



WYRDWOOD

'If Stephen King went on holiday to a remote settlement on the Isle of Man, something very like *Wyrddwood* is what would have emerged. A small community with secrets galore, a growing sense of the uncanny pervading the mundane, flawed characters we truly care about, *Wyrddwood* has them all, along with the chills and thrills to keep you turning those pages. But most importantly, this is a book built on deep characterisation. Jobling invests his creative energies in both the good and wicked, and so we feel involved in their fates.'

ANTHONY MCGOWAN, author of *Lark*, winner of
the Carnegie Medal for Writing

'Dragging dark fairy tales kicking and screaming into the present day, *Wyrddwood* is proof that Curtis is a masterful storyteller who quickens the pulse and chills the blood.'

PHIL EARLE, author of *When The Sky Falls*, winner of the
British Book Awards Children's Book of the Year



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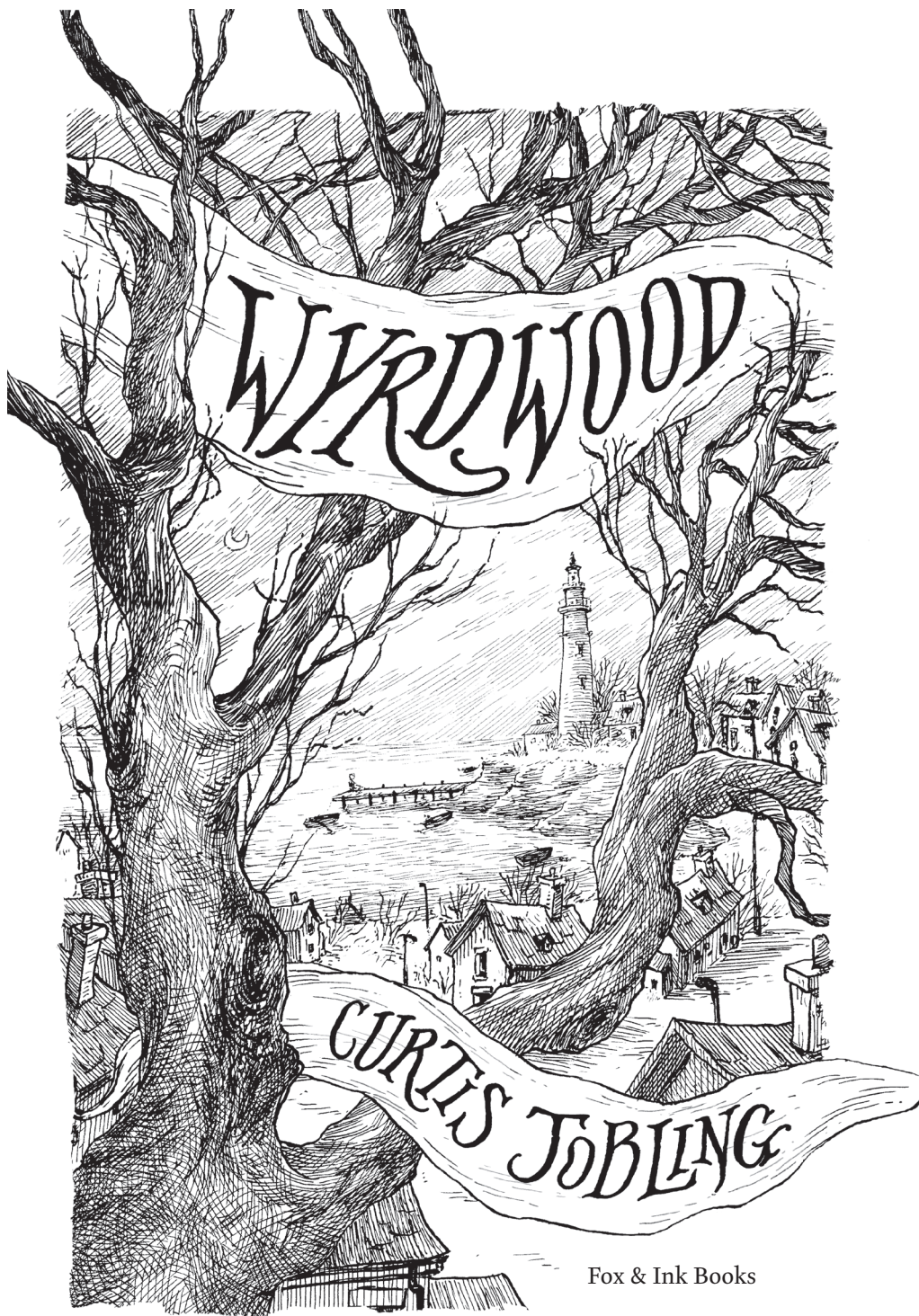
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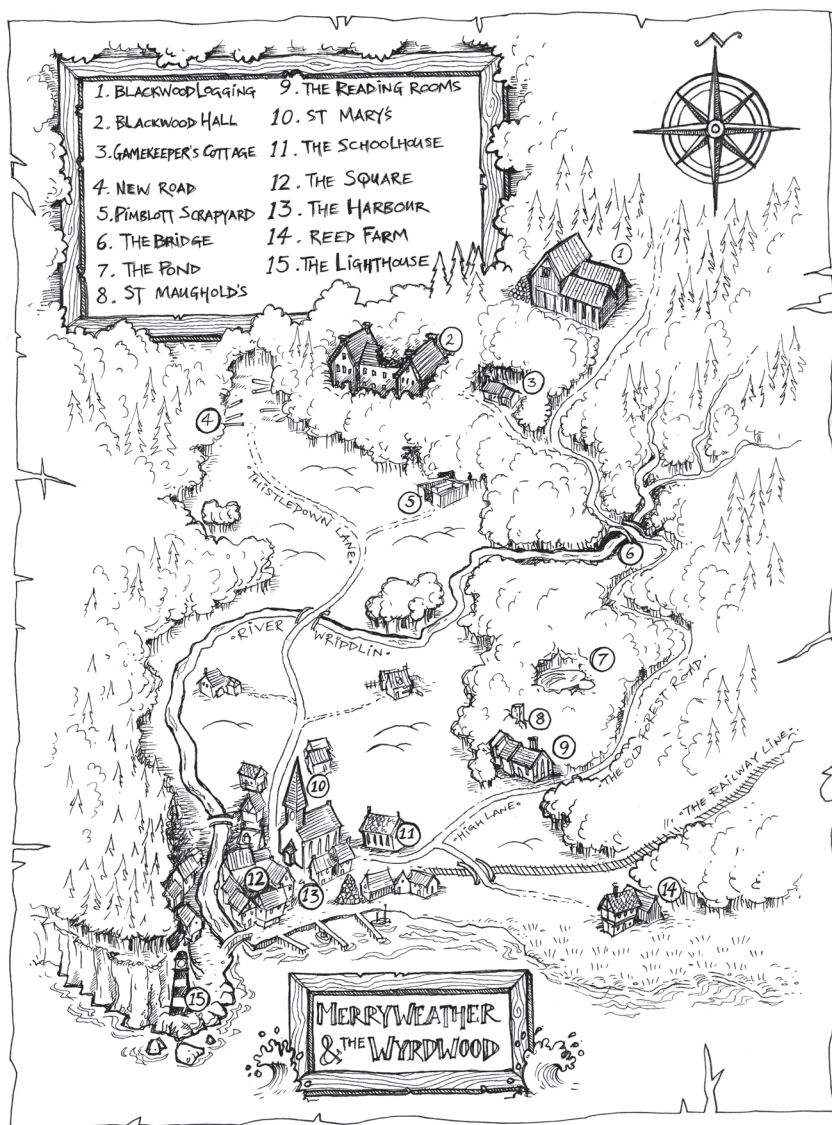
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*For the Tuesday Night Players –
Andy, Ian, Mark and Nick*

