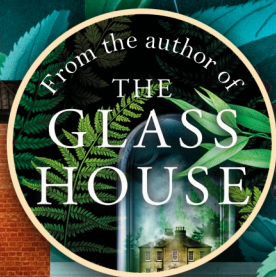


'An enthralling story of secrets, sisters and  
an unsolved mystery' **KATE MORTON**



# THE VANISHING OF AUDREY WILDE



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## Eve Chase

The *Sunday Times* bestseller

PENGUIN BOOKS

## The Vanishing of Audrey Wilde

'I fell head over heels in love with this enchanting novel. The writing is simply stunning, the story haunting, and the characters absolutely terrific. What an amazing writer! It was a joy to immerse myself in the secrets, the temptations and the heat. Every now and then you read a special book and this is one. Spellbinding, heart-stopping and touching on depths we all have within us but can't always articulate. I can't tell you how much I loved it' Dinah Jefferies

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Eve worked as a journalist in magazines and newspapers before writing fiction, an ambition she's held since childhood. Working from her writing shed in the garden, she loves to create immersive, page-turning novels; mysteries steeped in family secrets, set in wild, beautiful places. She lives in Oxford with her husband, three children and a very hairy golden retriever called Harry.

Her novel, *Black Rabbit Hall*, won the Saint-Maur en Poche prize for Best Foreign Fiction, 2019. *The Vanishing of Audrey Wilde* was longlisted for the HWA Gold Crown award, 2018. *The Glass House* was a *Sunday Times* bestseller and Richard & Judy Book Club pick.

Eve loves to hear from readers – say hello on Instagram and Twitter @EvePollyChase and facebook.com/EveChaseAuthor. For further details about her writing visit evechase.com

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# The Vanishing of Audrey Wilde

EVE CHASE



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*For Ben*

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*I know a bank where the wild thyme blows,  
Where oxlips and the nodding violet grows  
Quite over-canopied with luscious woodbine,  
With sweet musk-roses and with eglantine . . .*

*A Midsummer Night's Dream,*  
William Shakespeare

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## Prologue

*Applecote Manor, the Cotswolds, England. The last weekend of August, 1959*

None of us can bear to touch his belt, so horrifyingly intimate. But as we drag him across the lawn it ploughs into the soil. He's heavier than he looks too, unwieldy. Every few steps we stop and catch our breath, startling at each other's faces in the dawn light, daring each other to look down at the unbelievable fleshy fact of him, the childlike abandon of his outstretched arms.

Daisies are stuck to him now, their pink-white petals opening to the sun that is rising at a worrying speed behind the orchard. There's something very wrong about these daisies, stars in the dark stickiness of his hair. Dot leans forward as if to pluck them out, sit down and thread them into a chain over the hammock of her gingham skirt. If she did, it wouldn't make anything stranger.

Another few stumbling steps, and Dot's spectacles fall off. She starts to scabble for them. We tell her to stop. There is no time. The birds are starting

to sing, all at once, an explosion of noise, a wild loop of fear.

I try to talk myself down from blind panic: we are the same girls we were at the beginning of this long, hot summer. Applecote Manor still stands behind us, gazing sleepily over the valley. And in the meadow beyond the garden gate, our beloved circle of prehistoric stones, unchanged, unchanging. We need to get him much closer to those stones, away from the house and fast – the orangery’s glass roof is glinting dangerously in the first rays of sun, even closer than we thought.

A whoosh of nausea folds me in half. I cough, hands on my knees. Flora slips her arm over my shoulders. Feeling her tremble, I look up, try to reassure her, but can’t.

Eyes full of fear and light, she blinks repeatedly, as if adjusting to something in my face she hasn’t seen before.

Pam, jaw clenched, starts tugging at his shirt-sleeve. But the fabric is no match for the dead weight of his arm and it rips, the noise horrible, deafening. Dot smothers a sob with her hand.

‘It’s all right, Dot –’ I stop short, noticing a splatter of blood across her fingers.

I lower my gaze to check my own hands. Flora’s. Pam’s. My stomach rolls again. Our summer dresses are butcher’s aprons. We all look like we killed him now, not just one of us. Sisters. Bonded by blood.

# I

*Over fifty years later*

Crime. Crowds. The way a big city forces girls to grow up too fast, strips them of their innocence. It's time for the family to leave London, move somewhere gentler, more benign. They've viewed a number of houses in the last three months – the estate agents' brief, rural, roomy, a doer-upper – but not one that Jessie felt could be called home. Until this moment: standing in Applecote Manor on a late January afternoon, feeling as if she's being filled with sunlight.

It's in a right state, of course. They couldn't hope to afford a house like this otherwise. Evergreens are packed hard against the orangery's windows, threatening to break them and scatter the wooden window-seat with poisonous berries, like beads. The stone flags on the floor undulate, rising in the centre of the room as if a creature might be pushing up from the earth. But Jessie is already imagining oranges dangling, blood-warm and heavy in the hand, the glass doors flung back to the euphoria of summer, the peal of girls' wild laughter.

