

Have you ever
been tempted?

Some other Eden

'A wonderful book,
intriguing and compelling,
with a memorable cast of
characters' Katie Fforde

NATASHA FARRANT

About the Book

Deep in the English countryside, Marshwood has always been much more than just a house. It has been a place to escape to and a trap, the backdrop for elegant parties and a wartime hospital, an idyllic escape from trauma and unhappy marriages. When the roof starts to cave in and the money runs out, eighty-year-old Bella resists the pressure to sell and instead begins to peel back the layers of the past.

As this imposing house gives up its secrets of marriage, war and forbidden love, patterns begin to repeat themselves when Bella's granddaughter's childhood sweetheart returns from the war in Bosnia. Like so many before him, Jack comes seeking solace. But he also wants Isla, who is – who really *should* be – unavailable to him.

And as all three characters explore whether you can ever truly go back, the past and the present collide with shattering consequences...

Contents

Cover

About the Book

Title Page

Dedication

Acknowledgements

Epigraph

Southern Spain, August 1995

Part I: Spring – Summer

Part II: Summer into Autumn

About the Author

Also by Natasha Farrant

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Some Other Eden

Natasha Farrant

For Jeanne Moorsom, my grandmother,
who loves books.

And, as ever, for Steve.

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And so we beat on, boats against the current, borne back ceaselessly into the past.

—F. Scott Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby*

Oh! I have slipped the surly bonds of Earth
And danced the skies on laughter-silvered wings

—John Gillespie Magee, 'High Flight'

Southern Spain, August 1995

WHY? WHY? WHY?

There is no respite today from the children's questions. Today they waver on the line between exhaustion and exuberance, buoyed by a nervous energy which gives a febrile quality to everything they do. They have been like this ever since they boarded the plane at Gatwick, throughout the flight to Malaga and the taxi ride to the bus station, where they now wriggle fretfully in a bus which shows no sign of departing. Their fluty voices, sloughed of meaning by their mother's tiredness, merge in her mind with all the other external irritations of the day – the loud diesel thrum of the idling engine, the smells of strong tobacco and supermarket cologne, the limp cotton of her dress clinging to her sweat-slicked skin, above all the dull throbbing of the angry bruise which spreads over her cheekbone from her left eye.

Why isn't Dad with us?

Why isn't the bus moving?

Why are we here? When are we leaving? What time is it?

'Please,' snaps Isla. 'No more questions.'

And now there is a definite wobble to her seven-year-old son's chin, his tears held in abeyance only by the small brown paw of his younger sister in his hand. The beam of four reproachful eyes turns upon her, lighting the path for a fresh onslaught of guilt.

'I'm tired,' she says, excusing herself.

A commotion outside distracts their attention. The bus, it appears, is about to leave. On the station forecourt cigarettes are being crushed underfoot, final embraces are

being distributed along with sandwiches, thermos flasks and last-minute advice. The revolutions of the engine change and the bus shudders as straggling passengers drop into their seats.

‘How long till we get there?’ asks the little girl, Beth.

‘Shh,’ says her brother, Marcus. ‘You heard. No more questions.’ He turns shyly to his mother for approval. She smiles and holds out an arm to draw him closer.

‘Still a few hours,’ says Isla. ‘Try to sleep.’

She sits with Beth on her lap and Marcus pressed against her, leaning her forehead on the glass of the window. Her head hurts. She raises her hand to the contused skin around her eye.

‘Mum?’ Marcus is still awake, watching her.

‘I’m OK.’ She has been trying to make light of the pain for his sake. ‘Please, pumpkin. Go to sleep.’

He closes his eyes obediently. A soft sigh escapes his lips a few minutes later as his small blond head flops sideways onto his sister’s shoulder. A lump rises to Isla’s throat. Outside, bare brown mountains melt into the rapidly advancing dusk but she does not see this. A different landscape unfurls before her mind’s eye as the bus advances into the Andalusian interior, soft and green, an English idyll dotted with landmarks as familiar to her as the lithe hard bodies of her sleeping children. The encroaching shadows smooth away her bruises, the cut on her temple. Isla looks out at the darkening landscape and through the dusty glass of the bus windows a house appears. It stands above a garden flanked by rolling hills, redolent of summer roses and the sharp cries of soaring swifts. This is Marshwood. Marshwood, where it all began.