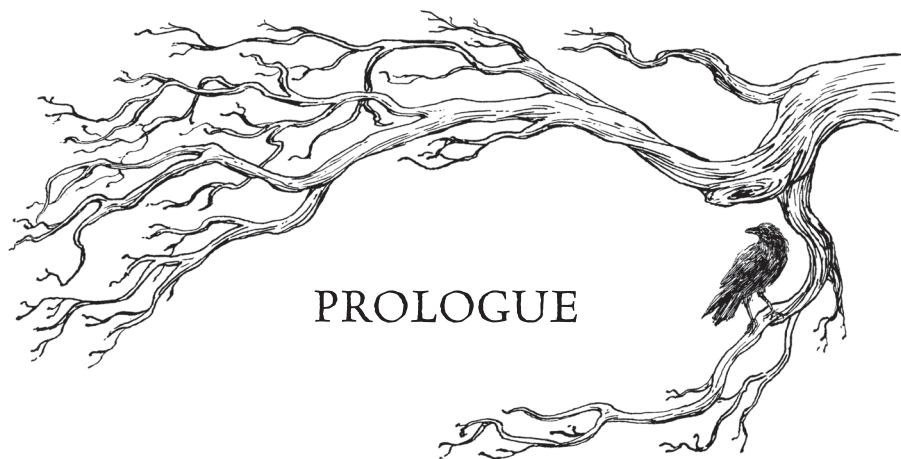












PROLOGUE

ALPHA'S PAWS KICKED UP THE LEAVES, SHOWERS of red, brown and gold thrown high in his wake. Sam Harper watched the dog go, pursuing a rabbit with boundless energy and hopeless optimism. He envied how simple life was for the hound, as it scampered over a nearby rise.

Strictly speaking, Alpha was Kiki's dog, but with his daughter away at boarding school the task of training the young dog had fallen to Sam. As an author who spent hours in front of his computer all day, he couldn't complain; an hour-long yomp through the Wyrddwood usually resolved any writer's block he was experiencing and put a smile on his face in the process.

A harsh wind suddenly whipped at his back, snapping against his overcoat. He turned his waxed collar up as leaves took flight from the forest floor, briefly whirling about him in a vortex. Sam looked around, realising he'd lost sight of his dog, and sound of him too. The forest was quiet but for birdsong and the breeze teasing the branches.

Sam quickened his step, heading off up the rise where he'd

last seen the collie. The ground underfoot was mulch, the fallen autumn leaves already decomposing, making his ascent slippery and slow-going. Reaching the summit, Sam found Alpha a couple of metres down the slope. The dog was 'on point', his nose aimed straight ahead in the direction of the nearby logging road that cut through the forest.

"What on earth's gotten into you?"

Alpha barked three times, harsh and loud, and Sam followed his gaze.

Whoever the woman was, she didn't respond to Alpha's barking, her back turned to the man and his dog. Her blonde, breeze-tossed tresses flashed like spun gold in dawn's autumn light, while in her fist she gripped a long twig, her knuckles white and tense. She stood in an apparent trance, strangely motionless in the middle of the Old Forest Road. At first glance Sam thought her a ghost, for a shimmering glow seemed to radiate from her. A second later, and with his eyes focusing, Sam realised it was the woman's skin that shone, pale as alabaster, from head to toe. And from head to toe was no exaggeration, for Sam now saw the woman was completely naked. The wind caused her trailing hair to rise and fall, coiling about her with a life of its own.

What was she doing out in the cold, naked and alone? Was she lost?

"Hello there!" shouted Sam. "Are you all right?"

There was no reply.

Has she even heard me?

