them.’

Ellie thanked her, and asked her to keep in touch about Abby and Joe. She added, as she left, ‘how did the appeal go with Sharon’s son?’
‘We won,’ Jocelyn said. ‘Four years off his sentence. He’ll be on parole in a few months.’

Ellie nodded. ‘Well… that’s good. Tell Sharon…’

She did not finish the sentence, but Jocelyn understood.

Ellie showered her boys in hugs and kisses when she got home. She wept when she told Tom what was happening, and Fred became frightened and started crying too. She held the toddler in her arms and rocked him with a desperation Alec had not seen since he’d almost drowned. Tom joined in the hug, and she folded her sons around her fat belly and kissed them until they could stand no more.

‘I love you,’ she said. ‘I love you. And no-one is going to take you away from me. No-one. No-one.’

She stayed with Fred an extra half hour after she had put him to sleep, staring at him and stroking his perfect, pink little cheek.

When she emerged, she sought Alec’s strong arms.

‘Is Daisy okay?’ she mumbled into his chest.

‘She’s scared. I’ve been doing some homework with her. Trying to make things seem normal, but…’ he paused. ‘I’m starting to think I should send her back to Sandbrook. Reporters were harassing her today.’

‘It might be best,’ Ellie said in a small voice. ‘With Joe and Karen White and all the media hanging around, she might be in danger.’

Alec let out a shuddering sigh. ‘I’ll speak to her tomorrow.’

They retreated to their bedroom and dressed for bed. Ellie stripped to her loose pyjamas, but she became distracted and ended up staring off into space, her arms folded tightly over herself.

‘I want to kill him,’ she pronounced suddenly.

‘You need to stop saying that.’

‘I keep thinking… if he were dead, it’d all be over. The boys would be safe. Daisy would be safe, and the babies…’

‘The babies would be taken away from you the instant they were born, and your children would grow up motherless while you rot in jail,’ Alec finished sharply. He put his hands on her shoulders. ‘Don’t even think about it, Ellie. Don’t even think about it. You’re not like Joe. You are not going to stoop to the same level as a murderer.’ He stood back and straightened himself. ‘We’re going to find enough evidence to get Joe convicted, and he will serve his time. That’s how we deal with it.’

‘Like we dealt with it the first time?’ Anger rose within her. ‘He got off, Alec. He played the fucking system and he got off. He murdered a child, and he’s free, because that’s how justice works in this world.’

‘Ellie. You need to -’

‘Don’t say calm down,’ she jerked free of his grip. ‘Don’t you dare say I need to calm down, because I need my anger right now. It’s all that’s keeping me going. If I stop being angry, then I won’t be able to deal with this anymore, because I’m so afraid…’
Her hand went to her stomach. Alec padded up behind her and slid his hand on top of hers. ‘I know,’ he said.

He shuffled closer, pressing his body flush against her. Wrapping both arms around her waist, he kissed her neck.

‘Tell me what to do,’ he implored. ‘Tell me what I can do to help.’

‘Honestly?’ Ellie’s chest rose and fell as he continued to kiss her neck. ‘You can fuck me.’

She turned around and looked into his surprised brown eyes.

‘Fuck me,’ she said again, ‘and don’t hold back.’

He obeyed and began kissing her, but he was infuriatingly gentle and his touch was tempered by consideration and restraint. She kissed him back with fervour and ripped his shirt free, popping two of the buttons. She scratched his hard abdominal muscles and his back and bit his lip hard enough to draw blood. He gasped.

‘Don’t hold back,’ she insisted. ‘Don’t treat me like I’m fragile.’

He divested her of her pyjamas, and she threw him backwards onto the bed and straddled him, pinning him between her thighs as she leaned over him and delivered sharp love bites to his neck while she teased his cock with one hand and pinched him with the other. Every touch was argumentative and provocative, asking him to respond with equal force.

Eventually, with a frustrated growl, he grappled with her for dominance. They struggled, and he managed to turn her over and pin her in his arms. She lay on her side, panting, as he held down her legs with his own. She struggled, rousing him to deliver his own bites and pinches to her skin. He squeezed one of her breasts and rolled the nipple painfully between his fingers.

‘Hold still,’ he growled. He stroked her curly hair, which was now so long that it tumbled to her shoulders, and swept it aside to he could fasten his lips to her neck. His teeth dragged on her skin and his beard scraped her raw. ‘Hold still.’

She continued to fight. She wanted to be covered in his marks, in bruises and hickeys and scrapes. She wanted the evidence that she was his to be printed all over her body. She wanted him to stain her with his love until she no longer remembered Joe’s touch at all.

He managed to pin her properly, and with one hand began massaging and teasing her entrance. Ellie gasped, but it was maddeningly insufficient. She could feel his erection throbbing against the small of her back, and the wet spot it left on her skin. She ground her arse against him and whimpered, but he only continued to stroke her with tireless fingers, drawing winding, twitchy paths until she was slick with desire.

‘Please,’ she murmured. ‘Please…’

He ignored her and continued his languorous teasing. Jolts ran through her and her breathing grew shallow, but it wasn’t enough. It was nowhere near enough.

She put one hand behind Alec’s head and seized a fistful of hair. Freeing herself from his clutches, she pulled him upright until they were both on their knees, his bracketing hers. Grinding herself on his cock, she leaned back against him. She would sit on him, she decided, on his cock or his face, it didn’t matter, anywhere as long as she got the relief she needed.
Recognising the intensity of her desire, Alec turned her around so they were facing each other and pulled her onto his cock. As she settled on top of him, he groaned, and he propped himself against the bedframe so he could bring his face close to hers. Her fat belly bumped his and they kissed and sucked and bit each other, all while Alec's hands on her buttocks rolled her backwards and forwards. A sharp hiss escaped her, and at her insistence they switched positions again and Alec began to fuck her as hard as he could.

The intensity was blinding. She became inundated with sensation, both pleasurable and painful, until it seemed like nothing existed but Alec. She forgot that she was pregnant and vulnerable, she forgot about all the dangers that pressed upon her, and his touch made her forget that she had ever been Joe’s.

She came twice before Alec said her name in a hoarse shout and slumped back. He panted, shining with sweat, his fingers slick with her wetness. Ellie curled onto her side and rested her head on her pillow, shaking all over.

‘I love you, Alec,’ Ellie whispered. ‘I love you.’

Alec returned to his senses and sidled up behind her. Slowly, almost regretfully, he began tracing the marks he had left on her skin.

It occurred to Ellie, then, that Alec was the only man she had ever truly loved in her whole life. Harvey Johnson had been teenage infatuation. The boss she’d loved before she met Joe had been a kind of distant idolatry. And Joe… well, whatever she had loved, it hadn’t really been him.

But Alec… oh God, she loved him so much. When she thought of everything he was and everything he had done, it made her whole body ache. Alec Hardy, the man with the broken heart. The man who would do anything to protect his daughter, who had developed heart arrhythmia keeping a secret for the sake of his daughter and estranged wife, who felt so much for the Latimers and the Gillespies that he would have died to bring them justice, who bore Danny’s death as his own personal cross and carried photographs of Pippa and Lisa in his wallet as a reminder that he could not fail them.

Alec, the man with a crippling fear of the water who had thrown himself into a river to reach a little girl, who had hurled himself into the ocean without a second though to rescue her own son. Alec, who was so gentle and patient with her own children, who wanted nothing more than to love her and live with her and raise all their sweet babies together, a wish she shared with all her heart.

She compared his kindness and selflessness to the image of the brutal marks on Danny’s throat, and how the bruises had stood out, black and purple against the deathly white pallor of his skin, and how Danny’s body had been so small and those hands around his throat so big…

She shuddered, and drew Alec’s arm fast around her.

‘Tell me I’m yours,’ she implored.

He kissed her shoulder. ‘You’re mine.’

‘I’m not his wife. I’m not his. I’m yours.’

‘You’re mine.’

‘Say you love me.’

‘I love you.’
'Tell me everything will be all right.'

'Everything will be all right.'

She paused, and held him tight.

'We will protect each other,' she said, 'won’t we?'

'Yes.' He spread his hand flat across her stomach and her insides fluttered. 'We will.'
Tom went to see Susan Wright at her caravan. He had a newspaper tucked under his arm.

‘They’re saying my dad’s innocent,’ Tom said when she opened the door, and he held up the paper to her. She observed the picture of Joe Miller and the block letter headline, then stood back to let Tom inside.

‘It’s all over the news,’ he said. ‘Everyone’s talking about it. They’re saying the police force is corrupt and incompetent…’ Susan nodded as he pronounced those words, ‘and they’re saying Mum and Alec are to blame for it all. Do you think it’s true?’

‘Why don’t you tell me what you think?’ Susan deflected.

Tom sat down on the couch. Vince jumped up next to him and he scratched his ears. ‘I don’t know,’ he said. ‘I don’t know what to think. That’s why I came to you.’

He shuffled through the newspaper until he got to the rest of the article. ‘It mentions you in here,’ he said. ‘Dad said you gave testimony that you saw Nige with Danny’s body, not him. Is it true?’

Susan folded her arms. Her chest rose and fell, her breath rattling audibly in her diseased lungs. ‘It’s true,’ she said. ‘I told them detectives at the time, too, but none of them listened to me. The police never do.’

‘So you really were there?’ Tom said, agog. ‘You saw Danny’s body laid on the beach – and you swear it wasn’t my Dad who did it?’

‘It were Nige,’ Susan responded.

‘Then… then does that mean it really was Mark and Nige and not…?’

‘If you want to be sure,’ Susan said, ‘you ought to just ask him yourself.’

‘Who?’

‘Your Dad.’

Tom looked confused. ‘But how am I supposed to contact him?’

Susan pointed at something on the newspaper. He followed her direction and read the name out loud.

*Daisy was furious when Alec told her he wanted her to return to Sandbrook, but fear for her safety overrode Alec’s natural tendency to give in to whatever his daughter wanted. The next week they arranged for Tess to come and pick her up.

When Tess arrived, her reception was cold. She was not permitted in the house, and Alec stood on the front step, barring the door while Ellie and the boys stayed inside and said goodbye to Daisy.

Tess spoke to Alec: ‘I’ve seen what the papers have been saying. It’s like Sandbrook all over, isn’t it?’

Alec glared at her over his folded arms.
‘I’m sorry for what they’re doing to you.’

‘Don’t apologise,’ Alec snapped. ‘I know it was you.’

‘Know what?’

‘You know I couldn’t care less what the press says about me,’ Alec said, ‘but to bring Ellie into it – to throw our unborn children in it – I never thought you were like this, Tess.’

She replied coolly, ‘I have no idea what you’re talking about.’

He tilted his head to one side and studied her. ‘You’re not as good a liar as you think you are.’

‘That so? Managed to fool you for quite a few years.’

‘You still fooling Dave, too?’

‘What?’

‘He’s been considering leaving his wife for you,’ Alec said, ‘and yet here you are fooling around with Tony, too. Wonder what he’d say if I told him?’

Tess’ eyes narrowed. ‘You took my daughter from me,’ she snarled, and Alec took this as an admission of guilt.

‘I didn’t take her, she chose to live with me,’ he countered.

At that moment, Daisy herself appeared in the doorway, loudly complaining.

‘This is such bullshit,’ she declared, and both her parents scolded her. ‘It’s unfair! Why do I have to go back?’

‘It’s not safe here anymore, darlin’.’

‘But that’s why I should stay! If it’s not safe then I should stay here to look after all of you!’

She put her hands on her hips and pouted.

‘That’s a noble thought,’ Alec smiled, ‘but you’re just a little girl, Daiz. What could you do?’

‘I am NOT a little girl!’ Daisy roared. ‘I’m sixteen now! You have to stop treating me like a child!’

They argued for some time, Daisy spitting and expostulating about how unfair it was. She protested that her school was here, and her job, and moreover the beans, her unborn siblings.

‘As soon as we’ve arrested Joe Miller and this media circus is over,’ Alec told her, ‘you can come back.’

Daisy started to cry, and Alec looked as though he’d been dealt a physical blow. ‘But who’s going to make the peanut butter brownies?’ she sobbed. ‘You know how bad Ellie’s pregnancy cravings get, and you’re rubbish at cooking sweet things! What happens when I’m not there to make them at 1 AM?’

It was such a sweet, silly thing to say that Alec started crying too. She opened her arms and her father hugged her as tightly as he could.
‘And who’s going to read *The Return of the Native* with you?’ she sniffed. ‘Who’s going to play
video games with Tom? Who’s going to draw with wee Fred?’

‘It will be over soon,’ he said frantically. ‘You can come back soon, I promise. Just as soon as this is
over, you can come back.’

Daisy wiped her eyes and picked up her bag from the step. She slung her faithful camera around her
neck and stared at the ground.

‘I’ll finish reading *The Return of the Native,*’ Alec said. ‘I’ll call you as soon as I’m done, and we
can talk about it. I promise.’

Daisy wiped her eyes. ‘I didn’t tell you,’ she said, ‘you’ve been so busy, but I got an A+ on my book
report. My first ever in English.’

‘Yeah?’ Alec’s eyes were overflowing. ‘That’s fantastic, Daisy. I’m so proud of you.’

He stroked her brown hair and kissed her forehead.

‘I love you, darlin’.’

‘I love you too, Dad.’

‘You’ll come back,’ he called as Tess led her away. ‘You’ll be able to come back soon, I promise!’

The weeks passed in a crawl. The media lost interest after a while, and departed from Broadchurch,
although Abby occasionally stirred things up by releasing a statement to the press. Such statements
never made the front page, however, and were relegated to increasingly short articles further towards
the back.

The townspeople remained hostile towards Alec and Ellie, and to the Latimers too. Mark’s plumbing
business suffered, and none but his closest friends called him for work. Things as simple as going to
supermarket became an ordeal for all of them. Whispers and stares followed them wherever they
went, and they were greeted with coldness or hostility at almost every turn.

Unsure of what Joe was capable of, Alec and Ellie set about securing the house. They installed bars
on the windows, newer locks, and a security system. Ellie hated the way their once cheerful home
looked, and despised the ugly black bars. The doleful shadows they cast on her bright orange walls
with its collection of handprints made her feel like a prisoner. To make matter worse, in order to
cover the expenses they were forced to spend the money Ellie had put aside for baby supplies.

Alec found her standing in Fred’s old room, which had been vacated since Fred moved to the storage
room, looking around at the sparse furnishings.

They had a dresser filled with secondhand clothes, Fred’s old nautical mobile lying on the ground, a
pile of blankets, and a single cot.

That was it.

‘We’re not ready,’ she said sadly.

Alec wet his lips. ‘We could… dip into…’

Ellie shook her head. ‘No. Absolutely not. I’m not going to rely on the money of some abusive
arsehole who used to hit women and kids. Not to buy things for our babies. It’s too perverse.’

Alec felt the same way. He could imagine nothing worse than needing his father’s help, even posthumously, to provide for his children.

In the end it was Maggie who came to rescue.

‘Daisy rang me up,’ she announced as she unloaded a brand new cot and other baby supplies from her car. ‘She likes to keep in touch, and she mentioned you were in a bit of strife. Jocelyn and I thought we’d help out.’

‘Oh no – please,’ Ellie protested, ‘we can’t accept this!’

‘It’s far too much,’ Alec said, ‘really.’

‘Nonsense,’ Maggie said, hefting the frame free. She dumped another box on the ground and dusted her hands. ‘Jocelyn’s a very rich woman, and I’ve saved up quite a bit myself. This is nothing to us.’

‘Really, Maggie, we can’t accept this,’ Ellie said.

‘Ellie.’ Maggie clapped a hand on her shoulder. ‘You’re seven months pregnant. You’re broke, and there’s a murderer after you. Let us give you some baby supplies.’

Finally, Ellie’s protests died, and she showered thanks on her instead.

‘Don’t forget your promise,’ Maggie said later on. ‘You and all the family – including the babies – are coming to our house for lunch. I’ll cook a big spread for you, with lots of sweet things for the kids.’

‘I haven’t forgotten,’ Ellie replied. ‘It’s something to look forward to in the middle of this hell.’

‘Jocelyn’s quite excited,’ Maggie said. ‘Which is a miracle, because she’s a bloody nightmare when it comes to socialising.’

‘I know what you mean,’ Ellie said. ‘Alec’s terrible. He’s such a hermit, it’s almost impossible to get him to do anything.’

They laughed for a little while, and swapped embarrassing stories about their recluse lovers.

‘Ah. They’re worth it, though, aren’t they?’ Maggie said. ‘Miserable sods that they are.’

‘Yes,’ Ellie said. She looked over at where Alec was struggling to put the cot together. Fred was sitting beside him, gleefully pulling apart all his work and making him sigh. ‘They are.’

Lee and Claire’s sentencing loomed. Jenkinson advised them not to attend, but despite the media attention they were sure to receive, Alec and Ellie chose to go.

Inevitably, reporters swarmed them. Ellie could hide her pregnancy no longer and they eagerly snapped pictures of the two of them together.

The sentences were passed, and when Alec and Ellie emerged they felt lightened by the knowledge that Claire Ripley and Lee Ashworth would be behind bars for a long time.

Ricky’s sentencing was due just a few days later, but when they arrived at the courthouse they were
astonished to find it had been cancelled.

Tess spoke to them. ‘He’s changed his plea,’ she said. ‘Ricky’s changed his plea to not guilty.’

They rang Jocelyn, who rang Ben, who spoke to his lawyer associates, who sniffed out what had happened. About an hour later, Jocelyn returned their call.

‘With all the media attention Joe’s case is getting, Ricky believes he will be able to get off,’ she explained. ‘He thinks, now that everyone believes the two of you are corrupt cops, he will be able to pin the blame for Lisa’s death solely on Lee and Claire, and your own incompetence.’

Alec could not believe it. Cate was at the courthouse too, having only been informed of her ex-husband’s plea change when she’d arrived. Alec went to her and tried to explain the situation, but all she could do was shake her head at him and walk away, looking numb.

Blind with fury, Alec sought Karen White, and found her sitting on a step, jotting down notes. Ellie stood to follow, but a sudden back spasm incapacitated her for a moment, and by the time she struggled to Alec’s side he was already speaking.

‘I hope you’re pleased with yourself.’ At these words, Karen stood up, and held her ground impassively. ‘All this time taking the moral high ground with me, telling me you hate me because I failed the families, and look what you’ve done.’

He pointed to where Cate was sitting, half collapsed on a table. ‘Her husband – the man who murdered her niece, is pleading not guilty, and it’s all because of the shit you’ve been spreading about us in the papers. You always said you wanted justice for the Gillespies and the Latimers, and that you hated me because I failed them. But that was all a lie, wasn’t it? You don’t care about anything but yourself and your own career, and you’d sell anything as long as it was a good story.’

‘Careful,’ Karen said. ‘It’s starting to feel like you’re threatening me.’

He snarled, ‘how could you care about Cate when you gave her husband the opportunity to get away with murder? How could you care about the Latimers when you’re spreading this bullshit through the papers about Mark murdering his own son? When you’re sticking up for Joe Miller?’

‘Mr. Miller was found not guilty, and his story ought to be heard,’ she replied.

‘Oh, that’s right,’ Alec said, almost laughing. ‘You’re only doing the right thing, aren’t you? Saving the world one article at a time.’ He took a step forward, looming far above her. She recoiled slightly, and he pronounced, ‘you disgust me.’

He swept away, and Ellie turned to follow him. Before she did, she glanced back at Karen. She was too worn out to shout; her anger was a scarce commodity now, and she had to save it all for Joe.

‘The Latimers didn’t deserve what you did to them,’ Ellie said. She glanced over at where Cate sat, still immobile. ‘And neither did Cate.’

‘Joe Miller didn’t deserve to be imprisoned and beaten, and then threatened with death for trying to see his sons,’ Karen rejoined.

Ellie shook her head and walked away. The journalist watched her go, and took in Ellie’s exhausted expression, her bowed back and her protruding stomach.

For just a moment, a twinge of regret appeared to touch her features.
Alec did not sleep anymore.

His insomnia had been returning by degrees ever since Joe came back, but now, with Daisy gone and shadows and lies closing in on every quarter, he could not sleep at all. Ellie’s sleeping patterns were troubled too, but she was so exhausted at the end of each day that she drifted off nonetheless. Sometimes Alec would fuck her or stroke her to climax to help ease the tension, or he would simply sit with her and massage her aching body. Once he had helped her achieve slumber, he would either lie there, watching her, with one hand on her stomach, or he would get up and return to the pile of evidence they had accumulated against Joe Miller.

Now he had to look through the evidence collected against Ricky, too. He dreaded giving evidence in court again, and fretted at the thought of Ellie on the stand, and the further media attention it would provoke. The babies would be born by then, he thought miserably, and the idea of reporters snapping photographs of their beautiful children and decrying them as bastards, as proof of a non-existent affair and his own incompetence, made him sick to his stomach.

They had to convict Joe Miller, Alec thought desperately, and they had to do it soon.

He stared at the evidence they had collected, and was filled with the sensation that he was drowning. Pressing his head into his hand, he wept, and pined for Daisy.

Jocelyn and Sharon continued to handle Abby, and made excuses and exploited loopholes to push back the court hearing. Joe was apparently becoming impatient and irritable, and Abby was frustrated too, since her best hope of success lay in conducting the case as soon as possible. They eventually fixed a date some five months hence, but it remained tentative. Ellie, mindful that she would be recovering from delivery at that stage, asked them to keep pushing it back.

Tom was uncharacteristically sullen and withdrawn at this time, though Ellie considered it normal under the circumstances. She blamed it on the media attention, and on the fact he must be missing Daisy. The house did seem dreadfully quiet without her, and Fred wailed often that he wanted his Daiz. Alec’s taciturnity betrayed the same sentiment.

Ellie, meanwhile, grew bigger. Everything swelled up. Her ankles could barely fit inside her shoes anymore, new stretch marks appeared on her belly and thighs, and varicose veins spidered her aching legs. She was irritable and horny and prone to tears at the drop of a hat, symptoms that could only half be blamed on hormones.

Her strength was flagging. Alec recognised this, and he convinced her to take some extra time off work. She wanted to stay on until the very last minute, so determined was she to imprison Joe, but she agreed to let Alec take on more of her responsibilities.

Thus it happened that one day Alec went to pick Fred up from the childminder’s instead of Ellie, only to be confronted by something from his nightmares.

For there, holding Fred by the hand and leading him down the street, was Joe. Fred did not recognise the stranger pulling his arm, and he was wailing.

‘Oi!’ Alec roared, breaking into a run. ‘What the hell do you think you’re doing?’

Joe’s grip tightened on Fred’s arm and the boy cried louder. At the sound of Fred in pain, Alec shuddered to halt a few metres away, his chest heaving.
'I am seeing my son,' Joe replied firmly. ‘I have a right to see him.’

Fred whimpered and Alec’s heart throbbed at the sound. He held up his hands in a gesture of peace. ‘Joe – Joe, for God’s sake, don’t hurt him.’

‘Hurt him?’ Joe echoed. ‘I’m his dad. When will you and Ellie accept that all I want is to be a dad to my boys again?’

‘Dad!’ said Fred. ‘Dad!’

Joe started at the word, but when he looked down he saw that Fred was waving his little hand and grasping for Alec.

‘Dad!’ Fred pleaded again, his blue eyes fixed on Alec.

Joe released Fred in shock and the boy immediately ran to his father. Alec swept him into his arms and kissed him, then hooked him onto his hip and turned sideways so that his own body was between Joe and Fred.

Joe’s eyes burned. He stared at his rival, his lip curled, exposing his teeth. Fred sobbed and Alec stroked his curls, soothing him with a soft, ‘shhh… shhh…’

‘That’s my son,’ Joe said quietly.

‘No,’ Alec snapped. ‘You gave up that right. You gave up your right to be a father when you choked the life out of an eleven year old boy!’

Frightened by his tone of voice, Fred buried his face into Alec’s chest.

‘My boys,’ Joe said dangerously, ‘my wife – you think you can take them from me?’

‘I already have.’

Silence reigned, broken only by Fred’s whimpers. Finally, Joe began to laugh, and Alec shuddered from head to toe.

‘That’s what you think,’ he said. ‘But you haven’t taken anything from me. Just you wait.’

Alec held Fred tightly while Joe departed, disappearing down the street. He immediately pulled out his phone and called for backup.

Ellie almost fainted when she heard about the near abduction, but concern for her son kept her afloat. Kissing Fred and crying and holding him close, she screamed for the childminder’s blood.

‘He swore the two of you had worked something out!’ the childminder protested. ‘What wiv all the stuff in the papers about him suing for custody, I thought it musta been true!’

‘And you didn’t think to call us first to check?’ Alec bellowed. ‘For God’s sake! What is the matter with you people?’

He did not quite know whether to put her actions down to stupidity, incompetence, or sympathy for Joe, but after he’d taken a statement from her, she was summarily dismissed. Ellie assured her that she would never require her services again.
`Is there anything that we can charge her with?' Ellie muttered as she left the station.

‘She released a child into the care of his father,’ Alec said. ‘Technically, she did nothing wrong.’

The news rocked the station and set the officers talking. Some saw Ellie as the guilty party for denying Joe access to their children when she had no legal right; others saw it for what it was, and felt painfully sorry for the two detectives.

The word that Joe Miller was back in Broadchurch spread quickly. A few angry parents who had believed in Joe’s guilt from the start set up a search party to flush the child murderer from their midst. Nige was among them, and Alec had his hands full defusing the tension.

Ellie took Fred home. She wept bitter tears when she saw the little bruise forming on his wrist, and kissed him over and over. A squad car picked up Tom from school and brought him home.

Ellie explained what had happened, and how Joe had tried to abduct his brother. Tom stared at her with mounting horror.

‘Abduct?’ he echoed.

‘Yes. He hurt poor Fred too. Not badly, but…’ Ellie shook her shoulders and straightened herself. ‘Since we know he’s back in the area, I want you to be extra careful now, Tom. If you see him, or see anyone who looks like him, you call me or Alec or the station, all right? And from now on, you won’t be going anywhere without a police escort.’

Stunned, Tom acquiesced to these terms. He bit his lip and stared at the ground, looking troubled.

‘I think a hug is in order,’ she said.

Of late, Tom had been distant, and reticent about hugging his mother or responding to her declarations of love. Now, however, he welcomed her embrace.

‘I love you,’ she said. ‘And you are safe. I promise. Alec and I will make sure nothing happens to you.’

* *

At lunchtime the next day, Tom slipped out of class and went to the secret meeting place he had set up almost a month ago.

Waiting for him was Joe.

‘There he is,’ Joe said, smiling like the kindly father Tom supposed he was. ‘Here’s my champion.’

He held out his arms and Tom hugged him. The hug lasted an improbably long time, and although Joe had his eyes closed, Tom’s were open.

Joe drew back and they both sat down to talk. Joe asked him about football and skating and schoolwork, and all the other little things they usually talked about.

Eventually however, the subject changed. ‘You know,’ Joe said, ‘I was thinking… these meetings between us are nice, but I’d love to be able to see Fred again.’

Tom blinked once.

‘…would it be possible for you to bring him along one day?’ Joe implored. ‘We could all spend time
together. The three of us, like we used to.’

He smiled, and it made Tom’s blood run cold.

‘Dad,’ he said, ‘Alec said that yesterday… you tried to abduct Fred.’

Joe flinched at Alec’s name, but his smile remained in place. ‘Is that what he’s calling it? No, Tom, I tried to see Fred yesterday, and Alec stopped me. There’s nothing wrong with me trying to see the two of you, you know that.’ He sat up a little straighter. ‘Now, will you help me see Fred?’

‘No,’ Tom replied. ‘I don’t think Fred should see you.’

A strained silence settled over the room.

‘Why not?’ Joe said, trying to keep the smile on his face. ‘You think I’m dangerous?’

Tom shuffled his knees. ‘I don’t know.’

‘We’ve been over this, Tom. I was found innocent. You’ve seen the papers. You know what they say. Please, Tom. All I want is to see you and your brother.’

‘Can’t you just wait until the custody battle’s over?’

‘That’s too far away.’

Tom inched away from Joe. ‘I think… I think maybe I shouldn’t see you anymore either. It’s not right.’

Joe stood up and blocked the door. ‘You do think I’m dangerous,’ he said flatly.

‘No,’ Tom replied, growing afraid.

‘You do. You all do. You all think I’m dangerous. I’m not, Tom. I’m not. Why would I hurt my own wife and sons?’

‘Why did you kill Danny?’ Tom shouted.

Joe rocked back on his heel. ‘I thought we’d moved past that,’ he said quietly. ‘I was found innocent. Tom - why are you talking nonsense?’

He tried to open the door but Joe pulled it violently shut. Tom backed away.

‘Has Alec Hardy been getting to you?’ he asked, taking a step forward. ‘Have you been listening to his lies?’

Tom said nothing. He began to shake.

‘Do you think of him as a father?’ Joe went on. ‘Do you see him as your dad?’

Whatever Tom said next made Joe see red. The whole room dissolved, and he found himself screaming:

‘He took everything from me, but he will not take you, do you understand me? I am your father and he will not take you from me! He won’t take you from me, HE - WILL – NOT – TAKE – YOU – FROM – ME!’
Ellie had taken the day off work to stay home with Fred. He was asleep upstairs, and she was lying on the couch with a cold flannel pressed to her forehead.

A noise at the front door made her startle upright. She threw the flannel aside and glanced at the clock – 2 PM, too early for it to be Alec.

She scrabbled to the kitchen for a weapon when Tom came inside, and she stopped dead.

‘Mum,’ Tom sniffed.

There was a large cut above his eye that was gradually swelling up, and a small pattern of bruises around his throat.

Ellie’s entire world fell apart.

Alec rushed to see them in the hospital. Tom was being treated for a suspected concussion and bruising to the neck, while Ellie was under observation. The nurses feared the shock would trigger premature labour.

With the doctor’s help, Ellie calmed down enough to abate the danger to her unborn babies, and she was able to concentrate on Tom.

‘I’ve been meeting him secretly,’ Tom confessed miserably. His voice was strained and slightly husky. ‘For the last few weeks. With all the stuff in the papers, and him being found innocent, I thought… I thought maybe he was innocent after all. I just missed him, so I got in touch with Karen White and asked her to give him my number. I rang Dad and we…’ his bottom lip trembled and he couldn’t go on. ‘I’m so sorry, Mum. Please don’t hate me.’

Tom was so big that she sometimes forgot he was still a little boy in many ways. Throwing her arms around him, she peppered him with kisses. ‘I don’t hate you. Of course I don’t hate you, I’m just so glad you’re safe. Oh, Tom -’

Her throat closed over and she could say no more.

‘We need to report this,’ Alec said grimly. ‘We need to process the offence immediately. We have to get the word out – Joe Miller assaulted Tom Miller, and he is to be arrested on sight.’

Alec brought in the other officers and prepared to take his testimony. Ellie sat next to him, stroking his hand as he spoke. He described everything, pausing occasionally when his throat hurt too much, and spoke of how he and his father met up to hug and talk to each other, and how today Joe had asked him to bring Fred on their next visit.

‘I remembered what you said, Alec,’ Tom said, looking at him. ‘What Mum told me. About how he hurt Fred. I wasn’t sure I believed it, but when he asked me to bring Fred… I just knew it wasn’t right. So I tried to leave. He stopped me. We had an argument, and then – suddenly… suddenly he wasn’t my dad anymore. It was like… someone had flipped a switch. He pushed me. I hit my head on a table and -’

Tom started crying. Ellie wrapped him up in her arms and kissed his hair. ‘It’s all right,’ she insisted. ‘It’s all right.’
As he composed himself, Alec and Ellie exchanged a painful glance.

At last, Tom said, ‘the next thing I knew, he was choking me. It only lasted a little bit before he pulled back. He started apologising, but I just grabbed my skateboard and ran out as fast as I could. I don’t remember anything else until I got home.’

Alec gently placed his hand on Tom’s shoulder. ‘Tom,’ he said, ‘this is very important.’ He leaned forward. ‘Where have you been meeting your dad all this time?’

*A*

Alec descended on Susan Wright’s caravan with three squad cars. It was empty.

‘Get this area cordoned off,’ he snapped to one group of officers. ‘I want SOCO in there now!’ To the rest of them he said, ‘find Susan Wright, and that bastard dog of hers!’

The officers were rocked by the news that Joe had assaulted his own son. Any vestiges of doubt that lingered over his guilt were swept away, replaced by an overwhelming urge to repent for suspecting their boss. They committed themselves to their task.

Susan was discovered walking her dog on the beach. Both were brought to the station, where Alec and Ellie were waiting to question her. Vince was tied up outside, and Alec left instructions to the team to continue looking for Joe.

‘Sure you want to do this?’ Alec asked Ellie. ‘You can be with Tom, if you want.’

She shook her head. ‘I’ve left him and Fred with Mark and Beth and Lucy and Olly. Two officers are guarding them. He’s safe. Right now, I need to tear Susan Wright apart.’

‘Sure?’ he asked again, and when she nodded, they both entered the room.

Susan had refused a legal representative. She sat alone on the opposite side of the table, her arms crossed over her chest. They sat down and set up the tapes.

‘Susan Wright,’ Alec pronounced. ‘Wh-

‘What is your relationship with Tom Miller?’ Ellie cut in.

Susan said nothing.

‘Why has Tom Miller been visiting your caravan?’

Nothing.

‘Are you aware that Tom Miller has been secretly meeting Joe Miller at your caravan?’

‘Having trouble keeping track of your son, are you?’ Susan said at last.

Her tone infuriated Ellie. ‘Don’t play games with me, Susan. My son was almost killed in your caravan today. I am scared out of my mind for my children and I have lost every bit of patience I have. I will not put up with any cheek from you, and if you refuse to answer me I will arrest you for obstructing justice, do you understand me?’

Susan looked unimpressed. ‘Careful now,’ she said. ‘Wouldn’t want to get too upset, would we? Not in your condition.’
‘How long has Tom Miller been visiting your caravan?’ Alec interrupted before Ellie could react.

‘Twins, ain’t it? A boy and a girl? There’s lovely.’ Susan sat back, loathing written all over her features. ‘You people. The police took my boy away. They took everything from me. You arrested me over Danny, you didn’t listen to me when I told you it were Nige, you threatened to put my dog down,’ her eyes bored into Ellie’s stomach, ‘and here you are, a happy little family. All because you framed an innocent man.’

‘Joe Miller is not innocent!’ Ellie burst out. ‘He assaulted my son today, nearly choked the life out of him, and all in YOUR caravan! Now tell me Susan, before I get really angry, what is your relationship with Tom Miller?’

Susan unfolded her arms and relented. ‘He used to come to my caravan to feed my dog.’

‘How long has this been going on?’

‘He visited during the investigation into Danny's death. This year, it were ever since the papers started saying you were crooked.’

‘What else did he do while he was in your caravan?’ Ellie asked.

‘We’d talk.’

‘Just talking?’

‘Was there any physical contact?’ Alec put in sharply. ‘Sexual?’

Ellie started next to him and Susan shot Alec a look of pure contempt. ‘No,’ she said with finality.

‘Did you ever keep him there against his will?’ Alec went on.

‘No,’ Susan said. ‘He were always the one who came to see me.’

‘When did these meetings occur? How frequent were they?’

‘Once a week. Sometimes twice. He was getting bullied at school. Used to cut and come see me when it got too much.’

Alec glanced at Ellie, and immediately regretted having her in the room with him. She was far too emotionally wound up, and her fists clenched when she heard of Tom getting bullied. He put his hand on her knee beneath the table to steady the nervous twitch of her leg.

Susan was suddenly overcome by a gruesome coughing fit. Alec had to pause the interview, and an officer came in with a glass of water for her. She refused to touch it, apparently seeing anything offered by the police as toxic, and sat glaring at them until her ragged breathing evened out.

Alec resumed the interview.

‘When did Tom Miller start meeting Joe Miller?’ he asked.

‘About three weeks back.’ Her voice was little more than a husky croak.

‘Were you aware these meetings were taking place?’ Ellie asked.

‘Tom asked if he could use my caravan. I agreed.’
‘Were you present for any of the meetings?’ said Alec.

‘No. I’d take Vince for a walk. He promised to be gone by the time I came back, and he were.’

‘How long did the meetings last?’

‘Bout an hour, I s’pose.’

‘Do you know what went on at these meetings?’

‘I wouldn’t know if I weren’t there, would I?’

‘How many times did Joe Miller and Tom Miller meet in your caravan?’

‘Five.’

‘Did you have any contact with Joe Miller yourself?’

‘No.’

They went on questioning her in this manner for some time. Susan was co-operative, but Ellie could never quite be sure whether she was telling them the truth or not.

They eventually let her go without charging her.

‘We’ve arranged for a hotel for you,’ Ellie said, ‘you can stay there until our team is finished with your caravan.’

As Susan was led away, she said to Ellie, ‘I never said. Congratulations.’ She nodded slowly at Ellie's belly, and a smile spread across her face, one so filled with malice that it set Ellie trembling from head to toe.