Her face soft, opening, Jessie tracks the paned glass as it climbs to its geometrical peak, a feat of Victorian engineering that promises tangy Mediterranean fruit in the English climate among the woolly pippins. Something about that optimism – control through enclosure, a sort of forced nurturing – whispers in her ear: isn't she trying to do something similar, only with a family?

Jessie glances at Bella, who is slumped on the window-seat, pecking out a text on her mobile phone. A twist of too-long legs and inky hair, her sixteen-year-old stepdaughter is the striking spit of her dead mother, the first Mrs Tucker. Sensing Jessie's questioning gaze, she lifts her pale, aquiline face, narrows her eyes to glossy pupil-filled cracks, and answers it with a look of fierce refusal.

Jessie's glad Will didn't catch it, that look. Hands stuffed boyishly into his coat pockets, her husband is gazing back into the shadows of the adjoining kitchen with a sweetly furrowed air of recalibration, struggling to square the rural dream – an urban male fantasy of chopping logs, foraging, probably sex outside – with the eerie sound of birds fluttering in cave-like chimneys, the sense of imprisoned pulpy damp, this terrifying, thrilling isolation.

Beneath the shearling of her favourite lambskin jacket, in a 1970s-style that suits these rough-hewn surroundings, Jessie's heart quickens. She tucks her autumn-red hair repeatedly behind her ears,

ordering her thoughts. For she knows there's a huge jump between viewing an old country house on a winter afternoon – filmy silver light filtering through skeletal trees, moody and strange, like something dreamed – and the stress of moving hundreds of miles away, shedding their city skins. It would be an act of reckless blind faith, like falling in love with Will had been. But the house simply feels right – as Will did from the start – and, on a level that she can't explain, destined to be theirs.

And, really, the scale of Applecote is perfect. They wouldn't be lost in it. Huge compared to their London semi, it's still a doll's house compared to the real old piles in the area – the name 'manor' is definitely pushing it. Only two rooms deep, the square footage is in the width, and it's rustic rather than grand with gnarled wood-wormed beams, walls that bulge as if breathing, no straight edges. A pelt of ivy covers the Cotswold stone exterior, the house not immediately visible from the road. Jessie likes this, the unshowiness, the way Applecote doesn't dominate the surrounding lush countryside but settles into it, like an elegant elderly lady dozing in long grass. Jessie can see Bella finally finding some peace here, and her own daughter, Romy, freed from rubber-matted city playgrounds, climbing trees, those strawberry-blond curls catkin-fuzzed.

Romy already seems perfectly at home, prodding at the kiss of a snail's fleshy sucker on the other side of the glass with chubby toddler fingers. Jessie is sure her little girl will love the freedom of the countryside, just as she did as a kid, all those secret nooks of childhood, tiny worlds invisible to grown-up eyes. When the snail foams forward, Romy giggles and looks up: Jessie sees her own pixie-pretty features miniaturized, her family's Irish teal-blue, copper-lashed eyes, Will's full mouth. She grins back, Romy's delight her own. Their relationship is still porous, umbilical, the opposite of the one with Bella, which seems to be fortified by a wall just as thick as Applecote's. Occasionally, she can peer over it, if she pulls herself up, dangling precariously. Not often. Certainly not today.

It's been three years since Jessie crossed the city with her five months pregnant belly, the world's happiest accident, bulking under her coat like a hidden present, and moved into Will's house. Two years after Mandy died. Not wanting to intrude upon his life or his daughter's, she had hung on to her independence and Dalston flat-share as long as possible, resisting the man she'd fallen madly in love with – 'I don't want to waste another minute of my life apart from you. I need you, we need you, Jessie' – until it became ridiculous and impractical. They didn't want to unsettle Bella further by moving then, not with a new baby on

the way. And Jessie naively believed that a big heart, an eagerness to love Bella as her own, would eventually win over the fawn-like girl with the haunted eyes, who clung to her father's hand as if he were the last human left on earth. She had no idea that trying to love Bella, let alone parent her as she grew into an angry teen, would be like trying to hug an animal that wanted to sink its teeth into her neck. That she might never be forgiven for invading Bella's private world with her father and bringing forth the joy, noise and disruption that was Romy, a rival for her father's affections, and embarrassing proof of his new sex life. And who could blame poor Bella?

Time, everyone says. But time seems to be making things worse for Bella in London, not better, like something fragile left outside in the polluted city air, accruing damage. These last few months have been particularly bad, hormonally explosive with an unsettling crescendo that's forced their hand. Both Jessie and Will are agreed that Bella, whether she wants it or not – not, obviously – needs a fresh start. She must be removed from the skunky parties and the toxic cliques, taken far away from what she did to that girl, everything that happened. There's no point just moving to another London borough. If they're going to do it, they need to be radical, reframe their lives. They will leave the city for somewhere much more

innocent and benign. And what could be more innocent than Applecote Manor?