PART I

SPRING – SUMMER

England, March 1995

MARSHWOOD. ISLA'S CHILDHOOD home, a heavy L-shaped house built of honey-coloured stone in the middle of the nineteenth century. Six bedrooms, a large drawing-room, a breakfast room, a dining-room, two larders, three pantries, a cloakroom, a scullery and a complicated warren of semi-habitable attics and outbuildings. Two and a half acres of land clinging to a windy hillside in western Dorset beneath an ancient Roman fort, an orchard, a paddock, and kitchen and flower gardens. A place of infinite possibilities and asymmetrical rooms, sweeping views and curtained window-seats. A fine house, thought a little gloomy by some and romantic by others, perched on Pater Noster Hill a mile out of the historic village of Chapel St Mary and four miles from the nearest market town of Bournemouth. Large, isolated, draughty and damp, it had an air of faded grandeur perfectly in keeping with its sole inhabitant, Isla's eighty-year-old grandmother Bella. It had also become, in the early spring of 1995 and for the first time in living memory, the object of a bungled burglary, which 200 miles away in leafy west London had led to yet another argument between Isla and her husband Richard.

Richard had come home late, his briefcase bulging with papers to read for the following morning, his body stiff from a day of unrelenting meetings. Even the sight of his massive west London Edwardian villa, entirely mortgage free since his last bonus, did little to soothe his temper. As he let himself into the hall, all he could think was that it had been a bitch of a day, that his clients were bastards, and that he wished he had never decided to become a lawyer. What he

needed was a drink, a hot meal and mindless television, preferably though not necessarily delivered without question by his wife. Instead of which he had found the house in darkness and Isla huddled in bed on the telephone to her grandmother.

‘I’ll be down tomorrow,’ she was saying. ‘I’ll come with the children straight from school. Will you be all right till then?’

Richard threw himself into an armchair and assumed an air of long-suffering patience. The soft murmur of Beth talking in her sleep floated towards them from across the landing. Isla, still talking, raised an eyebrow towards the door. Richard got up to close it, then resumed his post in the armchair, sighing loudly as he loosened his tie.

The argument began as soon as Isla hung up, although thinking about it later she realized that in fact it had started long before, and that what appeared to be an isolated dispute was just one more link in the chain of a single ongoing quarrel, a quarrel which had become her marriage, or which her marriage had become, she wasn’t quite sure which.

‘Granna’s been burgled,’ said Isla.

‘Is that what it is.’

‘You might at least try to look concerned.’

‘I’m not in the mood, to be honest.’

Of the many faces of Richard and Isla’s continuing disaccord, Marshwood’s was the most familiar. She loved it. He did not. She went often. He did not.

‘I’m going down tomorrow.’

‘So I gathered.’

They sat facing each other, Isla and Richard, he crushing the fragile period armchair with his massive frame, she in her dressing-gown looking not much bigger than a child, sitting cross-legged in the middle of their king-size leather bed. They sat facing each other knowing that this was not how things should be nor even how they wanted them to be, that there were other gestures, other words which should be

coming to them naturally at this moment, anodyne solicitous enquiries about his day at the office and the children's day at school. At this moment he should be dropping a kiss on his wife's forehead or temple or lips, they should be going hand in hand together to the kitchen where his supper, set aside from earlier, sat waiting to be reheated, she should be pouring him a glass of wine and then he should be asking about the burglary at Marshwood, what was taken, what the police had said, how Bella was coping.

'I can't believe you're going down again,' said Richard.

'Richard, she's been *burgled*!'

'Well has she called the police?'

'Obviously.'

'And what do they say?'

'As it happens, they've caught him. The burglar.'

'Well then.' He closed his eyes. She knew it was to avoid looking at her. 'No harm done.'

'She's *upset*. And scared.'

'And what do the insurance company say?'

'They're coming tomorrow. Something about the windows, the burglar broke some windows, the leaded ones in the living-room. Apparently they were the original panes.'