Alec said discreetly to another officer, ‘keep her under observation. Round the clock. Make sure she doesn’t abscond. It’s possible she’s friendlier with Joe than she’s letting on. He may come to her for help.’

Brian approached him and announced that SOCO’s preliminary findings confirmed Tom’s version of events: a table with Tom’s blood on the corner, the room disturbed as though there’d been a struggle, and Joe’s fingerprints everywhere.

Returning to the interview room, Alec shut off the equipment and stood silently with Ellie.

‘Again,’ Ellie mumbled ‘It happened again. I should have realised. How did I not see? I can’t believe - oh God, Alec -’ she sobbed and covered her mouth with her hand. ‘He could have killed him today. I almost lost him. Another boy - my Tom - to Joe – because of that woman…’

Alec tried to comfort her, but she suddenly grew angry and threw him off. ‘Don’t touch me!’

‘What?’ he demanded. ‘What did I do?’

‘It’s all because of you!’ she exploded. ‘Because of us! If we hadn’t got together, none of this would be happening! The papers wouldn’t have started spreading all that shit, Joe wouldn’t have come back, my boys would be safe, Mark and Beth wouldn’t be getting hounded, and I wouldn’t have to deal with these… things, either!’

She struck the flat of her hand against her belly and leaned back on the desk, breathing hard. Alec
reached for her again and she jerked free. He swelled with frustration.

‘Don’t push me away, Ellie,’ he said. ‘I’ve dealt with you pushing me away for long enough. I won’t let you do it anymore.’

‘This all started the moment we got together!’ she persisted, tearing her hair. ‘The moment you fucked me without a fucking condom on!’

Alec mirrored her growing anger. ‘Fine!’ he shouted. ‘Fine, then it’s all my fault! All of this is because of me. So tell me how much you hate me, and how you wish we’d never got together, and that our babies didn’t exist!’

Ellie glared at him, her teeth set on edge.

He continued, ‘dump all your rage and pain on me. Blame me for everything if you want. I don’t care, because no matter what you say or do I am not letting you go. Not you or the babies or Tom and Fred. I will fight every instant of my life to keep you, and if I have to fight you too, then so be it!’

They faced off, both fuming.

Then Ellie’s teeth started chattering.

‘I’m sorry,’ she whispered. ‘I’m sorry. It’s Joe, it’s all Joe, it’s Joe that’s doing this to us.’

She broke down. Alec embraced her and she threw herself against him, clinging to him for dear life and wailing into his chest.

‘I will do,’ Alec said fiercely, ‘whatever it takes to keep you safe. You, and all our children.’

‘I’m so afraid, Alec,’ she said softly. ‘Oh God, I’m so afraid. I almost lost him today. I don’t think I can do this.’

They rocked back and forth for several minutes until they had no more tears to shed. When it was over, they looked at each other with renewed courage, and took heart.

For that was their secret. No amount of grief in the world could tear them apart, for their relationship had been forged out of the worst horrors and traumas they had ever endured. Horror and loss and loneliness could not split them in twain, for these were the very things their souls were knit by. Where grief would break others, it only served to make Alec and Ellie stronger.

Ellie said, ‘I think it’s time we took Maggie and Olly up on their offer.’

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An article appeared in the *Broadchurch Echo* the very next day, jointly written by Maggie Radcliffe and Olly Stevens. In it, Ellie and Alec detailed their version of events regarding the trial, and explained what had happened to Tom.

The news that Joe Miller, the darling of the tabloids, had attacked his own son in circumstances eerily similar to those surrounding Danny’s murder, created an instant media storm.

Alec arranged a press conference and went on television. The word went out that Joe Miller was wanted for the attempted murder of Tom Miller. The residents of Broadchurch were whipped to a frenzy, and Nige’s hunting party almost quadrupled in size.
Ellie took courage from the shift, but Jocelyn was cautious.

‘His assault of Tom is not enough to indict him of Danny’s murder,’ she said. ‘It is compelling – but not enough.’

‘Doesn’t matter,’ Ellie said. ‘If we arrest him for Tom’s assault, at least that will get him off the streets and away from my children.’

‘Abby dropped the case,’ Jocelyn went on. ‘Unsurprising, given the circumstances. You need not fear a custody battle anymore.’

‘Good,’ Ellie said. ‘If you hear from her again, will you tell her something for me?’

Jocelyn agreed, and Ellie pronounced a string of curses so vile it would have made a sailor blush.

‘I’ll pass it on,’ Jocelyn said demurely, and she hung up.

* 

Tom was feeling well enough to come into the station, which meant Alec was able to document his injuries more thoroughly and confirm a few pieces of evidence. Ellie found it too painful to watch Tom’s body being treated as evidence, so she waited in the next room over.

‘Please don’t arrest Susan,’ Tom begged as they questioned him. ‘She didn’t do anything wrong. She’s my friend. It was always me that went to see her, and she never did anything bad to me!’

Alec had to take the statements down, but he made sure to explain to Tom that Susan was not a good person. She was dangerous and unbalanced and a liar, and he needed to stay away from her. He nodded mournfully at that, and seemed to accept his words.

‘How’s Mum?’ Tom asked as Alec finished up. The two officers who had been helping him departed with a murmur of ‘sir.’

Alec seated himself opposite Tom with a sigh. ‘Not so good.’

‘I keep wanting her to get angry with me,’ Tom said, wiping his nose. ‘To yell at me, or tell me how stupid I was, or ground me, but she won’t. All she does is hug me and cry. It scares me.’

‘She’s just glad you’re safe. We all are. That’s all we care about right now.’

Tom looked miserable. ‘I’m sorry I went to see him,’ he croaked. ‘I’m sorry... I’m sorry I thought...’

‘It’s okay. We forgive you.’

He put his head into his hands. ‘I just missed my dad,’ he wept.

Alec put his hand on Tom’s shoulder. The teenager suddenly turned and hugged him.

‘It’s all right, Tom,’ Alec said gently. ‘You’re thirteen. You’re allowed to make mistakes.’

Slowly, Tom composed himself. He wiped his face and steadied his sobbing breaths. Alec kept his hand on his back, gently rubbing until he felt better. He was close enough to make out every shallow bruise on Tom’s neck, and his heart twisted.

He led Tom outside once he felt well enough, and as they meandered towards Ellie’s room they heard her roaring at someone on the phone.
They stopped to listen, and realised she was abusing Tom’s school for not keeping track of him and for not realising he had been sneaking out.

‘It’s sort of nice to hear her yelling,’ Tom admitted.

‘Yeah,’ Alec agreed. He folded his arms and they waited for the shouts to subside. ‘You know that once all this is over and you’re feeling better, she’s going to ground you for a million years.’

‘I know,’ Tom said, and he smiled, as though he were looking forward to it.


Alec spent the rest of the day trying to find Karen White so he could question her about passing on Tom’s phone number to Joe. Unfortunately, she was not in her office, nor at home. Before he could pursue the matter thoroughly, he received a phone call from Tess.

‘Daisy wasn’t at school today,’ she said frantically. ‘She won’t answer her phone. I don’t know where she is.’

Alec looked like he was about to have an aneurysm. He called Daisy over and over, and she answered him on the fifth call.

‘Daisy!’ he cried, half in relief and half in anger. ‘Where are you?’

‘I’m in Broadchurch,’ she replied. ‘I actually need a lift from the station. Can you come and get me?’

Alec did, and found her waiting at the station like she’d said. He barrelled into her and hugged her with all his might.

‘What the hell do you think you’re doing?’ he shouted. ‘Don’t you know how dangerous it is at the moment?’

‘Tom was assaulted!’ Daisy shouted back. ‘And I had to hear about it from today’s paper! Why didn’t you call me?’

Alec passed his hand over his face. ‘We’ve had so much to deal with, Daiz, I didn’t…’

Daisy cut him off. ‘I came as soon as I read it. I’m not staying with Mum anymore.’

Alec shook his head. ‘Daisy, it’s not safe here. Joe’s come after Fred and Tom both. If he tried to hurt you too…’

Alec shook his head. ‘Daisy, it’s not safe here. Joe’s come after Fred and Tom both. If he tried to hurt you too…’

‘I don’t care,’ she said stubbornly. ‘If you send me back I’ll just get on the first train to Broadchurch again. If you lock me up, I’ll break out and get on the first train back. I’m staying, and I don’t care what you say, because I’m scared out of my mind for you and Ellie and Tom and Fred and the beans, and I refuse to hide in Sandbrook while you’re all in danger!’

Alec protested, but she put her hands on her hips and argued with a wilful, pigheaded stubbornness that was all too familiar.

Alec finally gave in to Daisy’s demands, though he warned her that she would not be allowed to go anywhere without an escort. She agreed to these terms and hugged him delightedly.

Alec rang Ellie to tell her the news, and he brought Daisy home.

‘Where is he?’ Daisy said, stalking into the house, her coat swishing past the handprints on the wall.
‘Where is he?’

Tom appeared in the doorway. ‘Daiz?’

Daisy ran at Tom and started pummelling him.

‘Ow! Daiz!’

‘You – stupid – idiot!’ Daisy yelled, slapping his shoulder over and over. ‘Why the hell did you agree to meet him? You could have been killed, you goddamn -’

She broke off and hugged him tight. Then she pulled back and whacked him again.

‘How could you believe the papers?’ she bellowed. She pulled off her shoe and used it to beat him. ‘How could you ever believe Dad and Ellie would frame Joe? What is wrong with you?’

Her nostrils flared and she fumed at him. Tom stared at her in fright, ‘I – I’m sorry. I didn’t… I don’t know… I just…’

Daisy caught sight of his injuries. ‘Oh… your poor head - your neck… oh Tom, you idiot!’

She cried and hugged him again.

‘Thanks Daisy,’ Tom muttered. ‘I missed you too.’

‘I leave for one month and you go off meeting murderers!’ she wailed. ‘Oh. But I’m so glad you’re okay.’ Wiping her eyes, she said, ‘Fred. Where’s wee Fred?’

Just then, Ellie entered with Fred holding her hand. He went wild with joy upon beholding his sister, and she swept him into her arms.

‘I heard he tried to hurt you too,’ Daisy said, kissing his cheek while he giggled. ‘Oh Freddy…’

Daisy looked at Ellie. Propping Fred on her hip, she held out her hand and grasped Ellie’s in hers.

‘Ellie. I missed you. How are the beans?’

‘Beans are doing okay. Remarkably well, under the circumstances,’ Ellie said, and she came forward so that Daisy could put her hand on her belly. ‘They’re a bit stressed, though. Like their poor old mum.’

Daisy leaned forward and kissed Ellie on the cheek.

‘It’s good to have you back, Daiz,’ Ellie said quietly.

It finally felt like home again.

The days passed. Tom was recovering well, and Ellie had stopped going to work entirely so she could look after her boys. With Daisy’s help, she too recovered some of her strength.

But Alec was still unable to sleep. Throwing off the blankets, he went downstairs. He loved having Daisy back with him, but it only added to his list of concerns. At least while she had been in Sandbrook he could be sure of her safety, but now…
He shuffled restlessly through some pieces of evidence, re-reading Joe’s confession for the hundredth time. His eyes itched with tiredness, but he knew it would be fruitless to close them.

Ellie wandered down the stairs with the duvet around her shoulders, dragging it behind her like the heavy mantle of a queen.

‘Alec,’ she mumbled.

‘I’m in the lounge,’ he replied.

Ellie entered. ‘The beans woke me up. You weren’t there,’ she said reproachfully. ‘You know I can’t sleep without you.’

She sat on the couch next to him and draped the duvet around the both of them.

‘Sorry,’ he said. ‘Couldn’t get to sleep. Thought I’d look over some evidence.’

Ellie leaned against his shoulder and pulled the warm duvet tight around them. ‘Mmkay.’

She started to drool. Alec smiled faintly and put his glasses back on, continuing to read.

After a time Fred came into the lounge.

‘Mum,’ he said, rubbing his eyes. ‘Dad.’

Ellie started awake at the sound of his voice. ‘Fred! Sweetheart, what’s wrong?’

‘Can’t sleep,’ he announced, and he joined them in the duvet, seating himself on Alec’s lap and cuddling into his chest.

Alec rocked him back and forth while Ellie slumped at his side, and he tried to keep reading.

Daisy went into the kitchen for a glass of water. She paused when she glimpsed them. ‘What’s all this?’

‘We’re annoying your father,’ Ellie replied, with one eye closed. She opened the duvet. ‘Room for one more.’

Daisy joined them and snuggled in on her father’s left. She pulled the blanket around her. ‘Quit hogging, Ellie.’

They managed to share the duvet amicably, and all cuddled against Alec while he sighed.

‘I am trying to work.’

‘All the more reason to annoy you.’

Ellie and Daisy started giggling. Tom eventually shuffled into the room.

‘No-one’s in their beds,’ he said. ‘What’s going on?’

‘Tom!’ Daisy exclaimed. ‘Join us.’

Tom surveyed the scene for a moment. He shrugged. ‘Yeah, all right.’

And he scooted in next to his mother. Ellie put her arm around him and stroked his hair, kissing him. He made a face, but seemed to enjoy her attentions.
Once they were all together, Daisy spoke, mumbling into her father's shoulder. ‘Have you thought of names for the beans?’

‘Not yet,’ Ellie said. ‘We’ve been so busy…’

In truth, she had been afraid to name them.

‘They’re gonna come out soon,’ Daisy said. ‘They need to have names. We can’t call them Bean 1 and Bean 2 forever.’

‘I still reckon we should call the girl Cthulhu,’ Tom said.

‘And the boy?’

Tom considered it. ‘Ernest.’

‘Ernest and Cthulhu. There’s a certain charm to it.’

‘No,’ said Alec tiredly.

‘I think Luke and Leia is the best way to go,’ Daisy said.

‘No.’

‘Jekyll and Hyde?’ offered Tom.

‘No.’

‘Morecambe and Wise.’

‘Fry and Laurie.’

‘French and Saunders.’

‘Laurel and Hardy.’

Daisy leaned over Alec and whacked Tom. ‘We can’t call them Laurel Hardy and Hardy Hardy!’

Tom slapped her back and Alec found himself caught in the middle of a fight. ‘Please,’ he sighed. ‘You’re disturbing Fred.’

Fred thought it was hilarious, however, and joined in by smacking Alec in the face. ‘Ouch!’

‘Hardy,’ Ellie groaned. ‘Oh Christ, that’s right. I’m giving birth to two Hardys. We’re gonna be outnumbered, four to three.’

‘Hardy,’ Daisy mused. She fixed her gaze on her battered copy of *The Return of the Native* that was set on the table. ‘Hey, you know what I think?’

And she suggested something to them. Ellie and Alec liked the idea immensely, and they settled on two names then and there.

‘We should celebrate naming the beans,’ Ellie declared. ‘You know what I’m thinking, Daisy?’

Daisy shot upright. ‘Peanut butter brownies?’

Ellie nodded. Daisy seized her father by the shoulders and shook him. ‘Can we, Dad? Can we?’
He frowned. ‘It’s 12 AM. It’s a school night.’ There was a pause. ‘Of course we can.’

Daisy shrieked in delight and they all ran into the kitchen to make them. She took over as the head chef and designated different jobs to each of them. Ellie generously portioned out the peanut butter, Alec used the electric mixer, while she herself got the tricky task of melting the chocolate. Fred and Tom had the responsibility of measuring out the ingredients, but Fred became a little too enthusiastic and ended up tipping flour over himself.

As Ellie cleaned him up, she tossed some flour at Tom.

‘Mum!’ he complained, and he flicked batter at her. A food war broke out, and soon they were all doused with flour and bits of melted butter. Daisy snuck up behind Alec, who had stayed out of the war, and dumped two handfuls of flour into his hair. He growled and chased her through the kitchen. Tom laughed, even though his throat hurt when he did, and Ellie smiled wider than she had in weeks.

Within the hour they were sitting together on the living room floor, covered in flour and feasting on piping hot brownies.

‘Wait!’ Ellie dropped the brownie she was holding. ‘I just felt the beans kick.’

Everyone crowded around at once, and they clamoured to put their sticky, chocolate-covered hands on her stomach.

‘They’re kicking really hard,’ Ellie laughed. ‘I think they must be happy. Fred, sweetheart, do you want to touch too?’

Fred nodded and Ellie grasped her son’s hand and guided it forward, making five hands in total touching the round swell of her stomach. The boy cooed in wonder.

Daisy was ecstatic.

‘We love you,’ she whispered as kicks fluttered beneath her fingertips. ‘We can’t wait to meet you.’

Daisy addressed them by name for the first time, and in that instant Ellie, heedless of the sorrow that was waiting for them, felt nothing but joy.
Alec had finally gotten hold of Karen White. She was sitting in front of him, answering his questions about her contact with Joe with her head bowed.

‘How did he get in touch with you?’ Alec asked.

‘We met by accident,’ Karen replied. ‘Becca Fisher threw me out of her hotel. I went to Olly’s house. Your kids were staying there, and Joe was outside watching them. When I spoke to him, he said he couldn’t see them because the police would lock him up if he tried. That was when I agreed to write the article.’

At this intelligence, Alec grew still. ‘Was this the only time he’d stalked Tom or Fred?’

Karen looked uncomfortable. ‘I don’t know. He used to come to Broadchurch a lot.’

He continued to question her. When he was done, he told her, ‘I will be cross-checking with other witnesses to ensure what you’ve told me is true.’

‘Fine,’ Karen replied. She raised her head and looked him in the eye. ‘I’ve been fired, you know. The woman who advocated for a murderer. Boss says I’ll never work in journalism again. I suppose you’re happy about that.’

His countenance was dark. ‘You should never have given Tom’s number to Joe. You should have told Ellie the second he contacted you.’

‘I thought I was doing the right thing.’ She almost seemed sad. ‘Well. I guess you were right in the end. You’ve finally won.’

‘Won?’ he repeated. ‘I haven’t won anything. This was never a competition, Karen. It was never even about you or I. It was only ever about justice for the Latimers and the Gillespies.’

His words went against everything she had ever assumed about him. Her lips parted slightly, but Alec had her escorted outside before she could say anything more.

He considered what she had said about Joe watching the house, and wondered how often he had stalked his sons. It would certainly explain how he’d known where Fred was on the day he’d tried to abduct him from the childminder.

Was this behaviour ongoing? Was he watching them even now, waiting for the perfect moment to strike?

He shuddered at the very idea.

* *

Abby was the next person he needed to interview. For several days she had been evading questioning and hiding behind legal pretences to escape him. By today, however, Alec had lost both his temper and his patience. Under the very real threat that he would arrest her for obstructing justice if she did not comply, she assented to an interview.

‘When did Joe Miller last get in contact with you?’ he asked.

‘It was just after all the stuff with Tom,’ Abby replied with a sigh. ‘He called to say he was in
trouble. He seemed hysterical, and he kept saying Tom’s name and yours a lot. I had no idea what he was trying to say. I tried calming him down, but after a minute he hung up. I never heard from him again.’ She unknotted her arms and ran one finger across the table. ‘And then I turned on the news the next day and saw what he’d done.’

Alec took down Joe’s mobile number from Abby. It was different from the number he’d used to contact Tom and Karen. He paused the interview to speak to an officer, and asked her to get a trace on the number.

When he returned, he said, ‘were you aware your client had been secretly meeting Tom Miller?’

‘No idea. He was always talking about how he wanted to see his sons, but I told him not to contact them before the hearing. It would’ve completely jeopardised his chances.’

‘Did you suspect he may have been visiting them, or stalking them?’

Abby shuffled in her seat. ‘I did know he was visiting Broadchurch a lot. He lived in London, but he’d come here every chance he got. Again, I told him not to do that.’

Alec took Joe’s London address down and sent officers to investigate. He finished up with Abby, and then left to talk to his next witness.

‘Becca,’ he said as he entered the Trader’s. She was sitting with Paul Coates, looking over her accounts.

‘Alec!’ she said in surprise. ‘Ellie not with you?’

He shook his head and tried to ignore the Ellie-shaped void at his side. ‘Had to stop working. She’s nearly nine months now.’

‘I heard about all the stuff with Tom and Fred,’ Becca said. ‘I’m so sorry that -’

‘I need to ask you a few questions,’ Alec interrupted. Becca glanced at Paul, then glided into the foyer to speak with him privately.

‘Was Karen White staying here about two months ago?’ Alec asked.

Becca replied in the affirmative. She pulled out the hotel register and gave him the exact dates. Alec jotted them down.

‘She mentioned that you threw her out,’ Alec went on.

‘That’s right,’ Becca said. ‘I talked to her about you. Told her that the stuff about you and Ellie having an affair was nonsense. I mean, I should know, right?’

She let out a chuckled, but stopped when she saw the look on his face.

‘Anyway,’ she went on, colour rising to her cheeks, ‘she didn’t listen to me. So I – uh, I said that as long as she was in Broadchurch to dig up dirt on the two of you, she wasn’t welcome in my hotel.’

Alec did not react. ‘That’s all I needed to know.’

He went to leave, but Becca stopped him. ‘Wait – Alec, I know things are awkward between us, but I wanted to say – I’m happy for you and Ellie. And if there’s anything I can do to help -’

‘You want to help?’ Alec said abruptly. ‘Then tell your friends to start calling Mark for plumbing
work. And to stop avoiding Beth. The Latimers have been through enough.’

Becca deflated. ‘Please, Alec, I really do want to help you.’

‘And she’s not the only one,’ Paul said quietly. He entered the room and smiled sheepishly. ‘Sorry. Eavesdropping. But you should know that ever since word got out about Tom, I’ve had a lot of people coming to me asking if there’s anything they can do for you. You, and the Latimers, and your new children.’

Alec was scornful. ‘Really? Sure could’ve used this support two months ago, when Karen White was dragging our names through the mud. Instead Ellie couldn’t even walk down the street without people calling her a whore behind her back.’

‘Not everyone believed the papers,’ Paul protested. ‘Many of us were on your side from the start.’

‘I made sure to tell everyone the truth here at the Trader’s,’ Becca said. ‘You had support, Alec.’

‘But not enough,’ he said. ‘The damage is done, and I’m not here to make people feel better about themselves by accepting charity.’

He stomped from the room. Becca and Paul let him go.

When he returned to the station, two officers came up to offer intelligence. They had found Joe’s apartment in London. It was empty, and had been for some time. There were no obvious clues as to Joe’s whereabouts, but they promised to search it thoroughly.

As for the second phone number Abby had given them, it had been switched off for the past four days, and they could not get a trace on it. The last signal, however, had been triangulated in Sandbrook.

‘Sandbrook,’ Alec murmured to himself. ‘Why Sandbrook?’

* *

The house was quiet. Fred was napping, Tom was resting, and Daisy was doing homework. Feeling restless and sore, Ellie was trying to distract herself by reading Jude the Obscure. Daisy had finished it several days ago, and had subsequently hurled it across the room with a scream of sorrow and betrayal. It had lain forlornly for a while until Ellie picked it up and decided to re-read it.

She had not read it in over a decade, and although she vaguely recalled the big tragic twists of the novel, the events affected her more profoundly than they ever had before. She became particularly distressed at the part where the protagonist’s children were murdered, and one line, the heartbroken cry of Sue to her lover Jude after discovery of their little bodies, stood out to her:

“Oh, my comrade, our perfect union — our two-in-oneness — is now stained with blood!”

Disturbed, Ellie recalled, with a stab of misgiving, that Jack Marshall had told herself and Alec he’d been reading Jude the Obscure the night Danny died. The thought of that man’s untimely end – his suicide, plunging from the cliffs – made her shudder.

Placing the book aside, she read no more.

Yet the line stayed with her, and it swam through her head like a shark in a shipwreck.

“Oh, my comrade, our perfect union...”
Agitated, Ellie began wandering around the house. Her back was throbbing terribly, and lances of pain darted through her at intervals, as though hatpins were being driven into her spinal cord. Prowling past the bars obscuring the windows of her house, she resembled a caged animal.

Eventually, the pain worsened and she came to a halt in the kitchen. Too great with child to sit at ease, she stood by the kitchen window and looked out.

Through the bars she could see swallows, the heralds of spring, wheeling and dancing through the sky. A soft smile lit her face as she watched them play, and she wondered when they had returned. Their forked tails twisted and turned hypnotically as they manoeuvred, and they seemed to cast a kind of spell over Ellie. Absorbed in the dance, she no longer saw the bars marring her window and her awareness of the white-hot throbbing in her spine all but disappeared.

She lost track of how long she stood there. The sun began to set, and the arrival of night was hastened by a swathe of rain clouds flooding in from the sea. A blustery, cold wind started blowing, and after a while it grew so strong that the swallows were forced to retire and give up the last vestiges of day.

Blinking, troubled by this change in atmosphere, Ellie murmured to herself:

‘There’s going to be a storm.’

As if in agreement, the wind surged so hard that it nearly bent the trees over, and fat drops of rain splattered against the window.

Alec entered the room, looking exhausted and windswept. She turned automatically to him, and the sudden movement sent a bullet of agony into her nervous system. Inhaling sharply, she tried to fight down the sensation. ‘What news?’ she asked.

Alec leaned against the bench next to her. ‘Spoke to Karen and Abby today,’ he said. He passed a hand over his beard. ‘And we’ve got a trace on Joe’s second mobile. If he uses it, we’ll be able to find him.’

‘It’s progress,’ Ellie murmured. ‘It baffles me how he’s been able to hide for this long, what with the police as well as Nige and the others out looking for him, and half the country knowing what he looks like.’ She drummed her fingers on the bench. ‘He must have a hideout somewhere.’

‘Someone could be harbouring him.’ Alec scratched his chin. ‘But who’s left that’s sympathetic?’

‘He may have gone back to Ireland,’ Ellie suggested, ‘to be with his brother.’

‘We’ve been in touch with him,’ Alec said. ‘Doesn’t seem likely.’

‘But not impossible.’

Alec could not bring himself to dash her hopes outright, so he said nothing. His phone rang discordantly and he flinched, answering it with a tired, ‘what?’

Whatever the person on the phone said made his eyes widen in alarm. ‘Stay there,’ he ordered. ‘I’ll be right over.’

‘What is it?’

‘I may not be back until late,’ Alec said. He pulled his coat back on and shoved his mobile away. ‘Take the kids and stay with Mark and Beth tonight. I’ve asked Lucy and Olly to check in too, and
I’ll send some officers to watch the house.’

‘But what’s happening?’ Ellie demanded.

‘I’ll call you later.’ He kissed her and ran out. Ellie made a frustrated groaning noise after him, her hands forming claws, as though she were ready to strangle him.

Alec arrived at Susan’s caravan with two squad cars shortly afterwards. She had been permitted to return there the previous day, and this intelligence had obviously spread, for Nige Carter and a group of angry Broadchurch residents were surrounding the tiny dwelling and hurling insults. Two officers were attempting to keep the peace. Alec recognised them as the officers he’d tasked with observing her secretly. They’d had to break cover to protect her.

‘We don’t want you here no more!’ Nige shouted. Flecks of foam were stuck around his mouth. ‘So why don’t you just leave!’

Susan was standing in the doorway of the caravan. Vince sat next to her, and she calmly sucked on a cigarette as she watched the seething crowd.

Someone threw a glass bottle and it shattered at her feet. She did not flinch.

‘Oi!’ Alec shouted. ‘That’s enough!’

The arrival of the Detective Inspector quelled the crowd for a few moments, and their shouts subsided to angry mutters.

‘Break this up. Now.’ Alec’s teeth were gritted. His uniformed officers arrived at his side, making a wall of seven between Susan and the townspeople.

‘Alec!’ Nige shouted. ‘We’re doing this for you, mate. We know what happened with Tom, and we know she helped him! She’s too dangerous to be allowed in Broadchurch!’

The mob behind him murmured their agreement. ‘She can’t be allowed near our kids!’ one shouted.

Another wave of agreement swept through them.

‘This isn’t how we do things, Nigel,’ Alec said. He cast his gaze over the other townspeople, some of whom he recognised. Their fury was palpable, and almost medieval. Torches and pitchforks would not have seemed amiss. ‘Disperse, all of you!’

Nige was unmoved. ‘I told you!’ he cried. ‘I told you about her, didn’t I? I said she were dangerous, I said she were harassin’ Mum and me and you did nothing! And now because of her, Tom nearly -’

‘That’s enough!’

An arctic wind swept in from the sea and a few drops of rain spattered to the ground. The air was moist and cold, and it dampened Alec’s lungs as he spoke. ‘Whatever this woman did, there are no grounds to come to her house with a lynch mob to try to enact some… vigilante justice!’

In the ensuing silence, Susan took a long drag on her cigarette and coughed softly.

‘If you disperse now,’ Alec said, addressing everyone in the crowd, ‘we will forget this. We won’t press charges. You can all go home. But if you stay,’ he eyed Nige, ‘I will arrest you, you understand?’
The officers clenched their jaws, ready for a struggle. Mercifully, however, the townspeople backed down. They slunk away in files.

‘We don’t want her in our town,’ one muttered as they departed. ‘We don’t want her here!’

Someone spat on the ground. Several swore at her. But they left nonetheless, trailing off until only Nige remained, looking furious.

‘Nigel,’ Alec said warningly. ‘Let this go.’

‘No!’ he cried, petulant as a child. ‘You people – the police – you won’t do nothing about this! She’s been stalking me and Mum and helping a murderer and you won’t do nothing!’

‘Joe ain’t the murderer, Nige,’ Susan said behind them. Her mouth was curved contemptuously. ‘You are your father’s son, after all.’

Nige’s thick brows pulled together and he ran at her. Alec half-tackled him to keep him back, and two officers joined in.

‘Don’t say that to me!’ he shouted. ‘Don’t you say that to me! I ain’t him! He ain’t my father, and you ain’t my mother!’

While they struggled with Nige, Susan choked and became overcome with an ugly coughing fit. She dropped her cigarette and bent almost double with the force of her spasms. Covering her mouth with both hands, she hacked so hard she nearly retched.

When she took her hands away, they were spotted with blood. Seeing the red broke something in her. Concern mottled her face, and she looked up at Nige.

‘I never should have let them take you away from me,’ she croaked. ‘It all started the minute they took you away. You were just my little boy - my only boy – and then the police took you away… if I’d raised you, if you’d been mine, I could’ve saved you.’

She descended from the caravan and approached him. Despite all his struggles to reach her, her sudden approach and the sainted look on her face made Nige recoil.

‘I could’ve saved you from yourself,’ Susan nodded. Blood gleamed on her lip. ‘I could’ve raised you to be good. But they took you away…’

An agonised look passed over her and she fell silent, perhaps thinking of the other daughter the police had stolen from her, and the eldest, the girl her husband had murdered.

‘I’m glad they took me from you!’ Nige declared. ‘You’re mad. Raving mad!’

‘But we can still have something,’ Susan implored, starting forward again. ‘You and me. It’s not too late. I’m still your mother.’

‘You’re not my mother!’ Nige roared. ‘Why can’t you get that through your thick skull? You ain’t my mum, I’m not your son, and I don’t want anything to do wiv you! So why don’t you just leave me alone and die already!’

Susan stopped. The words had found their mark.

‘Nigel,’ Alec said quietly. ‘Come away now.’

Nige almost looked guilty for what he had said, but the aberration passed. He turned and stalked
'You better leave,' he said as he left. ‘You better leave Broadchurch. And don’t you come back.’

Alec instructed two officers to escort Nige home to his mother. He was led to the squad car and shoved inside.

When Alec turned back to Susan, her face was streaked with tears. They tracked down her face like claw marks. Wiping them away with the back of her hand, she glared at Alec through yellowed eyes.

‘It’s because of you,’ she rasped. ‘You and all the police. It’s all because of you. You twisted everything I told you. You took away my son…’

She looked so dead and broken that something like pity stirred in his breast. ‘Susan…’ Alec began.

At that moment one of the officers ran up to him. ‘Sir!’ he shouted. ‘We’ve just got word! Joe Miller’s phone is back on. The tracking coordinates are coming through now!’

Alec’s eyes widened. Without further regard for Susan, he got into his car and left her alone to weep.

Alec gathered every available officer and sped to the scene at once, barking directions to the driver as the coordinates came through. He was filled with a strange sense of déjà vu, and hoped vehemently that it would be as before – that he would find Joe Miller waiting for him, tired of running and ready to surrender.

They ended up at Tom’s school. It was dark and deserted, having been let out almost three hours ago. Alec knew Daisy was already at home, and that Tom had not attended today. It seemed an odd place to surrender – perhaps his intention was instead to stalk Tom and gather intelligence regarding his activities or whereabouts? Had his use of the phone been a mere error?

The coordinates were narrowed down to within a few metres, and Alec found the spot precisely – but there was no sign of Joe.

‘Fan out!’ Alec ordered. ‘Start looking! He may have heard us coming and run.’

The officers began checking through the classrooms, while Alec remained in the corridor, looking along the rows of lockers. He wondered if Tom’s locker was among them.

‘Is this section for juniors?’ he asked. He opened one of the lockers and saw heavy textbooks inside.

‘No. Older kids,’ one officer replied.

Alec began opening every locker that did not have a lock. Finally, he hit upon the right one.

‘Found it!’ Alec called. ‘Get an evidence bag! We need to get this analysed!’

He looked around the inside of the locker for clues as to whose it was. It was a girl’s – definitely not Tom’s. There was a pink hair clip at the bottom, a few standard textbooks and –

Alec’s marrow seemed to freeze in his bones.

There, partially obscured by the mobile phone, was a dog-eared copy of *Tess of the d’Urbervilles.*

Swallowing hard, he gingerly lifted the front cover. On the inside, printed in the loopy handwriting
of a teenage girl, was the name DAISY HARDY.

Ellie followed Alec’s advice and took the children to the Latimers’ house as soon as he left. Lucy and Olly were there too, and the irresponsible pair generated a jovial atmosphere. With Lizzie and Fred causing trouble and Beth trying to make cheesecake while Tom, Mark, Daisy and Chloe kicked a football through the kitchen, it would have felt like a normal get together had it not been for the police car parked outside.

Ellie stayed apart from the others. She was sitting unsteadily on the arm of the couch, sweat beading on her forehead. Beth entered the room, sucking batter off her thumb. She saw Ellie and paused.

‘El?’ She sounded concerned. ‘You don’t look well.’

Ellie swayed slightly. Steeling herself, she looked up at Beth and smiled. ‘I’m fine. Just bad back pain is all.’

‘You’re not…?’ Beth began.

‘No. No, don’t worry about that. They’re not going anywhere. Not until Joe’s been captured.’

Beth looked doubtful. ‘I don’t think you really get a say in it.’

‘It’s fine, Beth,’ Ellie said. ‘They’re not due for another week anyway.’

Daisy came into the room. ‘Ellie!’ she shouted. ‘I forgot my camera. Can I go back and get it?’

‘What do you need it for?’

‘For the cheesecake! We’re decorating it now, and it’s gonna be epic. I want to take pictures before Tom eats it all.’

‘Can’t you just use your phone?’ Beth asked.

Daisy scoffed, and muttered something about them knowing nothing about photography. ‘Please,’ she said. ‘I’ll be quick.’

‘Well you’re not going alone,’ Ellie said, dragging herself upright. ‘I’ll go with you.’

‘I should come too,’ Beth said, but as she said it Mark called her, saying Lizzie wouldn’t stop fussing. She looked at them apologetically.

‘It’s all right,’ Ellie said. ‘We’re only going across the field, and the squad car’s just out front. Anyway, I could use a walk.’

Beth nodded, and went to get Lizzie.

‘Don’t touch that cheesecake until I get back!’ Daisy yelled as she left.

Absorbed in their little revelry, the others did not even notice them leave.

The atmosphere outside was damp and murky, and the wind was still keening fiercely. Broken branches tumbled across the field and the odd drop of rain spattered here and there. Far in the distance, thunder rumbled.
Ellie pulled her orange coat on and managed to zip it up over her belly. She tucked her hands into the sleeves, and struggled to keep up with Daisy’s brisk pace.

‘Come on! It’s gonna rain soon,’ Daisy said. She was navigating swiftly through the gloom, and paused to glance behind her. ‘God, look at you,’ she laughed. ‘You’re waddling!’

‘I’d like to see you do better with two tiny humans compressing your spine,’ Ellie said. She tried to remain light-hearted, but as they walked on the smile slipped from her face. Deep trenches lined her brow. The wind howled in her ears and she flattened her hair to her head, feeling dizzy.

The short wail of a siren made them look back. The squad car parked outside the Latimers’ house suddenly sped off down the street. Ellie blinked in surprise.

‘That’s weird,’ Daisy said.

‘There’s only one reason they’d leave,’ Ellie murmured.

Daisy looked hopefully at Ellie. ‘Maybe they got him!’ she said. ‘Maybe that’s why Dad ran off without telling you where.’

‘God I hope so.’

They reached the house. Ellie unlocked the door and turned off the security system. Daisy ran upstairs and Ellie struggled into the kitchen, leaning hard on the bench, her lungs shuddering. Out of the elements, she soon overheated in her orange coat and shrugged it off. Tossing it on the bench, she wiped her sleeve across her brow and shuddered as a rolling wave of pain suffused her. She had only half-closed the door behind her, and a wet gust of wind forced it open with a bang, making her jump.