And yet.

The windowpane bisecting the family's reflection seems uncannily symbolic, reminding Jessie that there are other, murkier, reasons Applecote draws them: Will trying to escape the mental imprint of a lorry turning left, the broken body of his beautiful wife churned along a concrete road; Jessie's insecurities, the ones that flare secretly, pettily, in her brain. For how can she tell Will that she's never felt comfortable in his dead wife's smart house, a domestic life that was never hers? That she has to fight terrible childish urges to paint over the chic grey walls with a riot of colour? That this is his second marriage, yes, but it is her first, her only, and she wants it to have its own unique character. And that Mandy, magnificent Mandy Tucker, a subject so huge and heartbreaking that Jessie daren't mention her at all, is inescapable in the London house. Only last week Jessie pulled out one of Mandy's scarves from behind the radiator in the hallway. Sitting down on the stairs, the grey walls pressing in, the scarlet silk limp in her hand, secreting another woman's expensive scent, she wondered what to do with it. In the end, at a loss, she dropped it back behind the radiator and felt terrible. But Jessie knew that

bits of Mandy would always be in that house, her marriage, hiding in crannies, waiting, watching.

They wouldn't be at Applecote Manor. No ghosts here.

'I can tell you've already moved in,' says Will, making her start, guiltily pushing away thoughts of Mandy.

She can see her own smile spread in his tawny brown eyes. 'And I can tell you're still on the motorway. Outside London.'

A laugh rumbles up from his thick coat. 'I might turn off.'

So he's losing his nerve. 'Might?'

'We can't afford it, Jessie. Not if you factor in all the work that needs doing. Unless you want to live like a squatter.'

Even this has a romantic appeal. She imagines them all huddled around a roaring fire for warmth, drinking cocoa from tin mugs, telling each other stories.

'The commute to the London office will be like some sort of daily triathlon,' Will says, warming to his theme. 'We don't know a soul here. In fact, there isn't a soul here. We may as well move to Mars.'

Out of the corner of her eye Jessie sees Bella nodding fervently in agreement. She thinks of the journey out of the city earlier in the day through sleepy suburbs, the anonymous banker satellite

towns, chocolate-box villages, the cold skies clearing, bluing, until they passed the point at which a daily commute into London was, Will joked blackly, ‘completely unfeasible without a mid-life crisis’, on and on, a series of country roads, smeared with the bloating carcasses of fox and pheasant, then a narrow lane, squeezed between hedgerows, a deserted old house, waiting. In a way she doesn’t quite understand, it felt like a route deep inside herself. She can’t turn back.

‘Total madness.’ Will’s mouth starts to twitch with a smile. ‘*But . . .*’ He is the only man she’s ever met who can seduce only with his eyes. ‘. . . it’s wild and beautiful, just like you.’

Bella groans, ‘Oh, God.’

‘And you’ve got a slightly mad, determined look going on that’s making me think you might just move here anyway, whether I come or not.’ He grins at her from beneath the mop of floppy dark hair that he likes to wear a little too long, a little rock and roll, a small rebellion against being forty-four, nine years older than Jessie, and the demands of the growing logistics company he set up fifteen years ago with an old college friend, Jackson. A large, loud bachelor, Jackson was the best man at Will’s first wedding (huge, white) and absent from his second (a family-only affair in a register office, Jessie in a green dress, scarlet lipstick, a baby on her hip).

‘So, yes, there’s a chance you might be able to persuade me. A very small chance.’ He pulls her towards him, lightly pressing his hand against her bottom.

Jessie wishes they could make love here, right now, mark their territory. She nuzzles against the stubble of his chin.

Appalled by any display of physical affection – and attuned to it – Bella looks up abruptly, and guns her father’s right hand. Jessie feels the flinch in the contracting muscles of Will’s fingertips. She sidesteps away to make it easier for him. The embroidered hem of her skirt swishes back against her knee-length leather boots. ‘What do you think, Bella?’ she asks, maybe a bit too brightly.

Bella burrows her eyes into the phone again. ‘I’d sooner hang myself from a door by a belt than move here.’

‘Don’t hold back. Tell us how you really feel,’ says Will, gamely trying to humour her. Bella’s face remains blank, violently silent.

Romy’s large blue eyes look up from the wood-louse scuttling along the floor to her mother, sensing something wrong.

Jessie’s fingers reach for her most cherished possession, the gold charm, a tiny gingerbread man, that hangs on the chain around her neck, a necklace Will gave her to mark Romy’s birth. The skin-warmed metal calms her, as it always does.

She's needed to touch it a lot in the last few months as worries about Bella and the fractures in this rapidly patched-together family roil beneath the surface of her days.

