

It wasn't the first night Layah had heard the whistling – but it was the first time she had followed it. She had been sleeping badly ever since they had arrived at the cottage by the lake. Perhaps it was the echoing silence of the countryside, nothing like the familiar hum of London at night. Perhaps it was sharing a room with her younger sister, Izzie, who snuffled in her sleep. Or maybe she was still sore at her mum for changing their holiday plans and dragging them to this soggy corner of nowhere.

It always started at midnight. At first, Layah thought it was birdsong – a high, thin sound that became a melody, rising and falling. And each night, it returned. Layah hadn't mentioned the whistling to her mum or Izzie. It made her shiver under the duvet but she would roll her pillow over her ears and eventually drift off to sleep.

Tonight, though - their third night in the cottage -

the whistling was different.

Layah's eyes were open but she couldn't remember waking or falling asleep. She lay in bed, her muscles tensed, listening. When the whistling came, it was more confident than before, wild and tuneful all at once. Her skin prickled, the way it used to during Babcia's bedtime stories about ghouls and witches. But Layah had stopped believing in monsters long ago. She refused to let her imagination run away with itself; fanciful daydreaming was Izzie's talent. Layah was going to find out where the whistling was coming from and silence her irrational fears.

She padded across the floorboards and unhooked the latch on the bedroom door. Out in the corridor, she peered into the pool of darkness below. The whistling was louder now, seeping through the house from somewhere outside. Layah creaked down the stairs, squinting against the patchy gloom. It sounded like it was coming from the back garden. As Layah pushed open the kitchen door, it squeaked.

The whistling stopped.

Her heart was thumping as she gazed across the murky kitchen towards the window. The garden was a mess of overgrown rose bushes and the sky was grey, offering little light, but she was certain there was a shape in the middle of the lawn. She moved closer to the window. There was something out there and it was human in outline, Layah was sure of it. Her fingers reached for the switch to the outdoor lamp – light sprang into the garden and there, staring straight back at Layah, was an old woman with blank, yellow eyes and a hungry, twisted smile. Layah screamed.

'Layah!' The kitchen light burst on and her mum came skidding into the room. 'Layah, what's wrong?'

Layah stumbled back to the window. The outdoor lamp flooded the back lawn. There was no one there.

'Mum, I - I thought I saw someone – just there.' Layah was breathing too fast to speak.

Her mum scanned the garden.

'I'm sure it was nothing,' she whispered.

'I thought - I thought I heard whistling-'

'Whistling?' Her mum seized Layah's shoulders. 'What did she look like? Layah, tell me what you saw.'

'It was a woman – she had these huge yellow eyes and long white hair,' stammered Layah, alarmed by the panic in her mum's face. Her mum released her and checked the lock on the back door.

'Mum, what's wrong?' Layah demanded. 'Was she real?'

Layah's mum turned and smiled, her bright eyes sombre.

'There's no one there, Layah. It was just a dream. Nothing to worry about.'

Layah wanted to argue but her head felt woolly with tiredness. Her mum placed an arm around her shoulders and shushed her upstairs and back into bed.

The whistling did not return. As Layah curled up under the covers, she heard only the hushing of the rose bushes and the lone cawing of a bird.



Layah woke to a clattering of spoons and cereal bowls from downstairs. For a moment it felt like she was back in Babcia's house – on the camp bed in the study, surrounded by towers of books. Layah opened her eyes and saw the faded beige wallpaper of their holiday cottage and the grey light of Lowesdale. Her heart sank.

This time last year, they'd all been in Poland – her, Izzie, their mum and dad – on a proper family holiday visiting their grandmother. Babcia made every meal a celebration. For breakfast, they would make *pierogi* on the kitchen table; Babcia was always in charge, Layah and Izzie filling the doughy parcels with sauerkraut and mushrooms, their mum boiling them and their dad frying them in butter. They ate in their aprons, flour on their cheeks, all laughing at one of Babcia's stories.

This was their first summer without her and already everything was changing.