'Oh great,' said Richard.

'What?'

'More expense.'

'Rich, it's not *about* the money!'

'No,' he sighed. 'No, it never is, to you.' He heaved himself to his feet and began to unbutton his shirt. 'I'm tired,' he said. 'I'm going to eat. And then I'm going to bed.'

They lay side by side in the dark that night, unable to sleep and unwilling to talk. It was Richard who eventually broke the silence.

'You didn't even ask if I minded your going away this weekend.'

Isla felt a twinge of guilt. 'You could always come with us, you know. It's been ages since you did.'

'Would you stay if I asked you to?'

'Richard, what is this?'

'If I asked you to choose?'

'It's not about choosing. It's about doing what's right. Come with us, Rich. You might enjoy yourself.'

'I have to work on Saturday.'

'Well then . . .'

'What?'

'What difference does it make if we're here or not?'

'It just does. And I've got the golf tournament, remember? You were all meant to come and watch.'

Isla had not remembered. She withdrew the hand she had stretched out towards him. The covers rose and fell as Richard turned away, a cold draught wrapping itself around her shoulders.

He was still bad-tempered the following morning at breakfast.

'Please don't sulk.' Isla waited for the children to go upstairs to brush their teeth before confronting him. 'I promise this'll be the last visit for a while. You must see why I have to go down.'

'I'm not sulking. I've been thinking. This can't go on. Marshwood. The problems, the endless expense. The bills, the things going wrong, the burglaries . . .'

'Only *one* burglary.'

'It can't go on, Isla. You're going to have to talk to Bella. Tell her I can't keep footing her bills.'

'I mean it,' he told her later on the phone just before she set off. 'Talk to her. I'm not working myself to the bone for a pile of bricks that's not even mine. I'd rather have my own place. My own house in the country, with my own non-leaking roof and my own fully functioning burglar alarm.'

Don't think I'm not serious about this. I am. I bloody mean it.'

Marshwood was jointly owned by Bella, Isla and Isla's mother Callie, but its upkeep was unfeasible without his substantial lawyer's income. She knew he was serious. He was always serious. Isla, crawling through Friday afternoon traffic towards the M3 with her children spreading crisps and orange juice over the back seat of the family Volvo, tried to remember the last time Richard had *not* been serious. Once, she was sure of it, he used to tell jokes. Jokes which actually made her laugh. Now . . . well.

They arrived in the early evening as the spring dusk lingered, reluctant to take its leave of the lengthening day. The children shot out of the car and disappeared into the garden, heedless of their mother's cries to follow her into the house. She found her grandmother in the drawing-room, surrounded by the friends her grandfather Clement used to call her Coven: tall, formidable Esther, who had come to Bambridge as a nurse during the war and never left; shy Kitty, forever distracted mother of seven and grandmother of fifteen, always trailing baskets of knitting or needlework; flirtatious, fun-loving Nancy, whose tongue could be as sharp as her heart was kind.

'The children have gone feral already, I'm afraid.' Isla kissed her grandmother's papery smooth cheek before turning to the others. Her heart sank a little. The old ladies had a look about them she knew well. They were in the middle of an argument, and she had interrupted them.

'I hope you'll make her see the light,' grunted Esther.

'You have no heart,' snapped Nancy.

'Well, you have no sense,' retorted Esther. 'I don't hold that against you.'

'Please stop quarrelling,' begged Kitty. 'It doesn't help.'

Bella gave a forlorn sigh, and they all turned towards her. She sat at the centre of her little group, presiding over a drinks tray, elegant and somehow other-worldly in a

patterned Indian shawl and her regulation dark red Chanel lipstick. 'We were talking,' she said mournfully, 'about the man from the insurance company.'

Isla suppressed a sigh of her own. The man from the insurance company was the *bête noire* of Marshwood, almost its resident ghost. Out of the corner of her eye, she glimpsed Beth and Marcus tearing through the garden towards the old fig tree in the middle of the lawn. She had driven down with them straight from school. After three hours in the car, they were beyond hunger, and wild. She felt a stab of envy for their freedom.

'Tell me what he said this time.' She laid a gentle hand over her grandmother's.