Beyond the woman was a hairpin bend in the road, a great

bank of trees obscuring the route ahead. Not hidden from view for Sam, though. From his vantage point he could see clouds of diesel exhaust following a Blackwood timber wagon as it departed the lumber yard. He could hear the low growl of its engine as it now rumbled into view. Where the woman was standing, she was entirely hidden from the driver's perspective in his cab and would only be visible when he rounded the sharp bend.

"You need to get off the road!"

Sam began walking, and then to run, painfully aware the woman wasn't reacting to his shouts. Alpha bounced through the treeline, barking with agitation and rising panic, adding his voice to his master's. The wagon was closer, its thunderous engine causing birds to take flight from the nearby trees.

"Move!"

Sam's cry was more of a shriek now. He stumbled up the road's embankment, the dirty exhaust smoke rising over the treetops as the eighteen-wheeler approached the blind corner.

The woman didn't move.

The logging truck appeared around the bend, filling the road, the woman's shining white form in bright contrast against the filthy metal cab. Sam's legs powered him on as he dived, scooping her up in his arms. Rolling clear of the speeding vehicle, her body provided no resistance, her frame light as a feather. The trucker's horn blared its warning too late, but it didn't matter; the two were clear.

Both Sam and the woman tumbled down the embankment, leaves flying in their wake. Alpha bounded after them, yelping with concern. Sam threw an arm out to grab a sapling, slowing their

progress before they ended up in a muddy brook. His heart raced, blood surging, hammering through his head like a pneumatic drill. His mouth was dry, adrenalin working its strange magic on him.

The woman lay limp, unconscious. Alpha padded up to them, nudging her with his wet, black nose. Sam brushed him away, placing his palm over her forehead. She was burning up, her skin warm to the touch. He pulled at the end of the twig she held, surprised to discover her grip was as strong as iron, even though she was out cold. He looked back up the slope to the road, but to his dismay saw no sign of the lorry driver returning, let alone stopping to check they were all right. Taking off his coat, Sam wrapped it about the naked woman, pulling the wax jacket tight about her torso. With cold, tattered fingertips he fastened the buttons closed along its length.

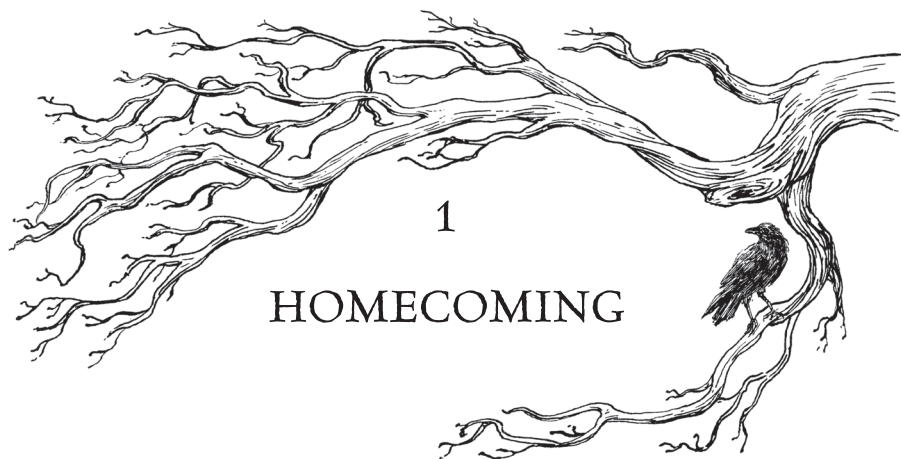
Picking her up, her head lolling against his chest, Sam inhaled the scent of fresh flowers that spoke of spring meadows. It wasn't the last time something about the woman would strike him as odd, especially in the dying throes of autumn. Setting off through the woods, the ghost-white woman cradled in his arms, he noticed the birds and squirrels providing an audience in the trees, sat in branches on high, silently watching them pass by.

"Come," he called back to Alpha.

The dog didn't immediately follow. He stared into the woods and released a low growl, a parting shot at some unseen menace. Then Alpha was off, close to Sam Harper's heel as his master made his way home through the dark of the forest.