Layah's home in London was suddenly full of closed

doors, snappy conversations and hurried meals. No one seemed to have any time any more. Layah's family no longer had film nights, weekend outings or Sunday lunches. And Layah found herself spending more time alone in her bedroom – her parents were wrapped up in their squabbles and Izzie had her books.

Layah rolled over and checked her phone. No messages. Clearly her school friends were too busy having fun to notice she'd gone. She threw down her phone and opened the box on the bedside table. It was Babcia's final gift: an amber pendant on a gold chain. One for each of her granddaughters. Layah fastened the necklace around her neck, grabbed a jumper and headed downstairs.

Rook Cottage was – to put it mildly – cosy. As you entered one room you were already halfway into the next, and every inch was stuffed with flowery furniture. Izzie was reading at the kitchen table, a spoon of cornflakes dangling in one hand. Her dirty-blonde hair was pulled into two unbrushed plaits and she was blissfully unaware that the ends were dangling in her orange juice. Outside, Layah could see their mum untangling the washing line, the garden flowers nodding in the wind. A shiver ran through Layah, as she remembered her dream – that woman with yellow eyes smirking at her through the window. Layah gave her head a little shake.

She sat down next to Izzie and filled a bowl with chopped banana, cornflakes, chocolate flakes and Nutella – a family speciality – and tried not to think about her nightmare.

'You need the honey?' said Izzie, handing it over without glancing up from the page.

'Thanks.' Layah grinned. 'So what's new?'

'Reading.'

'Not much then,' muttered Layah, prodding her cereal as gloom engulfed her again.

This Lake District holiday might have been less boring if Layah's younger sister wasn't a walking bookstand. Today's book choice had a magical creature splashed across the cover.

There was a startled cry from the garden and Layah jumped as a mass of blackbirds took flight and the washing line whipped out of their mum's hands. Their mum threw a mouthful of bad words at the birds then stomped indoors. Ren Bellford wore a silk scarf to tie up her wild, dark hair and as usual she looked effortlessly radiant. Layah and Izzie both agreed it was detrimental to their education having a mum most of their teachers fancied. Their mum had insisted on giving her daughters her own surname, 'the responsibility of an only child', she'd always claimed. Izzie looked like their dad – small and pale – but Layah had her mum's dark hair and eyes.

'I can't get the washing line pole to stand up!' announced Mum, shutting the back door behind her. 'We'll have to dry our clothes in the oven!'

'Bad idea,' advised Layah quickly. Their mum could burn pasta, so who knew what she'd do to their socks!

Their mum went to the fridge and took a glug of orange juice from the carton. 'I've fixed the hot water,' she continued, 'but now the toilet's making funny noises – maybe I shouldn't have kicked it . . .'

'We can help, you know,' said Layah, 'we're not babies.'

'Oh, I know.' Mum smiled. 'But I've got it. You two should be having a nice time. It's the summer holidays after all!'

'It's not really a holiday, though . . . without Dad,' said Izzie quietly.

Their mum's face crumpled as she looked at her daughters. Layah noticed dark circles under her eyes.

'You know how important your dad's work is to him,' Mum sighed. 'If a crusty old scientist in Denmark is giving a speech about ferrets with fevers or whateverit-is, your dad says he has to be there!'

'I thought we were all going out for dinner on my birthday,' said Layah, 'to that fancy Polish restaurant with the red tablecloths. That was the plan.'

'Plans change,' said Mum lightly. 'We can still celebrate your birthday here – it's not until next week.'

'We're going to be here for my birthday?' Layah groaned and hunched over her cereal bowl.

If she was going to have her thirteenth birthday in the middle of nowhere, she'd rather just ignore it.

'But Layah, how are you feeling?' said Mum. 'After your sleepwalking last night.'

'I think I'm all right,' said Layah. 'It was just a bit ... creepy.'

Her mum's brow furrowed and Izzie lowered her book.

