

When we were eight, Dad cut me open from throat to stomach. In a forest in the wilds of British Columbia sat his workshop, dusty and reeking of blood. He had skins hanging to dry and they brushed our foreheads as we crept through them. I shivered, even then, while Aggie grinned devilishly ahead of me, bolder than me by far. After summers spent wishing to know what happened in this shed I was suddenly desperate to be gone from it.

He'd caught a rabbit and though he'd let us stalk the woods with him he'd never shown us the act of killing.

Aggie was eager, and in her haste she kicked a brine barrel, her foot making a deep echoing thud, one I felt on my foot, too. Dad looked up and sighed. 'You really want to see?'

Aggie nodded.

'Are you prepared for it?'

Another nod.

I could see the furry rabbit and all the blades. It wasn't moving; dead already.

'Come on over then.'

We went to either side of him, our noses peeking over his workbench. From here I could see all the fine colours of its pelt, russet browns and dusky oranges and warm creams and greys and whites and blacks. A kaleidoscope of colour, all designed, I supposed, to make it invisible and prevent this exact fate. Poor rabbit.

'Do you understand why I'm doing this?' Dad asked us.

We both nodded. 'Subsistence living,' Aggie said.

'Which means? Inti?'

‘We hunt only what we need and we give back to the ecosystem, we grow food, too, we live as self-sufficiently as we can,’ I said.

‘That’s right. So we pay our respects to this creature and thank it for sustaining us.’

‘Thank you,’ Aggie and I chimed. I had the feeling the rabbit could have cared less about our gratitude. Silently I bid it a glum apology. But all the while something was tingling in my belly, right down at the bottom of it. I wanted to get out of there. This was Dad’s realm, the furs and the blades and the blood, the smell he was always draped in, it had always been his realm and I wished it could stay that way; this felt like the opening of a door to a darker place, a crueller one, an *adult* one, and I didn’t know why she wanted this but if she did, if she did want it then I had to stay. Where Aggie went, I followed.

‘Before we eat it we have to skin it. I’ll cure the pelt so we can use it or trade it, and then we’ll eat every part of the carcass so there’s no . . .?’

‘Waste,’ we answered.

‘And why’s that?’

‘Waste is the true enemy of the planet,’ we said.

‘Come on, Dad,’ Aggie complained.

‘All right, first we cut from throat to stomach.’

The tip of his blade went to the fur of the rabbit’s throat and I knew I had made a mistake. Before I could slam my eyes shut the knife opened my throat and sliced my skin in one long swift motion to my tummy.

I hit the floor hard, cut open and spilling. It felt so real, I was sure there must be blood and I screamed and screamed and Dad was shouting now too and the knife dropped and Aggie dropped and she pulled me tight against her. Her heartbeat pressed to mine. Her fingers drumming a rhythm against my spine. And in her skinny arms I was intact again. Myself, with no blood and never in fact a wound at all.

I had always known there was something different about me, but that was the day I first recognised it to be dangerous. It was also the day, as I stumbled out of the shed into a long violet dusk, that I looked to the trees’ edge and saw my first wolf, and it saw me.



Now, in a different part of the world, the dark is heavy and their breathing is all around. The scent has changed. Still warm, earthy, but muskier now, which means there's fear in it, which means one of them is awake.

Her golden eyes find just enough light to reflect.

*Easy*, I bid her without words.

She is wolf Number Six, the mother, and she watches me from her metal crate. Her pelt is pale as a winter sky. Her paws haven't known the feel of steel until now. I'd take that knowledge from her if I could. It's a cold knowing. Instinct tells me to try to soothe her with soft words or a tender touch but it's my presence that scares her most, so I leave her be.

I move lightly past the other crates to the back of the truck's container. The rolling door's hinges rasp as they let me free. My boots hit the ground with a crunch. An eerie world, this night place. A carpet of snow reaches up for the moon, glowing for her. Naked trees cast in silver. My breath making clouds.