HOMECOMING

THE WIPERS SLAPPED BACK AND FORTH, failing to clear the endless snowfall. Pristine flakes floated before the car, illuminated by the headlights, their passage through the night hypnotic and haunting. The girl bounced in the centre of the back seat, feeling every bump on the twisting forest road. The twins were either side of her in their baby car seats; her brother fast asleep, her sister quite the opposite. The baby let loose a wail of protest.

“She’s off again,” said the girl.

Their mother didn’t reply. One hand clutched the wheel, the other hovering over the radio, fingers punching buttons, seeking out a station. A familiar tune suddenly burst through the speakers.

“It was Christmas Eve, babe, in the drunk tank. An old man said to me, ‘Won’t see another one’...”

Their mother glanced over her shoulder at the children, still gripping the wheel, a hopeful smile flashing across her moonlit face.

“Better?”

“Still crying,” replied the girl.

“Not a fan of fairytales, eh?”

Her mother reached over to the passenger seat and rummaged through her handbag. “Hang on, sweetheart.”

The girl turned to her baby sister, placed a comforting hand upon her brow and whispered soothing words, though they did no good. Outside, countless trees zipped by, spectral sentinels that flanked the road, glimpsed through the swirling snowstorm.

“Give this to her,” said their mother, holding out a dummy in a wavering hand. The girl reached, trying to grasp it, but only flicking the dummy from her mother’s fingers. It landed in the footwell.

Their mother cursed under her breath, extended an arm back, twisting, trying to reach the dummy. All the while she kept her eyes on the road, the snow continuing to fall, mesmeric and magical. Her fingertips brushed the dropped dummy – so close. She turned back for a split second.

“So happy Christmas, I love you baby—”

The hump-backed bridge came out of nowhere, materialising through the blizzard. The mother’s hands were both back on the wheel, only too late. The car hit the dry-stone wall, passing through it in an explosion of rubble.

Plummeting.

The headlights lit up the frozen river below, sheet ice onrushing.

“—I can see a better time, when all our dreams come true.”

*

The scream of the engine whistle woke Kiki Harper instantly. She raised her head from where it had rested on the table, just as the steam train emerged from the forest and into the bright light

of the winter's day. She wiped the drool from her chin, worried for a moment that someone might have heard her snoring. But the carriage was empty, as was so often the case on this quiet, backwater line.

Kiki shivered, the nightmare still fresh in her mind. Wasn't the first time she'd experienced it, and it sure as hell wouldn't be the last. She stared out of the window, seeking distraction in the familiar countryside they travelled through. There wasn't a cloud in the sky, only trails of slate grey steam as the engine approached its journey's end.

The guard's voice crackled into life over the tinny public-address system.

"Next stop, Merryweather-by-the-Sea. End of the line, Merryweather."

Kiki let her gaze wander over the farms and fields that neighboured the tiny seaside town, unable to keep the smile from her face. Merryweather was little more than a village, truth be told, certainly compared to the towns one would find on the mainland. The piers and jetties of the harbour reached out like rickety fingers into the Irish Sea, a hotchpotch of buildings crowding the shoreline at their back. It was pure picture-postcard, a blanket of snow turning an already pretty vista into a chocolate-box landscape. And beyond Merryweather's rolling fields, the great forest itself: the Wyrdwood. An impenetrable crescent of wilderness, it was only navigable by the train line and a couple of old roads that snaked through its vast depths.

At least until the new road was completed.

Kiki could see where the work had already begun on the forest's edge, high on the northern downs, the bright yellow of diggers reflecting the low winter sun. The inhabitants of Merryweather had been assured that the new road would connect them to the rest of the island, making travel and trade so much easier, and unlocking a world of possibilities for those who called it home. Of course, the person who benefited most was Reuben Blackwood, Merryweather's master of industry. Not only was the Blackwood Logging Company providing the workforce who'd fell the trees to make way for the road, but they also got to sell on the timber once they'd done so. Indeed, the new luxury development on the edge of town was the handiwork of Blackwood Construction. Win-win for old Reuben.