Kitty looked up from her knitting and shook her head. 'He was most unsympathetic.'

'Positively brutal,' cried Nancy. 'Although,' she added thoughtfully, 'rather good-looking. In a very *middle-class* sort of way.'

'He was utterly unrealistic,' sniffed Bella.

'He won't recognize the claim,' explained Esther. 'And he's putting the premiums up again.'

'That's rather a problem,' said Isla.

'Well yes, dear,' agreed Esther. 'It is.'

'He was cross because we didn't do what he asked after the last time, and change all the downstairs windows.'

'Well how could you, darling?' protested Nancy. 'When it is so expensive.'

'It does seem so unfair, when you think of the premiums.' Bella pouted, querulous. '*And* what I had to pay for the roof last winter.'

'And there was that little fire too, when you left the gas on.' Kitty, squinting down at her *matinée* jacket, jumped as Nancy poked her sharply in the ribs.

'Must you bring that up now?' hissed Nancy.

'The whole thing's a bloody disaster,' said Esther. 'You're going to have to move. It's not *safe* here. Today a two-bit

burglar, tomorrow an axe-murderer. Mark my words, Belle, it's a slippery slope.'

Later, once the protesting children had been put to bed and the Coven had left, Nancy and Esther still arguing, Isla sat at the foot of Bella's bed and took up Esther's point.

'You *are* going to have to think about it, you know,' she said.

'He hardly took a thing,' grumbled Bella. 'Honestly. All this fuss about a bit of Edwardian silver. He didn't even take the television.'

'No.' It was a matter of personal pride to Bella that she had not bought a new television set since watching Neil Armstrong land on the moon. 'Well, he wouldn't, would he? Realistically.'

Bella looked mutinous. 'It wasn't *me* who called the insurance company, it was Esther. *I* was all for letting it go. She's sorry now, of course. What with the premiums going up again.'

'Which brings us back to my point,' said Isla. She tried not to look at Bella as she launched into her little speech. *It's time to have a serious discussion about this, the burglary's just the tip of the iceberg, maintenance costs to think of and now the insurance going up too, what will happen when you can no longer drive, you can't stay up here on your own, not pleasant but we have to be sensible, we want what's best for you but if things go on as they are soon the property will be worthless* – the phrases drummed into her head by Richard rolled out, miserable, each one feeling like a betrayal, and she tried not to look at her grandmother, whose initial expression of incredulity had given way to one of injured pride.

'Basically, I don't think Richard's prepared to pay up much longer,' blurted Isla as she finished. 'And I don't think I can change his mind. Granna?' she asked, as Bella remained resolutely silent. 'I can sort of see his point,' she offered. 'We all love Marshwood, but . . .'

‘Richard does not love Marshwood,’ said Bella.

‘Well, no,’ conceded Isla. ‘But he’s very fond . . .’

‘He has never understood what Marshwood means to me. To us. He has no imagination.’

‘I’m not sure that’s *entirely* fair . . .’ Isla trailed off again, forced by her fundamental honesty to recognize that imagination was indeed not Richard’s strongest point. An uncomfortable silence descended on them again. Bella glared out of the window. Isla looked around the room. Her gaze stopped on the far corner where the wallpaper, giving up a decade’s battle against encroaching rot, had emphatically parted company with the wall. ‘What happened there?’ she asked

‘Damp. It’s all this rain. It’ll dry.’

‘Oh Granna . . .’ She looked beseechingly at Bella, quelling her architect’s instincts to examine the damage more closely. ‘I don’t know what to do. I love Marshwood as much as you do, but please say you’ll at least think about what I’ve said?’

She paused, apprehensive. The mutinous glint in Bella’s eye was a sure sign of a firebolt about to be delivered. Past experience had taught her that these could come from nowhere and bear little or no relevance to the subject at hand, but they usually hit home.

‘You can remind your husband,’ announced Bella, ‘that under the terms of your grandfather’s will, nobody can throw me out of this house for as long as I wish to live in it.’

‘Granna, nobody wants to . . .’

‘And you can tell him that he needn’t worry about me being so isolated any more. I didn’t want to tell you over the phone. Jack’s back. He came to tea yesterday, and he wants to see you.’