I rap on the driver's side window to wake the others. They've been sleeping in the cabin of the truck and blink blearily at me. Evan has a blanket pulled over him; I can feel the scratchy edge of it against my neck.

'Six is awake,' I say, and they know what it means.

'This won't go down well,' Evan says.

'They're not gonna find out,' I say.

'Anne'll flip, Inti.'

'Screw Anne.'

There was meant to be press here for this, government officials and heads of departments and armed guards; there was meant to be fanfare. Instead we have been hamstrung by a last-minute motion meant to delay us until the stress of this prolonged journey causes our animals to die. Our enemies would have us keep them caged until their hearts give out. But I won't have it. So we are four – three biologists and one vet – stealing, moonlit, into a forest with our precious cargo. Silent and unseen. Without permission. The way it always should have begun.

There's no more road for the truck so we're on foot. We lift Number Six's container first, Niels and I taking a back corner each while burly Evan carries the front on his own. Amelia, our vet and the only local among us, will remain here with the other two containers to keep watch.

It's a little over half a mile to the pen, and the snow is deep. The only sound Six makes is a soft panting that signals her distress.

A loon calls, distinct and lovely.

I wonder if it stirs her, that lonely cry in the night, a recognition of the same ancient call she makes. But if it does, then she doesn't reply in any way I can interpret.

It seems to take an age to reach the pen, but eventually I make out its chain-link boundary. We place Six's container inside the gate and head back for the other two animals. I don't like leaving her unguarded, but very few know where in the forest these pens have been placed.

Next we carry male wolf Number Nine. He is a massive creature, so this second hike is harder than the first, but he hasn't woken from his sleep so there is that, at least. The third wolf is a yearling female, Number Thirteen. She is Six's daughter, and lighter than either of the adults, and we have Amelia for this last journey. By the time we have carried Thirteen to the pen it's nearly dawn and exhaustion has set into my bones, but there is excitement, too, and worry. Female Number Six and male Number Nine have never met. They are not from the same pack. But we are placing them in a pen together in the hope they will decide they like each other. We need breeding pairs for this to work.

It's just as likely they'll kill each other.

We open the three containers and move out of the pen.

Six, singularly conscious, doesn't move. Not until we retreat as far as we can without losing sight of them. She doesn't like the scent of us. Soon we see her lithe form rise and pad out onto the snow. She is nearly as white as the ground she walks so lightly upon; she, too, glows. A few seconds pass as she lifts her muzzle to smell the air, maybe taking note of the leather radio collar we have placed around her neck, and then, instead of exploring the new world, she lopes quickly to her daughter's container and lies beside it.

It stirs something in me, something warm and fragile I have come to dread. There is danger here for me.

'Let's call her Ash,' Evan says.

Dawn burnishes the world from grey to golden and as the sun rises the other two animals stir from their drugged sleep. All three wolves

emerge from their containers into their single acre of glittering forest. For now, it's all the space they'll be given and it's not enough, I wish there didn't have to be fences at all.

Turning back for the truck, I say, 'No names. She's Number Six.'

Not long ago, not in the grand scheme of things, this forest was not small and sparse but strong and bursting with life. Lush with rowan trees, aspen, birch, juniper and oak, it stretched itself across a vast swathe of land, colouring Scotland's now-bare hills, providing food and shelter to all manner of untamed thing.

And within these roots and trunks and canopies, there ran wolves.

Today, wolves once again walk upon this ground, which has not seen their kind in hundreds of years. Does something in their bodies remember this land, as it remembers them? It knows them well; it has been waiting for them to wake it from its long slumber.