Kiki had left for Coalridge School at the end of summer, but Merryweather was much changed in those three months. The carriage bounced over points as it followed the harbour approach, a tower of lobster pots reaching skyward, dominating the promenade. Metal groaned as the driver applied the brakes, the engine slowing as it pulled into the station. Kiki was already at the door, half hanging out of its open window, enjoying the familiar smell of steam, sea and home.

Stepping down from the carriage onto the gritted platform, Kiki surveyed the empty station. Shifting her kitbag over one shoulder and hockey stick across the other, she shuffled her way through the shuttered ticket office and out into the street beyond. It came as no surprise that there were no taxis waiting outside: this was Merryweather, after all. Whipping her phone out, Kiki

found one faltering bar of signal. She checked the time 2.15 p.m., right on time. She looked up and down the street for her lift: no sign.

Her chilly fingers punched the message into her phone – *Where are you?* – then hit send.

Pocketing her phone, Kiki cupped her hands and blew, rubbing life into them. She gave her feet a stamp. One thing was for sure: when winter hit Merryweather, it hit hard.

Kiki looked about; she wasn't alone on the station approach. An elderly lady sat on a bench beneath the station-house canopy, sheltering from the snowfall. Kiki knew her as Nan, as did everyone in Merryweather. Harmless as well as homeless, Nan was well-liked by all, and although countless folk had offered shelter to her down the years, she declined them more often than not. Hers was a life choice. She must have been seventy if she was a day, wearing half a dozen layers of clothing, a bag-for-life beside her that appeared to contain all her worldly belongings. Nan glanced up as Kiki edged closer, dark eyes twinkling from her wrinkled, weatherbeaten face. Kiki fished around in her pocket, pulling out a fiver and a fistful of change before handing it over.

"I'm sorry, Nan," said Kiki. "It's all I've got. Hopefully enough there to get you a warm cup of tea, though."

The old dear's toothless smile warmed Kiki's spirit.

"You're that Harper fella's daughter, aren't you? Clever bloke, your dad. What do they call him, again?"

"The King of Creepy," replied a blushing Kiki. Having an author father in a small town like Merryweather meant that recognition, and the accompanying embarrassment, came with the territory.

“He’s doing the Big Switch-On tonight, I hear.”

Kiki nodded. “One of the reasons I thought I’d come home early and surprise them.”

The bag lady’s gnarled hand suddenly seized Kiki’s, startling her. Nan’s face softened as she squeezed Kiki’s fingers, her grip gentle but earnest.

“I knew your mum, sweetheart. God rest her soul.”

Kiki eased her hand free, lost for words. It had been eight years since the accident, but dramas like that lived long in the minds of many. Didn’t matter what Kiki might achieve in her life; she and the twins would for ever be *those kids*, cursed to have their childhood trauma follow them until their dying days.

Blowing into her hands once more, Kiki decided to steer the conversation away from awkward terrain. “You got somewhere to stay tonight? It’s a bit grim to be out in this cold.”

Nan relaxed into her many layers of clothing as she leant back on the station bench. “Don’t worry about me, child. The new vicar’s a good soul. He keeps an eye out for me.”

“Well, you look after yourself,” said Kiki, smiling as she turned away from the old woman.

Kiki stepped out into the snow-covered street. Looking both ways, she searched for her lift, but there was still no sign. She double-checked her phone, but the signal was now gone, along with any hope of receiving a message.