Daisy sorted through her messy room. Finding the camera under a pile of t-shirts, she slung it around her neck, and grabbed her raincoat for good measure.

‘I got it!’ Daisy yelled, bounding back down the stairs. ‘Let’s go!’

She could not see Ellie in the hall. She wandered into the kitchen and saw her, leaning hard against the sink, her knuckles white.

‘There you are!’ Daisy said, walking to her side. ‘Come on, let’s go! Tom will eat all the cheesecake if we don’t hurry.’

Ellie neither moved nor spoke. Her eyes widened and she stared at some point behind Daisy’s head.

‘Ellie?’ Daisy said. ‘Hey, what is it?’

‘Daisy.’ Her voice was firm and calm. ‘I want you to get behind me.’

‘What?’ Daisy turned to see what Ellie was looking at.

The back of her neck prickled. A sudden rush of adrenalin filled her.

Standing there in the doorway was Joe Miller.

‘Daisy,’ Ellie said again, with only the slightest tremor to her voice.

The teenager was rigid. Joe was taller and bigger than she had imagined, and he blotted out the exit entirely. Tearing her eyes away, she looked at Ellie, who was shorter than herself and almost nine
months pregnant. Her breathing was laboured, and the creases beneath her eyes were more pronounced than usual. She was angry, she was afraid – and she was in pain, too. It radiated from her.

‘No,’ Daisy said. ‘No, Ellie, I’m not going to -’

‘Daisy!’ Ellie roared. ‘Get behind me this instant!’

Ellie’s Mum Voice was so powerful that somehow it made her seem more frightening in that moment than Joe. Cowed into submission, Daisy ducked behind Ellie, and Ellie put out her hand to guide her into place, until her round belly eclipsed her. The hand that grasped her slid down her chest and found the camera at her neck. She tapped it with her index finger, alerting Daisy’s attention, and dropped the hand.

‘So you’re Daisy,’ Joe said. ‘Pretty thing, aren’t you?’

Daisy began to tremble.

‘I feel like I know so much about you. Quite the Thomas Hardy fan, right? And a good artist too.’

He pulled out two photographs from his pocket, both of them featuring the cliffs of Broadchurch. ‘I found these in your locker. Did you take them yourself?’

‘Dad… my Dad will be here soon,’ Daisy said. ‘He’s just on his way home now, and if he finds you here with me,’ she thrust her chin out in defiance, ‘he’ll lock you away forever.’

‘No,’ Joe said flatly. ‘He’s not coming home. I know where he is. And I know I have plenty of time right now.’

The wind keened through the cracks in the house, finding every chink in the doors and windows. Joe took a step forward, and Ellie flinched back.

‘You’re a hard girl to track down,’ Joe said. ‘I went to find you in Sandbrook, you know. But by the time I got there, you’d run back to Broadchurch.’ He regarded her thoughtfully. ‘You look like him. Has anyone told you that?’

Daisy swallowed hard. ‘Yes.’

‘It makes me think of how they will look,’ he went on. Ellie’s breathing was already laboured, but she started to hyperventilate at those words. ‘I suppose they’ll look like him, too.’

He took another step forward. Swifter than lightning, Ellie darted forward and seized a kitchen knife from the block on the counter. Pointing the knife straight at Joe, she shuffled back, keeping her body squarely in front of Daisy’s.

Joe folded his arms and tilted his head at her.

‘You really think you can kill me, El?’ Joe asked.

‘Just fucking try me,’ she snarled.

Yet even with the weapon, she was not a particularly fearsome sight. Sweat ran off her in waves, and she was swaying. Daisy noticed there was a large wet stain forming on the inside of her legs.

‘Oh, God, Ellie…’ Daisy whispered, realising what that meant.
If Joe noticed her waters had broken, he made no sign. ‘Put the knife down. You’re not a murderer, El.’

‘Oh, don’t you fucking dare try and tell me what I’m capable of!’ Ellie screamed. ‘You murdered Danny. You killed him and you nearly killed Tom too, and both times I couldn’t stop you, but by God,’ she took a shuffling step back towards Daisy, ‘as long as I am breathing you will never hurt another child. And if that means I have to kill you, I will.’

Joe knew she was telling the truth, and doubt flickered over him. Ellie’s face grew red.

‘My son,’ she said, her breath catching in her throat. Anger and sorrow were at war inside of her. ‘Tom – how could you? And Danny – he was just Beth’s little boy… God he was so small, Joe – how could you hurt him?’

The mention of Tom threw off his equilibrium. ‘I didn’t - ’

‘Don’t deny it! Don’t look at me and say you didn’t!’

‘I didn’t mean to!’

The defensive shout slipped out before he could stop it. He looked momentarily horrified at the confession, but the urge to justify himself overwhelmed his senses. ‘Tom – Tom and Danny, I never meant to hurt either of them! I was trying to help them!’

‘Help them?’ she echoed thunderously. ‘Help them?’

‘Danny only came to me because Mark hit him! I patched him up! I was there for him! And Tom – Tom was feeling ignored!’

A red cloud descended over Ellie. Long, long ago, Alec had told her that anyone was capable of murder given the right circumstances. She had not believed him at the time. But now, with the knife in her hand, and her unborn babies twisting against her spine and Daisy at her back and Joe – Joe – standing there in her kitchen, in exactly the same place that Tom had stood when she’d first seen him with his bruised throat and cut forehead – oh, she had never felt more capable of murder. The desire clotted her veins and stopped up her lungs. It gnawed at her soul.

Joe went on, ‘Tom was feeling ignored! With those – those things – about to be born, and with the two of you at work all the time, he felt ignored! He was getting bullied at school because of you, and he couldn’t talk to you about it. He had to go to Susan Wright instead. He missed his Dad, and I was there for him! I helped Tom when you wouldn’t!’

‘Don’t say his name!’ Ellie shrieked. ‘Don’t even say his name you fucking piece of shit! He needed stitches! He couldn’t talk properly for a week because of you “helping him,” and all I could do was thank God you didn’t kill him!’

‘I would never – I never wanted to hurt him!’ Joe cried, seemingly genuinely tortured. ‘It was all Alec Hardy. He turned him against me. It was because of him that he -’

‘Don’t bring my Dad into this!’ Daisy piped up suddenly. ‘You don’t get to blame him for what you did!’

‘Why can’t you just fucking admit it?’ Ellie shouted hoarsely. ‘You’re a murderer and a paedophile and you have no-one to blame but yourself!’

He started at the word ‘paedophile’ and looked as though he had been scalded. ‘I am not,’ he said
quietly.

‘Not what? Not a murderer? Not a paedophile?’ Ellie said defiantly, as though baiting him.

He flinched again. ‘I am not like that! I am not that man!’ he shouted, taking a step forward and clenching his fists.

The red walls of the kitchen loomed oppressively on all sides, and seemed to drip and throb. In that moment, a contraction crippled Ellie. Feeling as though she were being squeezed in a giant fist, she spread her legs and braced one hand on her knee, keeping the other upright so the trembling end of the knife was pointed at Joe.

She screamed.

The sight restored some equilibrium to Joe’s passionate state. His breathing slowed and he watched her carefully, perhaps moved by the memories of when she’d been in labour with Tom and Fred, and how he’d soothed her fears and whispered words of love as she’d writhed in agony.

Or maybe he simply realised that although Ellie was certainly willing to kill him, she was physically incapable of it.

He folded his arms, suddenly thoughtful.

‘My wife,’ he murmured. ‘Having another man’s children.’

‘I – am not – your wife,’ Ellie gasped. Sweat shone on her upper lip.

‘Alec Hardy’s bastards,’ he continued in distaste.

He looked around the kitchen. He had once been lord and master of this tiny domain. This had once been his home. Ellie had been his wife. His children –

His gaze fell to the fridge, and the multitude of drawings thereon. He glimpsed Fred’s crude attempt at a family portrait, and saw that Alec had been drawn in the part of father.

It drove the message home. Alec had replaced him in every respect. As husband, as father – even as the chef. All the rage he should have directed against himself, Joe directed outwards, and let it fall upon Alec’s head.

Of course, with Alec absent, the rage necessarily fell on three innocents instead, two of whom had not even taken their first breaths.

‘It’s all because of him,’ he muttered, more to himself than to Ellie. ‘All because of him.’

He looked up, and saw past Ellie to Daisy’s half-obscured face. ‘It’s all because of your dad,’ he snarled. ‘Everything that’s happened to me – it’s all because of him. He locked me up. He sent me on the run. He got me out of the way, so he could take my children from me, my house, my wife - ’

‘That’s not true!’ Daisy said. Her voice was small, but it grew with her conviction. ‘My Dad’s a hero! He only ever does what’s right! You don’t get to blame him because you’re a bloody paedophile!’

The word made him swell like a tumour. ‘I am not!’ he roared taking a step forward. ‘I never touched anyone! I never touched Fred or Tom or Danny!’

‘No, you just strangle the life out of them instead!’ Daisy screamed, starting forward slightly before
Ellie could stop her.

The movement brought Daisy’s form out of obscurity, and Joe suddenly noticed the large professional camera around her neck. A red light, which Daisy had hitherto concealed with her hand and the winter coat in her arms, winked at him at intervals.

‘Are – are you recording this?’ He stared at her in disbelief. ‘Have you been recording this – this whole time?’

The blood drained from his face. He had admitted to murdering Danny on video, once again. There would be no arguing his way out this time. Joe let out a feral, almost animal groan. He stared hard at Daisy, his teeth bared.

Outside, it began to rain, lightly at first. Droplets drummed on the roof like fingers on a piano.

Then it began to pour.

The police sirens wailed as they surged through the rain, scattering cars and sending sprays of water everywhere as they burst through puddles. Seeing the lights on inside their house, Alec bailed out as soon as they were near and was the first to go inside.

‘Daisy!’ he shouted. ‘Ellie! Tom! Anyone!’

‘Here!’ a voice called back. ‘In here!’

Alec burst into the kitchen. Ellie and Daisy were both inside. Blind to anything else, he ran to his daughter at once and swept her up.

‘You’re okay?’ he said quickly, checking her.

‘I’m fine,’ Daisy pointed at her feet. ‘It’s Ellie – she’s hurt. She’s hurt real bad.’

Ellie was slumped on her knees, groaning to herself. Her hands were raised upwards, as if in supplication, and were stained with blood. On her legs, blood mingled with amniotic fluid.

‘God, Ellie –’ Alec said, anguished. He pushed her dark hair out of her eyes. ‘What happened?’

‘He was here,’ Daisy said, shaking. The words tumbled out in a childish babble: ‘Joe – he was here, he came after me. He – he wanted to get back at you for taking Tom and Fred away. Ellie got him talking and he confessed to Danny’s murder – I was recording it on my camera,’ she paused and held up the camera to illustrate her point, ‘except he saw – and he – I think he tried to kill me. But Ellie – she had the knife – she stabbed him, and he kicked her, and now she’s hurt and I don’t know what to do!’

Three officers came careening inside. ‘Sir!’ they called. They entered the kitchen and stopped dead when they saw Ellie.

‘How long has he been gone?’ Alec demanded. He gently shook Ellie's shoulder, but she was limp. She saw straight through him.

‘Not long. Um. Few minutes,’ Daisy said. ‘He heard the sirens, and that’s what made him run.’

Alec turned to the officers. ‘Find Joe Miller!’ he commanded. ‘Fan out, cover the area! He’s close, and he’s injured! Get everyone out there after him!’
The officers looked at Ellie for a moment, torn.

‘Now!’ Alec roared, and they ran out.

‘Alec,’ Ellie moaned. She grabbed him with one red hand, staining his sleeve with Joe’s blood. ‘I killed him. I think I killed him.’

‘We have to get you to a hospital,’ he said.

‘No. No. They can’t be born,’ Ellie sobbed. ‘They’ll take them away from me. I killed him. They’ll take my babies away.’

‘Ellie, look at me.’ She moaned and did not obey. ‘El,’ he entreated. ‘Love, look at me.’

She did. Her brown eyes found his, creating a lifeline between them. ‘No-one,’ he told her, ‘is going to take our children away. I promise. You acted in self-defence. Now we are going to find Joe Miller, and we are going to lock him away. Our children will be born, and you will be safe. I promise.’

His words pierced through the red miasma that enveloped her. She nodded, once.

‘Can you stand?’

She shook her head.

‘Right.’

Alec glanced around and quickly shot out of the room. He returned with Nish and another officer called Isaac.

‘Stay with her,’ he said. ‘Get an ambulance in. We don’t know the extent of her injuries. We may not be able to transport her ourselves.’

Nish was already on the phone. Alec told Isaac, ‘call the Latimers, and Ellie’s sister. They need to be here to help her through this.’

Ellie sensed something was afoot. ‘Alec,’ she said in distress as Nish knelt by her side. ‘Alec, what are you going to do?’

‘I’m going out to find Joe,’ Alec replied. ‘This ends tonight.’

‘No - Alec – Alec, please don’t leave me,’ Ellie begged, her eyes wide.

Alec knelt at her side once more, and she gripped his arm in both hands.

‘I’m sorry, love, I’m so sorry, but I have to find him. It’s the only way I can be sure of your safety. All of you.’

Her fingers dug into his arm, unrelenting. Alec placed his hand atop hers.

‘This will end tonight,’ he pronounced with finality.

Ellie looked into his eyes. Her bottom lip trembled and her grip relaxed slightly. She sagged. Taking this as permission, Alec kissed her swiftly.

‘I’ll come back,’ he said. ‘I promise.’
He squeezed her hand. Then his fingers slipped from hers and he stood up. He turned to Daisy, who had been watching the scene in silent horror, and addressed her:

‘You have to be strong now, Daiz.’ He stood tall and squared his shoulders. After a moment, Daisy copied the gesture and stiffened her wobbly chin. ‘You’re not a little girl anymore, you have to be strong. I need you to look after her for me. Can you do that?’

Daisy nodded. A lump in her throat prevented her from speaking, but determination blazed in her eyes.

‘Good. I love you, darlin’.’

He kissed Daisy’s forehead and ran from the room. As his warm spittle dried and the sensation of his whiskers scraping her skin faded, it suddenly occurred to Daisy that she might never see her father again.


The storm raged, black and wild and wet. It was such a night as when sorrow may descend without there being any sense of incongruity. Trees leaned sideways in the wind, their boughs groaning from the force of the elements. The downpour was so thick and constant that stepping outside was like stepping into water only slightly diluted with air.

Through this soup, Joe Miller ran.

He had one hand tucked under his left arm, and he sobbed with every step he took. Ellie had buried her knife in his armpit, aiming, probably, for his heart. Despite the pain, his training as a paramedic told him not to remove it yet. It was wedged awkwardly and the position suggested she had struck an artery. It would need to be taken out with skill and care, and the wound quickly compressed to stem the bleeding, feats he could hardly accomplish in his fugitive state.

He could hear the distant sound of a siren, and habitually turned in the opposite direction. Fearing the roads and the streetlights, Joe headed to the ocean and ended up near the harbour. He stumbled into a partially flooded boatyard, where unseaworthy vessels lay on their sides like beached whales, the great chasms in their hulls breathing and spurting like blowholes. It was here that Joe paused to crouch and calm himself. Gingerly, he touched the wound in his arm.

The pain was terrible, but the numbing effects of the cold made it bearable. In the darkness, however, there was no way to tell how bad it was or how much blood he was losing. He decided to try taking it out and grasped the handle. He tugged; it did not come free, and the pain was so excruciating he almost passed out. She had wedged it into the bone.

Groaning, he stood carefully and looked around, trying to get his bearings, searching for the track that would take him back to his sanctuary.

The clouds having swallowed up the moon and the stars, only artificial light could guide him. The distant flashes of car headlights and the blinking of harbour lights and houses illuminated the area bit by bit, rendering the shapes of the boats like monsters. Occasionally, light struck the great wall of cliffs, those guardians of Broadchurch and the silent sentinels of the mainland. They loomed at him with teeth bared, making him recoil in abject fear.

He had lived in Broadchurch for a decade, yet in this moment he had never felt more like a stranger. Ellie would have taken courage from the sight of those cliffs, and smiled when she recognised their faces; but in him they instilled nothing but terror.
A dog barked somewhere far off and he jumped. Hissing through his teeth, Joe tottered his way onwards. The bleached skull of a seagull crunched under his feet. It disintegrated, and was swept away in the torrent.

As Joe struggled along by the harbour, he suddenly felt as though hundreds of years of Broadchurch’s nautical history were playing out in front of his eyes. This night – this storm – seemed risen from a place in the distant past, and was fit to make wives sigh for husbands at sea. The dead and beached ships in the boatyard came alive and teetered upright, sprouting masts and rigging and sails ready to catch the wind. By the wharf, the ghosts of ancient mariners awoke and moved through the rain.

Ellie’s ancestors were among them, and Danny’s too.

In this haunted atmosphere, Joe was an intruder, and singularly unwelcome. He kept his head down and blinked rapidly until the visions passed.

He reached the sailing club, which was proudly decorated with tackle and shells, and which had a brass ship wheel, some hundred and fifty years old, fastened to its door. The burgees were fluttering madly from the eaves, and after a few strained moments the twine snapped and the line of flags whipped into the sky to be lost forever. A naked bulb burned by the door; Joe passed by this tiny beacon as close as he dared, using its light to make his way on.

He became entangled in a coil of rope on the ground and tripped heavily. It sent a jolt through his arm and he screamed. The club door opened and someone looked out.

‘Halloo!’ they bellowed into the storm. ‘Is anyone there?’

The voice was thickly accented, as thickly accented as the man’s Wessex grandfathers and great-grandfathers must have been. The aged native peered into the storm, past the curtain of rain spilling from the guttering, and glimpsed him.

Struggling to his feet, Joe ran on.

*

Having left Ellie and Daisy in the hands of Nish and Isaac, Alec called in every other officer he could and ordered them to scour the area. Joe Miller had to be found, he told them, and he had to be found tonight.

Putting all thoughts of Ellie and the new babies out of his mind, Alec bent himself to this task. Much as he ached to be with her, he was convinced that the best thing he could do for his family was find Joe. Only then would they be safe. Only then would they be able to live in peace.

He thought of the blood soaking Ellie, and her words – “I think I killed him.” Daisy said she had recorded the incident, so he hoped it would clearly show the stabbing was done in self-defence – but there was the possibility that Ellie had attacked him first, as she had done in the interview room. Certainly, she had provocation, but would it be enough to absolve her of all blame?

Treacherously, one part of his mind asked – what if she really killed him? What if I have to arrest her?

He quaked at the thought. No, he told himself. Only one person would be led away in chains tonight, and it sure as hell wouldn’t be his pregnant wife.

Joe’s pregnant wife, he reminded himself as he forged through the rain.
But that was wrong too. Perhaps the law said she was Joe’s wedded wife, but the law, as in so many things, was wrong.

If ever any two were man and wife, it was he and Ellie.

‘Sir!’ a uniformed officer ran up to him. ‘There’s no sign of him in the area, and we haven’t enough officers to search the whole town. Where should we concentrate our efforts?’

Alec shielded his face with one hand and looked up and down the street, trying to fight off the sensation of drowning. The gutters, blocked with leaves and mud, overflowed and ran over his shoes. He jolted at the fresh sensation and followed its course with his eyes.

It ran, inevitably, towards the ocean.

All roads led waterward in Broadchurch.

‘The beach,’ Alec said decisively. ‘The harbour. He won’t be on the roads. He’ll have gone to the beach to hide. Get everyone down there. And make sure an officer stays near the Latimers’ house, in case he comes back!’

The officer nodded and ran to spread the word.

The storm raged, and Alec suffocated. Buried memories surfaced violently within him. Suddenly he was a child being pulled from the ocean by a coastguard, with nothing in his vision but distant cliffs. Then he was an adult, pulling Pippa’s lifeless body from the river and setting her on a bed of bluebells. And then he was a man reborn, lifting the body of a toddler from the foaming waves.

Water rained upon him, leaching into his clothes, his skin, his lungs, his soul.

Shuddering, Alec steeled himself and ran towards the ocean.

Ellie lay on the hospital bed with several nurses running around her in alarm. They had washed Joe’s blood off her and stripped her of her clothes. In the sterile hospital gown she seemed very small all of a sudden, even despite her bulging stomach. To combat the pain, she’d been sucking on gas and air, and this, combined with her distracted state of mind, had made her giddy. Lucidity came and went, or was mingled with childish ramblings.

But one theme was consistent.

‘Alec,’ she said. ‘I want Alec. Where is he?’

The nurse told her she did not know, and that she needed to lie still while they assessed her. She was bleeding, and her contractions felt wrong; there was little or no respite between them. They felt continuous, and were horrifically painful.

Daisy had stayed in the room with her and was answering the nurse's questions about what had happened. Lucy and Beth were with her, with Beth holding Ellie's hand and talking her through it as gently as she could. Lucy offered words of encouragement.

‘Don’t let them take them away,’ Ellie entreated suddenly. ‘Please, please don’t take them away.’

‘They’re not going to take them away, El,’ Beth soothed.

Ellie was inconsolable.
'I killed him. I killed him. They’ll take them away,’ she said in anguish.

The diagnosis came. They called it “partial placental abruption,” but the phrase was meaningless to Ellie. They explained rapidly, as they prepared to wheel her away, that Joe’s assault had caused the placentas to come away from the uterus wall. It was more severe on the side of the smaller twin – the boy – and his heartrate was beginning to drop. His distress convinced them that she needed an emergency caesarean immediately.

Upon hearing the word “caesarean” Ellie began to cry.

‘I don’t want them to cut me open,’ she said. Her head flopped from side to side. ‘Don’t let them cut me open. Alec. I want Alec.’

‘He - he’ll be here soon,’ Daisy offered, grasping Ellie’s other hand. ‘Dad promised he’d come back, and he always keeps his promises.’

The nurse began asking her questions about any allergies she had, and whether she’d ever had an adverse reaction to anaesthetic. Knowing that this meant the caesarean was definitely going ahead, Ellie began to thrash a little more.

‘I’m scared,’ she moaned. ‘I don’t want them to cut me open. Beth – don’t let them.’

‘I’m sorry, love, there’s no other way,’ Beth said. ‘We have to get them out.’

A fresh wave of pain came over her. She screamed again and clamped down on Daisy’s hand. The teenager was terrified, and she looked over at Beth and Lucy for guidance.

When it was over, Ellie sobbed, ‘I want Alec.’

‘I know you do,’ Beth said. ‘And he’s coming, I promise.’

‘He wanted to be here when they were born,’ Ellie said. She lay back against the pillow, her chest heaving. ‘He can’t wait to meet them.’ She looked plaintively at one of the nurses. ‘Couldn’t we wait? Couldn’t we wait until he got here?’

‘There’s absolutely no time to waste,’ the nurse said, with more businesslike practicality than empathy. ‘You want those babies born unharmed, then we need to get ‘em out now.’

The anaesthetist was ready. Ellie was promptly wheeled in the direction of the operating theatre. Daisy tried to follow, but was firmly told she had to stay behind. Lucy put a hand on her shoulder and squeezed. Meanwhile, one of the nurses took Beth to put scrubs on so she could stay with Ellie during the surgery.

Daisy and Lucy departed to join Olly, Tom, Chloe, Fred and Lizzie, who were waiting nearby. Lizzie was asleep in her sister’s arms, and Olly was sitting next to Tom. Half of his attention was fixed on his morose cousin, while the other half was glued to his phone screen. He was tapping his foot in agitation, and he started when he saw the girls enter.

‘How is she?’ he asked, shoving the phone away.

‘Terrified, goofy from the gas, shook up from Joe, and hurt bad,’ Lucy informed him. ‘A right fucking mess, in other words. They’ve taken her to have a caesarean. Beth’s gonna stay with her.’

Daisy folded herself into the seat next to Tom, and after some contemplation she murmured, ‘this is nothing like what I imagined.’
The screams of a woman in labour rang down the corridor. A second anguished groan started up, until a veritable chorus of agony could be heard. Daisy shuddered.

‘I thought birth was supposed to be beautiful,’ she said. ‘This is…’

‘A bloody nightmare?’ Lucy supplied. ‘Yeah. Don’t let the movies fool you, kiddo. Birth is nothing but horror. When I had this one,’ she paused to pinch Olly’s ear, ‘he damn near killed me. I shit the bed and pissed myself three times. Then they gave me an episiotomy.’


‘A quick snip down there,’ Lucy said, making a scissor motion with her fingers. ‘Couldn’t get his big fat head through so they cut me to make him fit. Stitched me up afterwards, made a dog’s breakfast of the whole area, and it was so bloody painful I couldn’t sit down for weeks, let alone use the loo without screaming.’

Tom looked like he was going to faint. Olly groaned, ‘Mum, please…’

‘I’m still waiting for him to prove he was worth it,’ Lucy said, and Olly shoved her away when she started poking him in the face.

Daisy looked over at the entrance to the operating ward. ‘How long until the beans are born, d’you think?’

‘Not long,’ Lucy said. ‘It’s all over pretty quick once they bring out the knives. I’d say they’ll be giving her the spinal tap now, and then it’ll be full steam ahead.’

‘It doesn’t seem right for the beans to be born like this.’ Daisy’s bottom lip trembled. ‘All the papers saying those things about them. Joe attacking Ellie while she was in labour, and now they’re getting cut out in this shitty hospital and Dad won’t even get to be there when it happens.’

All was silent but for the sound of Lizzie stirring in Chloe’s arms. After a while the baby quietened, and Daisy sniffed.

‘She was hurt protecting me,’ she said. ‘It’s because of me she – oh God, what if something’s wrong with the beans? Or what if Ellie really did kill Joe and she goes to prison? What if -’

‘Stop it, Daisy,’ Tom said. His hands were clenched on his knees. ‘Don’t blame yourself.’

But Daisy could not help it. ‘I shouldn’t have gone back for my camera,’ she wept.

Tom put his arm around her and she hugged him back. Fred looked distressed at the situation, and he clambered into Tom’s lap to join in. The three of them huddled like frightened chicks in a nest.

After a little while, Chloe looked around and frowned. ‘Hey – where’s Dad? He ran out a while ago. I thought he was going to the toilet, but he’s still not back.’

‘Wouldn’t worry about it, sweetheart,’ Lucy told her. ‘Blokes get awful squeamish about this stuff. He’s probably off having a lie down somewhere.’

* *

Alec had finally hit upon a lead.

‘Up that way,’ the master of the sailing club said. ‘I saw him. Bald head. Dark clothes.’
‘How long?’ Alec asked.

‘Not ten minutes.’

‘Did he seem injured?’

‘Aye. I heard him give shout o’ pain.’

Neglecting to thank the man, Alec forged on. Creating a path through the gloom with the beam of his torch, he scouted the direction the man had pointed him and realised, with a sinking heart, that it led up the cliffs.

Yet out of his initial aversion sprang hope. If Joe had indeed tried to escape along the clifftop path, it would create the perfect place to trap him. Pausing to speak to the officers behind him, he then pulled out his walkie-talkie, shielded it from the rain, and barked orders into it.

Ellie could not feel her legs.

She was lying in surgery, staring at the white ceiling as they put the screen up. She had been through this routine twice before, but experience only made her more fearful. She trembled, and her teeth knocked violently together.

Beth stood next to her, filling the space that Alec should, by rights, have occupied. She was dressed in blue scrubs, and she held Ellie’s hand as they prepared her.

‘I see you’re a veteran at this,’ the doctor said, observing the caesarean scar.

‘It will be the same as before,’ the nurse told her, ‘you won’t feel any pain or anything sharp – all you’ll feel is a lot of tugging, or pulling back and forth.’

She demonstrated by pulling back and forth on her belly.

‘Father not here?’ the doctor asked as he checked the instruments. The nurses bustled around him in a flurry.

‘No,’ Beth answered. ‘Couldn’t make it in time. Best friend filling in instead.’

Ellie began to cry.

The doctor said kindly, ‘never mind. We’ll do this now to make sure that when he shows up, he’ll have two beautiful, healthy children waiting for him.’

Ellie was worryingly unresponsive. The doctor murmured for the nurses to keep her alert, and went quickly to double check some of the charts.

‘Do you know what you’re having? Or is it a surprise?’ a nurse asked.

Ellie made no sign she had heard. Her thoughts had turned to Alec, and she bitterly regretted letting him go after Joe. He was far too self-sacrificing to be trusted. She knew he was willing to die for her and the children, and it terrified her. The last thing she wanted was for him to die for them; she wanted him to live for them, and for himself too.

Despair crept over her. Why couldn’t he see the value in his life as she did? Why couldn’t he value his own life as much as he valued hers, or Daisy’s? Why did he always insist upon suffering and
dying in the place of others?

‘El,’ Beth said, breaking her reverie. ‘Talk to us. Won’t you tell us about the beans?’

Stifling her imagination, Ellie sniffed and turned her attention to the present danger.

‘It’s a b-boy and a g-girl,’ she mumbled.

‘Ah, lovely!’ the nurse said. ‘And do they have names? Will you tell us?’

Ellie bit her lip and did not respond. The nurse repeated the question, but Ellie only shook her head. ‘I can’t. N-not until Alec’s here.’

‘The beans,’ the doctor cut in, changing the subject. ‘Is that what you’ve been calling them in the meantime?’

Ellie nodded. She could sense activity was intensifying behind the curtain, and knew that the surgery was imminent. The doctor was murmuring that due to the awkward position of the twins, the larger one would have to come out first. She blinked away a tear.

‘I know one woman who called her baby “Squishy”,’ a nurse supplied, trying to keep her calm. ‘Didn’t know what she was having, so she decided Squishy would be a good placeholder name.’

‘Not the weirdest one I’ve heard,’ another nurse said.

‘Ellie’s been calling them Bean 1 and Bean 2,’ Beth said. ‘Daisy, her step-daughter, came up with the nickname, and it stuck.’

The nurses had finished preparations. They were ready to proceed. The distracting chatter ceased for a moment, and without further ado the doctor made his incision along the same line as the first two times, making a fresh wound of an old scar.

* *

His breath sobbing in his lungs, Joe avoided the edge of the cliffs as best he could, keeping to the lower half of the clifftop path. The ground was uneven and treacherous, much of it reduced to squelching mud that slipped and gave way under his heavy tread. He tripped often, and this, combined with the blackness of the world around him, meant that his journey was a slow one.

At long last, he glimpsed his sanctuary. A tiny shout of relief escaped his lips. But at that moment, torchlight appeared behind him. The beams swung wildly up and down, indicating that whoever held them was running. Instilled with fresh terror, Joe scrambled on, his eyes fixed on that tiny sanctuary. If only he could get inside…

Four more beams appeared, climbing the hill from the other side and cutting off his path.

They knew he was here. They were surrounding him.

He turned away from the cliffs and tried to run back in the direction of town but yet more lights appeared.

Cursing, hyperventilating, overcome with pain and despair and terror, Joe could do nothing but slowly back away towards the edge of the cliffs.

‘There he is! I see him!’ someone shouted.
‘Close in! Don’t let him escape!’ another voice shouted commandingly. This one spoke in a masculine Scottish accent.

Joe turned his head in the direction of that voice and sought its owner but the dazzling lights blinded him, and he could discern nothing. With officers closing in around him like a human net, Joe backed further and further towards the edge. His foot dislodged a piece of shale and sent it plunging into the roaring, gnawing ocean that raged against the coastline far below. Spinning around, he looked down and realised with a cruel stab of irony that this was where Danny had stood on the night he’d died, taking his last look at the ocean and the cliffs of Broadchurch as blood dripped from his fingers.

The first child was pulled free.

‘A girl!’ the nurse announced. Ellie held her breath; the child began wailing, and she inhaled sharply.

‘Is she all right?’ she asked.

‘As far as we can tell.’

They cut the cord, placed her in a blanket and held her briefly to Ellie’s face. She only had time to touch her once before she was withdrawn. Ellie let out a low moan at the separation, and followed the child with her eyes until she was out of sight.

The boy, being smaller, came free with less effort. Ellie could see nothing of him behind the screen, and waited for the telltale cry.

It did not come.

‘He’s not crying,’ Ellie said desperately. ‘Why isn’t he crying?’

‘It’s all right. They don’t always cry right away when they’re born by caesarean,’ the nurse assured her.

‘But T-Tom and F-F-Fred, they all cried right away. And s-so did she.’ She craned her neck to see. ‘Is there s-something wrong with him? They s-said something about his h-heart. And the bleeding. Is – is he?’

She received no reply, and the silence lengthened.

The others were still waiting pensively outside when Maggie and Jocelyn arrived. Jocelyn was having one of her bad days, so her arm was locked in Maggie’s, and the journalist was leading her as gently and as hurriedly as she could.

‘Maggie!’ exclaimed Daisy. ‘You came!’

‘Just as soon as we heard. What’s happened?’ she asked briskly.

‘Nothing since I texted you,’ Daisy replied. ‘Ellie’s having the caesarean now. Still no word from Dad.’

‘The town’s up in arms,’ Maggie said. ‘Word’s got out over Twitter. Some people are braving the storm and looking for Joe as we speak.’ She glared at Olly. ‘I suppose we have you to blame for that.’
‘I’m trying to help!’ he protested as Lucy scolded him. ‘I figure the more people who know that Joe’s out there, the sooner they’ll find him.’

‘You just watch yourself, mister. You are getting above your station,’ Maggie growled. Lucy smacked him and he yelped.

Jocelyn said to Daisy, ‘you mentioned you recorded the incident?’

‘Oh – um, yeah,’ Daisy said, pulling the camera from her neck. ‘When Joe came after us, Ellie kept him talking, and she got him to confess on camera without realising. But – um, I also recorded the – uh…’ she glanced at Tom, who had Fred in his lap and was looking morose. ‘I recorded the – the stabbing.’

She lowered her voice.

‘Ellie’s been worried that – that she’ll go to prison because of it. I think it was self-defence, but it all happened so fast I don’t know who attacked whom first. I’ve been scared to watch it back.’

‘Will you let us see it?’ Jocelyn asked. ‘I’ll be able to tell you who was at fault and whether there’s grounds for prosecution or not. But certainly, the circumstances alone present a very strong case in your favour.’

Daisy nodded and handed it to them. ‘Don’t let Tom see,’ she implored.

She had no desire to live through the experience again, so Jocelyn, Maggie, Olly, Lucy, and a curious Chloe stood a little way off to watch it.

It was harrowing to see – or rather to hear. Daisy’s position and the fact she’d subtly concealed the camera behind Ellie’s bulk and her coat meant that for a long time, there was little to be seen beyond a grey blur and part of the red kitchen wall.

Finally came the part where Daisy had started forward in defense of her father. Joe’s astonished face came into view. There was a brief intermission as all hope drained out of his face.

Then he attacked. The change was so sudden it were as though a switch had been flipped.

Ellie threw herself in front of Daisy at once. Daisy stumbled, and the camera careened wildly. Jocelyn blinked, the black holes in her vision preventing her from discerning what was happening. Maggie quietly described it to her.

They grappled; Ellie drove the knife forward, and Joe turned at the last second. The blade was buried in his armpit. He screamed, and the camera was a swirl of red – either from the red walls of the kitchen or from Joe’s blood, or both – and then Joe swore at Ellie, gave her a sharp retaliatory kick to her stomach and threw her to the ground.

She fell sideways and hit the edge of the bench before she sank down, moaning in pain, her hands bright with blood. Joe, meanwhile, staggered back to look at the wound under his arm.

Distantly, sirens could be heard.

Joe started at the sound. He looked hard at Daisy for a moment, his eyes burning, then turned to Ellie on the ground.

He vacillated. The sirens became louder and Joe made up his mind. He fled. They heard Daisy say Ellie’s name, and the camera shut off.
The five of them stood there in shock for several moments, until Jocelyn requested, ‘could you play it again?’

‘I can’t watch it a second time,’ Chloe said.

‘Nor me,’ Lucy shuddered.

The two of them stood to one side, looking green, while Olly obliged Jocelyn. She listened carefully and strained her eyes as hard as she could.

Once it was over, Jocelyn pronounced, ‘a clear cut case of self-defense. He was in her home. He attacked first. Only then did she stab him. No-one in their right mind would press charges against her. A pregnant woman defending a herself and a teenager from a child murderer? There’s no case there.’

‘And the stupid bastard confessed on camera,’ Maggie crowed. ‘There’ll be no wriggling out of it this time. He confessed to killing Danny and assaulting Tom. Once Alec brings him in, he’ll get put away for life.’

‘If Alec brings him in,’ Jocelyn murmured. ‘Joe Miller’s now a man with nothing left to lose. He’s badly injured, he’s angry, he clearly blames Alec for everything he’s lost, and he knows Daisy recorded his confession.’ She pressed her lips together, her mouth hardening into a thin line. ‘There’s nothing more dangerous than a trapped animal.’

Alec had Joe in his sights. He could tell the fugitive was blinded by the beams of his torch, and that his enemy could not discern him in turn. Marshalling his officers, they marched forward in a semi-circle, drawing close around him. Joe Miller continued to back away, heading further and further towards the precipice. His eyes were fixed on the officers, and he did not seem aware of how close he was to nothingness.