'Bell-Bell.' Romy stomps over to Bella, presents an offering of a woodlouse balled in her cupped hand, and grins, ever hopeful. Bella recoils and shoots one of those chilly looks at Romy that make Jessie shudder. There's something in Bella's gaze that is just not sisterly sometimes, not even particularly human. But she'd never say so to Will.

'Shall we hit the road then, Baby Bear?' Will swings up Romy in his arms, on to his shoulders, where she sits very upright, kicking her feet, like a tiny mahout. He tries to talk to Jessie as Romy covers his eyes with her hands. 'I'm starving, sweetheart.'

'One last look?' Something in Jessie sinks at the thought of returning to London. She fears Applecote might vanish the moment they leave it. 'I'm sure there's a room on the top floor we didn't see earlier. It's probably only a storeroom or something, but I'd like to check it out. The agent rushed us past it, didn't he, Bella?'

Bella shrugs. But Jessie remembers how Bella kept glancing back at the top floor as they all clattered downstairs.

'I now have no option at all but to feast on this

scrumptious foot then.' Will starts to pretend-gobble Romy's boot. Romy squeals. Jessie turns back into the shadowed old heart of the house, quietly amazed to hear Bella's slouching footsteps behind her.

They take the scenic route. Jessie pauses in the old drawing room, where the light is tinged the colour of Guinness and the windows furred with dust. She peers out to the weedy gravel beach of drive, the clumps of unpruned lavender, and watches Will talking to the estate agent, not noticing his little girl stuffing her duffel-coat pockets with stones. She hopes he's sniffing out if there's a deal to be done. He's good at that, surprisingly fierce in business, given what a total softy he is with the girls. But he's always had the two sides to him, a protective outer shell that only the people he loves ever really penetrate.

'Did someone seriously live in this place?' Bella asks, pulling Jessie back from her thoughts. She draws a road in the dust on the wooden floor with her pink Converse. 'Like this. Not done up or anything?'

'They did. A Mrs Wilde. A widow. She was here alone for decades, well into her nineties. Can you imagine? Must have been quite a lady.'

'I bet they discovered her mummified corpse watching telly, eaten by her lapdog. That's the sort

of thing that happens in the country, isn't it?' Bella suppresses a smile. 'No one can hear you scream.'

'The truth is a little less exciting, I'm afraid.' Jessie smiles back. Bella's deadpan black humour creates little moments of connection in their otherwise fraught relationship. Jessie's always enjoyed finding little sparkly chinks in Bella's armour. 'The house just got too much. She had a tumble on the stairs, and had to move out to a care home, oh, over nine months ago. Applecote's been on the market ever since. I just can't understand why the place hasn't been snapped up.'

'You can't?' Bella asks, in exaggerated disbelief.

'I just love the way it's stopped in another era, like a pocket watch.' Jessie takes in the wide oak floorboards – really slices of tree, nothing like the reflective laminated wooden floors in their house – the William Morris wallpaper, curling away in fruit-peel strips, dotted with pale squares where pictures once hung. Included in the sale are pieces of brown furniture, bureaux, black-lacquered plant stands, even a crocheted blanket scrunched on a chair, the kind of thing Jessie imagines women once knitted together in the village hall on rainy afternoons. 'Just needs a bit of a tinker, and it'll start ticking again.'

Bella lets out a low moan and leans back against a writing desk, making it wobble, a large glass paperweight sliding along its upper shelf. She picks

it up and holds it to the light, where it glints dully like a fairground crystal ball. Jessie half expects to see Applecote's history swirling within it, picnics, croquet on the lawns, girls in gingham.

'Dad will never go for it, Jessie.' Bella sighs, not taking her eye off the glass. 'Way too much work.'

'Oh, it's a paint job,' Jessie says, sensing as she speaks that this might be an optimistic appraisal. Her mother always did up their houses, roping Jessie, protesting, into it: money was tight, and since there was no man about to do these things, her mother simply bought a DIY manual and did it herself, only once nearly electrocuting herself.

'A bank job. Dad says it's a money pit.'

'I'm happy to get my hands dirty.'

'Very dirty?'

'Yes. Definitely.' Jessie realizes just how hungry she is for a challenge, some kind of project, after the warm, sweet drift of being a stay-at-home mum to Romy. She may have overstayed her career in packaging design, frustrated by the prescriptive briefs, locked in by the usual things – habit, rent and saving to buy her own flat, money she never used, invaluable now – but she misses its creativity and focus. And she can't help remodelling this house in her mind, the family, too, seeing them both emerge like a three-dimensional model. 'I hate those overdone country houses anyway. A home should be a bit rough around the edges.'

‘But it’s never going to be our home,’ says Bella, with sudden intensity. ‘Dad’s not going to risk moving so far from London. Not here.’