Across the road was Merryweather’s quaint town square. It sported all the features she remembered: the old stone cross at its centre, the bench where she’d experienced her first kiss, the duck

pond Stefan subsequently fell into, and the wrought-iron railings that made up its perimeter like a regimental row of spears. Kiki caught her breath and had to look twice; a handsome bandstand took pride of place beside the rose garden, back where the old one had stood. Even through the gloom of this grey winter afternoon, its bright-white paint appeared to glow with a life of its own. Must have cost the town a few quid to replace the old one, Kiki figured, dragging her eyes away from the structure towards the centrepiece of Merryweather's Christmas celebration.

The tree towered over the square, a great spruce brought down from the Wyrdwood, as was tradition. Looked like the vicar, Father Morrow, had set a couple of volunteers from St Mary's to work adorning it with countless bulbs. One gentleman was hanging from the raised platform of a cherry-picker, reaching out with the trailing string of lights, the main event mere hours away. The Big Switch-On was a first: Kiki couldn't remember a time when the town Christmas tree had been decorated. Pensioners outnumbered young'uns in Merryweather, and for the most part they were a conservative and traditional bunch. Kiki had to admire the nerve of the new vicar, dragging the community into the twenty-first century. Fairy lights on Christmas trees would have some of the old gits choking on their sherry!

Even with this spot of Christmas spirit on show, Merryweather felt strangely subdued to Kiki. She had expected to see more people out and about, feel the buzz of the upcoming celebration, but there was little in evidence. The town appeared to be sporting a hangover, an odd mood pervading the streets.

“Stop the killing! Blackwood out! Save our forest! Blackwood out!”

A bearded man in his twenties blocked one of the entrances to the town square, a placard in one hand and camcorder in the other, a small campsite set up close to the spruce. Protest of any kind was out of place in sleepy Merryweather, and nobody was more out of place than Trevor Blackwood, the town’s resident eco-warrior. Here was a man protesting against *his own family* – they didn’t come much stranger than that. Kiki raised a fist in the air in solidarity. *He’ll appreciate that*, she reckoned. She looked past Trevor and the surrounding buildings, beyond the snowfields, up towards the Wyrddwood high on the horizon. The ancient forest loomed large and foreboding, an emerald crown upon the brow of a sleeping giant. Didn’t look to Kiki like it needed saving one bit.

“Pipe down, Trevor. Nobody’s being killed.”

A police officer trudged along the pavement towards the protestor, boots crunching in the snow: Officer Maggie O’Malley, Merryweather’s solitary and rather short arm of the law. She was in her thirties and, although stocky, was the same height as Kiki. It was hard to come across as imposing when you were no taller than a sixteen-year-old. Kiki had met O’Malley before, just the once, ages ago. That had been on a night she would rather forget, but she remembered O’Malley as being a kind lady. Sympathetic. A good hugger. Whether O’Malley was a forgiving soul was yet to be seen.

“How much are Blackwood paying you, Maggie? How long will you turn a blind eye while they murder the Wyrddwood?”

“The only one dying here is me.,” replied O’Malley dryly, before putting a friendly arm around Trevor. “Come on. Let’s you and me grab a brew in The Green Man, see if we can chat out your concerns.”

As the police officer led the protestor in the direction of the pub, O’Malley caught sight of Kiki across the way and couldn’t help but do a double-take. The look of surprise was evident on O’Malley’s face for a moment, before she managed to shake it away with a curt nod of acknowledgement. It was hardly the cheery greeting Kiki had hoped for. The police officer was clearly still salty.

Makes sense, Kiki figured.

She turned and, resigned to the fact her lift was a no-show, started walking. As she trudged up the near-deserted road, Kiki felt the eyes of the locals upon her from every half-shuttered cottage window. Was this the welcome she could expect while home for the holidays? Was Kiki on O’Malley’s watchlist now?

Might keep the police officer busy for a change, Kiki mused, only to be jarred violently from her thoughts.

A missile struck Kiki’s shoulder, hard enough to stagger her. It landed upon the powder-coated ground, more a rock of packed ice than a playful ball of snow. Kiki looked about and discovered she wasn’t alone. Two figures skulked by the cut-through to the harbour, and she recognised them instantly. The heavy-set, buzz-cutted thug was Leo Pitts, better known as “Pitbull”. He had somehow reached the age of twenty without doing a single day’s work, a perk of being the mayor’s son. Pitbull was already crouched, gleefully preparing another ball of ice.