'It doesn't matter!' Layah added breezily. 'Dad says too much cheese gives you bad dreams. It must have been all those cheesy nibbles we had last night. Anyway, what are we doing today?' She looked at her mum.'Maybe we could all go out for scones?'

But her mum wasn't listening; she was busy putting away the cereal boxes. Layah felt a swell of annoyance.

'Yes, you go to the village,' said Mum vaguely, 'I've

got a couple of chores to do here first then we're meeting Henry and his son at the Boating Centre at two.'

'Do we have to?'

Layah rolled her eyes at Izzie, who grimaced in agreement.

'Henry is one of my oldest school friends, Layah. He didn't need to lend us this cottage,' chided Mum, 'and all I ask from you is a *teaspoon* of politeness.'

'Does cake count as lunch?' interrupted Izzie.

'Yes, fine!' said Mum distractedly. 'But make sure you eat an apple later. Layah, here you go.'

Her mum passed Layah a twenty-pound note and her fingers brushed against the amber necklace. Izzie was wearing her necklace too, the pendant glinting like a drop of swirling sunset.

'It's lovely that you're still wearing them,' said Mum softly.

'Of course.' Layah frowned. 'We'll always wear them.'

Her mum touched it gently before straightening up. 'Perfect! Now off you go!' she said, cheery once more. 'You should be outside having fun.'

Layah wished she wouldn't pretend. Why couldn't her mum just admit it? Admit that the only reason they'd left in such a hurry was because she was running away from her marriage. Layah didn't know if their family would ever get back to normal again.

The hazy rain cut through the sunlight as Layah and Izzie strode down the winding road which led to the village of Lowesdale. The sprawling lake glittered below

- Tree

them and ahead the craggy mountain face of the Lowesdale Giant stood up bold against the sky. This was their fourth day of being chucked out of the cottage. Their mum hadn't invited them on her long walks – 'I just want to clear my head,' she'd protested, 'you'd be bored!' – but had instructed them to explore the village and always stick together. Layah knew there was no point complaining and she couldn't let Izzie go out on her own.

'Layah, when are we going home?' said Izzie, as soon as Rook Cottage was out of sight behind them. 'We'll be back before school starts, right?'

Layah kicked a pebble into the ditch but said nothing.

'If we're staying until your birthday, I might miss the Year Seven induction day!' Izzie said, hurrying to keep pace with Layah. 'If I miss it, I won't know where anything is – what if I don't get my library pass?'

Layah snorted. Izzie had avoided the bullies in primary school, but secondary school would be different. Teenagers noticed things. Layah knew they didn't like you to be different. She felt a hot lump in her throat at the thought of the mouthy boys in her year laughing at Izzie's odd socks or her green rucksack.

'And I was going to buy my new schoolbooks with Dad,' continued Izzie, 'I don't want to miss that.'

'Get used to it,' muttered Layah.

She ripped off a leaf from the hedgerow and started tearing it into pieces, a knot of annoyance tightening inside her.

'But Dad's coming to join us?' pressed Izzie. 'He's still coming, isn't he, Layah?'

'That's it!' Layah snapped. 'Enough with the stupid questions!'

She marched ahead, tugging up her jacket collar and crossing her arms across her chest.

The truth was, they had barely heard from their dad since he'd gone to the conference in Denmark. Yet their mum was still acting like they were on a jolly holiday and everything was fine! Layah heard Izzie's footsteps flopping behind her and felt a rush of guilt. She shouldn't have shouted. It wasn't Izzie's fault that she was an oblivious bookworm. Layah crunched around another bend in the lane, glaring at the soggy scenery until she saw something which made her stumble to a stop.

Layah turned as Izzie came around the corner, looking at her shoes.

'Izzie, don't look behind me. Close your eyes! Just don't look at the hedge.'

'What is it?' cried Izzie, as Layah threw out an arm to shield her view.

'It's an animal. It's dead. Just don't look at it.'