Jessie doesn’t answer. Yes, there’s a risk in moving, she decides, not least for Bella, but there is also a risk in staying where they are. In London Bella could easily float further and further away, like a balloon in the sky, until they lose her completely. She imagines herself and Will looking back at this day, thinking maybe things could have turned out differently if they’d been braver. And who says Jessie can’t reinvent a freelance career from the country when Romy’s a bit older? She’s always been struck by how many smart city women daren’t change anything – home, relationship, job – in case it destabilizes the lot, as if all those busy London lives are improbably balanced on the tiniest of points, like ballerinas, and the merest tilt will send everything crashing to the ground. She refuses to become like that.

‘Are we going upstairs or what?’ Bella puts the paperweight back on the desk a little too hard, jolting the room’s stillness. ‘I might yet find my corpse up there, you never know.’

‘You never know,’ agrees Jessie, feeling an unexpected twitch of unease.

Emerging on the attic-like top floor, it feels instantly colder and smells mustier. Old servants’

quarters, Jessie supposes. The doors are in a boarding-house line off a dark, narrow landing.

‘That’s the room,’ Bella says, in a hushed voice, pointing at a scuffed white door at the far end of the landing on the gable wall, almost hidden in shadow.

It takes Jessie a moment to realize that the walls are actually subsiding slightly towards each other, giving the impression that the room is further away than it is.

The doorknob turns reluctantly with a rasp. A soup of dust swirls in front of her, obscuring the room. Jessie feels particles settling in her hair, tastes an odd sweetness on her tongue. As it clears, the room solidifies, still and shadowy as a Dutch interior painting, its world as self-contained and ripe with meaning.

It is not a storeroom.

The thick black beams on the eaves funnel their eyes to a small porthole window made of purplish stained glass – an ornate pattern of grapes and vines – that bruises the light against the wall. There’s another window too, larger, square, with tattered umber silk curtains that drape to the floor, making Jessie think of an antique, disintegrating ballgown. Most curious of all, a sleigh-style bed, still made up: a stack of pillows, a mothy pink blanket, with satin-ribbon trim, folded at its end; a wooden school desk with an inkwell

and pen-scarred lid; a mirrored dressing-table, kidney-shaped, similar to one Jessie's late nan owned.

Jessie's footsteps sound far too loud in here: the room feels private, inhabited. It's like coming across a deserted old cabin in the woods, she thinks, and finding ashes still warm in the grate. She glances at Bella, who is hanging back, still standing in the doorway, long arms braced either side of it, countering the force that's pulling her in. Her eyes are enormous, their blackness spreading, wire-tripped awake.

'Well, this is a surprise.' Jessie isn't sure why she whispers. Like you do in a room where a child is sleeping. She encourages Bella forward. The dressing-table's mirror reflects them both as smudges, half-formed future ghosts.

Bella moves cautiously into the room, running her flat palm along the faded floral wallpaper before stopping, staring intensely at the bed, panning it for meaning.

'Do you like it?' Jessie smiles, pleased to see Bella's staple expression of sullen indifference replaced with absorption, as if she's stepped out of herself for a moment. She even looks different in this room, her monochromatic beauty not modern at all.

Bella glances up, surprised, having clearly forgotten Jessie was there. 'What?'

‘I think this room might have your name on it, Bella.’

Bella blushes, apparently caught out thinking the same thing. Sometimes, in rare, precious moments like this, Jessie glimpses the girl Bella must have been before her mother died, someone less shut off, more readable. She wishes she’d known that Bella. She’ll never give up trying to find her again.

‘If we move here, it’s yours. We can decorate it together, exactly how you like. And . . . and you can take the room next door as a den or something. You’d have your own bathroom up here too! Imagine that, a bath without Romy’s armada of rubber ducks.’

Bella nods absently, seeming not to be listening to Jessie but someone or something else that only she can hear, the wrong pitch for adult ears.

Jessie perseveres, nods at the bed. ‘You can have that too. We may have to stretch to new bedding, though.’

And that’s when Bella whips around, snaps back to the present, to being Bella Tucker, a teenager who doesn’t want to be there, whom the world has royally screwed over. And Jessie knows it’s coming, the sudden, unpredictable whiplash of rage that will pull Bella away hard. ‘Who are you to say what is *mine*? What we can buy?’ Bella’s voice trembles. ‘It’s not your house in London to sell.’

Jessie takes a deep breath. ‘Bella, I’m putting all my savings into this too. But it’s not about money, it’s . . .’ She catches herself. She mustn’t mention Bella’s behaviour in London: moving here is not a punishment. ‘Your dad wants a change.’

‘Don’t tell me what Dad wants.’ Bella stands straighter, broader, a threatening show of strength and unmistakable genetic difference, towering over Jessie’s petite five-foot-three frame, her spray of freckles and coppery hair, the softness that has settled on her hips since Romy’s birth. ‘Like I don’t know him better than you.’

Jessie presses the gold of her pendant between her fingers, feeling her heartbeat conducted along the chain. ‘He can work most of the week from home. You’ll see more of him, we all will.’ She tries to steady herself, take a breath. ‘He wants a slower pace of life, Bella.’