And the other? A great shock of dyed-red hair exploding from his girlfriend's head, granting her the appearance of a freeze-framed sniper victim in *Call of Duty*. Through the eighteen-year-old's permanent scowl, twin trails of cigarette smoke drifted from flared nostrils. Kiki raised an optimistic hand to wave at the older girl, but got a single finger back by way of return.

Ruby Pimblott. Some things, and people in particular, never changed. Doubly awkward when the fool's kid brother was your best mate.

"Thought we'd seen the last of you, Harper," said Ruby, spitting in the snow with added sneer.

"Last I heard, this was still my home," replied Kiki, passing them by.

"Merryweather's never been home to the likes of you," said Pitbull, making no attempt to hide his prejudice. Kiki winced. He may not have said it in so many words, but Kiki got the sentiment of the idiot's comment. The Harper family were the only people of colour in the town, discounting the schoolteacher who'd arrived earlier in the year. Dad's parents had emigrated from Antigua before Sam Harper had been born, and Kiki's dual heritage had never drawn any racist comments from anyone in Merryweather. Except from Leo Pitts, that is.

As Pitbull drew his arm back, he let loose a taunting cry. "Heads up, loser!"

Before the missile had left his hand, Kiki had unhitched her hockey stick. By the time the packed ice had flown across the street, the stick was flying, connecting to the ball with a wet

whack. The ice shattered around her but the small rock that had been concealed within was sent whistling back. It hit the first-floor window of a nearby cottage, the pane of glass cracking with the impact.

While Pitbull laughed, Kiki kept the tears locked away. It took all her resolve not to run over and bray him round his ignorant, thick skull with her hockey stick.

“You can’t help yourself, can you?” said Ruby. “Cause trouble in an empty room, you would.”

This time round, Pitbull didn’t bother with the snow. He grabbed another stone and prepared to throw it, Kiki picking up her pace. Before he could launch it, a figure emerged behind him from the cut-through, barging between the delinquents and staggering them. Pitbull was going to say something to his surprise assailant and then thought better of it; Wynn Campbell stared him down, calloused fists clenched at his sides. A cold glare from the young fisherman was enough to send Pitbull on his way. Wynn may have been the same age as Kiki, four years Pitbull’s junior, but he looked every inch a full-grown man. Days and nights fishing for lobster in the Irish Sea would toughen up any youngster. Ruby followed Pitbull, scowling at Wynn as she slinked after her friend.

He didn’t move from the alley, making sure the two were gone. The fisherman wore a dirty old donkey jacket over his waders, the collar turned up to protect him from the weather. Beyond Wynn, Kiki spied his boat, the *Shearwater*, bobbing in the harbour. His intervention had been timely, the young fisherman arriving not a moment too soon.

“Thanks,” said Kiki, smiling, as Wynn turned his rosy face towards her.

If she was expecting him to say anything, she was to be disappointed. The glare he’d sent the idiots was now directed at Kiki, as cold as the day itself. There was a barely perceptible shake of the head as he regarded her.

Disapproving.

Kiki broke eye contact with him and continued up the lane towards the edge of town. *To hell with Campbell.* It was going to be a brilliant Christmas if everyone in Merryweather ended up being a judgy sod.

It was a mile’s hike to home, but with ice and snow on the road that twenty-minute walk was looking more like an hour. Kiki’s stomach churned as her feet plunged through the thick white crust. The skies may have been cloudless, but to Kiki’s mind an invisible shroud of gloom had descended over field and forest. Every step brought her closer to her family but, for some reason that remained just out of reach, Merryweather felt like anything but home.

Kiki checked her phone once more. Still no reply from her waste-of-space best friend.