Izzie clamped her eyes shut and she felt her way down the road, Layah's hand tight on her arm. Layah wished she too could look away, wished she could un-see it, but it was impossible. The creature was tangled in the thorns of the hedge – a dash of brown disturbing the dark green leaves, its wings outstretched as if frozen midflight. There was a dark stain on its fluffy chest.

'What animal?' asked Izzie.

'A bird.'

Izzie shuddered and quickened her pace.

'It's OK,' said Layah, 'we're passing it. Just round this bend.'

Layah tore her eyes away from the poor creature. It felt cruel to leave it there, strung up like a puppet, but she couldn't bear the thought of approaching it. When they reached the bridge into the village, Layah let go of Izzie's arm. Izzie looked up at her, white-faced.

'Was it hit by a car?' whispered Izzie.

'I don't think so. I think it must have been killed by a fox or something.'

Izzie looked a little pale.

'Hey, let's go to the Boat Café,' said Layah, trying to sound cheerful. 'I think the next cake we need to try is peanut-butter fudge. You in?'

Izzie gave a small smile, which Layah returned. Without looking back, the two sisters hurried towards the lake.



Lowesdale Village was an in-between place, halfforgotten amongst the rolling fells of the Lakes. Ramblers, country cyclists and the occasional holidaying family stopped off in Lowesdale on their way somewhere else. The village high street boasted a grocer, bookshop, the Old Singer Tea Room and a post office selling doorstops shaped like dogs, and biscuits shaped like sheep.

At the edge of Lowesdale Lake there was a café which looked out over the water and the sleepy Boating Centre, which had more boats than customers. The Boat Café advertised an eccentric selection of cakes and Izzie had set them the challenge of sampling the whole menu. Their top favourites so far had included marmalade pavlova, sherbet and raspberry sponge and upside-down coconut cake.

Layah headed for the table by the window while

Izzie veered towards the counter. Layah gazed out at the bobbing boats. She couldn't get rid of the image of the little bird in the hedge. Those bright eyes in that tiny head were scorched into her mind's eye.

Izzie clattered back to the table with a giant slab of peanut-butter fudge cake and two forks. Izzie reached towards her rucksack for her book but then she paused, closed it again, and looked up at Layah.

'Why would a fox leave a bird in the hedge?' said Izzie slowly. 'Why wouldn't it just eat it?'

'I don't know . . .' Layah hesitated then added, 'but let's not talk about it. I don't want to upset you.'

In truth, Layah was still feeling a little queasy herself.

'I'm fine, honestly, Layah. It was just a bit of a shock.'

'Come on, let's eat!' Layah took a mouthful of cake. 'I reckon the raspberry sponge has got competition!'

Izzie was soon judging the new cake from squishiness to sweetness, and Layah watched her intently. A few years ago, even mentioning a dead animal would have brought Izzie close to tears. But she was eleven now, Layah kept forgetting that. It was as if her younger sister was catching up with her. The thought made Layah feel slightly less alone.

Izzie was just considering asking for chocolate sauce

when Layah noticed that the light had faded. The coloured flags on the boats seemed dulled and the gnawing of the waves had gone silent. A shadow crept over Lowesdale.

Then Layah heard the whistling. A piercing, unworldly tune. Her breath caught in her throat. She looked back at Izzie, who was blabbing away as if nothing had happened, but Layah definitely heard something.

And then she saw her.

The woman from her nightmare was standing in the entrance of the Boat Café. She was staring at Layah. Her face, hollow and chewed with age, was contorted with a smile. Her eyes were not as huge, nor as luminously yellow, as they had been the night before, but there was a lemon tinge to them which made Layah's skin crawl. They stared at each other. Then the woman whirled away, darting out of the door.

'Layah! What's wrong?'

Layah had pushed back the table and was stumbling through the forest of chairs towards the door. She heard Izzie call again but didn't look round.

Layah burst out of the café and looked up the street. She could see the old woman weaving through a straggle of local farmers. Layah hesitated for a second – Izzie was still calling her from inside the café – then sprinted off, but the woman was too far ahead and moving extraordinarily fast, her white hair billowing out behind her. Layah saw a final flash of those yellow eyes as the woman disappeared down a side street.