For one wild moment Alec thought Joe wasn’t going to stop, and that he would continue to walk backwards into air. Then he accidentally kicked a large piece of shale, sending it wheeling over the edge, and the sensation made him turn around to confront the chasm at his feet. Recent cliff falls had made the precipice even more treacherous than usual; the green lip had all crumbled away, exposing an incline of uneven yellow dentures. He stared downwards, and after a few horrified moments he inched away, tearing free of the wind’s cruel fingers – only to halt again when he saw the officers.

‘Stop!’ Alec shouted over the din of the storm. He held up a hand and all his officers obeyed. ‘Back up!’ he told them. ‘Give him some space.’

The officers retreated by a few metres. Alec, however, moved forward, mounting the crest of the hill and exposing himself to the elements’ fury. Raindrops pierced him like glass arrows.

‘Joe Miller!’ he thundered.

He feared Joe would not be able to hear him over the din, but the way Joe’s head snapped up told him otherwise. He took another step forward.

‘I am arresting you for the murder of Daniel Latimer, the attempted murder of Tom Miller, the assault of Ellie Miller, and the attempted assault of Daisy Hardy.’

To his officers, Alec sounded completely dispassionate, nothing more than a detective arresting a suspect. Only the quivering of his Adam’s apple betrayed how badly he was affected.
Joe began to shake his head. ‘No. I didn’t attempt to murder Tom. I didn’t.’

He was bent to one side, and Alec noticed his injury. He recognised the knife Ellie had buried in him; he had used it many times before, cooking in that little red-walled kitchen. The first time he’d ever used it, he recalled, was the day he’d rescued Fred from drowning; the day he’d made love to Ellie for the first time.

It quivered under Joe’s arm. Water or blood or both dripped from the handle.

‘Tom said otherwise,’ Alec replied sardonically. ‘He said you knocked him to the ground and strangled him.’

‘And I know if my Dan were still alive, he’d say something similar!’

Alec turned. Storming past the officers, who were too surprised to stop him, was Mark Latimer. Upon hearing of Joe’s assault of Ellie and his subsequent flight, he had slipped away from the hospital and followed the sirens and the light to this most fitting of locations. The officers made an attempt to grab him, but Mark was unstoppable, and Alec gestured for them to let him go. He stood next to the Detective Inspector.

‘Mark,’ Alec said. ‘Let us handle this. Please.’

Mark was defiant. ‘I’m here to speak to the man who killed my son.’

As so many times before, Alec let his emotions get the better of him. He relented, and Mark stood shoulder to shoulder with him.

The rain abated slightly, coming down in ribbons rather than great, unbroken sheets. Mark glared at Joe, who sank under the weight of his gaze until he was almost doubled over. Pressing one hand against his wound, Joe asked hysterically, ‘what do you want from me?’

‘I want you,’ Mark said, the tendons straining in his neck, ‘to confess. I want you to look us in the eye and say you killed our son!’

The force of Joe’s exhalations sent water spraying from his lips. After a moment, he shook his head.

Mark clenched his fists at his side. ‘Say it!’ he demanded. ‘Why can’t you just say it? Why can’t you face up to what you did? Why are all of us being punished because of you? Danny… Danny… my boy…’ his eyes screwed up. ‘Why can’t you let him rest?’

‘We have it on camera, Joe,’ Alec said, trying to stay professional as thoughts of what Joe had done to Ellie and Tom and Fred and Daisy and their two unborn children chased each other in his head. ‘Your confession. Ellie kept you talking and Daisy recorded it all on her camera. She has stitched you up. There’s no way out now. So just come quietly.’

He took a step forward and showed Joe the handcuffs he was holding.

‘It can end tonight,’ Alec told him. ‘Just come with us and this can all be over.’

‘All over?’ Joe repeated. ‘All over so you can go home with Ellie and my sons and those bastards of yours? So you can enjoy everything you’ve stolen from me?’

‘I haven’t stolen anything, Joe,’ Alec said stonily. ‘Everything I have was freely given to me.’

‘As if you deserve to talk about what you’ve lost – or to talk about things being stolen from you
when you took our boy away from us, when you tried to kill Tom!’ Mark interjected.

‘I wasn’t – I didn’t – I never meant to hurt them!’ Joe said. ‘I never meant to hurt anyone! I was trying to help them! For God’s sake, I was a paramedic! All I ever did was save people! I was trying to save Danny. I fixed him up after you hit him. I wanted to protect him! I loved him!’

‘Don’t you dare talk about him like that!’ Mark roared, and Alec had to rope him with one arm to hold him back. ‘You murdered him! You don’t get to stand there and say you loved him. Not him, nor Tom, nor Fred, nor Ellie!’

‘I did love them. I always loved them,’ Joe said brokenly.

‘Then prove it,’ Alec challenged. ‘If you loved any of them, prove it now and turn yourself in. Do it for them, so they can move on.’

Joe stared at him. His breathing slowed. ‘I never asked to be this way,’ he said softly.

‘I know,’ Alec said, appealing to his sensibilities. ‘But you can make amends. Right here, right now. No more running. No more lies.’

Mark glanced at Alec and unclenched his fists. The detective continued:

‘You’re not that man.’ He took a step forward. ‘And you can prove it to everyone. All you have to do is turn yourself in. You can end this, Joe. Just you. No-one else.’

Joe’s breath heaved in his chest. He adjusted his grip on the wound under his arm and sagged.

‘Maybe,’ he said softly as water cascaded over his body, ‘maybe it is time.’

The waves boomed and crashed below him, marching rank on rank against the rocks like soldiers helmeted with foam. Joe sagged further against the limestone, and Alec approached him warily.

‘Put your hands behind your head,’ he said.

Joe almost laughed. ‘In this condition?’

Alec was uncompromising. With a great groan of pain, Joe put one hand above his head. The other, incapacitated by his wound, he let dangle at his side.

It would have to do. Alec nodded at the officers and they came forward, ready to assist. He edged closer. Joe did not move a muscle. Alec reached for him with one hand.

That was when Joe grabbed him.

With no regard for the pain it caused him, his injured hand shot out and closed around Alec’s wrist, crushing bones and tendons. He pulled Alec close and looked hard into the eyes of his rival. Mark gave a shout of alarm and the officers rushed forward.

‘If I can’t have them,’ Joe said, ‘neither can you.’

And with that, he pulled Alec backwards towards the precipice, and they tumbled together into the open sky.
The Return of the Native

Far away, a child was crying.

At the sound, Ellie gave a little giddy shout. ‘Oh. Oh,’ she said in relief.

‘There we go!’ the nurse said.

‘Oh El. Thank God.’ Beth sighed.

Ellie could not see him. She craned her neck, but the nurse whisked him away without even letting her look at him. She made a distressed noise.

‘I want to hold him. Please, can I hold him?’ she begged.

The nurse returned to her side with empty arms. ‘He’s just with the baby doctor now. We need to make sure he’s all right.’

The screen prevented her from seeing where the doctor was. Ellie strained as if she were trying to sit up. ‘I want to see him,’ she said.

‘You need to lie still,’ the nurse said, pushing her shoulder. ‘We have to take care of you, too.’

‘Is he hurt? Is he okay?’

‘His heartrate was quite low,’ the nurse said patiently. ‘We’re just getting him stabilised and making sure he didn’t sustain any serious injuries. He may have been without oxygen for a little bit there.’

‘The girl, then,’ Ellie said, her teeth chattering violently. ‘Can I hold her?’

‘I’m sorry, no. We’re going to keep them both under observation for a little bit.’

‘Just one of them,’ Ellie begged. ‘For God’s sake, just one at least. Please.’

‘Let them work, El,’ Beth soothed, stroking her hand. ‘You’ll see them soon.’

A misery and a longing unlike any she’d ever known overcame her. Forcing herself to be quiescent, she lay back. Tears dripped from her eyes, and she couldn’t stop herself from shaking.

The doctor stemmed the bleeding inside her. She was close to needing a transfusion, but for the moment he was satisfied she would be okay.

As they stitched her back together, Ellie kept her head turned to one side, looking at where she supposed her babies must be.

‘I wish he was here, Beth,’ she grieved softly.

Alec Hardy was pressed vertically against the cliff face, his head turned to one side and bruised by the rough surface of the shaly incline.

When Joe had grabbed hold of him before their fateful plunge, Alec had turned his body towards the land. Owing to this movement, he had not so much fallen from the cliff, as Joe had, but slid. His feet
had scraped backwards over the edge and his desperate hands had clawed at rock and root and vegetation in search of salvation.

Ugly cliffs were common in this part of the world, but a characteristic of this particular cliff was that the bank upon which one could stand and gaze over the world had a shallow slope beneath it, a jutting limestone shelf that was like a bald and yellow twin to the green one above, a consequence of uneven weathering and the subtle decay of the cliffs. Alec had always been suspicious of these crumbling edifices and their constant cliff falls; it was ironic that just such a crumbling, the breaking away of the very head of the cliff to make this second shelf, would save his life.

For while Joe had plunged into the boiling cauldron below, the flailing and grasping Alec’s fall had been interrupted; he had slid down the cliff onto this second shelf and come to an abrupt and agonising halt when his foot caught on a jutting piece of quartz.

And there he hung, some two and a half metres below the edge of the world, all his weight pressed upon that faithful lump of quartz, his fingers digging into crumbling limestone as he kept himself flush against the stone. Pitiless nature lashed at him with wind and water, howling in his ears.

His leg throbbed horribly. He tried to place his other foot on the quartz so as to relieve the pressure on his injured leg, but it was too small, and his position was too precarious to switch feet entirely.

Turning his head to one side, he looked heavenward. He shouted hoarsely for help, but the wind and the rain assaulting the cliff robbed his speech of any volume.

No help came.

Alec pressed his cheek to the cliff and adjusted his grip, clinging as tightly as he was able with his numb fingers. As he hung there, it occurred to him that he now stood hand-in-hand with Broadchurch itself. Some two hundred feet below, the ocean, that same ocean that had almost killed him as a child, rolled and boomed. The sound made him quake, but in the midst of his terror he found a moment of thankfulness. He had watched Joe fall to his death. Never mind that it would mean his own doom; Ellie was safe. Daisy was safe. Tom and Fred and his two new children, those little strangers he’d so longed to meet, were safe too. The sound of the waves fighting the rocks far, far below assured him that survival was impossible, and in spite the consequences this held for him, he was grateful.

A burden lifted from his soul and peace suffused him. His family was safe, and they would live on, at the price that he would no longer be in the world to cherish them.

He pressed his cheek to the weathered face of Broadchurch and stared into the blackness. He had no fear of the water now. His task was done.

Yet still he clung to the cliff.

He became conscious of a lighthouse blinking in the distance. The sight mesmerised him and he lost awareness of the wind and the rain and the cold. There was nothing but blackness, and that single flashing pinpoint of light.

Once, many decades ago, that lighthouse had been lit by precious sperm whale oil and manned by faithful keepers. Later, it had been lighted by kerosene, and in successive decades technology had improved to create the finely tuned, automatic machine it was today. And yet it still kept the same distinct beat of revolutions that it did when it was first lit, and what Alec glimpsed now was not much brighter than the pillar of blazing whale oil would have been. An ancient mariner would have looked out through the blackness of that storm and seen much the same sight Alec did, the same
pulsating light, going at the same speed, like a beating heart.

He felt as though he were slipping backwards in time. Decades upon decades folded in on each other, making one long night out of hundreds of thousands. The past smothered him. The cliffs, aeons old and littered with fossils, weathered limestone, broken shells, assaulted him with years gone by. The roaring ocean below him dredged up memories of drowning, and all that the water had stolen from him.

His foot twisted on the jutting lump of quartz and his fingers scrabbled frantically for a moment, before he regained his balance with a dreadful stab of agony. The movement brought him violently back to the present, with all its pain and futility.

How easy it would be, he thought as sediment dripped across his lips, to simply let go and fall backwards into that blackness. To become a part of Broadchurch’s past, and fit into her web of history. To take that plunge as so many had before him, and become one of time’s obscure hostages.

The lighthouse continued to revolve. He thought, suddenly, of Ellie. The past was beckoning him, but didn’t he have a future? Didn’t he have a future with Ellie and Daisy and their new children? At least he had yesterdays filled with Daisy and Ellie to be grateful for, but his new children only existed in his tomorrows. They occupied some dim futurity he had only dreamed of, but never thought he could touch.

He had a future with her, and a family.

And hadn’t he promised her? Hadn’t he promised to come back?

Tempting as it was, he could not fall into the past. Ellie wasn’t there. His new children weren’t there, nor Tom, nor Fred, nor the beautiful young woman Daisy was becoming. His life lay ahead of him, he saw that with certainty.

He would not die here. He was going to live. And he was going to keep his promise.

Bearing himself upwards on his leg, ignoring the pain, Alec reached out and grasped a jutting chunk of limestone. It was just solid enough to bear him, and by pulling himself up with that hand, he was able to take the weight off his leg. Pressing his good knee against a lump of hardened sediment, he threw all his weight behind and used it to launch himself upwards to grasp another lump of shale.

‘I just saw something move!’ someone exclaimed excitedly above.

Alec tried to turn his head to see, but the awkward position prevented him.

‘Alec!’ someone called. ‘Alec, is that you?’

It was Mark. Alec called back in the affirmative, or tried to. Torch beams fell upon his head.

‘It is him!’ someone else said.

‘He’s here!’ Mark yelled. ‘It’s him! He’s down here! On the cliff! Somebody hold my legs, we have to get him up!'

The officers held Mark and lowered him down the escarpment. But the distance between them was too great; he couldn’t reach.

‘Lower!’ Mark said.
They could not lower him any more without endangering him. Mark looked wildly below.

‘Alec! Alec, can you reach?’

A distance of perhaps two feet separated them. All it would take was one more big effort, and he would be up.

Alec drove his knee hard against the cliff. He would have to rely on his bad leg to climb up. Just as he was about to try, the lump of shale came free in his hand and skittered away.

Alec dropped sharply, and only just managed to regain his grip by driving his hand into the wet rocks. His nails cracked and he hissed in pain. Mark gave a little shout of alarm.

‘Come on!’ he yelled. ‘You can do it!’

Half-blinded by the rain, Alec looked up. Just below Mark’s outstretched hands, he could see a jutting lump of rock. Summoning every last piece of strength he had, he drove himself upwards on his injured leg and grasped the lump, praying it would hold.

It did; barely. Just before it too crumbled away, he pulled himself upwards a second time and grasped Mark’s hand.

Taking him in both hands, squeezing with all his might to combat the slipperiness of the water, Mark shouted for the officers to pull him back. They did, and the two of them were dragged backwards onto land.

Alec rolled onto his back, breathing hard, and stared at the rainy sky. Half a dozen anxious faces loomed over him.

‘Sir! Sir, are you all right?’

He nodded once and sat up, and his officers sighed with relief. Mark clapped his hand on Alec’s shoulder. ‘I thought we’d lost you, mate,’ he said, giving him a little shake. After a moment he inquired, ‘Joe?’

Alec shook his head. ‘Gone.’ He tried to stagger to his feet. ‘We need to get a coastguard. Find him. Confirm that he’s -’

His leg gave way under him and he tumbled back onto the grass.

‘Easy,’ Mark said. ‘Take it easy.’

‘I don’t think we can get a coastguard out in this,’ an officer said pensively. ‘It’s too dangerous.’

‘There’s no way he survived,’ another officer pronounced, looking over the brink. ‘I know these cliffs. A fall from here takes you straight onto the rocks. He would have died the instant he hit the water.’

‘But if we don’t look now, we might lose the body,’ someone pointed out. ‘It could get washed out to sea.’

Alec considered their words and made a decision.

‘Leave it,’ he said. ‘Doesn’t matter. We’ll search for him in the morning.’ Mark helped him up and he put his arm around him. ‘I need to get back to the hospital. I need to see Ellie.’
With Mark supporting him, he limped away from the nameless cliff and headed towards Broadchurch.

In the fluorescent glow of the hospital lights, Ellie appeared as white and washed-out as a corpse. The great bulk of her belly had been removed, and she seemed so small under the bedsheets. Fearful that she would start haemorrhaging again, the nurses had her under close observation. An IV was attached to the vein of her left arm.

Someone entered her room. She’d sent Beth to check on the boys, and to gather intelligence on Alec’s whereabouts, so she assumed it was her friend returning. She said, ‘Beth?’

But the tread was too heavy and uneven for it to be Beth. Her heart leapt, and she saw that it was Alec.

He was damp all over, as if he’d just been fished out of the water. A blanket was wrapped around his shoulders and he was limping, his shoes squelching on the tiles. She knew instantly something terrible had happened, and she glared at him, burning with fury.

‘You wanker,’ she croaked vehemently.

‘I’m sensing you’re angry with me,’ he said.

‘You left me.’

‘But I came back.’

He leaned over and kissed her forehead.

‘The nurse told me,’ he said, ‘placental abruption. You lost quite a bit of blood.’

She shook her head. ‘Have you heard how the babies are? They won’t let me see them.’

‘I went to see them as soon as I got here. They’re keeping them under observation for now, but they think they’ll be okay. All I heard was people telling me how lucky we were that it wasn’t worse.’ He stroked Ellie’s forehead ruefully. ‘It never should have happened in the first place.’

Ellie blinked slowly at him, troubled by his expression.

‘What happened out there?’ she asked.

Alec shuffled heavily to the wall and pulled up a chair next to her bedside.

‘Joe’s dead,’ he informed her, sitting back.

Her teeth chattered. ‘I killed him?’

‘No. He killed himself. Jumped from the cliffs. Tried to take me with him, but,’ he shrugged, ‘I had promises to keep.’

Ellie stared at him. Her hand crept along the bed. Alec reached out and grasped it. His hand was badly chafed and cut from clinging to the cliffs. She ran her thumb over the abrasions, trembling.

‘He tried to kill you?’ she asked.
'Tried.' He briefly related the events that had occurred on the cliff.

It was a surreal moment for Ellie to hear Alec tell her she was a widow, and that her husband was lost at sea.

But the gentle pressure of Alec’s hand banished that line of thinking. No, she thought, she was not a widow; her own true husband had just returned from sea. The water had given him back.

‘We need to get a coastguard out,’ Ellie murmured. ‘Find him. I feel like I’ll never find peace until I see his body.’

Alec kissed her hand. ‘We’ll think of that tomorrow,’ he told her.

He leaned over her, tenderly studying the lines on her face as he stroked his thumb back and forth on her hand. She looked utterly exhausted, drained in every sense.

‘I saw Daisy,’ he said. ‘Just as I came in. She showed me where the beans were. She told me all about what you did. How you protected her.’

‘Is she okay?’ Ellie murmured. ‘She must be so shook up. I didn’t even think to ask.’

At that, he smiled at her so tenderly that there was no need for him to reply. He pressed his forehead to hers.

Ellie closed her eyes. His damp hair dripped onto her cheek.

‘Is it over, Alec?’ she asked. ‘Is he really dead?’

‘Yes,’ Alec said. ‘It’s over.’

They only had a few moments of peace together before two nurses burst into the room and pointed accusingly at him. They scolded him for absconding when he needed medical attention and tried to get him to leave so the doctor could look at his leg. Alec flatly refused to leave Ellie’s side, however, so the doctor came to him.

He was dressed in warm clothes and his damp blanket was exchanged for a dry one. The doctor told him he had sustained extensive ligament damage. His leg was swelling badly, so they wrapped it lightly and braced it to prevent further injury. As he worked, Ellie begged to see her babies, but was refused.

* *

To give Alec time with Ellie and the twins, Mark took it upon himself to deliver the news to the others.

‘Dead,’ Beth echoed softly. She wet her lips. ‘Are you sure?’

Mark nodded once. Beth’s legs gave way and she crumpled to the floor.

‘But Alec’s okay?’ Maggie asked anxiously.

‘He’ll be fine,’ Mark said. He knelt next to Beth and put his arm around her. She threw herself against him. Chloe joined them, and the three of them huddled together, crying half out of relief, and half for Danny.

Once they were sufficiently recovered, Beth got to her feet. She took Lizzie into her arms and sat
down with Chloe. Lucy, Olly and Maggie all crowded around to comfort her.

Tom was sitting a little way off, his head bowed, staring hard at the cracks in the floor. Mark quietly approached him and sat down next to him.

‘You all right, mate?’ he asked.

Tom said nothing. A tear escaped his eye and he rubbed it away.

‘I’m sorry for what happened,’ Mark said. Tom stayed silent. ‘It’s all right to be sad,’ he assured him. ‘Even after everything that’s happened, he was still your Dad.’

‘No,’ said Tom abruptly. He rubbed the yellowed bruise at his neck with the flat of one hand. ‘He hasn’t been my Dad for a long time.’

‘Come here, mate,’ Mark said. He put his arm around the boy and Tom rested his cheek on Mark’s shoulder.

Beth approached them. Tom felt her shadow fall on him and he looked up.

‘Beth,’ he croaked softly. ‘I – I’m sorry. I’m sorry for everything…’

‘Don’t apologise, sweetheart,’ Beth said. She stroked Tom’s hair, her finger brushing the cut on his forehead, and looked into his blue eyes. ‘You ain’t got to apologise for anything.’

She sat on Tom’s other side. Cradling Lizzie with one hand, she put her arm around him.

Mercifully, not long afterwards, the doctors gave the all-clear for both twins and they were released from observation. The girl seemed particularly robust, since the abruption had been but slight on her side, but it had been borderline severe on the boy’s side. Owing to the speed with which they had diagnosed and operated on Ellie, they had saved him from lasting damage, but he was certainly frailer than he ought to have been.

They were delivered to Ellie’s side. She took the boy into her arms at once, checking him all over with a maternal eye, just to make sure the doctors had missed nothing. Alec took the girl.

‘He has a birthmark,’ murmured Ellie. A large, blotchy red mark marred the boy’s left cheek, just under his eye.

The nurse informed them he had sustained this injury in the womb, and although it was only superficial, there was a chance the mark might be permanent.

It made Ellie unbearably upset.

‘His little face,’ she said, her eyes watering. She looked at her lover and choked out, ‘I couldn’t protect him, Alec.’

‘Shhh,’ Alec soothed. ‘Shhh. Don’t say that.’

‘I vowed I’d never let that man hurt another child. But look at him…’ she touched the birthmark with one finger. ‘And all the nurses, they’re saying if it had been any longer he could have – he could have -’

‘Don’t think about it,’ Alec told her. He scooted his chair a little closer so he could see the boy better.
He had his eyes firmly closed, the lids shuttered over the reddish blotch. ‘He’s perfect just the way he is.’

Alec brought the girl close to Ellie and she reached out with one hand, moving the swaddling cloth away from her cheek to see her more clearly. They compared the two. Even this early, their faces showed similarities.

‘What a pair they are,’ said Alec.

‘Like two halves of a whole.’

Alec leaned over and kissed Ellie’s temple. He thought of all the pain and the horror and the loneliness they had endured, and every instant of terror and ignominy that the past few months had held for them.

Holding the two of them now, Alec felt it had been worth it.

Daisy had obviously gotten sick of waiting, for just then she came marching into the room. She saw her father holding a small bundle and a tiny shriek of joy escaped her. Tom was following, holding Fred’s hand, and he went at once to his mother.

‘Hello darlings,’ Ellie sighed as her boys came in. ‘Kisses.’

Tom kissed her, and picked up Fred so he could kiss her too. She stroked both of them, desperate for their touch after all the horrors she had been through.

Daisy put her arms around Alec’s shoulders and hung over him, staring at the girl he was holding.

‘Oh,’ she breathed. ‘She’s so small.’

Alec asked if she wanted to hold her, and she agreed immediately. With a deft hand, she took the newborn from her father and looked adoringly at her.

‘Hello,’ she whispered. ‘I’m your sister.’

Ellie was reluctant to relinquish her son, so she let Tom and Fred simply look at their brother instead. They gazed in wonderment.

‘He really is tiny,’ Tom said. ‘He’s so much smaller than Fred was.’

‘Fred!’ said Fred, who did not quite understand what was going on, or why there was so much fuss over these odd pink jellybeans.

‘Mark told us exactly what happened,’ Daisy said, rocking back and forth. She looked at Alec, resenting that he had withheld the details from her. ‘He said you – he said that you - ’

She looked down at Alec’s bandaged leg, which he had stretched out in front of him. The nurse had ordered him to keep it elevated, but he was loath to be far from Ellie’s side, so he had ignored her to keep his chair as close to her bed as possible. Her arms full, Daisy contented herself with kissing the top of her father’s head, which was still damp from the rain and full of grit and sand.

‘I’m glad you came back, Dad. I don’t know what I would’ve done if…’

‘As if I’d leave you, darlin’,’ Alec said softly. He looked over at Tom. ‘I’m sorry about Joe.’

‘Don’t be,’ Tom said.
'I wanted to arrest him. I tried,’ Alec said. ‘I never wanted it to end the way it did.’

‘It doesn’t matter. He’s nothing to me,’ Tom said. ‘I’m just glad you and Mum and the beans are safe.’

From the curve of his mouth, they could tell Joe’s death was affecting him more than he was letting on. But if he grieved, it was for something he’d lost a long time ago.

Maggie and Jocelyn came in.

‘God, it’s a bloody feeding frenzy out there,’ Maggie said. ‘Reporters are swarming everywhere like sharks. The nurses are beating them back with broomsticks.’

She saw the two bundles and her face lit up.

‘Ah! So the little dears are all right after all,’ she sighed.

‘They were saying there might be complications,’ Jocelyn said. ‘We were all so worried.’

‘They’re all right,’ Alec said.

‘They’d be better if it weren’t for Joe,’ Maggie said vehemently. ‘Kicking a pregnant woman! I’m glad he finally got what was coming to him.’

Tom flinched, and Maggie checked herself. She cleared her throat and approached Ellie.

‘What about you, petal? How are you feeling?’

‘Like shit,’ Ellie croaked.

‘You look it too, if you don’t mind me saying.’

Daisy started giggling. The girl stirred in her arms. Jocelyn cautiously followed the sound and stood at her shoulder.

‘He’s quite a fighter,’ Jocelyn commented.

‘He!’ Daisy said reproachfully. ‘She is a fighter, I think you mean. You wanna hold her?’

Without waiting for a reply, she dumped the child into Jocelyn’s arms. The barrister started, her clumsy, inexperienced hands making for a poor cradle.

‘Support her head,’ Daisy ordered, fixing her posture the way Ellie had taught her to. ‘There you go!’

Jocelyn peered at the infant. A tremulous smile was fixed on her face but it faded after a moment. Maggie stood by her side, and she said sadly to her, ‘I can’t see her.’

Where she should have seen the child’s face, she saw only black holes.

‘Never mind. All you need to know is that she’s little and red with a great big grumpy look on her face.’ Maggie looked up brightly. ‘Takes after her daddy already!’

Jocelyn let touch, smell and hearing create a picture for her where vision failed. She asked, ‘what are their names?’
Ellie replied, ‘Gabriel and Eustacia.’

It took them a moment, but they got it.

‘Oh – Oh! From Thomas Hardy,’ Jocelyn said.

‘How did you know?’ Ellie asked.

‘We’re from Broadchurch, petal. We live and breathe Thomas Hardy here.’ Maggie laughed. ‘Fitting names for Hardys!’

‘It was Daisy’s idea,’ Alec explained. ‘We’ve been reading his books together, and she noticed that my name comes from *Tess of the d’Urbervilles*. She thought we could make it a tradition. Name the new Hardys after Hardy’s characters.’

‘We chose our favourite characters. Gabriel was mine. Eustacia was Alec’s,’ said Ellie.

‘How delightful,’ Jocelyn said. ‘I get the feeling they may grow up to resent their names, however.’

‘That’s a family tradition too,’ Alec said, unperturbed.

Lucy entered the room, hauling Olly along by his ear.

‘You and your bloody tweeting!’ she yelled. ‘Will you look at what you’ve done! Every reporter in the goddamn country’s turned up! Apologise to your aunt at once!’

Alec sat up in his chair. ‘What’s going on?’

‘Olly opened his big fat mouth is what happened,’ Lucy said. She spied the babies. ‘Oh! Oh thank Christ, they’re okay after all.’ She hovered over both of them and smiled. ‘Oh, well done, sis!’

Olly looked at them too. ‘What happened to his face?’ he pointed at Gabriel.

Ellie replied, ‘Joe.’

Everyone fell silent. Jocelyn carefully handed Eustacia back to Alec, and as he nestled his daughter in the crook of his arm, he looked at Olly.

‘What’s happening out there?’

That was when Beth and Mark burst in. ‘Bloody hell,’ Mark said. ‘Can’t they give us a moment’s peace?’

‘Oh, Ellie,’ Beth said, immediately approaching her friend. ‘How are they?’

‘Fine,’ Ellie murmured weakly.

Attracted by all the noise, a nurse came in and almost had a heart attack when she saw how many people were in the room.

‘I said *family only!*’ she said despairingly. ‘Not the whole bloody town!’

‘It’s okay.’ Alec looked around at the assembled crowd of misfits. ‘They’re family.’

‘Well, be that as it may,’ the nurse said, unimpressed, ‘I can’t allow this many people in here. Out! Shoo! Mother and babies need their rest! You can all come back tomorrow.’
She started fussing with Ellie’s IV. Distant shouts could be heard echoing down the corridor.

Ellie inclined her head towards the door. ‘What’s going on out there?’

‘The word about Joe attacking you and committing suicide has got out,’ Beth told her. ‘There’s reporters from everywhere and film crews out the front of the hospital doing live reports.’

‘Every one seems to be telling a different story. Some say Alec threw him from the cliffs,’ Mark said. ‘Some are saying the police all killed him. Some people are saying that both of them are dead. We got hassled by a few who got past security, asking us how we felt now that Joe was dead. It’s madness.’

Alec heaved a sigh. ‘I’ll have to go out there and set them straight. The longer these rumours circulate, the worse it’ll be.’

‘No. Absolutely not,’ Maggie said. ‘You’re not going anywhere. Olly and I will handle the media for you.’

Alec frowned mistrustfully at Olly.

‘Let them do it, Dad,’ said Daisy. At her urging, he relented and sat back.

‘You stay here with your babies,’ Maggie said. She took Olly’s arm and marched him away. ‘We’ll get the truth out there.’

When they were gone, Fred yawned violently and announced, ‘I’m tired.’

‘Oh. I’m sorry sweetheart,’ Ellie murmured. She hadn’t realised how late it was.

‘I’ll take him,’ Lucy offered.

‘He can stay at our house,’ Beth said. ‘Tom and Daisy too. Everything’s set up there.’

Tom and Daisy protested. ‘I want to stay with Mum,’ Tom said, and Daisy said the same, except about her Dad.

‘Well you can’t,’ the nurse said briskly. ‘Your Mum lost a lot of blood and she needs her rest. And you,’ she rounded on Alec, ‘need to rest as well. I told you to keep that leg elevated!’

She put her hands on her hips and glared. In the face of such resistance, they had to yield. Lucy, Beth and Mark took Fred, Daisy and Tom and departed. Ellie blew kisses to them.

‘We’ll be back first thing in the morning,’ they promised.

‘Not before visiting hours you won’t!’ the nurse snapped as she ushered them out.

To her consternation, Daisy and Tom both doubled back. Tom gave Ellie a kiss and a cuddle. ‘I love you, Mum,’ he said.

Daisy did the same to Alec. ‘Love you, Dad.’

Daisy quickly said goodbye to the twins too. ‘Bye-bye, Gabe! Bye-bye, Stace! We’ll see you tomorrow!’

The nurse, now livid, aggressively herded them from the room, keeping her arms out to prevent them
from coming back a second time.

Jocelyn was now the only visitor left. ‘I should go too,’ she said. ‘Sharon will want to hear about this. Did I tell you? She’s prosecuting for the crown in Ricky Gillespie’s case.’

Alec and Ellie looked at her in surprise.

‘By rights, she shouldn’t have been able to take the case. But, Sharon being Sharon, she pulled some strings.’ Jocelyn smiled wryly. ‘She’s been putting the pressure on them early, trying to collapse the case before it even gets to court. She wants to spare you the trauma of giving evidence in a criminal trial again, especially because of...’ she trailed off and nodded at the babies.

Alec grunted. ‘How’s it looking?’

‘His barrister’s best line of defense was to blame police corruption and incompetence. Ever since word got out about what Joe did to Tom, he’s been faltering. Now that Joe’s attacked a pregnant woman and confessed on camera, that defense is completely blown away. Oh yes, Sharon will be very happy indeed.’

She tried not to look too gleeful. ‘Well. Good luck with it all.’

Running her hand along the wall, she relied half on her poor vision and half on touch to navigate her way into the corridor.

With all the commotion over, Ellie decided to try breastfeeding. Gabriel was sleepy and still, so she traded him for the more alert Eustacia. Loosing the gown, she unwrapped Eustacia and lay her against her breast, skin to skin.

The baby cried for a little. Then her cries subsided to snuffles, and after a few minutes she latched onto the nipple and began suckling. Ellie breathed a great sigh. Flooded head to toe with endorphins, she forgot all the traumas that had come before and lost herself in the sensation.

A gentle knock made her look up.

It was Tess.

‘What are you doing here?’ Alec asked in surprise.

‘Daisy asked me to come,’ Tess said. She remained in the doorway, observing them awkwardly. ‘Got here about an hour ago. Been helping her through it. Poor thing was so frightened when she called me. I sped all the way here with my sirens on.’

‘You heard about what happened?’ Alec asked, his face twisting as he recalled how Joe had threatened their daughter.

‘Everything.’

Ellie gazed placidly at Eustacia, too absorbed in her new daughter to pay any attention to her. Tess directed her words to Alec.

‘Your CS came in when she heard. She's been storming around looking for you. I told her I'd be acting on your behalf tonight. Hope you don't mind.’

Alec said, ‘Daisy recorded the confrontation with Joe on her camera. We need to get it out there. Prove Ellie's innocent, and show Joe Miller confessing to Danny's murder.’
Taken care of. Daisy already gave it to me,' Tess said.

Alec paused. 'Then we need to make sure they know Joe jumped of his own volition. They're saying we herded him off there or something. We need to -'

'Done,' Tess said. 'Your officers have all given testimony, all confirming the events. Joe Miller committed suicide, and tried to kill you too. Your two journalist friends are already spreading the word.'

Alec fell silent. Tess continued, 'all that's left is for you to recover. Let me handle the police work for tonight. You can go back to barking orders tomorrow. Until then, stay with Ellie.'

It took a great deal of effort, but he managed a short, 'thank you.'

Tess nodded. 'I'm glad you're okay,' she offered lamely. 'And... congratulations.'

She turned on her heel and left.

Ellie said, 'she must be feeling guilty.'

'There's a first,' Alec replied.

Eustacia finished feeding. Ellie traded her for Gabriel, who was a little more alert now. She held him to her skin as she had Eustacia and tried to encourage him to suck.

Frustratingly, he was not as forthcoming as his sister. But with some time, and a little help from the nurse, Ellie managed to get him latched. He too began feeding, though slowly and weakly.

Once he was done, Ellie finally felt at peace.

The hospital was quiet. News vans were still parked outside, but they would not become active again until the time came for the morning news. A few people loitered in Emergency with injuries, and the labour ward rang with its usual complaints, but most patients were sleeping. The storm had blown itself out, although it rained steadily, forcing the reporters to huddle under tents and umbrellas.

Alec had not wanted to leave Ellie, but at the nurse’s insistence he eventually consented to sleep in a bed in the other wing. He shared the room with three other people, and he was dozing fitfully.

In the labour ward, Ellie was alone. She was sleeping deeply, too exhausted to do otherwise. She knew from experience that it was best to take advantage of the first few hours while she couldn’t feel her legs; once the anaesthetic wore off, she would be in agony.

Through this dreamy atmosphere, a figure moved with singular purpose.

The nurses, when they passed her, glanced at her without much interest. It was only when she came to the labour ward that she began to use stealth, waiting until the nurse checking the neonates slipped out for a cigarette before she entered.

After several minutes, the figure came to a halt in Ellie’s room. She quietly disconnected the nurse call button and stood back, watching Ellie sleep.

Ellie’s expression grew troubled; she seemed to sense she was being watched. She opened one eye and discerned a shape. Thinking it was a nurse, she did not react immediately.
Then her eyes adjusted to the light, and a violent stab of panic electrified her body.

There, standing in front of her, was Susan Wright.

And in her arms was Gabriel.

‘Oh good,’ Susan said. ‘You’re awake.

‘Susan?’ Ellie rasped. Her eyes widened, fixed on her son. ‘Oh God. Oh God. Help! Help!’

Too weak to shout, her voice was pitifully small. There was no-one in earshot to answer her.

‘I’ve been thinking lately,’ Susan said, looking at Gabriel, ‘how unfair life is. My husband murdered my little girl, and for that my son and my other daughter was taken from me. Nige murders that Danny, and then you lot pin the blame on Joe Miller. Then you murder him, throw him from a cliff, and you get to live on. You and that detective inspector, and these bastards of yours.’