Bella hisses out the words, ‘All Dad wants is Mum back. Don’t you get it?’

Jessie recoils, steps back. The oak boards creak, the weight of them – their relationship, the complicated tangle of family ties – too much to bear. She tries to silence the little voice in her head, the one that fears Bella might be right, that she is less loved than Mandy, that she and Will met too soon after Mandy’s death for the love to be as real for him as it is for her.

Bella sizes her up. ‘You think Dad will come here and forget all about Mum, don’t you?’

‘Bella . . .’ she begins, not knowing how the sentence will end, a guilty heat rising beneath her skin. It is impossible to lie to Bella, even if she wanted to. She is too astute.

‘Well, he won’t, Jessie. And he won’t ever love you like he loved my mother. He never has. Everyone knows he married you because of Romy. And everyone knows this move will end in total disaster.’ She looks away, raises her chin.

Jessie blinks furiously, damned if she’ll let Bella see her tears. It’s not the first time Bella’s said these things, but it doesn’t hurt any less. ‘I only care about what’s right for us, for you. Where *we* might be happy.’

‘I’m happy where I am!’

‘Are you?’ Jessie asks quietly. The question rearranges the air. ‘Really? Because from where I’m standing, it doesn’t look like that.’

Bella’s mouth opens, as if to say something, but no words come out. She spins around to the square window, roughly yanking back the curtains. Leaning forward against the sill, her legs coltishly crossed, she looks as young and vulnerable as she did menacing a moment before, and Jessie feels terribly sorry for her.

She waits for the worst of the mood swing to

pass – a gritty sandstorm that will obliterate everything for a few moments, choke, then start to clear – before tentatively joining Bella at the window, careful not to touch her hot, angry edges. Sadly, theirs is not a tactile relationship: Bella has made it quite clear that any sort of physical contact with Jessie is so not okay.

Jessie's heart lifts at the view from the window: the wild expanse of garden, the exact opposite of their outlook in London, tiny, Astroturfed (by Mandy), overlooked by neighbours, who see Jessie as a young cuckoo stealing another woman's nest. Their earlier hurried route through Applecote's garden is clearer from here too. She maps it: the orangery's glass roof, the woody area known as the Wilderness, the small walled orchard, the black rectangle of derelict swimming-pool, a bit visually unnerving, like a void. At the end of the garden, although she can't quite see it from here, she pictures the iron gate, where they'd stood staring out at a glorious expanse of meadow with its ancient circle of knee-high stones, like tiny savage people. ('Pretty cool, eh?' the earnest agent had panted, sniffing a deal. 'Hardly fucking Stonehenge,' Bella had replied drily.) At the edge of that meadow, scooped out of it, the distant glitter of the river. Oh, and a bird of prey. A kite, Jessie guesses, with that forked tail. She and Bella track it together, swooping, diving, momentarily united

in the act of seeing, the space between them closing a little.

‘Is something else bothering you, Bella?’ Jessie asks gently. ‘I mean, apart from everything, obviously.’

Bella presses her nail-bitten fingers to the cold glass. ‘Bad stuff has gone down in this house.’ Her voice is thin, sapped by her earlier outburst. ‘I came into this room and I could feel it.’

Jessie studies Bella’s face, the thoughts rippling beneath the milky translucent skin: she knows it’s only Bella’s hyper-sensitive teenage mind externalizing its own indefinite fears. ‘Can you describe it?’ she nudges gently, hoping this might be a way of talking about the emotions Bella bottles up.

Bella frowns. ‘A sort of trapped feeling. Like the past is stuck, that’s all. Or someone. I don’t know, it’s weird.’

Jessie feels a sharp pang of sadness: Bella’s talking about her own grief, circling it. And Jessie knows better than to try to address it directly. ‘The house has been empty a long time, and neglected. But as soon as a new family moves –’

‘Even if we move in, this house won’t ever belong to us,’ Bella interrupts, her voice hard again. Outside, the kite plunges. A flock of birds rises: each one black, tiny, like a handful of nails thrown against the soft blue sky. ‘Just like I won’t ever belong to you, Jessie.’

*Chelsea, London, May 1959*

Ma's certainly taking her time to die. She's been draped on the chaise-longue beside the window for two days now, barely moving other than to reach for a cigarette and a sticky glass of gin and orange, her heavy-lidded gaze trained on the street below, where wind whips the blossom off the trees in a mocking swirl of confetti. Having declared her heart 'shrivelled to a devilled kidney, barely capable of beating', she's determined to 'fade away gently, surrounded by my four darling daughters'.

This poses a problem. It's Monday. Our home weekend is over and we're meant to be at school. Not only will we get punished for being late, but my classmates, who view my mother as an exotic circus act and stick their faces to the school windows whenever it's rumoured she's not forgotten to pick us up, will think us even more racketsy. We get enough of this anyway: 'Ah, yes, *Bunny's* daughters,' people say, flushing at Ma's name, equally excited and disapproving. I want to tell them we're not so different. That the wonky world

of my sisters and mother contains all the passions and squabbles of a hundred normal families just like them, only that without Pa it's been reduced to something more intense and salty, like a sort of gravy.