Bella had wanted to trip her up, of course, to pay her back for her perceived betrayal, but Isla had been pleased with her response. It never ceased to surprise her how, after so

many years, just the mention of Jack's name could cause her heart to skip but she had learned to conceal it well. A measured pause, a dignified acknowledgement – *really? I wonder what he's doing here* – and she had moved on, claiming fatigue. Alone in her room though, she pulled a blanket off the bed and climbed with it onto the cushioned windowsill from which she could look out over the moonlit garden to Jack's house beyond.

In Isla's mind, her childhood was divided into two clear parts. Before she was five, in London. Afterwards, at Marshwood. Before was a small flat in a red-brick building with a white porch and cracked marble steps, walks in frosty parks and rides on steamed-up buses, and afternoon naps – she remembered these clearly – when her mother painted and which smelt of turpentine. She remembered also – though she was never sure whether this was just one isolated memory, or many instances of the same thing happening all rolled together by the passing years – Callie tearing round to tidy the flat at the end of the day, a spray of perfume, a dab of lipstick, the stolid daytime nursery atmosphere of their home transformed into something different, something electric and vibrant which included her at its centre, something exciting and full of laughter which meant that Isla's father was coming home. Memories of her father were vague, prompting her to wonder whether those she had of Callie did not in fact date from a later era. Laughter, loud and sudden and clear. A smell of cigarettes and, curiously, eucalyptus. A pleasing sense of warmth and security, that everything was as it should be – though she wondered whether this too might not be a retrospective attribute.

That had been 'before'. Five unremarkable, happy years, unruffled in Isla's memory by the gradual dimming of her father's light. *Before* Daniel died, a period eventually followed by *after* the move to Marshwood, the two separated by a vague period of *in-between* which carried a

sour hospital smell and the sound of muffled crying. And then her father and the flat were gone and Callie and Isla were at Marshwood along with most of their belongings – though not their furniture – and Callie was either locked in her room or stalking over hills on her own, and her eyes were always red.

‘Your mother is Grieving,’ explained Bella when after a fortnight of this Isla enquired timidly when she was to go home. ‘Do you know what that means?’

Isla shook her head. Bella often used words she didn’t understand. It was one of the things that made her so frightening and so exciting all at once.

‘It means,’ sighed Bella, ‘that she is Depressed. We hoped it would not come to this, but we think that she should Let the Flat.’

‘Let the flat what?’ asked a baffled Isla.

‘Come over here, Isla.’ Clement’s voice was quiet and kind. Isla went to him willingly. Her grandfather was a different proposition altogether from Bella, gentle and somehow always more accessible. He patted his knee and she nestled into him, inhaling his smell of pipe smoke and sawn wood. ‘What Granna is trying to say is, how would you like to come and live with us?’

Jack Kavanagh’s parents had bought Marshwood’s old coach house from her cash-strapped grandfather in the early sixties and converted it into a handsome four-bedroom home. She had known him all her life, but she dated the beginning of their friendship to then, to the beginning of ‘after’. He was brought over for tea soon after Callie and Isla’s arrival, and after ten minutes of wriggling at the table asked if she would like to see his den.

He had built it deep in the heart of the laurel hedge which separated Marshwood from his parents’ property. The hedge appeared impenetrable from the outside but Jack dropped to the ground and crawled beneath it, followed by a silent Isla, to emerge in a small clearing concealed from prying eyes by

a thick canopy of leaves overhead and latticed branches on either side. There were two grubby cushions on the ground as well as a metal box which when opened revealed a torch, a mangled packet of Toffoes and half a bottle of orange Fanta.

‘My mum was really cross about the cushions,’ said Jack, offering her a sweet. ‘She says they’re ruined for ever and she doesn’t want them back. Is your dad dead then?’

Isla pondered this. *Dead* was not a word she had heard much in connection with her father. *Gone. Departed. Passed over. Deceased.* And yet she knew that he *was* dead, as dead as Clement’s old bull terrier who had joined all the other dogs in Marshwood’s extensive pet cemetery the previous Easter. The thought of the pet cemetery cheered her up. It hadn’t occurred to her until this moment that her father might have company on the other side.