Ellie hauled herself upright and desperately tried to reach her son. ‘No - give him – give him…’

She flailed for him. Susan watched her pathetic struggles with a dry smile. ‘Careful. Wouldn’t want to pop them stitches, would we?’

‘You bitch,’ Ellie spat. ‘Don’t you dare -’

‘You ain’t really in a position to be making threats, love,’ Susan interrupted acidly. Ellie grew quiet, and Susan looked back at the baby in her arms. ‘It’s poetic justice, really,’ she said with satisfaction. ‘The police took away my boy. So I’m gonna take away your boy.’

Helpless, Ellie could now do nothing but weep. Tears sluiced her cheeks. ‘Susan please,’ she begged, her fingers twisting in the bedsheets. ‘Please, for the love of God, don’t hurt him.’

‘Hurt him?’ Susan repeated. ‘I ain’t a monster. I’m not gonna hurt him. All I’m gonna do is take him away from you. Like you took Nige away from me.’

She hefted Gabriel in her arms. The movement was deft and practised, her hands as confident as any mother’s. The crook of her elbow formed a pillow for his tiny head, and he barely stirred at all, though he was now upright enough so that Ellie could see every curve of his tiny, perfect face, with its blotchy red birthmark like a flower.

Then Susan turned and strode from the room.

‘You can keep the girl,’ she shot over her shoulder. ‘It’s more than what you lot ever did for me. So you see? I’m not all heartless.’

And she swept down the hallway and out of sight.

‘Wait,’ Ellie called weakly. ‘Wait.’

Heedless of the catheter, the IV lines in her arms, even the fact that the lower half of her body was still paralysed, Ellie tried to follow. She threw the covers off and tried to get up, only to crash heavily onto the floor.

‘Gabriel,’ she murmured. Her nails scraped across the floor, searching for purchase. ‘Gabriel,’ she said again. She inched forward, but her dead legs were still tangled in the sheets and they arrested any hope of further progress.
Ellie’s vision swam. Before she passed out, she said softly, ‘Alec.’
Alec was roused from his bed. In his exhausted, injured state it took him several moments to understand what they were saying to him. The instant he gleaned Ellie was in danger, however, he was out of bed and struggling down the hallway as nurses chased him, shouting that he shouldn’t be walking.

He burst into Ellie’s room. She was inconsolable, and the nurses had her strapped down to stop her from trying to move. Her wound had opened slightly on the left side and fresh blood stained her clothes.

Eustacia was with her. To keep Ellie quiet, they had yielded to her demands to see her daughter, and they kept her crib within arm’s reach.

‘Alec!’ she said, starting up. The nurses exclaimed loudly and pushed her back down, trying to stem the bleeding and fix the damage she had done. ‘Alec! She took him! She took him away!’

‘Who?’ he demanded, a part of him wondering if Ellie had only had a bad dream.

‘S – Susan Wright!’ Ellie sobbed. ‘She took him, she took our Gabriel, she took him away!’

Alec seized one of the nurses. ‘Is this true?’

The nurse nodded, swallowing hard. ‘We checked. He – your son – he’s gone.’

Alec looked ready to kill. ‘How the bloody hell did she get in here?’ he roared.

‘She – she came through Emergency!’ the nurse said, looking frightened. ‘She has lung cancer – terminal – she’s been coming here for a year to seek treatment. She came in tonight because she was complaining of bleeding from the lungs. We decided to keep her in for observation. None of us thought anything of it when we saw her up and about. We all know her here!’

‘So you just let her have the run of the hospital? You just let her waltz around wherever she pleases? You don’t think to query that she has my fucking child in her arms?’

He rounded on the others. ‘Who saw her leave?’

They all shook their heads. No one had seen her in the labour ward, and no-one had seen her leave the hospital, although two admitted they had seen her heading in this direction.

‘How long has she been gone?’ He looked at Ellie, but she too shook her head helplessly.

‘No-one knows,’ a nurse said. ‘We came in and Ellie was passed out on the floor. When she regained consciousness, she told us.’

One nurse, an older woman with wrinkles pitted around her mouth, came forward.

‘It wouldn’t have been long,’ she said. ‘I checked in on Ellie. Then I – I ducked out for a fag.’ She looked ashamed. ‘I wasn’t gone more than ten minutes. Ellie was down when I came back. That’s when it must’ve happened. She woke up about ten minutes later and told us.’

Susan was less than half an hour ahead of them. Alec ran his hand through his hair.

‘Cameras,’ he said suddenly. ‘Cameras! Where can we access the security footage?’
‘We’ve already got Simon on it,’ they told him. ‘He’s looking through it now.’

Alec tried to run to the door, but his injured leg hampered him and he fell over. They shouted in concern and helped him up.

‘Tend to Ellie,’ he muttered, ‘I’m fine. I’m fine!’ He paused and tried to think. ‘Are there any officers left on the premises?’

‘Just two. The rest have gone.’

‘Get them in. Wake up everyone you can and get the word out. But don’t let the media know. They’ll only hinder us.’ He reflected for a moment before adding, ‘and find Tess Henchard!’

Alec did everything he could from the hospital. He sent two officers to stake out Susan Wright’s caravan immediately and rang the officers who had been observing her for the past week, asking for any clues as to where she might have gone. They offered little, but Alec was so desperate that the smallest detail was hope to him.

The receptionist spoke to them, and Simon too, both informing him that Susan had walked out the front door.

‘She discharged herself,’ the receptionist said. ‘She’s terminal, you know – ain’t got more than a few months to live, so she said she decided there wasn’t much point in her staying. I didn’t want to let her go, but then she said she forgot to ask someone to feed her dog and she was worried about him, so…’

The receptionist looked nervous. ‘Gabriel,’ Alec said. ‘My son – was she carrying him?’

‘Um… she was wearing a big coat,’ the receptionist said. ‘Because of the rain, I guessed. But maybe…’

Alec went to see the security footage, which clearly showed Susan leaving the labour ward with Gabriel in the crook of her arm. She pulled her large, warm raincoat around her, concealing the child inside, and calmly walked to reception, where she discharged herself and strode outside.

Alec was so incredulous he could barely speak. Not trusting himself to stay calm in front of the hospital staff, he told them to get out of his sight and returned to Ellie, who was still in hysterics. She was begging to see her other sons. Alec left the room and swiftly called Mark and Beth and told them to wake the boys and come at once.

Ellie was in such a bad way that Alec decided he could not leave her until they arrived. Having done all he could, he sat at her bedside to wait. He had appropriated a crutch and been using it to get around the hospital; he propped this next to him in readiness.

Ellie’s violent paroxysms of grief had blown themselves out. She lay quietly now, her vacant eyes staring at the ceiling. One hand gripped the crib wherein Eustacia lay, and her whole body shook with gasps.

‘Tom and Fred are coming,’ Alec told her. He took her hand, but she seemed not to feel him. ‘They’ll be here soon.’

‘There’s no hope,’ Ellie gasped. ‘There’s no hope. He’s so small. It’s so cold and wet. Even if she doesn’t mean to kill him, she’ll do it accidentally.’
He tried to soothe her. ‘Don’t say that. The other officers will be here soon. Once we’re all here, we’ll find him. He’ll be all right.’

She shook her head. ‘He has a weak heart.’ Her breath fluttered like swallows’ wings. ‘He has your heart, Alec.’

Alec had kept back his grief on account of her, but at these words he broke down. Dropping his head into his hand, he leaned on the bed and a great groan escaped him. Tears slid from his eyes.

‘Gabriel,’ Ellie keened. ‘Gabriel… oh Gabriel, my little darling. I’d only just met him and now he’s gone, and I won’t see him anymore… we have so many clothes at home. What will we do with all his clothes?’

‘Don’t talk like that. Don’t,’ Alec pleaded.

He fell into silent despair, while Ellie could not stop talking. She uttered Gabriel’s name over and over, as if regretting that she had not named him sooner, and was trying to say his name as many times as possible before the opportunity was gone.

‘Gabriel… Gabriel… oh my sweet baby…’ she turned desperately to Alec. ‘What did we do to deserve this? We never did anything wrong. All we ever did was love.’

The statement struck Alec hard, and he sank further into despair. Was it true? Was all this because they had dared to love? Ellie had loved Joe, and in loving him she had doomed herself. He had loved Tess and Daisy, which had put him on that self-sacrificing path to penance and a living death. And then came the worst crime of all - they had loved each other. In the aftermath of all those hideous murders, after all that horror and betrayal and loneliness, they had loved each other, and dared to think they could be happy together.

They had loved their spouses and their children. And they had loved each other. Was that really all they were guilty of? Was that really what they were being punished for?

‘There is something – something external to us,’ Ellie said shakily. ‘Something that says you can’t – you can’t love. Something that takes everything away from us. Why can’t we keep what we’re given? Oh God, Alec -!’ one of her sobs seemed to solidify in her throat, ‘- our son, Alec, my son and yours – why was he given to us if only to be taken away?’

Alec’s attention was robbed by a sudden flurry of activity near the door. He wondered if the officers had arrived and started up to investigate, but Ellie cried out:

‘No - don’t leave me! Please, I can’t bear it, I can’t bear the loneliness of being away from you!’

‘There, love, I’m here,’ Alec murmured, sitting back down and pressing his face close to hers.

‘They’re a pair,’ Ellie sniffed, looking at Eustacia. ‘She can’t split them up – it’s not right, it’s not right, it’s not fair. He’s innocent! Why couldn’t she hurt me instead? I couldn’t move! She could have killed me, smothered me, injected air into my veins, had her revenge and been on her way! Why should he have to suffer because of me?’

The more she spoke, the more she raged against her position.

‘And why do we have to suffer? We – we’re innocent too! I’m not the guilty one. I’m not the one who murdered a child! So why am I being punished? And you – you’re not the one who fucked up the Sandbrook case. It was all Tess, but you took the blame and it nearly fucking killed you! We’re innocent! It’s not fair, it’s not fair, it’s not fair…’
She struck her fist against the pillow and began to thrash. Alec held her down and stroked her forehead. ‘It’s all right, love, it’s all right.’

‘My baby,’ she moaned, ‘oh God, my baby. Gabriel… I want to hold him, Alec. I want to hold him.’

Tess barged into the room, her hair a wild tangle. ‘Alec!’ she called. She paused next to them, panting. ‘I came as soon as I heard.’

‘Are the other officers with you?’ Alec asked.

‘Outside waiting for your orders,’ Tess said.

‘Good. Get them searching the area. She can’t have gone far. In this rain, holding a baby, she’d be slow. Once they’re gone, I need you to get access to CCTV footage in the area. She went out the front of the hospital. Look for any cameras along the street nearby.’

Tess nodded. ‘Will you come?’

Alec gripped the crutch next to him and his face twisted. ‘I can’t. I can’t leave Ellie until Mark and Beth get here.’

Tess nodded. ‘I’ll be in touch.’

Alec stared longingly after her, wishing desperately he could search with them. But he didn’t dare leave Ellie yet, and with his injured leg he feared he would be more a hindrance than a help.

Ellie was shading her eyes from the fluorescent lights with one hand. ‘Oh my comrade,’ she was murmuring. ‘Our perfect union… our two-in-oneness… is now stained with blood…’

The words were meaningless to him. He looked over at Eustacia, fast asleep in her crib, and the thought of her growing up without her brother smote him to the very core.

Mark and Beth came running into the room. Alec looked up in relief, and saw that Tom, Daisy and Fred had come too. Fred was in Beth’s arms, and he was howling furiously at the wake-up. Tom was wearing, of all things, Ellie’s bright orange coat. She had taken it off in the kitchen just before Joe had attacked, and Tom had salvaged it before SOCO started tearing their house apart. He seemed to be wearing it partly to protect himself from the rain, and partly because he needed the comfort.

The sound of Fred’s cries roused Ellie from her stupefied state. ‘My darlings,’ she said. ‘My boys – oh!’

Beth and the boys went to her to soothe her, and they quietened Fred’s disgruntled shouts. Mark and Daisy ran to Alec.

‘Is it really true?’ Daisy said. ‘Is Gabe really gone?’

Alec nodded. ‘We’ve got everyone out there looking. Your mum’s helping.’ He suddenly looked at Mark and said, ‘Mark, can you call Nige and get him to come in? Tell him that if there’s anything he knows about Susan that could help us…’

Mark went off to ring Nige. Alec’s mind ticked over. He pulled out his phone and made a call of his own, telling one of the officers to stake out Nige’s house in case Susan went looking for him.

Sitting back, he tapped the phone against his chin. ‘Think, think, think, think, think,’ he ordered himself feverishly. ‘Where would she go? Where would she take him?’
‘Alec,’ Tom murmured. He nudged his shoulder, and Alec struggled to his feet so he could speak to the boy where Ellie could not hear. ‘I think I have an idea of where she might have gone.’

‘Where?’ Alec demanded.

Tom told him, and Alec’s blood ran cold. It seemed to fit, and he decided he had to investigate at once. Jamming the crutch under his shoulder, he left before Ellie, who was absorbed with Fred and Beth, could notice. Tom helped Alec along, but just before they were gone, Daisy ran after him.

‘Dad, wait!’

‘I’ll be back, darlin’,’ he told her. ‘Stay with Ellie. Keep her calm.’

Daisy was shaking. ‘Is Gabe gonna be okay?’ she pleaded. ‘Is everything gonna be okay?’

Long ago, Alec had promised his daughter that he would never lie to her again.

But sometimes, to protect their children, parents had to lie.

He touched her shoulder and said firmly, with a conviction he did not feel, ‘it’s all right, darlin’. Everything is going to be fine.’

*

Alec was loath to divert too many officers away from the search, just in case Tom’s hunch was wrong, but he did take two squad cars. Tom came with him, the big boy acting as a second crutch and helping him to the car.

‘It was when she gave me the caravan keys so I could meet Dad,’ Tom explained as they splashed through the rainy streets, ‘I noticed she had these two keys on the chain, and I asked her what they were for. She told me it was for the clifftop hut, saying that although she didn’t clean it anymore, the owners had never asked for the keys back. They’d just shut it up after everything and left it alone.’

‘Sir!’ the driver shouted. ‘I see lights! The lights are on!’

Tom had been right after all. They came to a screeching halt on the gravel and Alec got out. He looked at that dreaded hut, crouching like a white beast on the hill, its windows shining like eyes. It felt wrong, so so wrong, that Gabriel should spend his first hours where Danny had spent his last.

‘Stay here, Tom,’ Alec ordered, slamming the car door shut.

‘But I want to help!’ he protested. He was still wearing Ellie’s orange coat, and as he got out he zipped it up to protect himself from the cold.

A dog started barking. Vince was tied by the front door, in a tiny wedge that was sheltered from the rain. In his haste, Alec left his crutch behind, so he had to half-run, half-hop to the entrance.

He rapped on the door. ‘Police. Open up!’

There was no reply from within. He tried the handle; it was locked. Alec turned to his officers.

‘Get it open,’ he told them, standing to the side.

They did. The lock came away with some force, and they stood back to let the Detective Inspector go first.
He pushed the door open. It was filthy inside. Empty food cans and rubbish littered the floor. It looked as if a squatter had been living here for some time. He suddenly recognised a blue coat slung over one of the chairs, and at once the mystery of where Joe Miller had been hiding all this time was solved. Susan had been helping Joe after all; she must have given him a copy of the keys to the hut so he could stay here.

Once he’d taken this in, his eyes swept up to see a hunched figure in corner, standing with her back to him. He came to an abrupt halt and held out his arm to stop his officers from charging ahead any further.

‘Susan Wright,’ he pronounced, keeping his voice firm.

He could hear nothing but rain pattering on the roof. As he adjusted to this new environment, he began to discern Susan’s ragged, painful breathing too.

Very slowly, she turned around. She was clutching a white bundle. His son. The son he’d never thought to have, who had intruded on his life so suddenly, and who threatened to leave it just as quickly. A hand closed around Alec’s heart.

‘So,’ she said. ‘You found me.’

Her voice was a rasp. The exertion of walking here so quickly in the rain had obviously put a great strain on her diseased lungs. She was shaking from exertion, but she clutched the boy securely. It seemed vulgar for Gabriel – so young and fresh and only just tethered to life, to be held in the arms of one so diseased and close to death.

One of his officers made a move, and Susan’s head snapped up. Her eyes narrowed and she held Gabriel to her shoulder, her hand curling around his head. Alec let out a strangled cry at the motion.

‘Tell your officers to wait outside,’ Susan ordered.

Alec was paralysed, staring at Gabriel.

‘Now,’ Susan snapped. Her fingers curled, causing the boy to wake up. A cry escaped him.

‘All right!’ Alec held up his hands in a gesture of peace. ‘All right – I’ll tell them. Just… don’t…’

His eyes were still fixed on Gabriel, and on those hands that held him, yellowed from her smoking habit, the fingernails formed into claws by disease. He gestured to his officers, and they left reluctantly.

‘Susan,’ he said when they were gone, ‘Susan please…’ he took a step forward, his foot crunching on a muesli bar wrapper. He became uncomfortably aware of Joe’s presence in the room; everywhere he looked there were signs of him and how he had been living for the past few weeks. On the floor was an old picture of Joe, Tom and Ellie, one that Alec recognised. Ellie had kept a copy of it in her house, and on her desk too. Joe had evidently kept his own copy.

The walls dripped blue with impressions of Joe, and everything that had happened in this hut.

Susan must have felt something similar, for she said, ‘this is where that boy died, innit? All them months ago. How long is it now?’

Alec said quietly, ‘almost two years.’

His heart was cracking in two, but despite the strain it caused him, he stayed perfectly immobile.
While Gabriel was in her arms, all the power rested with Susan. He had to stay calm. He had to be strong.

A tear tracked down his face.

‘Susan,’ he said, ‘whatever you’re thinking of doing to him… we can work something out. Anything you want, anything at all, we can work something out.’

‘No,’ Susan said. ‘Not unless you can turn back time, you can’t.’ She lay Gabriel flat and patted him gently, lulling him back to sleep. ‘I never got to raise my boy,’ she continued. ‘They took him away from me. Why should you get to raise yours? Why should you get to be happy after what you did?’

Alec wrung his empty hands. The cuts and abrasions from the cliff opened and started to bleed.

‘You’re wrong. What you think about me and Ellie and Joe and Nige, it’s all wrong. Joe Miller did kill Daniel Latimer. He confessed on video. Ellie and I, we’re not guilty of what you say.’

‘You’re a liar,’ Susan said. ‘I know what I saw on that beach. I know it were Nige.’

‘It wasn’t,’ Alec said. He could do no more than tell the truth and hope it would be enough. ‘It was Joe. Nige isn’t guilty.’

‘He’s got his father in him,’ Susan said. ‘Just like this one’s got you in him.’

‘For God’s sake, Susan!’ Alec cried. ‘Nige isn’t his father! He’s not guilty and you know it! Why should you blame him for what his father did? Why should my son suffer because of me?’

He sucked in a sharp breath and gritted his teeth, trying to stay calm.

‘If you hate me – then fine,’ he said. ‘Blame me. I don’t care, just…’ his trembling fingers reached into the space in front of him, grasping for Gabriel. ‘Don’t hurt him. Don’t hurt him because of me.’

Alec’s walkie-talkie went off at his belt. ‘Sir!’ it reported. ‘Nige Carter’s here.’

Susan’s eyes widened. Alec lifted the walkie-talkie. He steadied his voice and said, ‘copy that. Keep him there.’

‘Why is he here?’ she croaked.

‘I asked him to come here. To see you. Do you want to talk to him?’

Susan hesitated. She shook her head. ‘No. This is some police trick, innit?’

‘No,’ Alec replied. ‘I just want you to talk to your son. He’s a good man, Susan. He didn’t murder Danny, he didn’t help murder Danny, he didn’t dump the body, he had nothing to do with his death, no matter what you might say. He’s not his father.’

‘I’m not leaving this hut,’ Susan insisted.

‘How do you think this will end, Susan?’ Alec demanded. ‘We have the place surrounded. More officers will be here any second. There’s no way out. Whatever you do, there’s no way out for you.’

‘There’s no way out for me anyway,’ Susan said bitterly. ‘Ain’t you heard? I’m terminal. Don’t matter anymore.’

‘It does matter Susan, because you’re alive now. You choose what happens, and you choose how
you live and how you'll die. Do you want to die a child murderer? Do you want to become the same person your husband was?"

Susan flinched.

Alec continued, ‘or would you rather die as who you really are? As a mother, and a woman who’d never hurt her children, or anyone else’s?’

Alec’s walkie-talkie went off. ‘Alec,’ a voice said, and Susan quivered at the sound. ‘Alec, mate, it’s Nige. The police gave me the scanner. Can you hear me?’

Alec raised the walkie-talkie to his lips. ‘Copy that. I can hear you, Nige.’

‘Is – is Susan there?’

Alec looked steadily into Susan’s eyes. ‘She is.’

‘Can I speak to her?’

‘Go ahead. She can hear you.’

He held up the walkie. The sound of breathing followed for a little, then the voice said, ‘Mum?’

The word shattered something in Susan.

‘Mum, are you there?’

Alec held down the button. Susan said, ‘yes. I’m here.’

‘Is it true what they’re saying? Have you got that boy?’

Two fat tears rolled from her eyes. ‘Yes.’

There was a pause. Alec guessed that the officers were coaching Nige and telling him what to say, but Susan was oblivious to the possibility of puppeteering.

‘You won’t hurt him, will you?’ Nige said anxiously. You wouldn’t hurt him – just to get back at the police, would you?’

He received no answer.

‘Mum,’ he went on, ‘I know you hate me. You think I killed Danny, or that Mark did and I helped dump his body, but I didn’t. It were all that Joe Miller. They’ve got it on tape – he confessed without realising he were being filmed. It were him, Mum, not me.’

‘You have to believe him!’ a second voice shouted through the walkie talkie.

Susan looked confused, but she recognised the voice.

‘Susan, it’s me! Tom, Tom Miller!’ the voice continued. ‘Please don’t hurt my brother. We – we were wrong about my Dad. He really was the one who killed Danny, not Nige or Mark. Nige had nothing to do with it, and Mum and Alec aren’t like you think!’

There was a scuffling noise. Tom appeared to have absconded with the walkie. ‘Please!’ he shouted desperately as officers growled for it back. ‘You’re my friend, Susan. You helped me when I was in trouble. You were kind to me. Don’t hurt my brother!’
There was a further scuffle. The sound cut off and silence settled over the hut. Alec became aware of the sound of rain once more.

‘Tom,’ Susan uttered. ‘Tom Miller – this is his brother.’

Alec nodded. ‘That’s right.’

She was contemplative. ‘That boy – he’s a good boy.’

‘Yes.’

‘He’s not like his father.’

‘No. He’s nothing like Joe. And Nige isn’t like his father either. Whatever their fathers did – they’re innocent.’

He might have added, “Just like him,” but he did not dare.

Susan lifted Gabriel. The cloth fell away, exposing that birthmark under his eye. He stirred a little and made a soft burbling noise. Her eyes softened.

‘He’s small,’ she murmured. ‘My son, he were only little when he was born. The shock of it all – with my husband, and our daughters - it made me go early. Seven months, he was. He were little just like this one.’

Alec wet his lips. ‘Susan, you know that Nigel -’

‘Michael,’ she said suddenly. Alec looked at her without comprehension, so she elaborated, ‘I named him Michael. That woman what adopted him, she called him Nigel, but… I named him Michael. After the angel.’ Rocking the child in her arms, she turned to Alec. ‘What did you call yours?’

‘Gabriel,’ Alec swallowed hard. ‘His name is Gabriel.’

A smile tugged at the corners of her mouth. ‘Another angel. Little boys… they’re angels, ain’t they?’

‘They are,’ Alec agreed. ‘And he’s ours. He’s our angel, Susan.’ His voice cracked. ‘Please. Let me take him home. He has a mother and two brothers and two sisters who are all missing him.’

The policeman in him was gone. All that stood before Susan now was a desperate father with a broken heart. Susan thought of her own husband, the father of her children, and compared him to the spectre that stood in front of her.

‘It ain’t right,’ she murmured, ‘to punish a boy for what his father done.’

She took a few steps forward. Alec stretched out his arms for Gabriel, but she withheld him. ‘Will you give me… just a little time with my son?’ she requested.

‘I will,’ Alec said.

She slowly held Gabriel out to him. Alec immediately darted out and snatched him from her arms. Clutching the boy to his heart, he staggered backwards on his injured leg until he hit the far wall. Leaning against it, his lungs heaving, he supported Gabriel with one arm, and with the other lifted the walkie-talkie and barked a single order.

The door slammed open and officers swarmed in at once. They forced Susan onto the ground and handcuffed her roughly. She did not resist until they had her upright, when she said, ‘wait. Nige. I
wanna see Nige. You promised!’

The officers turned to Alec. He nodded. Nige was brought inside. He looked first at Alec and the bundle in his arms.

‘Is he all right?’ the big man asked, his brow knotted with concern.

Alec nodded, then gestured at Susan. ‘You have thirty seconds.’

Nige recoiled at the sight of Susan, but for Alec’s sake he stayed put. She studied him earnestly.

‘You look like him,’ Susan said. ‘Even now when I look at you, I see him. But you ain’t him.’

She strained against the cuffs and the officers let her step a little closer to Nige. A quarter of a century of separation stood between them, a gulf of years that could never be mended or bartered back. A miserable longing came over Susan as she contemplated what might have been, and compared it to the fate and the future that now awaited her.

‘I wish I’d got to raise you,’ she said at last.

Alec said, ‘time’s up.’ He looked at the officers. ‘Get her down to the station and process the offence. Make sure she spends what’s left of her short life behind bars.’

Susan did not resist. As she passed Alec, however, she slowed her step.

‘You cherish that boy,’ she said, nodding at Gabriel. ‘You cherish him. Him and all them kids of yours. Don’t take ‘em for granted.’

Alec held Gabriel as tightly as he dared, brushing his lips feverishly against his head. Troubled by the rough, sandpapery feel of his whiskers, Gabriel let out a weak cry.

Susan was marched to the squad car. Rain fell steadily upon her. Before they could shove her inside, she started hacking and coughing. After almost a minute, she coughed up a wad of blood and spat it onto the gravel. Exhausted, she raised her head and saw Tom. He was standing to one side, watching her pensively as he rubbed Vince’s ears to keep the dog calm.

She did not break eye contact with him until the officer pushed her head down and forced her into the car.

Once this was done, Tom darted inside.

‘Alec!’ Tom called, running to his side. ‘Is he okay?’

Secreted in the crook of Susan’s elbow, with her large, waterproof coat drawn over him, Gabriel had stayed warm and dry during his journey through the streets; but now, wrapped only in thin white cloth, he seemed to be feeling the cold. Tom pulled off his mother’s orange North Face coat, gave it a quick shake to get the raindrops off, and held it out. Alec placed the baby in the dry innards of the coat, and Tom swaddled him in orange. Comforted by the smell and the touch of the coat, Gabriel quietened and shuttered his eyes across his red birthmark. Tom gently carried him to the police car, the coat keeping him safe from the water, and got inside.

Alec limped slowly after him. The adrenaline fuelling him waned and he became steadily more aware of the throbbing in his leg. He took a step and collapsed onto the gravel. Two officers had to take his arms and lift him up so he could get into the car. He slammed the door shut. As he did, the other squad car drove away, bearing Susan Wright within it, the lights flashing. Her window passed
by Alec's, but her eyes saw past him and found Tom's. They exchanged a final, long look before she was driven away into the rain.

Bewildered by all that had happened, Nige sat down on the step of the hut. Vince whined and approached him. He laid his head on Nige’s knee.

‘What are we gonna do with you, eh, mate?’ Nige said softly. ‘What’ll you do without her?’

Vince wagged his tail. Almost reluctantly, Nige stroked his head. Something like a smile formed on his face and he fondled the dog’s ears.

The rain continued to fall, but far on the horizon, behind the clouds, the sun was rising.
“Well met, well met!” said an old true love. “Well met, well met!” said he.

“I have just returned from the salt, salt sea, and all for the love of thee.”

- Augie March, Men Who Follow Spring The Planet ‘Round.

By the time they returned the media had gotten wind of the story. The reporters went into a frenzy when they saw the squad car arrive and swarmed around them. Herding them back, the officers and the hospital staff formed a barrier so Alec and Tom could get out. Alec kept his head down. He was limping heavily on his bad leg and he clutched something orange to his chest. Lights flashed and shutters clicked.

Ellie jolted violently when Gabriel’s weak cries reached her ears. Milk spurted from her breasts, creating two wide damp patches on her gown, and she held out her arms, her eyes wide. But the doctors took him away before she could see him. She let out an anguished moan at the separation and looked at Tom and Alec as they entered her room.

‘You found him. You got him back,’ Ellie cried. ‘Is he hurt? Did she hurt him?’

Tom supported Alec, and Mark came over to lend a hand too. Together they managed to seat Alec by Ellie’s bedside. Daisy threw her arms around her father and kissed him, while Beth put her hand on his shoulder.

‘He’s okay,’ he told them. ‘She didn’t hurt him. Not deliberately. But the doctors need to check him. Make sure he’s all right.’

‘I want to see him,’ she begged. ‘I want to hold him.’

‘The doctors have to take care of him, El,’ Alec said patiently.

Ellie let out a shuddering sigh and her hand crept across the sheets. Alec took it and their fingers interlaced. His own hand was cut and grazed and bleeding from the cliffs; hers was covered in tape and tubes and had a heart rate monitor clipped to the finger.

Yet somehow, they fit together perfectly.

Daisy gave his shoulders a little shake. ‘What happened, Dad? How’d you find him?’

‘I wouldn’t have if it weren’t for Tom,’ Alec said.

Still holding Ellie’s hand, he related all that had happened to the small crowd.

* *

The hours passed and the media storm increased in strength. The sensational story of Joe’s suicide and the subsequent kidnapping was broadcast around the country, while the initial story of Joe’s death was printed in every paper. Every channel seemed to be showing the same poignant footage – that of broken, battered Alec bearing something small and orange in his arms and limping into the
hospital with his stepson.

Hidden away in their hospital room, Ellie and Alec tried to stay above it all, although once Alec’s leg had been securely strapped and treated, he did give a short statement to the press asking for privacy and respect in this time. He also gave sworn testimony to the police, answered some pertinent questions, and assisted them in processing the offence as quickly as possible. Once this was done, he returned to Ellie’s side and sat next to her, his chair pulled right alongside her bed. She shuffled over in bed to be closer to him, and once they were touching they managed to doze a little.

With rest and time, Ellie recovered all her lucidity. She had been half-mad from the grief and the drugs, but both were wearing off. All that seemed to remain was gnawing maternal instinct, which encouraged her to be strong for her babies.

Tess continued to manage the police work where Alec could not, and Daisy seemed to be quietly adoring of her mother for that. Tess had been Daisy’s hero ever since she was a child; it warmed Alec’s heart to see some of that old admiration creeping back after so long and frigid a separation.

‘SOCO have confirmed your hunch,’ Tess informed him. ‘Joe Miller was indeed staying at the clifftop hut these last few weeks. The owners shut that place up months ago and never gave keys to anyone, which means he must’ve got them from Susan Wright like you said. We’ll be questioning her soon.’

‘I’ll kill that woman if I ever see her,’ Ellie mumbled, her eyes closed. The feeling was returning to her stomach, and she was in pain. ‘I’ll fucking kill her.’

‘You won’t have to,’ Tess said breezily. ‘I talked to some of the nurses. They reckon she doesn’t have more than three months to live. Frankly, they’re surprised she’s held out as long as she has. They expected her to go a lot sooner at first, but, stubborn to the end, I guess.’

‘I’ll kill her,’ Ellie insisted. Her teeth were gritted, and she slammed her fist on the sheets. ‘What’s taking so long? Why won’t they let me see him?’

‘Easy, Ellie,’ Alec said.

‘Mum! Dad! Ellie!’ came an excited call. Daisy entered the room and hovered at Tess’ shoulder. ‘Have you guys seen what’s going on outside?’

They shook their heads. Daisy turned on the tiny television that hung above Ellie’s bed.

The news was broadcasting a live report from the front of the hospital. Ellie’s lips parted in astonishment; people were laying flowers by the entrance. Everyone in Broadchurch seemed to be coming to pay their respects, both to Danny and the Latimers, and to the Hardy family.

‘Look how many there are,’ said Ellie.

Alec scoffed. ‘I guess they’re feeling guilty.’

Paul Coates appeared. A newscaster was interviewing him, and he was proclaiming that the church was setting up a donation drive for the two families affected.

‘We were all devastated when we heard what happened,’ he said. ‘Everyone’s waiting with bated breath, hoping – praying – that Ellie and Alec and their children, especially that little boy, will be all right. The people of Broadchurch have been very generous. When they heard what happened, the donations simply started flooding in. We hope to get enough to cover any hospital bills they may incur, and to help them in the coming months.’
Alec was furious. ‘Who does he think he is, asking for donations like that? I’m not taking handouts from anyone.’

Ellie was similarly perturbed that they had not been consulted about this donation drive, but before they could discuss it, Lucy entered. ‘Oh, you’ve got it on!’ she said delightedly. ‘I was just coming to show you. They’re interviewing everyone. Beth and Mark ended up giving one, Paul Coates has been on there, asking for donations. I did an interview myself. Pulled a blinder, if I do say so. Have you seen me on there yet?’

She looked hopefully at the screen, but it had cut back to shots outside the hospital as yet more people arrived with flowers.

Ellie squinted at two of the figures. ‘I think that’s Jeb and Marge,’ she said.

‘Bloody looks like them, don’t it?’ Lucy agreed. ‘So is there any word about Gabe? Everyone’s been asking me how the little bastards are -’

Ellie cut her off savagely. ‘Don’t call them that. Don’t you call them that. Not ever.’

Lucy was taken aback by her tone of voice. ‘It was just a joke, El.’

‘Never call them that. Not even as a joke.’ Ellie said.

Her lower jaw chattered and she looked away. The appellation was too filled with violence and too associated with hatred for her to tolerate. It summoned images of the way Joe’s mouth twisted when he had pronounced the words, the way the papers had spoken about them, the whispers that had followed her when she’d been pregnant, and the raspy, wounded sound of Susan Wright’s voice when she’d held Gabriel in her arms.

Ellie blinked away tears. Alec murmured, ‘it’s all right.’

‘Gabriel and Eustacia. Those are their names. From Thomas Hardy. They’re not bastards.’ She squeezed her eyes shut.

‘It’s okay,’ Alec said.

Lucy looked guilty. Even though she had heard Joe call them such on the recording, it had not occurred to her that the joke name might trigger her sister. Feeling unwelcome, she departed on a flimsy pretence. Tess also excused herself and left to pursue the investigation. Daisy went with her, clamouring to help.

A nurse came in to see Ellie. They were worried about her stomach wound developing an infection, and were almost constantly checking up on her.

‘How is he?’ Ellie asked her.

‘Stable. Safe. We think he’ll be okay,’ the nurse assured her.

‘I want to see him.’

‘You can’t,’ the nurse replied, for perhaps the hundredth time. ‘You can’t walk, can you?’ She looked at Alec, and at the crutches propped next to him. ‘But I can take Dad to see him, if he wants.’

Alec shook his head. ‘Dad won’t see him if Mum can’t.’

Ellie sighed. ‘Don’t be stupid. Go and see him.’
'You wouldn’t forgive me if I saw him when you couldn’t.'

'No, I s’pose I wouldn’t,' Ellie reflected.

'You haven’t even forgiven me for taking your job.'

'Twice. Fucking twice, you took my job. It’ll take a lifetime for me to forgive you.'

'A lifetime?' A smile plucked the corners of his mouth. 'Well. That’s what we have.'

The hours passed. The feeling returned to her legs, and Ellie spent the time trying to walk. The nurse seemed satisfied with how her wound was looking, so she encouraged her efforts, saying that it was important to get the circulation back in her legs. Her bowels soon kicked into action too, and Ellie found herself struggling back and forth from the toilet almost constantly. As she grew more confident, she shuffled determinedly to see Gabriel. Alec hopped along beside her on crutches.

The baby looked no worse for wear, but God, he was so small. Tom had been such a mammoth size, and even Fred had been a big baby, but Gabriel seemed more like an imperfectly made doll than a child.

Ellie put her hand on the glass.

'Thanks to the cold and the rain, we’re worried about his lungs,' the doctor informed them. 'We want to make sure there are no complications, and that he doesn’t develop any infections. But he’s been fairly stable. We’re hopeful.'

'What about his heart?' Ellie asked.

'A little weak. But he wants to live.' His eyes flicked over Alec. 'He may have inherited your condition,' he said apologetically. 'More than likely it will manifest when he’s older. I’d advise you bring him in for regular checkups.'

The news fell heavily on Alec. Faintly, he said, ‘and Eustacia?’

'Little Stace is just fine. Perfectly healthy, and quite a pretty baby, if I do say so. It happens sometimes with twins that one will be bigger and more robust than the other. The asymmetry wasn’t particularly severe in this case, but… there were a lot of stresses that made it worse for the smaller twin, and brought on these problems.'