We spend all day carrying the remaining wolves to their pens, and return as evening falls to the project base camp, a small stone cabin at the edge of the woods. The others drink sparkling wine in the kitchenette to celebrate our having released all fourteen grey wolves into their three acclimation pens. But they aren't free yet, our wolves, the experiment has barely begun. I sit apart at the computer monitors and watch the feed from the cameras in the pens, wondering what they think of this new home. A forest not dissimilar to the one they came from in British Columbia, though temperate instead of boreal. I too came from that forest, and know it will smell different, sound and look and feel different. If there is any one thing I know best about wolves, though, it's that they adapt. I hold my breath now as big Number Nine approaches delicate Number Six and her daughter. The females have dug a groove into the snow at the very back of the pen and hunker down, wary of Nine's advance. He towers over them, shades of grey and white and black, as glorious a wolf as I've ever seen. He places his head over the back of Six's neck in a sign of dominance and I feel, with exquisite vividness, his muzzle

pressing onto the back of my neck. His soft fur tickles my skin, the heat of his breath brings bumps to my flesh. Number Six whines but stays down, showing her deference. I don't move; any sign of defiance and those jaws will close over my throat. He nips her on the ear and teeth sink into my lobe, startling my eyes closed. In the dark, the pain fades almost as quickly as it struck. I return to myself. And when I look again Nine has gone back to ignoring the females, pacing round the perimeter of the fence. If I watch, I will feel the cold of the snow on my bare feet with each of his steps but I don't, I'm already too close, my edges have forgotten themselves. So I look instead at the dark ceiling of the cabin, letting my pulse slow.

I am unlike most people. I move through life in a different way, with an entirely unique understanding of touch. Before I knew its name I knew this. To make sense of it, it is called a neurological condition. Mirror-touch synaesthesia. My brain recreates the sensory experiences of living creatures, of all people and even sometimes animals; if I see it I feel it, and for just a moment I am them, we are one and their pain or pleasure is my own. It can seem like magic and for a long time I thought it was, but really it's not so far removed from how other brains behave: the physiological response to witnessing someone's pain is a cringe, a recoil, a wince. We are hardwired for empathy. Once upon a time I took delight in feeling what others felt. Now the constant stream of sensory information exhausts me. Now I'd give anything to be cut free.

This project isn't going to work if I can't create distance between the wolves and me. I can't get lost in them, or I won't survive. The world is a dangerous place for wolves. Most of them will be dead soon.



It's midnight when I next look at the time. I have been watching the wolves sleep or pace, hoping in vain that they might howl, that one would begin and the rest would follow. But wolves don't howl when they're stressed. The research base cabin is made up of one main room, in which we keep all the computer monitors and equipment, an adjoining kitchen, and a bathroom at the back. Outside is a stable housing three horses. Evan and Niels have clearly already gone home to their rented cottages in

the nearest town – I’m so tired I don’t even remember saying goodbye to them – while Zoe, our data analyst, is asleep on the couch. I should have left hours ago, and scramble to pull my winter gear back on.

Outside, the air is biting. I drive through the forest and onto a snaking road, a couple of miles along the north-west of the Cairngorms, led only by the small orbs of my headlights. I’ve never liked car travel at night for it turns the thriving world into something empty and gaping. If I stopped and walked into it, it would be a different world altogether, filled with the shivering of life, blinking reflective eyes and the scurry of little feet in the underbrush. I turn the car down a smaller, winding road, one that leads me all the way to the valley in which Blue Cottage sits. Made of greyish blue stone and flanked by a couple of grassy paddocks, during the day its view is twofold: to the south lies thick, beckoning forest, to the north long bare hills that, come spring, will be covered in grazing red deer.

Inside, the lights are out but the fireplace glows orange. I remove all my gear, piece by piece, and then pad through the little living room to a bedroom not mine. She is motionless in the bed, a shape in the dark. I crawl in beside her; if she wakes, she gives no sign of it. I breathe her in, finding comfort in her scent, unchanged even now, even unmade as she’s been. My fingers twine within her pale hair and I let myself fall asleep, safe now in the sphere of my sister, who was always meant to be the stronger of us.

**G**ently, he says.

Her small hands are gripping the reins so tightly. She is too tiny up there, so tiny she must surely be flung.

*Gently.*

He slows her, a palm to her spine to press her flat.

*Feel him. Feel his heartbeat inside yours.*

The stallion was free not long ago and a part of him remains that way, but when she drapes herself upon him like this, gently, gently, as Dad says, he calms.