‘Yes,’ she said. ‘He is.’

Jack took another Toffo and they chewed together for a while in meditative silence. He was a robust little boy with permanently grazed knees and dancing black eyes, always tumbling into trouble and charming his way back out of it. He was not used to this sort of situation, and recognized its call for careful words. ‘Do you mind?’ he asked at last.

‘Yes,’ she said. ‘A lot,’ she added.

Another long silence, during which Isla thought quite hard about trying not to cry, and Jack scratched around the den looking for something to do. He turned towards her when inspiration struck, brandishing a small, very grubby penknife.

‘We should be blood brothers,’ he said. ‘Since you’ll be living next door.’

When Isla started at the local school in Bambridge at the beginning of the next school year, it was with Jack at her side. When Jack’s friends teased him for being friends with a girl, he fought them. When the girls asked Isla why she was such friends with a boy, she showed them the scar on her

right hand where Jack had cut her – an ugly scar, the knife having been both very dirty and much sharper than expected. The inhabitants of Chapel St Mary soon grew so used to seeing the two children together that if ever one were to appear alone, they were invariably asked where the other was. They were known locally as the Troublesome Twosome. Most people viewed them with affection. Others – those whose orchards Jack and Isla raided for fruit, or whose flowers they picked for a dare, or who discovered that they had been assigned the roles of witch or child snatcher in the twosome's complex fantasies – muttered that they were wild and uncontrollable.

Jack never replaced her father, of course, but he did make *after* a lot easier to bear. He had a nose for trouble. Bella grumbled that he dragged Isla into it after him, but in truth she was more often a willing accomplice. Once, when they were seven, he dared her to climb the highest tree in the grounds of Marshwood, and the fire brigade had to be called out to get her down. On another occasion, they convinced a gang of Jack's visiting cousins to play pirates.

'We will be the pirates and you will be the merchant seamen,' ordered Jack.

'You can't just have two pirates and five seamen,' complained the oldest child.

'Yes we can,' glowered Isla. Jack, fearing repercussions from his father, had been uncertain about her plan to make his cousins walk the plank, but she had goaded him into helping her and two of the visiting boys had received a thorough dunking before their cries alerted any grown-ups to their plight. Jack's father had whipped him for that. Isla, as usual, had gone unpunished.

Callie, having neither Jack nor a child's stoic adaptability, fared worse than her daughter. Isla cheerfully entered the world of Marshwood, a world of dogs and her own diminutive pony, where her grandfather let her play with his wood-turning tools and gave her a plot of garden of her very

own, and her grandmother laid down arbitrary rules which were never enforced. Whereas sometimes it seemed that Callie would never recover. Her period of weeping and solitary walks soon gave way to years of restlessness. India, Thailand, Nepal, Tibet. Greenham Common, Vietnam peace marches. The only times Isla's solid little world was rocked, when the fading memories of her father flickered painfully to life, were when her mother left and when she returned. Departures were always tearful and full of self-justifying explanations Isla did not understand. Homecomings were ecstatic but, once the presents had been given and the stories told, fast followed by a return to brooding anger.

When Isla was nine years old, Callie went to Andalusia on a painter's retreat. She came home fizzing with enthusiasm to announce that she was leaving England for good in order to settle in a small village in the Alpujarras.

'Leaving England?' Bella looked baffled. She had been washing one of the dogs when Callie, with characteristically catastrophic timing, made her announcement. She froze, one soapy hand clasped around a brush, the other restraining a sodden flat-coated retriever bitch. Isla, whose job it was to speak soothingly to the dogs during their monthly baths, looked up curiously. 'But why?'

The retriever broke loose. Isla was sent to catch her and tore down the flagstone passage after a trail of damp footprints, pondering the implications of Callie's announcement. It was the end of June, nearing the end of term. Days were long and adults indulgent. Jack and Isla, playing in Marshwood's garden long after their allotted bedtime, hid in the bushes surrounding the terrace and tried to eavesdrop on Callie, Bella and Clement. *I need to get away . . . can't forget him . . . can't move on . . .* This was Callie. *But are you sure this is what will make you happy?* Clement. *And what about the child?* Bella.