Ma presses a limp hand to her forehead. Her beautiful face is a study in poetic suffering. I'm not sure dying people look like that. Or wear crimson lipstick. Pam says we should just leave her with a hot glass of honey and lemon and jump on a train. But Ma's purse doesn't contain enough money for our rail tickets – we've checked – and while none of us believes Ma's theatrics, there's still a niggling worry that she'll die anyway, since Ma can do most things when she puts her mind to it.

I glance at the carriage clock eating minutes above the fireplace. My French lesson has just started. Madame Villiot will be calling out my name on the register, powdered chalk on the tips of her fingers, her tiny ruby earrings trembling above her white lace collar. It's hard not to be a little in love with Madame – everyone is – since there are no boys to fall in love with at Squirrels Ladies College, only the head girl with the Botticelli hair. I look back to Ma, feeling my forehead pinch up. 'Are you sure we can't send for the doctor?'

'Don't be hysterical, Margot.'

I stare glumly down at Fang, the moth-eaten

tiger-skin rug on the floor, wondering what to do next. Pam tramps into the room, making the glasses on the drinks trolley clink – ‘Built like a Boche tank,’ Ma always says – and yanks open the window. Blossoms flutter in, to settle like white butterflies on the dark wood floor. Ma winces, pained, and covers her eyes with her hands.

Bunny Wilde is not a fan of fresh air. Her natural habitat is a smoky, post-six p.m. world, the sodium shadows of West End theatres, Chelsea soirées and Mayfair clubs, lit by guttering candlelight, chandeliers and the gazes of adoring men. Ma loathes the countryside and embraces daylight only in an artist’s studio, naked, modelling for Jack Harlow, the painter she’s madly in love with, a handsome, dark, crow-like man, who smells of paint and Pernod. He’s betrayed her again – taking only my mother by surprise – and is courting a new muse: ‘Some Berkeley Dress Show model,’ Ma whispered on Friday, too terrible a thing to name out loud, like Russian nuclear weapons or a bladder infection.

Unfairly, the torpedo of blame that should be directed at Jack’s house – crashing through the tall glass dome of his artist’s studio, a glorious explosion of oil paint – has been directed at us. Last night Ma slurred, in and out of sleep, that Jack would have married her years ago if she hadn’t had so many daughters, as if the small fact of her

progeny was something that could be reshaped, like her eyebrows. It made me grateful that it isn't just me – 'My dear strange Margot,' she says, as if I have dropped into the parlour from the moon – being an obstacle to her happiness, that there are four of us sisters, so the blame can be divided and dished out into four smaller portions.

Flora, Pam and I were a shoe size apart growing up, an inch of dress hem: seventeen, sixteen and fifteen now. 'Quite impossible not to get pregnant with your father around,' Ma says, mischievously making light of something so terrifying, explained at school with diagrams of mating livestock, investigated by girls in taxis with boys after dances. (I had my left breast caressed at Christmas. It was less exciting than I'd hoped.) Just when Ma thought she was done, her figure safe, along came Dot, three years after me. Dot doesn't look much like the rest of us, dark where we're fair, tiny where we're tall. She doesn't look twelve either. Her spectacles are too big for her face. A late starter as I was, her chest all ribs, like a boy's. She can read well enough – she loves to read, her cocoa-brown eyes widening, living every page – but she can't do arithmetic at all. We think this is because of what happened. How Dot started.

Ma was pregnant with Dot when the engine of Pa's car cut out on the level crossing, seconds before the 14:07 from Edinburgh screamed down

the tracks. The policeman took his hat off at the door – I remember that, the icy blast of winter as the door opened, the unseasonal film of sweat on his square forehead. And Ma not believing him, shaking her head, holding the hard balloon of her tummy, shouting no, no, no, not her Clarence, not when he had survived the war, a thumb blown clean off and, after that, the thing that had made him cower under their bed some nights, hands cupped over his ears. Ma went into labour later that day, six weeks too early, and out slid Dot, blue as the Piccadilly Line. After that, Ma was in bed for months, very still, her mind living somewhere else. When Dot cried I would soothe her. Just as other friends had kittens, I had a baby sister, the first thing I remember ferociously loving, wanting to protect. When Dot is sick now – she has lungs that whistle in winter, and needs to be steamed over the bath, like a creased dress – it's me she calls out for, rarely Ma.

For me, embarrassingly, in my sleep, it's Pa. I was his favourite, Ma says. He called me Margot A-go-go because I was so cheerful and busy, always asking questions that made him laugh: 'Where does the sky end and space begin?' 'If God is everywhere is He in the bristles of my hairbrush?'