I am perched with one leg either side of the training yard fence, watching. There is coarse timber under my hands, a splinter beneath my fingernail. And I am on that horse, too, I am my sister, pressed to the warmth of the trembling, powerful beast, with my father's large, steady hand holding me still, and I am my father's hand, too, and I am the stallion, the light load he carries and the cold metal in his mouth.

*All creatures know love*, Dad says. I watch Aggie's embrace turn tender and fierce. She won't be flung free.

But the stallion's head lifts in the pink evening light; a scent has been carried to him on the wind and he paws at the earth. I twist on the fence, turning to scan the tree line.

*Easy*, Dad is saying, calming the horse and his daughter both. But I think it's too late for that. Because I've seen it now. Watching from the forest. Two unblinking eyes.

Our gazes meet and for a moment I am the wolf.

While behind me my sister tumbles from the rearing horse—

---

I wake disoriented from the dream, dreamt often, also a memory. For a few moments I lie warm in bed, remembering, but the day won't be denied, there is light streaming through the window and I have to get my sister up. 'Good morning, my love,' I murmur, stroking Aggie's hair from her face and gently helping her rise. She is guided into the bathroom and allows me to undress her and sit her in the tub. 'There's actual, real sun out there,' I say, 'so we'd better wash this mane in case you want to sit outside and dry it.' She loves to do that, as much as she loves anything, but my words are a charade for us both: I know she won't be going outside today.

'The wolves are in their pens. They survived the journey,' I say as I massage shampoo into her scalp. 'They'll want to run home.'

She doesn't respond. It's one of her bad days, which means I can talk and talk and she will do nothing but gaze listlessly at something beyond my capacity to see. But I will keep talking, in case she can hear me from that faraway place.

Aggie's hair is thick and long and pale, as mine is, and as I methodically work the conditioner through the tangles I wonder if she was right and we should have cut it all off. She is dispassionate about it now but despite the effort it takes to care for I couldn't bring myself to get rid of it, this mane she has always been known for, the hair I've spent my life brushing and braiding and trimming for her.

'If we hadn't taken them across an ocean they might have been able to.' I help Aggie out of the bath and dry her off, then dress her in warm, comfortable clothes and park her in front of the fireplace while I make breakfast. 'There's no love between Six and Nine yet,' I say. 'But they haven't killed each other, either.' The words fall so casually from my mouth that I am startled. Is that the way of all love? That it should carry the risk of death?

But the words haven't reminded Aggie of the same things, she is too far distant to be reached. I want to follow her to wherever she's gone and I also fear that place more than anything. I fear, too, the day she stops returning from it.

She doesn't eat the eggs I leave at her elbow, too tired, too soul-exhausted to manage anything at all. I brush her wet hair slowly, gently,

and I speak more of the wolves because they are all I have left that isn't rage.

Blue Cottage isn't far from the project base camp. Both cottage and camp sit on the edge of Abernethy Forest, one of the last remnants of the ancient Caledonian Forest that arrived here after the Ice Age. These old trees belong to an unbroken, 9000-year evolutionary chain, and it's within them that we placed the closest wolf pen, the one containing wolves Six, Nine, and Thirteen. If they manage to form a pack, we will name them after their new home: Abernethy. There are few houses around here, but behind us sprawls vibrant green pasture for the many sheep farms dividing us from the closest town. This was not where I would have chosen to place a new pack of wolves. But there aren't many places in the Highlands upon which you wouldn't find sheep, and anyway the wolves aren't going to stay put. I only hope they prefer the shelter of forest. Beyond this stretch of wintry pine woods rise the Cairngorm mountains, and there, I'm told, is the wild heart of the Highlands, where no sheep roam and no roads enter. Perhaps this will be where the wolves like it best.

I have the heater on high in the car. The road is slippery with ice, and a light snowfall has begun, a gentle swirl of lace. The drive is beautiful; this is big country, sloping hills and sinuous frozen rivers, stretches of thick forest.