Callie, it appeared, could not cope with the child, and asked that she remain at Marshwood for a time. She would

come back for her when she felt stronger. For now, she argued, it was better for everybody for them to remain apart.

As Bella expressed disapproval and Clement gently questioned Callie's judgement, Isla reached out for Jack's hand. He held it firmly. She crept closer and did not let go. Callie never did come back for her.

Their world changed when they turned eleven and were sent to separate boarding-schools but even then distance did not get in the way of their friendship. At thirteen, he convinced her to drink a bottle of Martini stolen from his parents' drinks cabinet, then held her hair out of her face as she threw it back up. She returned the favour during the following holiday, when he tried to smoke one of Clement's cigars. And at fifteen, when Clement suffered a devastating heart attack and Marshwood was plunged into mourning, Jack broke out of school and hitch-hiked home to comfort Isla, bringing her a box of toffees stolen from his dorm mate and marching her out of the house to the top of Pater Noster where he sat beside her and listened as she howled.

'Everybody leaves,' wept Isla. 'Daddy, Mum, Grandpapa. Everybody.'

'I'm here,' he said. And then, because it seemed the right thing to do, he took her in his arms. She rested her head on his shoulder and somehow, from deep within, began to smile.

Deep down, she had always known they were meant to be together. Two more years passed, two years in which they both came home less often, two years marked by exams and holidays divided between Marshwood and the occasional visit to Callie in Spain, two years during which Isla passed O levels with flying colours before setting her cap at a Cambridge scholarship, while Jack ignored his schoolwork and began to experiment with drugs. Two years in which the feeling born on the hill that day blossomed into something else, something she kept secret and hidden and

did not acknowledge even to herself until that final summer. Her love for him had exploded rapturously on the last day of the holidays, when she followed Jack through Marshwood's grounds down to the woods below, along the stream and around the bottom of Pater Noster along an alley of beeches to the small private lake which lay beyond, where they stripped down to their swimming-costumes in accordance with the challenge laid down the previous evening.

She hesitated on the edge of the lake, her toes curling with revulsion as her feet sank into soft, fine mud. They had never done this before. She toyed with the idea of calling the whole thing off, but the thought of losing face was worse than that of the water.

'Ready?' She nodded. *As I'll ever be.* He gave the signal and she hurled herself in.

Blinding water. Choking, a mistimed breath. Lungs burning, body sweating despite the cold. The strong, earthy smell of the lake. The conviction that she must win. He was faster but lost speed on the turn when he reached the other side, and she gained on him on the return straight. She threw herself onto the shore seconds before him and lay on the dry hard ground gasping for breath. When she opened her eyes he was lying on his back next to her, laughing.

'I won!' she beamed.

He turned to look at her and smiled.

'You won.'

A dog barked in the distance, but his eyes never left her face.

The dog barked again and the owner of the lake arrived, yelling at them, *can't you read* and *this is private*, and they had gathered their clothes, shaking with helpless laughter as they tried to run and pull on shoes at the same time. Isla's hand was in Jack's as they ran through the sweet coconut smell of the gorse in bloom, brushing aside the tall ferns under which they had hidden as children to emerge on top of the hill, still in their swimwear, where they collapsed

against the familiar grassed-over remains of the Roman hill-fort. And then that gesture. Jack's hand cupping her face, his thumb brushing her mouth. His voice, hoarse and full of wonder, saying her name. Her own hand coming up to meet his. Leaning in towards him, the wind caressing her bare limbs, feeling that at any moment it might pick her up and she could fly with it over the hills she knew and loved so well.

She had kissed other boys before, more out of curiosity than anything else, but this was different. His mouth on hers was soft, almost hesitant. A caress, more than a kiss. He moved away from her and she wound her hands around his neck to keep him close. 'Isla,' he repeated, and then his mouth was searching for hers again, and her hands were buried in his thick dark hair, and his were on her back, pressing her against him. She fell back against the soft springy grass. He rolled on top of her and groaned as she moved her hips instinctively under his. She gasped as his hand closed over her breast.