He pronounced the word “stresses” very delicately, coughed once, and excused himself to tend to another mother.

Alec put his own hand on the glass. It hurt him to know that his son was still suffering on his account. The thought of that little boy with arrhythmia because of him…

'I’m sorry,' he choked, speaking both to Gabriel and Ellie.

'Don’t, Alec,' Ellie said when she saw his eyes well up. ‘Don’t blame yourself. You heard what the doctor said. He might have your heart, but it was someone else that broke it.’

They stared at their son, pierced through with anxiety and sadness. ‘Oh, my angel,’ Ellie said piteously. ‘I can’t leave him, Alec.’

Neither could he. They stayed anchored to the spot until a nurse came across them and ushered them away. Ellie found she could not quite manage the walk back, so the nurse got a wheelchair for her,
and Alec clacked alongside them on his crutches.

Outside, the news crews kept vigil and the live reports continued. The nation was riveted by all that had happened, and the attention was only intensified by the fact that for the past few months, Ellie and Alec had been vilified and ostracised. The revelation of the truth mystified and outraged people, although no-one really knew where to direct that outrage.

Most of it was inevitably deflected onto Joe and Susan. Joe, once the darling of the tabloids, was decried as a vicious child murderer and a stalker. Susan was vilified no less intensely, and in their eagerness to paint her as a monster, they dug up her ugly past and smeared it all across the news. Alec was deeply regretful when he heard, and he ached for Nige. Pictures of his elder sisters, the sisters he had never known, flashed across the television screens. He was named as part of the “murder family.” It was claimed that Susan truly had been an accessory to her own daughter’s rape and murder.

Alec had no love for Susan, but this vile treatment of her sensitive past made him sick to his stomach.

While Susan and Joe were demonised, Alec found himself, for the first time, lionised. He and Ellie were hailed as heroes. That image of himself walking into hospital carrying the son he’d rescued from the jaws of death was spread everywhere. Well-wishers sent messages across social media, and Daisy read some flattering tweets to him as he covered his ears and grumbled about bloody Twitter.

Glowing reports and headlines followed him. One reporter went so far as to call him, “the finest detective in Britain.”

It made him feel sick.

Most of all, however, the media was desperate to know what had become of Gabriel. The nation was reeling from the sensational story, and many genuinely felt for the family and hoped that the boy would be okay.

Thankfully, by late evening, not long after she went to see him, Gabriel was given back to Ellie. She held him close and wept with relief. Alec took Eustacia into his arms and they held the two of them together again.

‘We’ll look after them,’ Ellie said in determination. She traced the flowerlike mark on Gabriel’s cheek. ‘No-one will ever hurt them. No-one will ever take them away from us. Never. Never again.’

‘We’ll get it right,’ Alec said. ‘We’ll raise them right.’

They contemplated the little strangers for a time. ‘Half of you and half of me,’ said Ellie. ‘What do you think they’ll be like?’

‘Well, that’s the exciting part, isn’t it?’ Alec said. ‘We get to find out.’

‘All I want,’ said Ellie, ‘all I pray for is that they’ll be happy, healthy and safe. I’ll do everything I can to make sure of those three things, but for the rest… what they choose to be, or what they’re like…’

‘That’s up to them,’ Alec finished.

‘Yeah,’ Ellie murmured.
Alec leaned over and printed a fuzzy kiss on her temple. He rested his head against hers and closed his eyes. Her brown hair, now grown past her shoulders, tickled his nose.

They invited Tom, Fred and Daisy to join them. The three of them huddled around their new siblings.

‘You two have caused an awful lot of trouble,’ Daisy scolded gently. ‘Only a day old and the whole country’s talking about you. Especially you, young man.’ She touched some of the wispy hair crowning Gabriel’s head.

‘But think of the stories we’ll have to tell them,’ Tom said. ‘How Mum fought to keep them safe, and how Dad rescued Gabe, and the whole country called them heroes.’

Alec looked at Tom in surprise. It was the first time he’d called him Dad. He seemed to have pronounced the word almost unconsciously.

Someone knocked on the door. It was Tess.

‘Sorry to interrupt,’ she said. ‘Jenkinson heard you got your son back. She wants to release a statement to the press. They keep hounding her about it.’

Ellie and Alec exchanged a look.

‘The whole country’s waiting to hear how he is,’ Tess prompted. ‘The flowers and the well-wishes and the donations keep coming. We should end the suspense.’

Alec said diplomatically, ‘tell them that mother and babies are doing fine. We – erm – appreciate all the support people have given us, and we ask for privacy in this time.’

‘That all?’

He nodded. ‘That’s all they need to know.

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It was a full week before they were released from hospital and allowed to go home. Alec and Ellie were under strict instructions to monitor their son and Ellie’s caesarean wound carefully, and to come back the instant they thought something might be wrong.

In his flight after Susan, Alec had done significant damage to his leg. It had swelled immensely, and he had to get around on crutches, but before he left the hospital with Ellie they fitted him with a walking cast to make it easier for him to get around. They warned that if it did not heal properly, it was possible that he would need surgery to correct the damage.

Owing to their injuries, Mark drove them home in the plumber’s van, which was the only vehicle big enough to fit them all. A sea of reporters followed them. Alec requested some officers to fend them off, which they did.

Ellie was apprehensive about going home. After all that had happened with Joe in that house, it was impossible not to be. But when she got out of the van, she was in for a pleasant surprise.

The bars on the windows had been taken down. The ugly security system was gone. The white house had been repainted in myriad colours and the door had been replaced.

‘What on earth…?’ she began.
Daisy and Tom appeared in the doorway. ‘Do you like it?’ they yelled.

‘Did you do all this yourself?’ Ellie asked.

‘Not quite,’ said Daisy, and she stood to one side.

Paul emerged to welcome them. His hands were clasped in front of him and he looked nervous. ‘I'm glad to see you're all safe,’ he said. 'Will you come in?'

He withdrew into the house. Beth and Mark held one baby carrier each. They smiled at their friends and gestured for them to follow Paul inside.

Ellie walked in apprehensively. Her house was the same, with its five handprints by the entrance and its messy, multicoloured charm. But to her astonishment, she found it was filled with gifts. All the items she had been fretting over, things she had wanted but did not have enough money to buy – they were all here. An enormous double pram was the first thing she glimpsed, followed by baby slings, brand new clothes, baby monitors, stacks of nappies and practical things like bottles and baby wipes. Every conceivable item a mother and her new babies would need – they were all piled up waiting for her.

The kitchen had received a makeover. It was the one room in the house they had not repainted after Joe left; because of that, she thought, somewhat superstitiously, that this was the reason he had been able to come back and confront her in that red-walled room. Possibly Daisy or Tom had cottoned on to this line of thinking, for it had been repainted bright orange. The tabletops had been replaced and it was kitted with brand new appliances, all brilliantly and brightly multicoloured, from a red kettle to an orange toaster and a yellow microwave.

But that was not all. When she walked into the living room, she saw that all her dearest friends were there. Nige, Paul, Lucy, Olly, Maggie, Jocelyn, Chloe, Dean and little Lizzie all shouted warmly to her. Beth and Mark came in behind her, carrying the babies, and Tom, Fred and Daisy came after. With the addition of these people, the picture became perfect. They all gave words of encouragement, and they cooed over the little babies. To top it off, they were all sitting on brand new couches, and that broken IKEA cabinet which had been the bane of her existence was replaced with a beautiful old antique, and was decorated with family photos.

‘How - how did you do all this?’ Ellie asked, overwhelmed.

Paul said modestly, ‘I put out the word.’

They made room on the couches and Alec and Ellie sat down. Ellie put a pillow on her lap to protect her wound, and she sought further answers from Paul.

‘Tess informed me that you weren’t happy with the idea of receiving cash handouts,’ he said. ‘So I asked the people of Broadchurch if they had anything, old or new, that they were willing to donate, or if they would be willing to give your house a bit of a makeover.’

‘Consider this your baby shower,’ Lucy announced, raising a glass. ‘We never got to have one, what with that Karen White kicking off, so we’re having one now.’

Ellie’s chin wobbled. She'd never had the chance to publicly celebrate the arrival of her new babies. Her joy had been stifled by lingering guilt over Joe, and by the hostility exhibited towards them in the papers. She'd fretted almost constantly over the fact that she was bringing them into a world where they were unwelcome.

For the first time, she felt assured that her little ones were wanted in this world.
Her eyes welled up and she started crying.

Everyone made concerned noises, but she brushed them off. ‘It’s all right,’ she said, wiping her eyes and smiling for the first time in a long time, ‘I’m crying because I’m happy. Thank you. Thank you all so much.’

‘But we can’t possibly accept all this,’ Alec said. He was thinking of his inheritance. Though he had no intention of ever using that money, the mere fact that he possessed it made him feel guilty for accepting these gifts. ‘There are other people who need these things more than us.’

‘Oh Alec, shut up,’ Ellie said, dabbing her eyes. ‘Let them give us a goddamn pram and a microwave.’

They all laughed at that. ‘I have to thank everyone,’ Ellie said, turning to Paul. ‘I have to – to send out thank you cards. That pram – that’s brand new, and well over a thousand pounds. I know because I tried to go shopping for one.’

‘A lot of the donations were anonymous,’ Paul said. ‘But I can tell you they all come from people in Broadchurch, who know you and love you.’

‘People have been sending us lots of food too!’ Tom said excitedly. He was cramming shortbread into his mouth and spitting crumbs everywhere as he spoke. ‘Lots of homemade stuff. Cakes and biscuits. Jams and conserves. Someone even baked us bread!’

‘There’s more upstairs too,’ Paul said.

Ellie and Alec took the babies to their new room. It had been repainted too. Forgoing the traditional blue and pink binary, Daisy and Tom had chosen to paint one half of the room blue and the other half orange. It was teeming with toys, books and clothes, some secondhand, some new, all donated by concerned Broadchurch residents.

They placed Eustacia in the cot on the orange half of the room and Gabriel in the blue half. Above the cots they hung nautical mobiles, and the twins were soon lulled to sleep by the vague images of boats chasing whales in a merry circle.

They returned to the living room, but Ellie detoured first into the kitchen. She looked contemplatively around, studying its transfigured appearance. She had been dreading returning here, and had feared that Joe’s ghost would linger in the walls, but she did not feel him.

‘I was thinking of moving house,’ she admitted, smoothing her hand across the new marble bench. ‘I’m not so sure we should now.’

‘Where would we go if we did move?’ he asked.

‘I don’t know. Anywhere, really.’

A heady shout of laughter echoed through the living room. Alec looked over at the door and thought of the crowd assembled there.

‘Your life is here,’ he told her. After a moment, he added quietly, ‘and so is mine.’

‘Ellie!’ Daisy said, appearing in the doorway. She was giggling. ‘Fred shoved some lego up his nose.’

They returned to the living room. Fred did indeed have a large green lego block wedged in his
nostril. He seemed to be enjoying the attention he was receiving as a result, and he turned in a circle, soaking up the laughter.

‘Alec,’ Ellie said. ‘This one’s yours.’

Alec sighed. He put his crutches aside and rolled up his sleeves. ‘All right, I’m going in.’

The belated baby shower finished up about an hour later. Mindful that Alec, Ellie and the babies would need their rest, the majority departed, leaving behind their well-wishes. Ellie thanked them profusely as they left, still overwhelmed by their generosity. Mark and Beth stayed behind to clean up and do some little household chores that the injured lovers could not accomplish alone, while Paul took the opportunity to speak to them privately.

‘It’s already been explained to me that you’re not comfortable with accepting money,’ he said, ‘but I would ask you to reconsider. You needn’t be too proud. You’ve been through a lot, and this money comes from people who want to help you.’

Alec refused, saying, ‘we won’t take anyone’s money. These gifts...’ he paused as Ellie unwrapped a pair of hand-knitted baby socks and held them up with delight, 'the gifts are more than enough.'

‘Maggie told me that the two of you have been struggling,’ Paul persisted. ‘And now with both of you unable to work...’

‘We’ll be fine. NHS has covered all the hospital bills, at least,’ said Ellie. ‘I really do appreciate all that you’ve done, but it doesn’t feel right to take money.’

‘Give it to the Latimers instead,’ Alec said. ‘Neither Mark nor Beth have been able to get work recently, and they’ve got Lizzie to look after. They deserve it more than we do.’

Paul took this into consideration and consulted the Latimers. They were hesitant about the proposition.

‘Don’t feel right to live on charity,’ Mark muttered. ‘Besides, people have been calling me up for work again. We’ll be okay.’

‘The money has been donated in good faith,’ Paul said. ‘Mostly by anonymous donors. It will be impossible to return it. But if none of you are comfortable taking it, I would be happy to pass it on to a charity of your choosing.’

Beth had been silent up until this point, but now she looked up. ‘Paul,’ she murmured, ‘It’s been a while since we discussed it – what with everything that’s happened – but I’d still like to set up a charity in Danny’s name.’ Mark made a disgruntled noise but she ignored him. ‘Could we use the money for that?’

‘I don't see why not,’ Paul said. 'What were you thinking of doing?’

Beth said determinedly, 'I want to set up a women's shelter.'

Both Ellie and Paul expressed their surprise.

‘I want to keep other kids safe from people like Joe,’ she explained. 'After everything that happened with Ellie, and with Joe seeking custody – well, I think what we really need is a place that women and kids can stay to escape abusive fathers. And I want to be able to offer them legal advice, too, so
that the mothers can afford a custody battle, and make sure that those men won’t have legal access to their children. Men like Joe – they’re able to twist things so the law is on their side. I want to change that.’ She folded her hands thoughtfully into her lap. ‘I already spoke to Jocelyn about it, and she said she’d be willing to give legal advice, even take a few cases pro bono. She has to retire because of her eyes, but she wants to keep busy, and she thinks this would be a perfect job for her. A way to make a difference. Sharon Bishop even offered to help occasionally too.’

She raised her head. ‘What do you think?’ she asked, a touch anxiously.

Paul could only smile. ‘I think it’s a wonderful idea.’

‘So do I,’ said Alec, who was thinking of his own father.

Ellie hugged her friend. ‘The money’s yours, then, Beth,’ she said. ‘Alec and I - we’re donating it to you.’

‘To Danny’s charity,’ Alec confirmed.

Beth beamed. ‘There’s a property in Broadchurch I’ve got my eye on. I want to buy it, do it up proper, turn it into a shelter. Maybe even build a little playground there, so the kids feel at home.’

‘The sum I’ve collected comes to about twenty thousand pounds,’ Paul cautioned. ‘It won’t be enough to buy a property outright.’

‘But it’s more money than I ever dreamed to have,’ Beth said. ‘If we keep saving – keep bringing in donations – I might get enough for the deposit soon.’

‘Beth,’ Mark murmured. ‘You sure about this?’

‘Yes,’ Beth said confidently, and there was a hard gleam in her eyes that told them she would not rest until Danny’s charity had become a reality. ‘I’m certain. This is what I’m meant to do.’

‘The church will help you,’ Paul promised. ‘I will assist you in any way I can.’

‘So will we,’ Ellie said. Alec nodded, and the matter was settled.

When Paul went to leave, he couldn’t help saying, ‘I should tell you – it’s not just me you have to thank for setting up this little donation drive. Becca has been helping me every step of the way. She set up a drop-off point at her hotel, where people could leave any gifts they wanted you to have. She put out the requests for baby supplies when she heard you didn’t want money. I know that – in the past – she made some mistakes, but…’ he trailed off, intimidated by the look on Beth’s face. ‘People do change,’ he finished quietly.

Beth was stony, but Alec put his hand on Ellie’s shoulder and said gruffly, ‘tell her we appreciate her support.’

‘It don’t make up for what she did,’ Beth said.

‘All right, Beth,’ Mark said.

‘I don’t expect you to forgive her,’ Paul told Beth. ‘But… I hope you try.’

Beth stayed resolutely silent on the subject. Paul decided it was best to leave it there, and he departed with a final series of warm wishes and congratulations to Alec, Ellie, and their babies.

When the others had all gone, Alec discovered one more change to the house.
They had new tenants. Barn swallows were nesting under the eaves of the house. They had built a fine little mud nest for themselves, and the female was huddled over a clutch of eggs. All that was visible of her was the tip of her beak and forked tail. The male took fright when they opened the door, and he fluttered nearby, looking distressed.

A trail of poo was already smearing the wall of the house. Alec frowned at the mess, then up at the nest.

Daisy, who had been taking sailing lessons with Chloe, said thoughtfully, ‘swallows are meant to be good luck. That’s what the master at the sailing club says, anyway. He’s got swallow tattoos on his arm, and he says they’re good luck for sailors because even though they leave every year, they always come back in the Spring. They’re like a promise. A promise to return, and a promise that better times are coming.’

Alec could not even contemplate destroying the nest. He somehow found himself empathising the two little fork-tailed parents.

After a brief family meeting, they agreed to share their home with the swallows. Until all the babies were hatched and grown, they would avoid using the front door and detour around the back door instead, so as not to disturb the little family.

Three days later, they received a call.

A body had been found on the beach.

Alec prepared to leave at once. Ellie insisted on going with him, and nothing, not Alec or her own wounded body, could stop her.

A squad car picked them up and took them to the beach. They were both hampered by their injuries, so the officers escorted them patiently and assisted them whenever they required it. Another group of officers was on the beach, cordoning the site off with police tape and keeping back the small crowd that was straining to see what – or who – they had found.

Alec and Ellie smoothly bypassed the little crowd. The tape was lifted out of their way, and they approached the form that lay in the surf.

The body in question was that of a white male. It lay face-up on the sand and the edges of the tide brushed against it. Some great trauma had caved in the skull, and crabs were crawling all over it, leisurely eating the brains. The clothes were in tatters and green weeds clung to the arms and legs.

Another wave broke and water foamed gently around it, fondling the body and making the weeds dance. It stared blindly upwards; gulls had pecked away the eyes. The face, the fingers, the whole body was bloated and purple, and it reeked.

Alec said softly, ‘water rots the body.’

One of the officers was retching nearby, but Alec and Ellie were impassive. As Joe’s wife, and therefore his next of kin, it fell to Ellie to give the positive identification.

Without a trace of emotion, she said, ‘That’s him. That’s Joe.’

A shout went up. Someone had broken through the barrier and was darting over to the body. Alec was barking to an officer to stop them when he saw who it was.
‘Beth!’ Ellie exclaimed.

‘Is it him?’ Beth demanded. An officer had caught hold of her and she struggled against him. ‘Is that him?’

‘Beth please,’ Ellie begged. ‘Don’t look. You shouldn’t see this.’

‘Yes I should,’ Beth said. ‘I want to see him. I want to make sure he’s dead.’

Undone by empathy, Ellie gave in. The officer released her and she came forward. Her shoes hung from her fingertips. Her bare feet sprang lightly on the sand.

Another wave broke. For a moment the foam obscured the face from view.

Then it receded, revealing a monster.

Beth inhaled sharply, but apart from that she made no sign. Transfixed by the horrific sight, she did not speak for almost a minute.

Then:

‘It’s over,’ she uttered. ‘We can finally live.’

She had seen enough. Alec and Ellie walked her up the beach.

Olly came running up to them.

‘Aunty Ellie!’ he shouted.

‘Not now Oliver,’ Ellie growled. Her stomach was hurting and she was stooped alarmingly to ease the pain. Her teeth were gritted.

‘It’s him, isn’t it? It’s got to be. Can I have the story? Please? Can I?’

‘I’m really appreciating all the emotional support,’ Ellie said sardonically. The she sighed. ‘Oh, fine. Whatever. Get it out there. The whole place will be swarming with reporters soon anyway.’

Olly looked gleeful. Ellie’s strength was fading, so Beth volunteered to get her back home. Alec, meanwhile, decided to stay with the officers. They were a good team, really, honest and hardworking, but there was no-one – besides Ellie, of course – who could manage something as serious as this alone.

He managed to get the body off the beach before the news vans arrived, and it was taken to the morgue to be inspected. It was soon pronounced that Joe had died the instant he’d hit the water, and that the traumas on the body were consistent with everything that Alec had reported about his death.

The finding of the body sparked even more media attention. Olly was the only one who had snapped pictures of the body when it was on the beach, so he was held in high regard for some time. Maggie was equally proud and reproving of his efforts.

While he was at the station, Alec inquired after Susan Wright. She had been remanded in custody, and was waiting for a criminal trial she would not live long enough to see. When she discovered what the media was saying about her and her daughters, she took it hard, and her health worsened dramatically.
Nige was her only visitor. The media attention hurt him just as much as it hurt her, and the shared trauma brought them together. He wanted to know about his sisters, those girls the media was so carelessly splashing across the front page. Owing to the cancer, however, Susan was not always able to speak. Sometimes it fell to Nige to tell the stories. He told her about his childhood and his life in Broadchurch and the parents that had adopted him. Susan found peace in the knowledge that her son had had a happy upbringing.

It was an uneasy peace, but it was a peace nonetheless.

In the Hardy household, things were almost starting to feel normal. It was all nappies and night feeds and squalling children. Daisy, who had entertained rather idealised notions about motherhood, soon became disenchanted. Watching Ellie struggle to the bathroom every morning, swearing at the pains in her stomach, picking at her pants as blood from the post-partum bleeding soaked through, and clutching her painful, rock-hard breasts as milk leaked from the nipples was enough to knock the rose-tinted glasses off anyone.

The worst time was when Gabriel developed a fever. It was a harrowing experience for all of them. They took him to the doctor immediately, and he informed them that they would simply have to let the fever run its course. Ellie sat up with him, gripping the side of his cot and staring at him, desperate to do something, anything, to make him better. They soothed him as much as they were able, but for the most part they had to let him recover on his own.

He suffered, and his parents suffered too. Ellie had almost lost him twice. A third time was almost too much to bear, too cruel.

After two days, the fever broke. Ellie had barely slept the entire time, so once he had improved significantly, she almost collapsed into bed. Her rest was interrupted by nightmares, however, and she ended up back at his bedside, checking on him and Eustacia just to make sure they were okay and that no-one had taken them.

Daisy was quite affected by this picture of maternal suffering.

‘Christ, this is awful,’ she remarked bluntly a few days later as she changed Eustacia’s nappy. Ellie was coaching her, instructing her on how best to do it.

‘Do you mean the nappies, or motherhood as a whole?’

‘Both,’ said Daisy. ‘It’s like a nightmare. All that fretting and worrying. And no-one told me that you bleed out of your hoo-ha for weeks after you’ve given birth!’

‘No-one told me either,’ Ellie said dryly. ‘After I had Tom I was convinced I was dying. The nurse was in hysterics when I told her.’

‘The whole process – pregnancy, birth, childrearing – it’s horrific. Everything hurts, everything smells, you can’t sleep, there’s blood and milk all over the place, and you’re completely stressed the whole time. I can’t imagine going through what you’ve gone through.’

‘Well, I’m an extreme case,’ Ellie reminded her. ‘But yes, it is hard. It’s not for everyone.’ Her eyes softened as she looked at her babies. ‘It is worth it, though.’

‘Even the caesarean?’

‘Of course. You were born this way too, you know. You ask your mum, she’ll tell you what I’ll tell
you. Like everything in life, some scars are worth it.

Daisy powdered Eustacia’s bottom and put her in a clean nappy. ‘I’ve been thinking,’ she said slowly. ‘I… I think I’d like to spend some more time with Mum. Maybe… visit her soon.’

Ellie smiled. ‘Your Dad will be pleased to hear that.’

‘Will he?’

‘Of course. You think he wants you fighting with Tess?’

Daisy paused. ‘I still haven’t forgiven her,’ she cautioned.

‘I know,’ said Ellie indulgently. She too had not forgiven Tess for telling the media about her pregnancy, but she had appreciated Tess’ assistance in the aftermath of the birth, and recognised in that some form of remorse. ‘But whatever mistakes your Mum has made, you’re still her daughter, and I know she loves you very much. I remember what it was like when Tom wasn’t talking to me.’ She paused before she continued in a low voice, ‘I wouldn’t wish that on anyone.’

‘I won’t go yet,’ Daisy said quickly, ‘not while you need me. But once things have calmed down…’

‘Tell your father when he gets home,’ Ellie encouraged. ‘He’ll be glad to hear it.’

* *

Alec was indeed immensely glad to hear that Daisy wanted to spend time with her mother. It seemed the rift between them was finally healing.

He was proving himself a devoted father to the little twins. Hampered by his bad leg and all the pressing needs at work, he was almost constantly overwrought and exhausted, but he nevertheless insisted on taking on as much responsibility as was physically possible. As far as he was concerned, Ellie had done and suffered enough. It was his turn.

So it was that when Gabriel began crying that night, Ellie did not even have a chance to move before he was up and limping to the cot.

Daisy came into the twins’ room a little later, rubbing her eyes. Alec had Gabriel in his arms. He was swaying him back and forth, and he was singing.

Daisy listened, spellbound. It was strange; she recognised the song, and yet she also did not. He was singing in another language.

‘What is that?’ she asked, creeping to his side.

Alec turned to her. When Daisy had been little, she’d thought her father was the strongest, biggest and handsomest man in the world. Standing there in the lamplight, holding Gabriel in his wiry dark arms, his face muffled by a thick beard and his eyes turned to liquid in the dimness, he resembled that perfect figure she had looked up to and so idolised.

‘It’s a lullaby,’ he told her. ‘Gaelic. My mum sang it to me when I was a baby. I sang it to you when you were a wee thing, too.’

‘I recognise it,’ she said softly. ‘Somehow, I remember it. Will you teach it to me?’

He nodded, and he sang. Daisy mouthed along with him, quickly growing in confidence. Soon both of them were singing to the baby in his mother’s tongue.
Alec had been thinking a lot about his mother lately. She had died so long ago, of a heart condition, that his thoughts of her came as impressions now – as the familiar scent of perfume, the soft touch of her woollen jumpers, the warmth of her hugs, the feeling of security she'd given him.

He felt her in his children. Her spirit lived on in them, in Gabriel’s weak heart, in the lullaby that sent them to sleep, in the fact that they were twins, as she had been a twin to his Uncle Bernie.

A heart, a lullaby, and one person split into two. That was what his mother had given him.

And one more thing.

She had been a devout woman, and she had spoken of God to her son as she died. Alec did not believe in God, and he knew it had disappointed her, just as it disappointed Paul Coates. Paul had even claimed to pity him, and demanded to know what he believed in.

It had taken some time, but his mother's words had given him faith after all. She had given him the strength to believe, though not in God.

For one did not need to believe in God to have faith.

Jocelyn called them the next day with good news.

‘Sharon’s done it,’ she told them. ‘Ricky Gillespie’s trial has collapsed. He’s changed his plea back to guilty. They’ve expedited his sentencing, and it will happen Friday.’

With neither of them able to drive, it was Lucy who agreed to take them up to see the sentencing.

‘You didn’t tell me Sandbrook was so bloody far away,’ she complained. As revenge, she blasted ridiculous pop music and sang along with relish, which set a vein throbbing in Alec’s forehead.

They arrived and were greeted by a familiar mob of reporters. But the mannerisms of the press were different now. Although the same lack of respect endured, the hostility they were used to was no longer there. Some reporters even shouted that they were glad to see Ellie up and about. They asked after the health of the children with concern rather than contempt.

It made no difference. Alec and Ellie ignored them stoically as they struggled up the steps to the courthouse.

Ricky’s sentencing was carried out. Thanks to all his plea changes, he received a significantly harsher sentence than he would have if he had kept to his initial guilty plea. The smirk he habitually wore was gone. When the judge pronounced his sentence, there was no hatred or defiance in his eyes, and when they led him away his expression was one of defeat.

Sharon Bishop was present for the sentencing, and she went to see Ellie and Alec afterwards.

‘I heard about everything that happened,’ she said. ‘Jocelyn’s been keeping me informed. How are your kids?’

‘Recovering,’ Ellie said. ‘It was a nasty shock for the older ones, and the babies…’

She broke off and grimaced. ‘Your son,’ Sharon said. ‘The youngest. How is he?’

‘He would’ve been a lot better if it weren’t for Joe. But that goes for all of us, I suppose.’
Her tone was a little frosty. Sharon nodded gloomily.

‘And… what about your son?’ Ellie inquired, fighting down her resentment. ‘Jocelyn told me you won.’

The barrister brightened. ‘He’s out. He’s on parole. He’s been helping out around my office as he gets back into the swing of things. It’s so good to have him back home.’

‘I’m glad,’ Ellie said, and she meant it. ‘We do appreciate…’ she paused and gestured around the courthouse. ‘…with Ricky and everything. It’s a relief to know he’ll be behind bars.’

‘The media’s already reporting it,’ Sharon told them. ‘“The heroes of Broadchurch bag another killer.” That’s the angle they’re going with, or so I hear.’

‘What about Abby?’ Alec asked abruptly.

‘Oh. Abby,’ Sharon said, her nostril curling. ‘Well, she tried to come crawling back after the case fell through, but I refused. She’s gone to work for another firm. Couldn’t get anything but an entry-level position. She took a gamble and she lost; now she has to start climbing the career ladder all over again.’

Alec seemed satisfied. ‘How’s the charity coming along?’ Sharon asked.

‘Beth’s raising as much money as she can, but she still has a long way to go,’ Ellie replied.

‘Mm. Jocelyn's taken quite an interest in it, since she can't practice professionally anymore. This kind of work will be perfect for her. Keep her busy and all that. I couldn't help offering my services too.’

‘Beth mentioned that,’ Ellie admitted.

‘She was none too pleased to hear from me,’ Sharon said. ‘Not that I blame her. But she's accepted my offer nonetheless. I've agreed to take two cases pro bono per year once she gets started.’

She mused silently for a little while. ‘I took Joe's case because I was angry,’ she said. ‘The law had failed my son. He had no chance of getting a fair trial just because of the colour of his skin. I wanted to show the world how flawed the justice system was - that someone like Joe could walk just because he was a white man, and because he had a barrister who said some fancy words. It was my way of getting revenge. I should never have done it, I know that now. The way to fix things is like this - like Beth's doing. To use the law to protect the innocent, as it should.’

Ellie said, ‘if your son has trouble getting work or anything, we can help him out. There are plenty of people in Broadchurch I can recommend him to. I’m a police officer, so I know it can be difficult for people when they’re first released.’

‘Maggie and Jocelyn have offered the same assistance,’ Sharon said. ‘He’s thinking he might start working at the Echo. He likes the idea of starting fresh in the country.’

They went to part, and to the surprise of the women, Alec held out his hand. Sharon shook it hesitantly. His grip was firm.

‘Sharon,’ Alec said. He paused and made an awkward noise at the back of his throat. ‘We appreciate you doing the right thing,’ he concluded.

Ellie also shook her hand, and with that they parted. For Sharon’s role in releasing Joe and allowing him to terrorise them again, they could not forgive her.
But they were trying, and someday Ellie hoped they might.

*

The last person they needed to see was Cate Gillespie. Alec found her in a corner of the courthouse, weeping profusely. She looked up when she saw them.

‘It’s done,’ she said. Her eyes were red-rimmed. ‘I almost can’t believe it’s over.’

‘How are you coping with it all?’ Ellie asked.

‘I’m not. I mean, I’m glad to know they’re all behind bars, but… I keep asking myself… now what? What am I supposed to do? Now that the killers are caught, do I even have a purpose?’

She pressed her head into her hand, muttering that she needed a drink.

Ellie sat down next to her, wincing as she did. ‘I think you should talk to Beth Latimer,’ she advised. ‘She’s raising some money to set up a charity in Danny’s name. A shelter for women and children. She could use some extra help.’

Her advice sent Cate into a thoughtful reverie. They discussed it a little longer, but Ellie could not stay long. She was hurting and tired, and desperately missing her babies. She gave Beth’s number to Cate, wished her all the best, and left.

As they drove back home, Alec looked out at the Sandbrook countryside and noticed that the bluebells were in bloom.

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A few days later, Cate called Beth.

She was surprised at first, but when she heard that Cate wanted to help with the charity, she became enthusiastic. She was receiving help from Ellie, Alec and Paul, but Cate was offering to be her partner, and given her own inexperience, she welcomed the prospect.

Her acceptance was conditional, however. She warned that she would only accept her if she stopped drinking and received counselling for her addiction. Cate agreed to this, and in turn named a condition of her own. She wanted the shelter to be named after Pippa as well as Danny.

Beth accepted, and a bargain was struck.

*

Maggie and Jocelyn turned up on their doorstep unannounced one day. A swallow burst out of the eaves in alarm, and they heard the peeping of chicks coming from above them. Daisy bellowed through the door, ‘go around the back!’

‘What?’ Maggie yelled.

‘I said GO AROUND THE BACK, YOU’RE DISTURBING THE SWALLOWS!’ Daisy roared through the wood.

Mystified, the women did as instructed. They knocked on the back door.

Alec shuffled to answer it with Gabriel in his arms. He squinted at them with some surprise.
'What are you doing here?' he asked.

'We’re sick of waiting for you to come to us,’ Maggie declared, holding up a freshly-baked loaf of banana bread. ‘So as long as you and Ellie are housebound, we decided to come to you.’

‘Erm… the house isn’t really ready for visitors,’ he warned as she bustled past him. ‘Mind the step,’ he muttered to Jocelyn as she followed.

Jocelyn stepped inside and her nose wrinkled as a medley of unpleasant smells assaulted her.

They found Ellie lying on the couch, breastfeeding Eustacia from her reclined position. With her caesarean wound, it was the only position from which she could breastfeed comfortably, since it took all the strain off her middle. She glanced up at them when they walked in. ‘Maggie?’ she said in confusion.

‘Look at you!’ Maggie scolded, gesturing around the darkened living room. Toys and clothes and plates were scattered everywhere. She could not move without treading on something. ‘Marinating in filth.’

She flung open the curtains, letting light into the room. Ellie mewled a complaint and shaded her face with one hand.

‘God, would you look at this place,’ Maggie said. With light in the room, the mess suddenly doubled. ‘Smelling is quite enough for me,’ Jocelyn said delicately.

Eustacia became disturbed at the noise and light, and Ellie had to shift her to get her to feed again. ‘It’s actually a good thing you can’t see,’ Maggie told Jocelyn loudly. ‘Ellie’s got her tits out.’

‘Excuse me, this is my house,’ Ellie objected.

‘Yeah, and a woman has a right to have her knockers out in her own house,’ proclaimed Daisy, entering the room. ‘Hi, Maggie. Is that banana bread?’

‘It is. I thought we could have some afternoon tea together, but now I see banana bread isn’t going to cut it. Why didn’t you tell us you were struggling?’

‘We’re not struggling…’

‘Good grief, is that pubic hair on your ceiling?’ Maggie demanded.

‘Just don’t look up and you’ll be fine. Or down. Or sideways. Just close your eyes,’ Daisy advised.

Tom wandered in. ‘Hi Maggie. Hi Joc – oh, Jesus, Mum,’ he complained, shielding his eyes.

‘Oh stop it. You drank from these too, you know.’

‘Mu-um,’ Tom said.

Ellie, however, was well past the point of caring. She had two babies to feed, and as far as she was concerned modesty could go to hell.

‘All right. Let’s leave the invalids to care for the babies.’ She cut off Alec’s objection to the term “invalid.” ‘Yes, you are invalids because neither of you can bloody well walk, let alone run this household on your own. So, Daisy, Tom, come with me.’
‘What for?’ Tom demanded.

Maggie went into the kitchen and returned with a bucket of cleaning supplies. She threw a bottle of Windex at Tom and he caught it.

‘We’re going to clean this filthy house,’ she said, her eyes gleaming. ‘And Jocelyn, you’re helping too. Just because you can’t see doesn’t mean you can’t wield a duster. Come on!’

Alec and Ellie protested, but they soon realised that Maggie would not be stopped. She went around collecting dirty clothes to put a load of washing on while primly directing the others. They couldn’t help smiling as they watched Maggie wrangle a toddler, two teenagers and a barrister to clean their house. Fred seemed to be the only one who was enthusiastic about it. He ran around with a broom between his legs, pretending he was Harry Potter.

‘Spitshine!’ they heard Tom yell.

‘Spitshine!’ Daisy yelled back.

A third cry went up, that of Maggie informing them that they were not permitted to spitshine the table.

‘I wonder if this is going to do more harm than good,’ Ellie said as she traded Eustacia for Gabriel.

After several hours, the house was fresh and clean and bright. The windows were all open, letting a cool breeze into the house. The dank, fetid stench was gone and the floor was visible once more. Freshly washed clothes fluttered on the washing line.

Not content with this alone, Maggie decided to make them dinner too. She was cooking pasta with the teenagers, while Jocelyn sat with Ellie and Alec.

‘We can’t thank you enough for this,’ Ellie said to Jocelyn. ‘It’s amazing how the mess builds up.’

‘Thank Maggie,’ Jocelyn said. ‘This is all her.’

‘She’s a determined woman,’ Ellie smiled.

‘And I’m very lucky to have her,’ Jocelyn said. ‘As long as we’re helping out with the practical things, how are you going for money?’

‘We’re coping,’ Ellie said. ‘Things are a bit tight, but everyone’s been so generous, giving us food and furniture and baby supplies. We can’t complain.’