I like that Pa called me Margot A-go-go: confirmation of a different version of me, the carefree little girl I was, like the photo of me riding on his

shoulders, Pa laughing, running across Kensington Gardens in the rain. Also, a great improvement on 'strange Margot', despite Ma and my sisters insisting it was just an affectionate nickname.

Pa's loss still feels epic yet utterly obscure. My memories are tombola random. I remember his face, the strong Wilde jaw jutting out above his medals, the jaw you see repeated in all the portraits hanging from the walls of Applecote Manor, Pa's old family house. But not his voice: it's got muddled with voices on the wireless, voices in my head. Ma says, 'We'd all be destroyed if we could remember everything, Margot.' This is her way of picking over the past, as if it were a box of chocolates, I think, ignoring the nasty coffee creams.

Sometimes I think that part of me is forgotten, or lost. And I don't know if I'll ever find it, whether it's something you lose and can't replace, like an adult tooth, or if it can re-grow. But, more than this, I'd like to know if my skin will ever be like my sisters', smooth as soap. The red itchy patches at the back of my knees appeared the day of Pa's funeral and never healed. When the sores are oozing and classmates stare in the school showers, I wonder why, out of all of them, I'm the one cursed with it, if my skin is a punishment for a terrible thing I haven't done yet. And what that might be.

My skin is the only thing my sisters won't tease me about, secretly relieved that I got it and not

them. It brings out rashes of kindness. Dot lets me sleep in the cooler bed by our bedroom window. Flora rubs ointment into the bits I can't reach. Pam briskly reminds me that at least I'm clever – 'which goes some way to compensate for your missing chunks of common sense' – and that everyone has something they don't like about themselves, apart from Flora, she adds wryly, since Flora is flawless.

That always makes me laugh. I need my sisters more than I do Ma sometimes.

It's not that Ma isn't a good mother. Just that she's different from other mothers, the ones who didn't lose their husbands in odd, terrible accidents, who don't live in tall, narrow, tilt-to-the-left houses on the wrong side of Chelsea, with a sooty stucco exterior, the interior painted the blazing colours of an African parrot – in defiance of English weather and good taste – the rooms strewn with Ma's marabou scarves, curlers and books.

Nothing works here. The fridge is balmy. We can see the picture on the television – Ma bought it with much fanfare to watch the Coronation – only if we hang up the old blackout curtains. The Hoover sulks accusingly in a wooden box beneath the stairs, awaiting a handyman to offer his services for free in exchange for a smile from my mother. Over the years her smile has won over all sorts of handymen.

Ma hates paying for anything if she can help it. Not for Ma dropping her shillings into a shop's cash carrier, waiting for it to ping along the wire to the cashier. Ma's purchases are all on credit. She has complicated bills all over London. She also has the longest legs west of Sloane Square. This helps.

Luckily, the Wildes – Pa's older brother, Perry, and his wife, Sybil, the ones from Applecote Manor – pay for Squirrels, our bracing boarding school in Oxfordshire, where we are meant to be right now. (They chose a grander, far warmer one in Dorset for their daughter, my cousin Audrey, but it wasn't enough to save her.) The Wildes won't give a shilling directly to Ma. It's no secret they don't approve – Pa's parents wanted him to marry a nice steady county girl with a title, and instead they got an outspoken theatre agent's daughter from Bloomsbury, their very own Wallis Simpson, to tempt their second son astray. Also, Ma doesn't care much what people think about her, which makes her quite dangerous.

The summer Grandma Wilde died in a deck-chair, happily sunbathing dead for an hour before anyone realized, she told me Ma was 'bringing you up like cats'. I nodded in agreement and sipped my lemonade. It does feel we have as many lives, forced to adjust our manners and allegiances according to the different worlds we inhabit,

learning to say the right thing, or not reveal too much, as we move between Ma's bohemian household, the stolid steadiness of Squirrels Ladies College, then our smart London friends' polite parlours for tea, buoyed along by the once-grandish heritage of our surname. Flora and I have learned to slip different selves on and off like socks. I've not decided who I am yet anyway – I feel like a completely different person from one day to the next – and Flora simply moulds herself to the company she's in, always meeting expectation. Dot's strategy is a sweet silence: she observes her surroundings carefully before impinging upon them, pushing her true feelings into her pinafore pockets. Pam can only ever be Pam, always gesturing too hard, saying too much, too loudly, her contours unique and fixed.

Pam's the one who let slip to the Wildes how our drawing room fills with the laughter of Ma's musician friends, men with skin the colour of burnt sugar, their accents strange and rich, fingers flying, like birds, over the frets of their banjos. How Ma prefers the company of artists and actresses from Chelsea to the tightly smiling wives of Kensington, discussing their new (cold) refrigerators on sunny street corners. How she seems to survive on Lucky Strikes and our maid Betty's bewildered attempts – at Ma's insistence – at Elizabeth David's cold tomato soup, gazpacho.