'Should I stop?'

She shook her head. He brought his mouth down to her breast and she thought she might faint. His hand crept lower down, pushing aside the fabric of her swimsuit. It occurred to her that perhaps she *ought* to stop him. Then, as his fingers got to work, she gave up any effort at resistance.

It never crossed her mind that he might not feel the same way as she did. Isla floated off the hill and back to Marshwood in a daze. Back at school, she wrote him long letters describing her feelings for him. The moment when she knew she loved him, the reasons she loved him, the way he laughed, the way he cried, the way he walked, the way he was always there for her, the feel of his mouth on hers, of his hands caressing her body, how she couldn't wait for half-term, how she wished they were at the same school. Even his replies – less frequent, more guarded – didn't ring

any alarm bells. Despite her general ignorance about boys, she knew enough not to expect the same level of emotional articulacy from them as she was capable of. The fact that this was Jack, who had never hidden an emotion from her in his life, she refused to see.

They both went home for half-term at the tail end of October, Isla arriving a day before Jack. She could not be still on the morning he was due back and Bella sent her out for a walk. It was a rainy, blustery day. Isla, who always lost her own jackets, donned an old Barbour of Clement's, called the dogs – Bella still kept two in those days, a setter and a Border terrier – and set off for Pater Noster. She walked slowly at first, not wanting the pounding of blood in her ears or her ragged breath as she climbed to interfere with the sound of a car in the lane below. But the dogs were young and energetic. The terrier, Petra, was little more than a puppy. Isla threw sticks for her most of the way up the hill. At the top, tiring of the game, she ran with her up and down the tussocks made in the hill by the old fort. The setter, who was known as the Duchess, emerged from a hedgerow bearing half a fallen tree, making Isla laugh out loud. A soft, steady rain was falling, and her jacket did not have a hood. She raked her fingers through her hair, sweeping it back so that it lay plastered against her skull. Rain trickled down her face, and when she looked at her hands after wiping it off she saw that they were streaked with the bright blue mascara she had applied that morning. She stood still for a moment, her face turned upwards towards the sky, loving the feel of the rain and the sweet smell of the wet grass. Then she shivered as the water began to seep into her collar, whistled to the dogs and began her descent back towards Marshwood. The incline was steep, the ground wet, the going slow. She slipped as she neared the end of the path. Petra, thinking she was still playing, leaped on her, leaving muddy paw prints on her jacket. Isla laughed. And then she heard the car.

It was him, she knew it was him. Pushing the dog aside, giving no thought to her appearance, she ran the remaining distance down to Marshwood. Over the years, she and Jack had expanded their old den to create a narrow passageway between the two properties. Isla flew across the lawn towards it, the dogs racing ahead of her, the Duchess' ears streaming in the wind. She heard their joyous barking and the cries which greeted them a good half-minute before she emerged from the hedge herself, panting but radiant – and froze.

An unfamiliar Morris Minor had just pulled up to the front door. Isla hung back, uncertain. She had expected him to return alone with his parents, but Clive and Tanya Kavanagh were standing in the porch, simultaneously waving to the passengers of the Morris Minor and shooing away the over-enthusiastic dogs now bouncing around them, shaking water out of their sopping fur. Perhaps this was not Jack come home after all, but a random visitor. The door to the passenger seat opened. Two feet swung out, followed by legs of unfeasible length, a torso in a lumberjack's coat, a shaggy crop of dark hair. It *was* Jack. But now out of the driver's side a girl was emerging, a girl with a mane of ash blond hair swinging down her back, a girl in a tailored leather jacket and impeccable jeans, who walked around the car with perfect composure and slipped her hand into Jack's before taking the few steps which separated them from the house.

Isla gasped and tried to creep away. Not so the Duchess, who adored Jack. Breaking away from his parents, she bounded over to him and leaped straight at his chest to lick his face. The girl screamed. The Duchess licked her too. Jack's father roared and turned towards the hedge.

'Isla! Get these monsters off my property! I swear to God, one day I'm going to shoot them.'

'They're only saying hello.' Isla slunk out of the shadow of the hedge, refusing to meet anybody's eyes.