Jocelyn was silent for a minute. ‘This may be inappropriate,’ she said, ‘but I have to ask - Alec, when I did your will last year, I noticed that you had a sizeable amount saved up. I remember commenting on it – I said your daughter was a lucky girl to have so much left to her. What happened to the money? Why haven’t you used it?’

Alec clammed up instantly, but after some gentle coaxing from Ellie he sighed and told Jocelyn the reason why.

‘We can’t bring ourselves to touch his money,’ he concluded. ‘As far as I’m concerned, it’s Daisy’s.’

‘I’m sorry,’ Jocelyn said sincerely. ‘I understand why you refuse to touch it. But even so, you could put the money to good use…’
Alec grimaced. His silence was enough to tell Jocelyn just how deep those wounds from childhood ran.

‘I’ve given it to Daisy,’ he said staunchly. ‘Let her do some good with it, once she’s old enough.’

‘I feel sort of guilty for accepting these gifts when we have that money stashed away,’ Ellie admitted, sweeping her hand around the newly furnished room. ‘But… I don’t know, I guess I’d prefer to raise my babies with the help of my community than by using the money of someone like Joe.’

Alec flinched. Ellie and Jocelyn shifted the topic of conversation, and spoke loudly of idle matters instead.

Maggie finished cooking and served up great big dishes of pasta to them all. She’d made far too much, so Tom and Daisy competed to see who could eat the most. The game ended with Daisy groaning and dry-heaving into the sink while Tom finished his sixth helping, put the empty pasta bowl on his head and strutted around the kitchen, crowing his victory. While they were distracted, Fred smeared sauce all over his face, his clothes, and part of the wall, before he sat back and grinned proudly at his efforts.

Though robbed of mobility, Ellie still had her Mum Voice and she put it to good use. The three were cowed into behaving themselves, and Tom and Daisy abashedly cleaned up the mess they'd made. Ellie tried to take Fred to get cleaned up, but with her caesarean wound she was incapable of lifting anything heavier than Eustacia. Alec, with his bad leg, was also incapacitated; it fell to the ineffable Maggie to carry him upstairs and wipe him down.

‘She’s a godsend,’ Ellie sighed. Tom and Daisy were flicking food at each other. She shot them a look and they stopped and slunk away to wash the dishes. Ellie sighed and said to Jocelyn, ‘still sure you want all of us to come to your house for dinner?’

Undeterred, Jocelyn said yes.

The babies woke up a little later, to Maggie’s delight. She had been cleaning when they were awake, and they had fallen asleep before she’d found the time to coo over them. She was especially taken with little Gabriel, and she held him confidently, looking utterly rapt with him. Jocelyn held Eustacia. She was hesitant and eager at the same time.

‘Ah! What a pair they are,’ Maggie said. ‘To think that these two came out of all that horror.’

Ellie smiled wanly, her eyes fixed on Gabriel. His near kidnapping, and his innate fragility, made her possessive of him. Even though she trusted Maggie, she could not stop herself from twitching slightly when Maggie made too sudden a movement.

‘They have a peculiar smell, don’t they?’ Jocelyn murmured. She raised Eustacia to her nose and breathed in. ‘Almost indescribable. Pleasant, though.’

She touched Eustacia's face, very gently. Her wizened fingers traced the contours of her cheek and brows. Eustacia let out a complaint, and the sound snatched Ellie’s attention from Gabriel. She fought down her maternal instincts and forced herself to relax.

‘So soft,’ Jocelyn murmured. She brushed the baby’s wispy crown of dark hair.

Eustacia’s pink hand opened and shut like an undulating sea anemone. Jocelyn touched those five little fronds and the baby grasped her finger firmly.

Observing them, Alec said, ‘Ellie and I – our parents are all dead.’ He paused and grimaced, wishing
he knew how to express himself better. ‘Gabriel and Eustacia… they don’t have grandparents. And –
erm, well… they’re going to need some older role models in their life.’

He fumbled and groped to find some way to ask his question with tact and grace. He came up
empty-handed, and blurted, ‘would you be their grandparents?’

‘I object very strongly to the notion that I am old,’ Maggie said sternly. Then a smile split her
features. ‘But I do like the idea of spoiling these babies rotten. What do you think, Jocelyn?
Honorary grandmas?’

Jocelyn looked startled. She prevaricated. ‘I don’t think – I couldn’t possibly – I’m not…’

Eustacia gripped her finger a little more tightly. She looked down at the child and saw nothing but
black holes.

‘I don’t know if I can,’ she said.

Maggie reached over and touched her lover’s hand. ‘You can,’ she said, squeezing.

Jocelyn was contemplative. ‘Then yes,’ she said. ‘But let them call me Aunty Jocelyn. I think I’d be
more comfortable with that.’

Mentally kicking himself for being so forward, Alec said, ‘yes. Aunty. That’s much more
appropriate.’

Maggie and Jocelyn departed a little later. Alec and Ellie struggled to the back door to see them off.
Ellie kissed Maggie affectionately on the cheek and even managed to land one on Jocelyn’s cheek
too. Maggie, meanwhile, stood on tiptoes and got Alec square on his scratchy beard. He looked
thoroughly alarmed and grunted. Jocelyn and Alec faced off for a little bit. A tacit understanding
passed between them, and they wordlessly agreed that although they liked each other, physical
displays of affection were unnecessary.

‘We can’t thank you enough Maggie,’ Ellie said for the fifth time. ‘You’re a godsend.’

‘You needn’t be too proud to ask for help,’ Maggie reminded them. ‘With the two of you laid up,
and still with five kids to look after, there’s no shame in asking for help with silly household things.’

Something flickered across Alec’s countenance. He wondered if he should tell Maggie that it wasn’t
pride that stopped him from asking for help, but an in-built, automatic assumption that no help would
come if he asked.

He had been alone for so long he had almost forgotten what it was like to have a family, or be part of
a community.

He took Maggie’s hand, shook it, and thanked her sincerely, from the bottom of his heart.

Alec and Ellie had just kissed Fred goodnight when Daisy glided into their bedroom, looking
troubled.

‘You all right, darlin’?’ Alec asked.

‘I need to talk to you about something,’ Daisy said bluntly. ‘Earlier today, I overheard you talking to
Jocelyn. I heard everything you said about Granddad.’
Alec’s face fell and Ellie’s breath hissed through her teeth.

‘Why didn’t you tell me that’s where the money came from? Why didn’t you tell me Granddad used to hit you and Grandma?’

‘Because I didn’t want you to know,’ Alec answered honestly.

Daisy marched across the room and hugged him hard. He returned it.

‘I don’t want his money,’ she said, sniffing. ‘You’re not foisting that bastard’s money on me. He used to hurt you and my Grandma, so bad that you can’t even bring yourself to use his money when you’re nearly bankrupt, and you want me to take it? No. Never.’

Alec pulled gently away. ‘I might not want his money,’ he said, ‘but I do want you to have it. You could do a lot of good with it.’

Vehemently, she shook her head. ‘No. I don’t want his money. I don’t need it.’

‘With it, you could go to any university you want…’

‘I don’t want to go to university!’ she cried. ‘You’ve been saying that since I was a kid, but you never even bothered to ask me if that’s what I want!’ She steadied herself and said, ‘Maggie offered me a proper job at the Echo today.’

Alec was dismayed. ‘What kind of job?’

‘Olly’s leaving the Echo. Thanks to all those stories he did about Joe and you guys, getting the truth out there and all, the Herald hired him. Maggie wants me to take his place.’ She ignored her father’s complaint. ‘We were cleaning my room and she found my essay on Tess of the d’Urbervilles. She read it. Said I was a good writer, and that with my personality and my photography skills, I was just what she was looking for in a junior.’

Her cheeks glowed apple-pink in the lamplight, and she smiled proudly. ‘Congratulations, Daisy,’ Ellie said. ‘That’s wonderful news!’

Alec could not muster any enthusiasm for the prospect. ‘A journalist? Daisy – how can you be a journalist after everything that’s happened? After what the press did to us? To your siblings?’

‘But that’s why I should become a journalist!’ Daisy protested. ‘Someone has to set things right. I’m going to be like Maggie. I’ll only ever tell the truth, and I’ll stand up for people like you and tear down people like Joe!’

Her eyes blazed with determination. ‘But what about school?’ Alec went on. ‘You’ve still got a year left. Don’t tell me you’re dropping out.’

‘No, I’m gonna finish,’ Daisy assured him. ‘Maggie thinks that’ll be best. But I’ll work part-time at the Echo in the meantime, and she’ll train me. If all goes well, I’ll have a full-time job waiting for me once I’ve graduated.’

She looked so pleased that Alec had to give in. ‘All right,’ he sighed. ‘All right, darlin’, if you think that’s right, then I’m happy for you. I’ll give my consent.’

‘Good, because I’ve already accepted.’ Daisy flashed him a cheeky grin.

‘Come here,’ Alec said with a wry shake of his head, and she hugged him a second time.
‘So Granddad can take his money and go to hell,’ Daisy concluded when she emerged from his arms. ‘I don’t need him.’

Alec’s lips twitched upwards. He radiated pride and adoration from every pore. ‘What should we do with it, then? It’s your money, so it’s up to you.’

She considered it. ‘Dunno. Keep it for Gabe and Stace?’

‘They might not want it either.’

From the bed, Ellie murmured, ‘I think I have an idea.’

*

Cate Gillespie and Beth Latimer, two mothers of murdered children, sat on the couch opposite Alec and Ellie. Cate was recovering from her alcohol addiction, and true to her promise she had not touched a drop in three weeks. She looked gaunt and shaky as a result, but there was light in her eyes that had not been there before. It spoke of purpose, of tasks to finish, of promises to keep.

She had a reason to live.

‘The fundraising’s going well,’ Cate told them. ‘Thanks to all the attention the heroes of Broadchurch are getting, we’ve been receiving donations from all over the UK. But as media interest dies off, so will the donations. We’re already getting far less that we did a week ago.’

‘Cate sold her houses in Sandbrook and added the proceeds to the fund,’ Beth added when she perceived Cate would not tell them herself. ‘But… because of everything that happened there, people weren’t really willing to buy. She ended up selling them for far less than they’re worth. Then she had to buy herself a new place, a little two bedroom here in Broadchurch.’

‘I ended up contributing far less than I’d hoped to,’ Cate said. ‘We’re still years away from our goal.’

Alec glanced at Ellie before he silently pulled out a cheque from his pocket. He unfolded it and slid it across the table.

‘What’s this?’ Beth asked. She picked it up and looked at it. Her eyes widened and she clapped a hand over her mouth.

Cate peered over her shoulder. Her eyes bulged.

‘This can’t be real,’ Beth said faintly.

Alec said, ‘it’s real.’

‘But -’ Cate goggled at the two of them. ‘How?’

In a very low voice, Alec related how he had come by the money.

‘No,’ Beth said. She folded up the cheque and slid it back across the table. ‘No, I’m not taking that. Ellie – it’s so much money! You could do anything with it! You could buy yourself a new house with it, a new car… think what it would mean for the babies! For all of you!’

Ellie looked at Alec, then around her messy little living room, decorated with Daisy’s photos and Fred’s drawings and all the gifts the people of Broadchurch had given them. She smiled.

‘We have everything we need.’
Beth was crying. ‘We can’t. It’s so much. It’s so much…’

‘Please. We want you to take it,’ Alec persisted.

Beth saw nothing but sincerity in his eyes. ‘You’re sure?’ she asked, her breath hitching.

He replied, ‘I can think of no better use for that man’s money than to make sure other women and kids are safe from people like him.’

Beth broke down. She picked up the cheque and looked at it again. ‘Thank you,’ she wept. ‘Thank you. Thank you both so much…’

Cate was still incredulous. ‘With this money,’ she said slowly. ‘Our dream becomes a reality. We can buy that old property near the harbour. We can do it up. This is real. Beth – we can actually do it!’

Their dream had hovered so far in the future that it had almost seemed unreal. It had hovered elusively, unattainably. But with this cheque, it was wrenched into the present.

‘There’s just one condition,’ Alec warned. His words stifled their elation and they regarded him somberly, waiting to hear the catch. He leaned forward and said, ‘do not tell anyone where the money came from. List the donor as anonymous. If people hear Ellie and I gave it to you, they’ll be all over it, spreading the story around, for good or ill. And there’s only two names I want people to be concentrating on.’

Those names hung, unspoken, in the air, hovering around him as much as they hovered around the mothers before him.

\textit{Danny.}

\textit{Pippa.}

Both Cate and Beth were astonished when they heard these terms. Beth leaned forward. She grasped Alec’s hand and looked warmly at him, tears still sparkling in her eyes.

‘You’re a good man, Alec.’

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Daisy kicked the door down, clutching a sheet of paper in her hand. ‘Guess who failed!’ she shouted, brandishing the paper.

‘I guess Daisy!’ Tom shouted back.

‘You guessed right!’

She gave Tom an enthusiastic high-five and flopped down on the couch where Alec and Ellie were fussing with Gabriel. She shoved the paper under Alec’s nose and he took it with surprise. Reaching for his glasses, he put them on and perused it.

It was Daisy’s list of results. She had performed dismally in history and science, rather well in English and art, and roundly failed maths.

Ellie peered over Alec’s shoulder. ‘At least you did well in art.’

‘And English,’ Alec said. ‘You’ve never performed so well in it.’
‘Thanks to Thomas Hardy. Shame about the maths, but I sort of expected it,’ Daisy said.

‘Well, now that we know Daisy’s failed, it seems like a good time to show you my results,’ Tom said. He ran upstairs and returned with a crumpled sheet.

‘Tom!’ Ellie said in exasperation. ‘You hid this from us?’

Tom’s results were even worse than Daisy’s. He had performed exceptionally in P.E., but awfully in every other subject, and had failed English and history.

‘I suppose it’s to be expected, what with everything’s that’s gone on,’ Ellie sighed. She looked at Alec. ‘Can’t we get them special consideration?’

Alec removed his glasses and rubbed his eyes. ‘We should probably try. God, Tess is going to murder me when she finds out.’

‘Who cares?’ Daisy said. ‘I’ve got my job at the Echo. It’s not like it matters.’

Tom and Daisy seemed singularly unperturbed by their failures, and neither Alec nor Ellie had the heart to discipline them. They went instead to the school board and pleaded for leniency. Eventually, the failures were upgraded to passes, and their near-failures translated to below average.

‘We’re below average! We’re below average!’ Tom and Daisy chanted.

Alec sighed.

Having recovered sufficiently from his injuries, and mindful of their money woes, Alec returned to work full time. Ellie was supportive, but privately frustrated at being left home alone with the children. She chafed to get out more.

Alec returned home after his first full day. He kissed all five of his darlings and fistbumped Tom before he collapsed into the chair with a thud and massaged his stiff leg.

‘How was it?’ Ellie asked.

‘Erm. Good,’ Alec said. ‘Everyone was nice to me, which was weird. Only two people called me shitface.’

‘Only two! That’s a new low,’ Ellie teased.

‘They were all asking about you,’ Alec went on. ‘They all want to know how you are, and how the babies are, and when you’re coming back. When are you coming back?’ he added.

The question touched a nerve in Ellie and she huffed. ‘That’ll depend on this stupid thing,’ she said, indicating her midriff.

He looked at her earnestly. ‘It wasn’t the same without my DS,’ he said. He picked up Eustacia and rubbed his nose against hers. The baby let out a grumpy burble. ‘I couldn’t believe how much I missed my darlings, too. I could hardly concentrate on the tractor thefts for thinking about them.’

Eustacia reached out and touched his whiskery cheek. She sobbed softly at how scratchy it was and withdrew her hand. Then it crept back up and she touched the stubble again. ‘My little jellybean,’ he smiled, kissing her. He leaned over and stroked Gabriel’s forehead. ‘My angel.’
Gabriel kicked his little legs.

It was difficult to strike a balance between Ellie’s desire to work again and Alec’s desire to stay home more, but in the end, they found it.

‘Since you can’t come to work,’ Alec said one afternoon not long after, ‘work can come to you.’ He placed a box full of evidence on the table. ‘We’re gonna need a wall.’

In no time the living room wall was converted into an evidence wall and Alec and Ellie were furiously working away on a case. It was to do with another spate of drug-related crimes. Alec suspected that some new high-level dealers may have moved back into the area.

Alec wore a baby sling in which Eustacia slept quietly. Ellie, meanwhile, had the smaller Gabriel strapped to her chest. With the children close to them and their arms free, they paced back and forth around the living room, or sat on the arms of the couches, looking over the pieces of evidence and rapidly discussing different possibilities.

Alec uncapped a highlighter and leaned over Ellie to circle something. She pointed at another piece of evidence and commented on it, frowning. Eustacia woke up and started crying. Alec hushed her quietly and she settled back down.

‘I think we can cross off Ross and Newman,’ Ellie said, striking through two of the suspects. ‘But Herman deserves a closer investigation.’ She held his photo in her hand and she looked at the overcrowded wall for a moment before pinning it in place. ‘You should get some people out to follow him.’

Alec nodded. ‘I think I’ll need to question Jones again, too. I feel like there’s something he’s not telling me.’

‘Don’t forget, Santi knows Jones,’ Ellie pointed out.

‘Does he?’

‘Oh yeah. I’ve seen them talking loads of times. Usually near the harbour.’

‘Did it look suspicious?’

‘They just looked like old friends. But if they’re both embroiled in this, it’s suspicious.’

Forgetting that the highlighter was uncapped, he tapped it against his chin. A bright yellow line smeared across him. ‘I’ll follow it up,’ he said seriously as Ellie laughed and licked her thumb to wipe away the yellow streak.

Fred woke up from his afternoon nap and entered the room, announcing that he was hungry. Alec went to tend to him, while Ellie had to change Gabriel’s nappy.

Later that night, once the twins had been put down and all was quiet, Ellie turned to Alec and kissed him softly.

The kiss became a little more passionate. Alec held her tightly and she slipped a hand up his shirt.

‘You smell like custard and baby farts,’ she told him, wrinkling her nose.

‘You smell like milk and lavender,’ Alec said generously, rubbing his nose against hers.

She smiled and kissed him again. ‘Wanna mess around?’
'Are you feeling up to it?'

'Let's find out.'

She dragged him into the bedroom and plucked at his shirt. He pulled it off, revealing his hard abdomen. He gently pushed her down onto the bed and sucked her neck.

Just as she was about to put her hand down his trousers, they heard a cry. Then another.

The twins were awake.

Ellie sighed. 'I suppose we'll try again later.'

A third cry went up, that of Tom yelling at them to please get the babies. A fourth cry followed, that of Fred who had been woken up and who was very, very cranky.

They shuffled off to deal with the situation. The babies were soothed and Fred was coaxed back to bed. Tom yelled a "thank you" when all was quiet.

Ellie and Alec stood in the twins' bedroom, holding one baby each. Gabriel had fallen back to sleep, but Eustacia was fussing in Ellie's arms, and she started wailing again. Ellie patted her and shushed her, kissing her gently.

When her cries finally subsided to soft burbles, Ellie looked up at her lover, exhaustion stamped on her countenance. 'Alec?' she said.

'Yes, love?'

Ellie paused. She approached him and looked hard into his eyes. Leaning forward, she said:

'Please get a vasectomy.'

---

Three months to the day after that fateful night in spring, Ellie walked hand in hand with Alec down the High Street of Broadchurch for the first time.

Alec wore black and Ellie wore orange, as they always did. Their children were with them. Tom and Daisy were squabbling over who would push Gabriel and Eustacia in the large double pram. They eventually compromised by taking one handle each. Fred, meanwhile, clung to Alec’s other hand, and he was singing to himself as he jumped into every puddle he could reach. Alec sighed as water splashed his trousers. His exasperated expression amused Ellie and she seemed to be directing them so that Fred was placed in the path of as many puddles as possible.

If Alec was aware of her scheme, he did not resist it.

Owing to their lingering injuries, they moved at a slow, meandering pace. It would take some time for Ellie to recover fully, that much was plain, but despite the scars and the harrowed lines on her face and the fears and traumas that haunted her, in this moment she glowed, as much from her bright orange coat as from the light within her.

As for Alec, he did not smile, for even now he did not smile readily, but there was something in the curve of his mouth that betrayed his contentment, and something in his eyes when they rested on the six characters around him that showed just how tenderly he loved Ellie and the children. He seemed immensely proud of her companionship, and silently boastful of how affectionately she clung to him.
and how many children she’d given him.

The little family passed down the street. Whispers followed them, as they always did, but they held no malice now, and Ellie did not fear them.

*Oh look, Ellie’s up and about again.*

*Those must be the babies! Thank goodness they’re all right.*

*Such a shame, what happened… but at least they’re happy now.*

*#

‘The most private, secret, plainest wedding that it is possible to have.’"

Those were Ellie’s words to Alec one evening, and he meditated for some time on how best to fulfill her wishes.

In the end, he went to Jocelyn. She officiated their marriage at her grand house overlooking the sea, and together with Maggie signed the register as witnesses.

In place of a vow, Alec simply slipped his ring over Ellie’s finger, the same ring Tess had dropped onto his desk the day after Pippa’s heart-shaped pendant was stolen from her car. ‘This was my mother’s,’ he told her. ‘The last thing she ever said to me was “God will put you in the right place, even if you don’t know it at the time.”’ He held Ellie’s hand and smoothed his thumb over the gold band. ‘I finally understand what she meant.’

He kissed her, and that was that; their two selves together at last, with nothing to divide them, pledged to bear every chance and circumstance that should come their way as one person.

Afterwards they sat outside eating the chocolate wedding cake Maggie had baked for them. The teenagers bickered and shouted, Fred ran amok, and Gabriel and Eustacia sat placidly in their parents’ arms as they took in the shapes of the jagged cliffs and watched the sun sink into ocean for the first time.

*#

To Alec’s surprise, Ellie took his name.

He had assumed she would keep her own, since it was difficult for him to think of her as anything but Ellie Miller. But then, he had also assumed Miller was her maiden name.

This was not the case.

‘Miller was his name,’ she said, curiously emotionless.

Alec was disturbed. Tess had changed back to her maiden name within hours of announcing her intention to divorce him. He couldn’t understand why Ellie hadn’t done the same.

‘Why?’ was all he could say.

She shrugged nonchalantly. ‘I had two Miller boys.’

He continued to stare and her façade quickly crumbled. ‘I suppose it was like penance,’ she sighed. ‘I was going to change it back. But then he didn’t… I couldn’t divorce him. So I decided to keep it as a reminder that I’d chosen him. That it was my fault.’ She added bitterly, ‘till death us do part.’
It was plain she was fully aware of how perverse this was, so Alec felt no need to comment. Shaking her head, she gripped the gold band on her ring finger and turned it in a slow circle. A smile crept over her face. ‘I think I’ll like being a Hardy. It’s a good name.’

*Tess of the d’Urbervilles* sat nearby on the table. The misnamed Alec glanced at it before asking, ‘and Tom and Fred?’

‘Well. They’re your sons. They should have your name, too.’

Alec murmured, ‘we’ll ask Tom.’

Tom was unperturbed. He agreed to the change with little resistance, and with that a Thomas Hardy of their very own was born.

Daisy was endlessly amused by this happy accident.

* Broadchurch tradition decreed that new children should be taken to the beach to receive a baptism of sorts from the salt sea. Ellie, like her parents and grandparents before her, had received this little blessing from the ocean, and she in turn had taken Tom and Fred to the water’s edge when they were babies.

One summer’s day, when Ellie was finally healed enough, it was Gabriel and Eustacia's turn.

The cliffs loomed behind them like old friends with weathered faces. The sun beat down and the wind blew through their hair, cool and crisp from long nights spent fondling the waves. Alec breathed in that distinctive, briny, Broadchurch air and closed his eyes.

Tom and Daisy were shrieking with excitement. They ran into the waves immediately and splashed and played. Fred joined them, and his elder siblings kept a close eye on him.

Ellie and Alec set up the towels. With a touch of trepidation, Ellie removed her clothes, revealing her two-piece bathing suit. Her caesarean scar was a vivid red, but it had healed, and like all scars it would fade.

Alec wore his own bathers and prepared to enter the water. He held Eustacia in his arms, while Ellie held Gabriel. Clutching the children, they waded into the surging waves up to their knees.

Alec looked over at Ellie for guidance. She dipped one hand into the water and smoothed her thumb over Gabriel’s forehead, careful to avoid his eyes. Alec dipped his own hand in the water and swiped his thumb across Eustacia’s forehead. She was furious at the gesture, and she wailed.

‘It’s good luck,’ Ellie explained mildly. ‘It’s meant to protect them from drowning.’

The waves foamed around him, somehow gentle, and he looked curiously at his children, the descendants of wreckers and smugglers, little Broadchurch natives in whom his Scottish ancestry was a mere footnote.

A shout went up behind them. Mark, Beth, Chloe and Lizzie had arrived.

‘I see you’ve given them the baptism!’ Mark announced happily. Lizzie was bouncing energetically in his arms, excited by the sight of the ocean. Daisy yelled a greeting to Chloe, which she returned.

‘Hello pretty girl!’ Beth cooed at Eustacia. Alec carefully handed her over and Beth smiled
delightedly at her.

‘Hey Tom,’ Daisy said cheekily when she saw Alec was empty-handed. ‘What do you say we give Dad a baptism too?’

And with that the two teenagers tackled Alec and sent him splashing into the surf. He rose dripping from the ocean and growled after his daughter. She hooted and ran away while he chased her. Droplets sprayed and spangled in the air, refracting the sunlight.

Alec had no fear of the water now.

Daisy and Tom ran and hid behind Ellie, laughing. He wiped the water from his eyes and blinked at the people assembled before him. Mark, Beth, Chloe, Lizzie, Ellie, Tom, Daisy, Fred, Gabriel and Eustacia - they were all looking at him, and smiling, framed by the water and the great cliffs behind them.

His five children. His wife. His friends.

Alec thought of everything he had lost, and he wondered if all that he had suffered and all that had been taken from him had been to give him this.

He walked over in his uneven gait and joined them to complete the picture. As the water surged and foamed around them in an endless, cascading lace of salt, Alec Hardy smiled.

Chapter End Notes

This is pretty much the end of the story. All that's left is the epilogue, which will wrap up a few loose threads. Thank you so much for reading, and a special thank you to everyone who commented or shot me a message about this story on tumblr. I treasure every response I get, and I really do value your feedback. I hope you enjoyed it!
‘DI Hardy?’ Nish said, knocking gently.

‘Come in,’ a voice replied.

Nish opened the door. ‘Your husband’s here to see you, ma’am,’ she said.

Ellie looked up from her place at the desk. The frown on her face disappeared. ‘Send him in.’

Nish departed and Alec entered the room leading two dubious little characters behind him. He was holding Eustacia’s hand and she was holding Gabriel’s, pulling her easily distracted brother along with some seriousness. Alec’s gait was still uneven; he had never fully recovered all his mobility. Since he continued to refuse surgery, the doctor suspected he would walk with a slight limp his whole life.

‘Hello darlings,’ Ellie said. She rose from her desk and the toddlers ran over to her. ‘Have you had a good day?’

‘No,’ Eustacia replied, which was her favourite word.

Gabriel, as was his wont, said nothing, but he smiled widely at his mother.

She knelt and kissed them fondly. They were as alike as peas in a pod, with the same unruly, curly brown hair and the same brown eyes. They were distinguished most obviously by Gabriel’s birthmark, that red cloud on his left cheek, and also by the subtler differences in their general bearing and aspect. Gabriel was all softness and silence and pliability; Eustacia was all hard angles, loud noises and stubbornness. She had the beginnings of the crooked Hardy nose, and Ellie suspected that someday she would inherit her father’s height too.

Ellie picked up Gabriel. As he clasped her neck affectionately, Eustacia wrapped herself around Ellie’s leg.

‘We’re about to go pick up Fred,’ Alec told her, ruffling Gabe’s hair. ‘Fancy bunking off and coming with us?’

It had been a rather lazy day. The only case Ellie had had was that of a doddering old man telling them his wife had been kidnapped. As it turned out, she’d been at the library. With nothing chaining her to the desk, Ellie agreed.

While Ellie cleaned up her desk, Alec quickly tended to some paperwork and administrative duties. The twins, never ones to wait patiently, ran around the station in the meantime. They knew this place almost as well as they knew their own house, and the officers, glad of any interruption to monotonous paperwork, loved seeing them. Eustacia, a rather brash, loud child, was the object of most of their affections; Gabriel was a little more recluse and wary, though he was awfully fond of Nish, and she of him.

Once they’d stolen as many sweets from the officers as they could, the kids started bouncing energetically on the couch in Ellie’s office. Satisfied that everything was in order, she pulled on her offensive orange coat, took the twins by the hand and led them out.

‘Ready?’ she asked Alec.
Alec finished sending an email and filed the last of the papers on his desk. ‘Ready,’ he replied.

Ellie said goodbye to her officers. They dutifully said their goodbyes, and waved to the children as well.

‘Bye-bye Gabe! Bye-bye Stace!’ they cooed.

‘Bye!’ said Eustacia, waving. ‘Bye-bye!’

Gabriel followed his sister’s lead and waved slowly. Nish blew him a kiss.

Ellie tugged gently on Eustacia’s hand. ‘Come on,’ she said. ‘It’s time to pick up your brother from infants’.

‘Fred!’ Eustacia supplied.

‘That’s right!’ Ellie nodded. They went outside, Alec leading the way. ‘Gabe, angel, can you say “Fred” too?’

But Gabriel was too absorbed in avoiding the cracks in the sidewalk to hear her. It was a quirk of his that he refused to step on cracks or lines in the ground when he walked. If he ever encountered a room where it was impossible to take a step without treading on a line, he would consider it impassable and sit there helplessly until his father came to retrieve him.

Ellie looked up at Alec. He shrugged back. Gabriel’s muteness was a common source of tension between them. They had taken him to many doctors, but each one informed them that there was nothing wrong with him either physically or mentally. Some children simply took longer than others to speak, or chose not to speak.

Not that muteness was an impediment to Gabriel. His sister understood him implicitly; words seemed to be unnecessary as a means of communication between the two of them, and if vocalisation were ever required, she could speak for him.

They got to the car. It was a new acquisition that they had put all their savings towards, an enormous black seven-seater monstrosity that was affectionately known as “the Beast” in the Hardy household. After some struggling, Ellie and Alec strapped Gabriel and Eustacia into their booster seats and Ellie got behind the wheel.

They picked up Fred from infants’ school first. He swaggered to the car with a roguish grin, his hands still covered in paint from an exercise in clandestine fingerpainting. According to his furious teacher, he had absconded from storytime, broken into the paint supplies, and then proceeded to paint one of the desks while no-one was looking.

Ellie personally thought the desk looked rather good, but the teacher began demanding that she pay to have it cleaned. This started an argument as Ellie called her negligent for letting Fred sneak off unsupervised. Alec attempted to keep the peace, but his efforts were in vain. The shouting escalated until, with a double-barreled threat to arrest her and get her lawyer involved, Ellie persuaded the teacher to back down.

‘Unbelievable,’ Ellie muttered as she loaded Fred into the car. He sat in the middle, in between Gabriel and Eustacia, and his sister patted his face affectionately when she saw him.

Suffused with embarrassment, Alec rubbed his eyes and sighed.

‘The desk was boring,’ was Fred’s justification. ‘I made it look nice.’
‘I thought it looked nice too,’ Ellie said primly.

‘El! Don’t encourage him.’

But Ellie’s vendetta against the teacher prevented her from seeing Fred’s fault in all this. She hunched over the steering wheel, her knuckles white and her expression thunderous. It fell to Alec to calmly explain that although, yes, the desk did look nicer painted, it was wrong to paint someone else’s property without their permission.

Fred had stopped paying attention by this point. He was showing Eustacia the really cool rock he had found, and she exclaimed happily. Gabriel touched Fred’s arm to communicate he wanted to see it too, and Fred showed it to him.

The next person to pick up was Tom. He usually walked home, but since school was about to let out, Ellie decided to get him anyway. He sauntered out of the front gate, kicking his football in front of him. He was the biggest boy in his grade, a hulking Russian prisoner of a fifteen year old whose size belied the fact that his voice still cracked and that he was as much a toxic cocktail of hormones and anxiety as any other teenager. He was very close to passing Alec in height, and Ellie was encouraging in this respect. Since Tom had grown taller than herself when he was twelve, she was determined that he should pass Alec before he turned sixteen, and she overfed him for this express purpose.

Tom clambered in the very back, his long legs folded awkwardly against the seat.

‘Hi Mum, hi Dad,’ he said cheerfully. He leaned over the seat and ruffled Gabe’s hair, who jumped and looked startled.

Ellie told Alec to call Daisy at the Echo to check whether she had finished work and whether she needed a ride. Alec did so, and Daisy said yes.

‘Is Maggie in there?’ Ellie asked hopefully as Daisy opened the car door. Alec was promptly kicked out of the front passenger seat and forced into the back with Tom; it was an unwritten law that Daisy outranked her father when it came to seating arrangements, and similarly that whenever she rode in the Beast, she would have sole and unquestioned mastery over the radio.

‘Nah, she’s off doing an interview,’ Daisy said, hopping in next to Ellie. ‘I just finished my last article, so I’m good to go.’ She turned around and grinned at the kids in the back seat. ‘Hey munchkins!’ she said. She grabbed at their feet and the twins giggled. ‘Hey beanies! Have you had a good day?’

‘No,’ said Eustacia, but she said it warmly.

‘Oh, that’s no good! Did you get stuck with Mr Stinky again?’ Daisy said, wrinkling her nose. ‘That weird, tall sweaty guy? No wonder you had a bad day!’

Stuck up the very back with Tom, his knees almost folded to his chest, Alec made an exasperated noise while the twins laughed.

To the consternation of all, Ellie decided she needed to visit the supermarket on the way home. Since Broadchurch only had one supermarket, it was the town’s central hub, and as a result it was impossible to go there without running into someone you knew.

‘So none of you want to come in with me?’ Ellie asked once she'd parked.

‘You always insist on talking to everyone,’ Daisy groaned. ‘If I have to hear about Eunice’s bowel
Tom elected to stay behind. Frightened by the prospect of seeing someone he had to say hello to, Alec stayed put too. He never went to the supermarket, either alone or with Ellie, if he could help it. The effort of interacting with so many people at once and having to make polite chit-chat when he was just trying to buy bread always put him in a foul mood.

‘All right then. I’m just going to get a loaf and some milk. You want anything while I’m in there?’

‘Ice cream,’ said Tom.

‘Crisps!’ said Fred simultaneously.

‘Only if you’re good,’ Ellie cautioned. ‘I’ll be five minutes.’

She entrusted the keys to Alec and slammed the door shut.

‘So how long do you think she’s really going to be?’ Daisy asked after a moment’s silence.

‘Last time it was an hour and that was just to get detergent,’ Alec remarked. He exited the Beast and climbed into the driver’s seat. ‘It was a hot day too. She left me in here all alone.’ He wound down all four windows. ‘Still better than going in, though. Tom, how does your mother know all those people?’

‘It’s a small town,’ Tom shrugged.

‘But she remembers everything about them. I can’t even remember their names.’

‘It’s right on peak time,’ Daisy remarked, checking her watch. ‘It’ll be full of mothers. People from school. Possibly mothers from the football team. Once they get her talking, we could be looking at two hours.’

‘She’s usually better if the twins are in the car with me,’ Alec mused. ‘If it’s me alone, it can be up to three hours, but I think she does make an effort to get away when you’re in here too.’

He leaned over Daisy, opened the glove box and pulled out a packet of jellybeans.

‘Let’s make a game of it,’ he suggested. ‘Everybody take some beans.’

‘Jellybeans for my jellybean,’ Daisy said as she tipped some into Eustacia’s hand.

Once they all had some, Alec continued, ‘right. We’ll take bets on how long she’ll be.’

‘And on what her excuse will be when she gets back,’ Daisy said.

Tom looked at them. ‘Oh – so we’re not supposed to eat them?’ he said through a mouthful.

‘No, Tom,’ Daisy sighed.

Alec saw that the twins and Fred had made a similar error. He handed the bag around again.

‘Right. I’m gonna say an hour,’ Alec said. ‘Daisy?’

‘An hour and a half,’ Daisy said. ‘If she gets Tom’s ice cream, that’ll take her up the other end of the store towards the freezers. That’s a real mine field in there. You know how old Wagging-Tongue Willy loves her frozen ice cream sandwiches.’
‘Ah, but that will depend on whether she gets Tom’s ice cream,’ Alec cautioned.

‘Or my crisps!’ Fred piped up.

‘Exactly. What were her conditions?’

‘Only if we were good,’ Tom supplied.

‘And have you been good? I know wee Fred hasn’t,’ Alec said.

Fred protested. ‘I made that desk look way better!’

‘Hmm.’ Alec tapped his chin and ate one of the jellybeans. ‘Your mother thought the same. And she had a fight with your teacher. She might not count that behaviour as naughtiness. Maybe she’ll think you have been good. What about you, Tom? Have you committed any felonies we should know about?’