Layah, panting, reached the corner and dashed round it. The street was empty. She jogged past a row of sleepy cottages; a striped cat watched her from a window, but there was no sign of the woman. She stumbled to a walk and finally stopped. The street had opened up on to a main road out into the countryside. She was all alone.

Layah looked up and saw a looming stone building with iron railings penning in a courtyard beyond. Skylarks quarrelled on the rooftop and the windows were blank and lifeless. A sign hung on the gate:

## Lowesdale School for Young Ladies

A silver sports car screeched past, horn blaring, and Layah tripped backwards out of the road. She gazed across the street, still hypnotised by the school.

'Layah! Layah!' Izzie was charging towards her, the remains of the cake clutched in a napkin. 'Layah, what's going on?'

'It wasn't a dream,' Layah cried, 'it was the woman.

Didn't you see her? She was at the café – long white hair and those yellow eyes!'

'What woman?' Izzie's eyes were round.

'Last night I had this dream. I thought I'd dreamed that I saw a woman in the garden but I've just seen her. She's real! Only she wasn't a normal person— No! What am I saying?' Layah was struggling to keep up with her racing thoughts. 'No, of course she was a normal person!'

'You saw a woman in the garden?' said Izzie shakily. 'Who was she? What did she want?'

'I don't know,' replied Layah, 'but I need to find out.'

Layah looked up at the windows of Lowesdale School; the place seemed deserted. Had the woman meant for Layah to follow her here? She had no idea. Questions were pinging around her head. But one fact had screwed itself into Layah's mind: she hadn't been sleepwalking. She hadn't been dreaming. Her mum had lied to her.



The beam of the dying moon winked off the window, as the girl eased up the pane and slipped over the sill. She stumbled as her bare feet landed on cold stone. She stiffened for a second but the patter of the rain outside had masked her movements. Her eyes traced the room, shrouded in creeping shadows. Her heart beat furiously, but it was not the darkness she feared. She was used to darkness.

The girl licked her fingers; she could still taste that sweet, sticky something she had taken from the shop. The owner would never suspect a break-in. She had ways of making things look natural. Anything – a sudden gust of wind or a flailing branch – could have caused the window to jerk open. Chocolate: that was what had been written on the jar. She'd remember that.

The girl looked across the room. There was a door at the other end, half camouflaged in the thick blackness. She took a step forward. Stealth is a game of patience. She moved without sound; the drum of her heart and murmur of the rain trembled in her ears. One more step. The door loomed into view; she reached for the handle but – too late!

A hand shot out of the darkness and clamped her wrist like a vice. The girl was pulled, half thrown, back into the room and hit the floor with a crack. She twisted, cringing up at the face which reared above her.

'No one saw me,' stammered the girl, 'no one will know! I just wanted to see . . .'

'Spare me the tears, you ungrateful girl!' spat the Other. 'You know our rules! You dare to venture outside without permission, when you know what you could be risking!'

The girl could only babble in response. The Other dropped her wrist in disgust.

'Look at you, fool. Where is your pride? Stand up and face me, instead of sniffling and whining.'

The girl scrambled to her feet, rolling back her shoulders and raising her chin. The Other observed her through narrowed eyes.

'You are certain you were not seen?'

'Yes – yes, of course,' whispered the girl, 'I can be fast.'

There was an icy pause.

'If that is the case, then I am impressed. Indeed,

you are improving in your studies,' the Other said. 'Perhaps you are ready for greater challenges. The timing is right, after all.'

The girl's eyes darted up. 'Yes. Yes, I'm ready to prove myself!'

'We shall see,' said the Other. 'For now, go to your room and do not leave it until I call you. Know that if you ever disobey me again there will be consequences.'

The words embedded themselves like spikes in the silence. The girl stood her ground.

'I shall not disappoint you.'

The girl looked up, her neck arching, her yellow eyes blazing in the solemn gloom.