‘I am a perfect child, you know that,’ Tom said modestly. He farted suddenly and the younger kids started screaming.

‘Tom!’ Daisy screamed. She pelted a jellybean at him.

Fred climbed over to the window and stuck his head out. Eustacia became discomfited and cried. Alec unbuckled her from her booster seat and pulled her into his lap. She brightened immediately and played with the steering wheel.

‘I’ve changed my mind,’ Daisy said. ‘She won’t get Tom’s ice cream. I know I wouldn’t. I’ll say fifty-five minutes.’

‘Final bet?’

‘Yep. Lock it in.’

‘All right. Fred, how long do you think she’ll be?’

‘Forever and ever,’ Fred complained.

‘Okay, Fred’s going with an eternity. Tom, how about you?’

‘An hour and fifteen minutes,’ Tom said.

‘Quite confident. Care to take us through your reasoning?’

‘Listen. I’ve known that woman for a long time. You can’t apply logic or reasoning to anything she does. You don’t think, you just feel.’

Alec considered it. ‘I’m gonna change my bet to an hour and ten minutes,’ he said.

‘Oh no,’ Tom said.

‘What?’

‘That’s Harriet Brinks. My old teacher.’

‘Not Brinksy!’ Daisy cried.

They all leaned forward to stare at the woman crossing the carpark.
‘No. No!’ Alec said in horror. ‘It is her. She and Ellie talked for an hour at the last parent/teacher
night. An hour. In a five minute interview. While all the other mothers were lined up.’

They all clamoured forward to stare at her as she walked inside.

‘Maybe Mum won’t see her,’ Fred said hopefully.

‘She’s heading for the bread aisle!’ Daisy cried.

‘No!’

Eustacia pushed down on the steering wheel and the horn blasted. They held their breaths, and
through the glass they just made out Ellie disappearing down the bread aisle too.

‘That's it. She's seen her. We're never leaving this car,’ Tom said.

An hour later, they could see Ellie had finally reached the register. They watched her through the
glass, judging her.

‘No, not that one,’ Alec complained. ‘She always picks the slowest register.’

‘And Mouthy Margaret’s on that one!’ Daisy said. ‘No – no, Ellie don’t!’

They held their breath. Ellie vacillated and settled on Margaret’s line. Alec clapped a hand to his
forehead.

‘The slowest line,’ he grunted. ‘Every time. Without fail.’

‘Which is good news for me,’ Tom said. ‘If she takes fifteen minutes, I’ll be the winner.’

For Alec to win, she had to be out of there in ten. Mouthy Margaret gave a wave to Ellie and they
started chatting. Alec didn’t like his odds.

They could see Ellie had ended up with ten items. She yakked away with Margaret until eventually
the person behind her complained. This started an argument.

Tom and Alec held their breaths, counting down the seconds. Just as the clock hit one hour and
eleven minutes, Ellie exited, and Alec shouted his triumph. Gabe, who had been napping, startled
awake.

On her way over, Ellie started another argument with the trolley boy. As they watched her, Alec
sighed, ‘I married her.’

‘Yeah. I mean, most of the people in this car came out of her, so they’re stuck with her, but you
choose her,’ Daisy remarked. 'Think about that, Dad.'

When she saw her mother, Eustacia pressed excitedly on the horn and sent it blasting through the
carpark. Alec frantically tried to stop her, but in his agitation he set off the car alarm. The Beast
wailed and flashed, attracting the attention of everybody in the vicinity. They stared at the beeping
car and its six screaming occupants.

Ellie could see Alec in the front seat, Eustacia in his lap, madly pressing buttons to turn the alarm off
as the kids shrieked at him.
‘I married him,’ she sighed as she crossed over to them.

Alec managed to turn the alarm off. When she got in the car, a lot of jellybeans changed hands. As she gave her excuse as to why she had taken so long, a chorus of groans went up and more jellybeans changed hands, this time gleefully hoarded by Tom.

Ellie was looking over the evidence wall in the living room. It was high enough so the kids couldn't get to it, and its central location meant she was able to work while she watched them. Long ago, with Joe, she'd had a strict policy that there was to be no talk of work in the home. But now that she'd married a detective, and both of them were juggling their careers with childcare, she had no qualms about letting that old rule perish.

She sat cross-legged in the middle of the room and read over a report while the twins crawled over her and played with her hair.

‘You will be beautiful,’ Eustacia promised as she tied her hair into knots.

‘Ow. Not so rough, Stace.’

Gabe made a concerned noise and kissed her to make up for his sister's ungentle hand.

In the kitchen, Alec was making dinner. Tom shuffled in.

‘Hey... uh, Dad?’ Tom said nervously.

Alec was peeling a carrot. He turned to him. ‘What is it?’

‘Um... I sort of need some advice.’

‘Shoot.’

‘It’s – uh – it’s sort of... about... a girl.’

Alec froze. He dropped the carrot he was holding and it skittered across the floor. ‘Girl?’ he repeated faintly.

‘Yeah.’ Tom retrieved the carrot and handed it back to him. Alec washed it off and quickly finished peeling it.

‘A girl. Right. So what’s the problem?’ Alec said, feigning nonchalance.

‘Um... her name’s Courtney. I – I kind of like her but I – well, I was wondering... how do you actually... talk to girls?’

Alec stared into the distance, reliving all of his high school years at once. Memories of smiling fondly at girls from afar, writing them love poems, and ultimately being called barf-breath and bug-eyes before being banished from female society and company until the age of twenty hit him all at once. He blinked.

‘Well - there’s no trick to it,’ he said, trying to sound reasonable. ‘Girls might seem like terrifying creatures when you’re a teenager, but they’re just people.’

‘People who can laugh at you and break your heart and ruin your life!’ Tom exclaimed, clutching his hands to his chest.
'Well – yes,’ Alec conceded. He gave the pot a stir and tasted the sauce.

‘How did you get Mum to like you?’ Tom asked.

Alec choked on the spoon. ‘Erm,’ he began. ‘I don’t really know. I suppose I was her friend first. And then… well, our situation was a wee bit complicated.’

He grimaced, picked up his carrot and furiously began grating it.

‘Well… what about Tess?’

‘She… erm, she worked with me. We were work colleagues for almost a year. I fancied her pretty much the whole time but I couldn’t bring myself to say anything to her except, “well done Henchard” and “see you later Henchard.” Finally we were at a work do and… I guess she liked me too and she was sick of waiting for me to make a move.’

He grated so hard his carrot snapped in two and he dropped the grater. Sighing, he turned to Tom and said, ‘listen, Tom. If you want advice about girls, talk to Daisy. She knows the mind of a teenage girl better than you or I could ever hope to.’

‘But she’ll pick on me,’ Tom whined.

‘That’s just how she shows affection.’

Tom sighed but he went off to find Daisy anyway. Alec mopped his brow with the dish towel.

A distant crowing told Alec that Tom had confessed his problem to Daisy. He shushed her furiously, to no avail.

Ellie wandered into the kitchen, a pen and paper in hand. The twins had tied her hair into odd clumps, but she was too absorbed in her work to realise how ridiculous she looked.

‘I think we should question Gibson again,’ she said. ‘I can only hope he’s still in the area. I should have kept a trace on his whereabouts.’

She tapped her pen against the paper and frowned before suddenly noticing how sweaty Alec looked.

‘You all right?’

‘Mm. Erm. Fine. It’s just that - erm - Tom just asked me about girls.’

Ellie was incredulous. ‘What?’

‘I know.’

‘Tom.’

‘Yes.’

‘Asked you?’

‘Yes.’

‘About girls?’
'Yes, El.'

'You.'

He frowned at her.

'Girls.'

'El,' he said warningly.

'Alec how many women have you dated in your life?'

His mouth set in a hard line. 'Four.'

She burst out laughing. 'Christ, the poor boy must be desperate to come to you.'

'His opening question was "how do I talk to girls?"'

'Well, between that and having you as his mentor, at least I won't have to worry about grandkids anytime soon.'

She started giggling. 'Alec Hardy. Casanova. Lady killer.'

'El.'

'No, you're right, I'm being unfair. I'm forgetting about all those mistresses you've got.'

She cackled so hard she had to lean on him for support.

Alec tugged the bands from her hair and ruffled her curls free. 'Well, the joke's on you, because you married me.'

Ellie threaded her arms around his waist. 'Yes I did.' She kissed him, then drew back, smacking her lips. 'Mm. You put fresh basil in the sauce, didn't you?'

'Always. It makes a difference.' He dipped his finger in the sauce and held it up to her. She sucked it contemplatively.

'Could do with some more spice,' she said, and pinched his arse.

Before Alec could respond, they heard a cry.

'Mu-um!' Fred yelled. 'Gabe’s stuck in the stairs again!'

'Oh for God’s -'

Ellie and Alec converged on the stairs. Gabriel had gotten his head firmly wedged between the wooden struts. He was unhurt, but his spirit was broken. He stared at the ground, defeated, apparently having made his peace with the fact that he was destined to live his whole life here on this step.

'Why don’t you ever cry out when you get stuck?' Ellie demanded in distress. ‘Alec, get the olive oil.’

They were well practiced at this extraction by now. Alec put some olive oil on his head and neck and they gently prised him free. He emerged with a pop and stood up, blinking and amazed that he had
been so easily rescued. Alec wiped the oil off him with a towel and the boy smiled widely. Once he was clean, he hugged his father and toddled off as if nothing had happened.

‘He’s a strange child, isn’t he?’ Ellie commented when he was out of earshot.

A hideous scream rang through the house. A terrified Fred tore past them with a livid Eustacia on his tail. He had her favourite toy, a stuffed whale, clutched in his hand and she was screeching for it back while she bludgeoned him with a pillow.

‘Fred, give her the toy!’ Alec shouted.

Eustacia chased him into a corner and beat him aggressively. ‘No, no, no!’ Fred yelled.

‘Kids, stop it!’ Ellie said, barging over to separate them.

Daisy chased Tom into the room, knuckling his head while singing, ‘Tom’s in lo-ove! Tom’s in love!’

‘Daisy!’ Ellie growled.

‘Get lost!’ Tom cried, fending her off. ‘Bugger off!’

‘Tom! Language!’

‘Bugger isn’t swearing!’

‘It bloody well is!’

‘Hah! You just swore!’

Ellie seized the spitting, hissing Eustacia in her arms and shouted at Tom as she tried to stop the toddler from murdering Fred. Alec looked over at silent little Gabriel, who was watching the exchange apprehensively.

‘Don’t ever change, Gabe,’ he told the boy.

A drawn-out scream filled the house, followed by, ‘Alec!’

Alec sighed. ‘Coming.’

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After dinner, Alec was left to supervise the kids while Ellie tried to scrape pasta sauce off the ceiling. He could hear her quietly cursing Fred’s aim as she worked.

They had turned the living room into an art studio. Daisy was creating some lovely landscapes, Fred was perfecting his portraits, Eustacia was drawing a tree, and Gabriel, who had managed nothing but a scribble, was shoving a brown crayon up his nose. Alec let out a little shout and wrested it from him before he could complete his mission.

Fred looked at Gabriel’s collection of formless scribbles and frowned. ‘He hasn’t drawn anything.’

‘Yes he has,’ Alec said, wiping the boogers from the crayon. ‘He’s drawn… a lake.’

‘But it’s brown,’ said Fred dubiously.
‘It’s a brown lake.’

‘How come he can’t draw?’ Fred demanded.

‘Some people are good at drawing and some aren’t,’ Alec replied patiently. ‘People have lots of different strengths.’

‘But Gabe’s not good at anything,’ Fred said. ‘He can’t even talk!’

Ellie came into the room, looking irritable. ‘Well. That’s the dishes done.’ She brightened when she saw the drawings. ‘Oh Fred! It’s beautiful, as always! Oh and look at Stace’s… and Gabe’s…’ she blanched. ‘Well, it’s very lovely too!’

‘Mum, when’s Gabe gonna talk?’ Fred asked.

‘He’ll talk when he’s ready, sweetheart.’ But now that the topic had been brought up she couldn’t help looking at Gabriel and coaxing, ‘Gabe, can you say mama?’

All eyes in the room turned to him. Gabriel looked frightened. Eustacia sensed his discomfort and hugged him.

‘Can you say farts?’ Tom put in helpfully. ‘Faaarts.’

‘Farts!’ said Eustacia

‘Tom!’ scolded Ellie.

‘Say Daisy. Dai-sy,’ said Daisy.


‘What about Daddy?’ Alec wheedled. ‘Dada. Dada.’

‘No, say Mama.’ Ellie elbowed Alec out of the way.

‘Dad. Daaaad,’ Alec insisted, shoving Ellie back.

‘Mum!’ said Ellie a little more aggressively.

‘Dad!’

‘Dad!’ said Eustacia traitorously.

‘Fred!’ proclaimed Fred.

Gabriel opened his mouth. He drew in a breath. Everybody leaned forward with anticipation. He burped, and they all groaned.

‘How come he can’t talk?’ Fred demanded loudly.

‘Some kids don’t talk until they’re a little older, that’s all,’ Alec replied.

‘I think he’s stupid,’ Fred said, squinting hard at his brother.

‘He’s not stupid, sweetheart,’ Ellie replied. ‘He’s just… reserved. He’ll talk eventually, once he feels like it.’
Eustacia became bored of all the fussing. She grabbed her brother’s hand and they toddled off to play. Fred ran to join them.

‘Do you think we should take him to see another specialist?’ Ellie asked worriedly.

‘Nah,’ said Daisy. ‘Katie from work’s got a six year old, and she said he didn’t start talking until he was three. He was mute for ages, and then one day he just started spitting out complete sentences.’

‘I don’t think it’s that he can’t talk so much as he doesn’t want to talk,’ remarked Tom. He belched suddenly and Daisy hit him, shouting that he was as bad as a toddler.

Ellie grunted. ‘I suppose Fred was a late talker too. Maybe we’re a family of late talkers.’ She shot a look at Alec. ‘Or maybe he’s just stubborn.’

That set the adults bickering. Tom and Daisy looked at each other and rolled their eyes.

As Alec prepared for bedtime, he glimpsed Eustacia marching determinedly down the hall, her face set in a serious expression. She had something clutched in her hand and she was clearly on a mission. Gabriel followed solemnly, acting as her back-up. Alec thought nothing of it until he heard the toilet flush a minute later.

‘Bye-bye badge.’

The cogs whirred in Alec’s brain. He patted himself down, then his eyes widened and he dashed into the bathroom just in time to see the twins flush the toilet a second time. His police badge disappeared in a cloud of water.

The kids looked proudly up at him. Alec gaped.

‘Ellie!’ he managed to shout.

She came running, thinking something had happened. ‘What? What’s wrong?’

Alec could barely speak. ‘They flushed my badge down the toilet.’

Ellie doubled over with laughter. Her breath came in shallow wheezes.

‘It’s not funny,’ he growled.

Ellie knew that laughing was the worst thing she could do in this situation, since the kids would take it as encouragement, but she couldn’t stop herself. She left the room, still doubled over, while Alec knelt in front of the grinning twins and explained to them, as gently as he could, that they were not to do anything like that ever again.

Ellie came back, wiping her eyes. She threw a pair of elbow-length rubber gloves and a plunger at Alec. ‘Better go fishing, unless you want to explain to Jenkinson why you need a replacement.’

Alec sighed and pulled on the gloves.

After a messy badge retrieval and a thorough cleansing and disinfection, Alec joined Ellie to put the kids to bed. Fred demanded kisses as he always did. Gabriel, too, was content with kisses. Eustacia needed a little more persuasion, and she demanded the same storybook be read to her five times before she finally seemed satisfied enough to sleep.
By the time all three were put to bed, Ellie and Alec were too exhausted to even contemplate anything but sleep.

‘Big day tomorrow,’ Daisy reminded them with a grin as she bid them goodnight.

* *

They awoke before their alarm went off and lay in bed, rubbing their eyes.

‘It’s quiet,’ Ellie mumbled.

‘Too quiet,’ Alec said.

They blinked at the ceiling, disgruntled by the lack of toddler knees in their faces.

Ellie rolled over. ‘Should we… take advantage of this?’

Alec faced her. ‘You sure? This feels like a trap.’

Ellie shuffled forward and settled a hand on his narrow hip. ‘I’ll risk it if you will.’

It was rare for them to ever get a quiet moment. Alec decided to gamble. He kissed his wife and she slid her hand down his pants.

The door burst open. The two of them screamed.

‘Rise and shine!’ Daisy announced. ‘Today’s the big day!’

‘Daisy!’ Ellie cried.

She marched over to the window and threw the curtains open. Alec cringed in the sunlight and flopped against the pillow, placing his arm over his eyes.

‘Come on, come on!’ Daisy said. ‘Chop chop! Up and at ‘em! We’re leaving in exactly two hours, and Fred and the beans have to be ready by then.’

She thundered out of the room and went to wake up Tom. They could hear his distant grunts of annoyance.

‘Well, the important thing is that we tried,’ Ellie sighed.

‘Go and attack Mum and Dad,’ they heard Daisy command, and suddenly three children came barreling into their bedroom. They jumped onto the bed, grinning ear to ear. Eustacia landed right on Alec’s stomach and he let out a low ‘oof!’

‘Oh, good morning darlings,’ Ellie said. ‘Did Daisy get you up too?’

‘Yeah!’ Fred said. ‘She’s being really weird!’

‘She’s just excited. It’s a big day for her. For all of us, really.’

The twins were busy hanging off Alec, giggling and tugging on his beard and hair.

‘Erm,’ Alec said. ‘Ellie, I think… I need a minute. Can you…?’

‘Whoops,’ Ellie said. ‘Come on kids, let’s go get breakfast started. Mr Stinky needs to have a shower.’
She led the three of them away and he murmured a thank you after her.

Fred was old enough to eat his toast and orange juice alone, but the twins needed some guidance, and in Eustacia’s case, firm persuasion, since she was a notoriously fussy eater.

Alec came down just as Ellie had finished making up the breakfast bowls. Fred was munching peanut butter toast at the end of the table, and he watched with interest as the combatants took their position.

Alec took the easy task of Gabriel. Ellie rolled up her sleeves and squared off against Eustacia.

‘No,’ the toddler said, glaring at the outstretched spoon.

Ellie coaxed her gently and demonstrated how good it tasted by eating some.

‘No.’

‘Come on, Stace, be a good girl…’

‘No.’

Just open up…’

‘No.’

‘Stace, you have to eat something.’

‘No.’

Eustacia squirmed and dodged the spoon. Her flailing fists hit the proferred utensil and sent the contents splattering against Ellie’s face. Wiping the fruit from her eyes, she shot a vicious glance at Alec. ‘She gets this from you!’

Eustacia’s disgruntlement was turning into a full-blown tantrum. Frustrated, Ellie used her Mum Voice on the toddler, but she only screamed back with equal ferocity. Where all others in the family, including Alec, cowered before the fury of the Mum Voice, Eustacia matched it.

Seeing that it was getting her nowhere, Ellie stopped and puffed out her cheeks. Mother and daughter glared at each other.

Alec leaned over and primly said, ’she gets this from you.’

Ellie elbowed Alec in the gut and he started laughing. The rare sight of her father laughing quelled Eustacia somewhat.

‘Here, let’s bring Gabe a bit closer,’ Alec said. ‘She’s always calmer when he’s near.’

Ellie did so. Gabriel looked quaintly at them. He considered taste to be the best sense by which to explore the world; everything he could lay his hands on invariably went into his mouth. This indiscriminate attitude made mealtimes a breeze, but walks in the park a touch more hazardous, especially when there were dog-walkers about.

Alec fed Gabriel and the boy drummed his hands happily on the table as he chewed.

‘Mmm, isn’t that yummy, Gabe!’ Ellie exclaimed. She picked up his bib and wiped the goo from his cheek. ‘Yum yum! Yoghurt and bananas!’
Eustacia watched the exchange suspiciously. Ellie and Alec leaned further towards Gabe, pretending to fix their attention solely on him. He opened his mouth and Alec popped another spoonful in.

‘Yummy yummy,’ said Alec in a deep voice.

Eustacia made a whining noise. Gabriel looked at her. He must have communicated that the food was good somehow, for Eustacia began grasping her hands.

Ellie got a fresh bowl and offered it to Stace. She accepted it willingly and ate it with her fingers, the defiant look in her eyes telling them that she did not consider herself defeated. She was eating on her terms. It was a peace agreement, not a victory.

Once the war was concluded, Ellie cleaned up while Alec took the kids to get changed. He wrestled the twins into their clothes and left to help Fred. By the time he came back, the twins had switched clothes and Eustacia was standing happily in a pair of trousers while Gabriel twirled in a dress.

Ellie came in, her hair wet from the shower. ‘Not again,’ she groaned.

‘Should we switch them back?’

‘They’ll only switch again when we’re not looking. As long as they’re dressed, I really don’t care,’ Ellie said. She knelt in front of Gabriel. ‘But as long as he’s wearing a dress, he should wear it properly.’

She pulled the dress the right way around and buttoned it into place. Alec did the same for Eustacia’s outfit and the twins grinned at them.

Fred sauntered down the corridor in only his pants. Exasperated, Alec called, 'Fred, put your trousers back on!'

'No!'

He started running. Alec looked at Ellie. 'I swear I just dressed him.'

'Go and get him. I'll put the twins' shoes on.'

'Tom you better be ready soon!' they heard Daisy shout. She received no reply. Ellie suspected Tom was playing the Xbox in his underwear, so she knocked on his door and told him to get changed.

After a great deal of struggling, the younger kids were finally ready. Alec assembled them in the living room while Ellie ducked back upstairs to get her things. Daisy, who had been ready over an hour, tapped her foot and sighed.

'Where's Tom?' she asked.

'Haven't seen him.'

'Well he better be here soon.' She looked curiously at her father, and a tiny, crooked grin split her features.

'What?' Alec asked.

Daisy cupped her hands around her mouth. 'STACK DAD!' she roared.

Alec’s eyes widened in fear. The game Stack Dad had evolved since its first inception. The aim of the game now was, once the cry of “Stack Dad” had gone up, for them all to crash tackle him and
stack on top of him.

Tom returned the call from the other room. ‘Stack Dad!’ he roared.

‘No!’ Alec cried in vain. ‘Don’t stack Dad, don’t stack D -’

Daisy tackled him. He staggered under her weight but managed to stay upright. Then the whole house shook as Tom thundered into the room and collided with him. Under the big boy’s weight, Alec fell like a toppled monument.

Fred shouted, ‘stack Dad!’ and jumped on top of them. Gabriel and Eustacia giggled and ran forward, pinning one of Alec’s legs each.

Ellie walked in to see Alec thrashing helplessly as all the kids piled on him. She put her hands on her hips. ‘Alec, will you stop messing around? We need to go!’

Alec squawked. ‘They attacked me!’

‘Up. All of you. You can play Kill Dad when we get back.’

They got up and she ushered the crowd out the door. ‘Why do you kids play that game?’ Ellie queried. ‘How do you even know who wins?’

‘Originally the last person to stack Dad was the loser,’ Daisy explained, ‘but since Gabe always ended up losing, we changed the rules so that in the game of Stack Dad, everybody wins except Dad.’

Alec sighed. He pressed his hands flat against his back and leaned forward until the vertebrae cracked.

They went first to Ellie’s favourite place in the world, the abandoned lot overlooking the sea.

‘I’ll just be a minute,’ she told them, getting out of the car.

She walked right up to the very edge and looked over. The sea groaned as it rubbed its flank restlessly against the sheer cliff face. Breathing in the crisp air, Ellie closed her eyes for a moment. When she opened them, she knelt and began gathering the sea pink that grew along the edges of the cliff.

The flowers were lovely, each one pink and delicate as a grasping baby’s hand. It always amazed Ellie that something so beautiful could grow in such a harsh place, out of rocky and saline soil and in defiance of the wind. Once she had gathered a bunch, she tied the bundle with one of Eustacia’s ribbons and ran back to the car.

They stopped at the cemetery next. It was grey and overcast. A few spots of rain peppered the ground. Fred and Eustacia were fighting again, so Ellie said to Alec, ‘I think you’d better stay here with the kids. I’ll meet them and come back to get you.’

Alec agreed. Ellie went into the cemetery, a lone orange speck among the tombstones. She approached a small crowd gathered around a grave.

In loving memory

Daniel Latimer…
Beth was arranging fresh flowers. Mark was holding his sleepy daughter, and a fully grown Chloe stood vigil beside them, Dean holding her hand.

Big Chimp, Danny’s favourite toy, was lashed to the grave, mouldy and badly weathered now. Ellie could remember Tom and Danny playing with that toy together, sometimes fighting over it.

She had to look away. Taking a moment to compose herself, she straightened her shoulders and came forward.

‘All right, El?’ Mark said quietly.

Ellie nodded. She knelt beside Beth and placed the bunch of sea pink on the grave. Beth recognised the coastal wildflowers. She touched the petals. Ellie put her arm around her friend.

‘He was a beautiful boy, Beth, she said. 'We all miss him.'

Beth nodded. Chloe sniffed and Dean kissed her forehead. Ellie and Beth stood, and they all looked at the cheerful grave.

‘I love you zillions, superstar,’ was all Mark could say.

They went away slowly. Nige was in the graveyard too. He stood far apart, in the small patch of land at the very limits of the allotment where nothing grew but nettles. Long ago, that patch had been the place of burial for suicides, drunks, unbaptised infants and all others for whom there was no place in heaven. It was here that Paul, in a last act of Christian charity, had recently agreed to inter two more souls.

‘All right, Nige?’ Mark asked.

Nige jumped guiltily. After a moment, he nodded. ‘Yeah. Yeah, let’s go.’

Ellie saw that he had boldly laid a rose stolen from the vicar’s garden on his mother’s grave. The spot of yellow gleamed defiantly among the greens and browns of this godforsaken part of the churchyard.

They passed another grave on their way out, that of Joe Miller. It was little more than a mound of earth. His brother had paid for a headstone, but vandals had kicked it over. It lay flat, masked by nettles and weeds, and slugs crept across the cracked lettering. Ellie refused to look at it, but it lurked in her peripheral vision, as Joe’s ghost so often did.

Paul and Becca came into the cemetery. A wedding ring gleamed on Becca’s finger and her belly was protruding prominently. Beth gave her a frosty greeting. She had not forgiven Becca, but since Paul had chosen to hitch his wagon to this particular horse, she was learning to tolerate her for his sake. Not wishing to intrude, Becca kissed Paul goodbye and left to return to the Trader’s. The vicar stayed with them, and going first to collect Alec and the children, they all walked down to the property by the harbour.

Maggie, Jocelyn and Cate met them on the way. Daisy shouted an excited greeting to Maggie and the twins went wild when they saw their honorary grandmothers.

‘Here's my special little man!' Maggie said as Gabriel bounded up. 'My, don't you look handsome in that dress!'

Gabriel twirled and smiled at her.
'Eustacia?' Jocelyn said. Eustacia tackled her legs and she staggered. 'Oh! There you are.' She knelt and patted Eustacia's thick hair. 'How's my little darling?'

Eustacia screeched a reply. 'Be gentle with Aunty Jocelyn,' Alec cautioned.

They made their way onwards, the twins sticking fast to their chosen favourite. Holding Fred's hand, Ellie spoke to Cate.

'I can't believe it's ready,' she remarked. 'It feels like only yesterday you bought this place.'

Cate smiled. Her complexion was rather pallid and she looked a lot older than her years, but there was a quiet strength about her. In the past two years she had suffered a single relapse. It had been a great source of tension between herself and Beth, but she had cleaned herself up admirably and seemed to have kicked her drinking habit for good.

'I felt like it would never get done,' Cate said. 'There was so much to do. For every problem we fixed there were ten more. But at last,' she paused as they mounted the crest of the hill and looked upon the property with real pride, 'it's done.'

The Danny and Pippa Shelter for Women and Children, or the D&P’s, as it was colloquially known, was quite a spacious property. It had once formed the main site office of a rather large maritime trading company that had gone bankrupt some twenty years ago. The buildings had deteriorated since then, having been used mainly as storage, until they became so derelict that they were only fit to be sold at a pittance. Cate and Beth had salvaged as much as they were able from these old buildings, often keeping the exteriors and gutting and refitting the interiors.

A high fence ran around the property, terminating at the main building that had once been the reception of the trading company. The fence was designed to look like a simple child-proof fence, but it was intended keep certain undesirables out as much as to keep children in.

'We already have people from the local area asking to move in,' Cate said. 'It feels wrong to be excited about that, considering what this place is for, but I can't help it.'

'You have every right to be excited,' Ellie said. 'You're going to help a lot of people. This is your dream.'

Fred and the twins had converged on Alec. They clambered up and around him and over him. 'Ow,' he said. 'Stace, Daddy needs that knee.'

Ellie smiled fondly at him. 'In a perfect world we wouldn't need a place like this at all. But as long as we're in this one, we have to make do.'

They came to a halt out the front and surveyed it. Daisy switched on the enormous camera around her neck and turned to Beth and Cate.

'It looks amazing, guys!' she said. 'Thanks again for giving me the exclusive interview. This is gonna be the biggest scoop I've ever reported on!'

'It'll be good to get the word out there about it being open,' Paul commented. 'Hopefully the publicity will bring in some more donations. This place will take a lot to maintain.'

'True,' Beth sighed, looking at the facility she had built. 'But we'll manage.'

Daisy went into photographer mode and loudly directed Cate and Beth as to where they should stand for their publicity shot. While this was happening, Mark put Lizzie down. Eustacia ran over to her at
once and smiled widely at the older girl. Lizzie was a gorgeous thing, all rosy cheeks and blonde curls, quite at odds with scruffy, dark Eustacia. Ellie suspected her Stace had a bit of a crush on Lizzie, which she was glad of since her daughter seemed to hate every other child she met, her brothers excepted.

Eustacia and Lizzie played together. Being with her worked Eustacia into such a tizzy that she sprinted around and eventually brought herself to grief on the insurmountable barrier of a pebble a quarter of an inch high. She tripped and started wailing, more out of anger than pain. Ellie soothed her. She picked up the sulky girl and swayed her back and forth.

Daisy and Maggie started interviewing Beth and Cate. Jocelyn stood aside and spoke to Ellie.

'I heard you’re working as Detective Inspector now,' she said.

Ellie replied, ‘that’s right. Alec’s decided to work part-time as DS so he can take care of the kids. It got too hard with both of us working full-time.’

‘Whose idea was it to switch roles?’

‘His. He never fully recovered from that night on the cliffs. His leg’s not been the same, to say nothing of the psychological. And,' she kissed Eustacia's curly hair, 'I think he’s quite enjoying spending time with the kids.’

'What about later on, when they're older? Will he look for another DI job elsewhere?'

‘I suppose it’s up to him. But I don’t think he's got much career ambition anymore. He'd much prefer to be my DS than a DI or even a CS somewhere far away from me and the kids. Plus Jenkinson’s been very accommodating of us, too, in no small part thanks to our stellar track record. We have more freedom here than we could hope for elsewhere.'

'So this is it, then? Rural DI and DS for life?’

'Who knows?' Ellie shrugged. 'Five years ago, I thought I had my whole future planned out. Look at where I am now.'

'Mm.' Jocelyn paused. She heard Maggie say something, and she turned her head towards the voice. 'I suppose all we can do is make the best of what we're given.'

Recovered from her fall, Eustacia became bored with her perch in her mother's arms. She fixed her eyes on Lizzie, made a bid for freedom and subsequently managed to get herself upside down. Ellie put her the right way up. 'You'll have to talk to us about the legal proceedings you're setting up here. I heard you've been giving advice to women and working on a few cases while the shelter was still being built.'

'That's right. Sharon's been a good help on that front too, though she cautions that she's only willing to step in on the more serious cases.'

'Make sure you keep Alec and me informed,' Ellie said. 'You'll be in a good position to judge how much of a threat these men pose. Alec and I will be able to provide police protection accordingly.'

Eustacia threatened to get herself upside down again. Ellie put her down and she immediately ran over to Gabriel, then grabbed his hand and toddled over to Lizzie.

After a while Daisy wrapped up her interview. Ellie held out her arm to Jocelyn and led her to the entrance.
'All right. Time for the grand tour!' said Beth, who was glowing with excitement.

She led the crowd inside. 'This is sort of like the reception area,' she said, gesturing around her. 'If you want to get in, you have to pass through these doors. There's no other way. This will prevent any unwanted visitors from getting in without being detected.'

It smelt all brand new. The carpet felt quite plush under Jocelyn's shoes. Maggie took her arm.

'It's amazing, Joss!' she explained. 'So big and airy.'

'I'll show you the rooms next,' Beth said. 'We didn't have much in the budget for furnishings, but we figure we'll let the families put whatever they want in there so it will feel more like home. And there's a kitchen and communal area - oh, and I can show you the little playground too!'

'Playground!' Daisy exclaimed. She pulled out her notebook and scribbled in it. 'You didn't tell me there was a playground!'

'We struggled to allocate money for it, but Beth insisted,' Cate said. 'And she was right. This place shouldn't feel like some kind of prison or detention centre. We want it to be a nice place for the kids. We want it to feel normal.'

'I wanna see the playground!' Fred shouted.

'All right, we'll go there next!'

The group went through the doors. Breaking away from Lizzie, Eustacia turned back to the entrance and made a distressed noise. Alec followed her direction and realised they were missing one. Gabriel was frozen in the doorframe, staring helplessly at all the criss-crossing lines decorating the carpet.

'Oh Gabe,' Alec sighed. He peeled off from the group, Eustacia at his heel, and picked the boy up. ‘What are we going to do with you?’ he asked, kissing him.

Gabriel cuddled him and Alec hooked him onto his hip with one hand. Eustacia tugged at his trousers and he held out his free hand to her. She took it and led him along, singing to herself as she did.

As Alec slowly walked through the foyer he passed two framed photos on the wall.

His heart stopped.

One picture showed a little girl with brown hair, smiling and holding her teddy. A heart-shaped pendant hung from her neck. The other was of a cheeky boy in a blue school uniform, his hair just getting too long, with an unready expression on his face, as though he'd missed the photographer's cue to smile.

They looked like ordinary photos of two beautiful children.

But of course, these children would never grow up.

‘Who’s that?’ asked Eustacia, pointing at the pictures.

His throat very tight, Alec answered, ‘their names are Danny and Pippa. They were two kids, just like you and Gabe.’

‘Twins?’ Eustacia asked, intrigued.
‘No,’ Alec shook his head. ‘They weren’t related.’ The old sensation of drowning rose within him. He fought against it and pushed back the river and the ocean inside him. He knelt next to Eustacia and Gabe shifted in alarm, clinging tightly to him to avoid the ground. ‘I’ll tell you all about them when you’re older. I promise.’

Eustacia stared. She nodded slowly. Alec gathered her up and smothered her in kisses. ‘I love you, jellybean.’ The visions of Danny and Pippa and how their bodies had looked when he’d found them slowly faded. He kissed Gabriel’s cheek, right upon his red birthmark. ‘I love you, angel.’

Ellie and Beth came into the room, looking for him.

‘There you are,’ Beth said. ‘The others have gone ahead.’

Alec cleared his throat and stood up, hooking Gabe securely on his hip. ‘Sorry. Erm…’ he scrubbed the tears from his face with the flat of his hand. ‘I had to go back for Gabe. He won't step on the lines in the carpet.’

Ellie saw the photographs. A hush fell over her and the two women approached him.

‘I also noticed…’ Alec conceded, gesturing to the photos. ‘I stopped to look.’

‘Cate and I put them in last,’ Beth said quietly. ‘Finishing touches. They’re our favourite pictures of them.’

Danny’s picture was a tiny bit crooked. She straightened it and her fingertips brushed against the glass.

‘We wanted people to see them when they walked in. This place wouldn’t exist without them, after all. We wanted it to feel like... like they're our angels, watching over us.’

Ellie was contemplative. Her present situation – her husband, her children, her normal, messy, imperfect, beautiful life – had all been given to her in the aftermath of Pippa and Danny’s deaths. It was strange to think that she owed her current happiness to such unspeakable tragedy, but she felt no guilt for that anymore.

All she felt was quiet determination. She would honour the brief lives of those children, stolen too soon. She would never forget them.

Ellie put her arm around Beth’s shoulder. ‘He’d be proud of you, Beth.’

‘I hope so,’ Beth said. ‘I still don’t know if I believe in God or heaven... but I do hope he is looking down on us.’

‘Think of what he’d say if he saw all this,’ Ellie gestured around her. ‘Everything you’ve done in his name.’

‘I think he’d be happy,’ Beth murmured. ‘For this. For all of us.’ Her hand closed over Ellie’s and she gripped it tight.

She was not sure the pain would ever go away. The scar Danny had left in her world, though faintly healed, had never stopped hurting. She felt his absence as a presence, as a tangible grief that seated itself in Danny’s old room or looked at her from Danny’s old photographs.

Sometimes it hurt so much she couldn’t breathe.
But they would live.

She surveyed the facility she had built in Danny’s name. Eustacia tugged her sleeve and she glanced down at the dubious little twins. A look of contentment fell over her and she smiled.

Oh yes, they would live.

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