When the black horse blazes onto the road in front of me I think at first I have imagined it. Its tail is a dark comet trailing behind. My foot slams the brakes too hard and my wheels fishtail. The car spins half a circle and comes to a stop backwards in the middle of the road, in time for me to watch the horse disappear into the trees.

My chest feels tight as I ease the car onto the side of the road.

A truck rumbles to a stop beside me. 'You okay?' a male voice calls from the driver's side window, which is open only a pinch.

I nod.

'See a horse?'

I point in the direction it ran. 'Ah shite,' says the driver, and then the truck, to my astonishment, promptly heads off-road to follow it. I am

horrified as it skids through the snow. I check the time and hop out of the car, following the tire tracks. It's not hard. He's left trenches in his wake.

The snow picks up; the world is falling around me. I'm in a rush now, late for work, but even so. I tilt my head to look up. Flakes upon my lips and eyelashes. My hand reaching to the cool papery bark of a silver birch. The memory of forty thousand aspens breathing around me, their canopy not naked but canary yellow and as vivid as his voice in my ear. *It's dying. We are killing it.*

A shout, from somewhere distant.

I let the memory slip away and start running. Past his truck and into thick snow only disturbed by his footprints and the hoof marks of a frantic horse. I'm sweating by the time I reach the river. A narrow, frozen stretch of ice between steep embankments.

The dark shape of him ahead. Below on the ice stands the horse.

Even at such a distance I feel the cold beneath its hooves. A cutting kind of cold. The man is tall, but I can't see any more of his shape beneath his winter layers. His hair is short, dark like his beard. There's a black-and-white collie sitting calmly next to him. The man turns to me.

'You know this is protected forest?' I ask.

He frowns quizzically.

I gesture to his truck and the mess it's made. 'You don't mind breaking the law?'

He considers me and then smiles. 'You can report me after I've dealt with the horse.' He has a thick Scottish brogue.

We look at the animal on the ice. She's not putting much weight on her front hoof.

'What are you waiting for?' I ask.

'I got a bum leg. I wouldn't get back out. And that ice won't hold forever.'

There are tiny cracks on the surface of the river, spreading with each shift of the horse's weight.

'Best get my rifle from the truck.'

The horse gives a snort, tosses her head. The black of her coat is broken only by a diamond of white between her wide, darting eyes. I can see the quick rise and fall of her belly.

‘What’s her name?’ I ask.

‘No idea.’

‘She’s not yours?’

He shakes his head.

I start climbing down the steep ravine.

‘Don’t,’ he says. ‘I won’t be able to get you out.’

My eyes stay on the horse as I slip and slide down the jagged edge. My boots hit ice and I edge my way out, watching for cracks. It holds me for now but there are sections thin enough to reveal the dark flow of water beneath. I see how easy it would be to step wrong, for that sheath to split and for me to slip silently through; I see my body dragged and tumbled head over tail until it’s gone.

The horse. She is watching me. ‘Hello,’ I say, meeting her deep liquid eyes.

She tosses her head and stamps a hoof. She is fierce and defiant; I move closer and she rears, thundering hooves landing with a crack. I wonder if she knows her fury will kill her, if maybe she’s fine with that, maybe she would charge towards oblivion rather than return to whatever she fled. A bit and bridle, a saddle. Some horses aren’t meant to be ridden.

I lower myself into a crouch, making myself small. She doesn’t rear again, keeping her eyes on me.

‘You got any rope in your truck?’ I ask the man without looking up at him.

I hear him move off to retrieve it.

The horse and I wait. *Who are you*, I ask her silently. She’s a strong beast and, if I had to guess, newly broken. It’s been a long while since I’ve ridden a horse and I’m a different kind of thing than I was. I let her see me, wondering what she will make of me.

The man returns with a coil of rope and throws it down. I don’t break from her eyes as my hands tie the old familiar knot by rote, I keep her with me and rise to my feet. With a quick motion I loop the lasso over her head and draw it closed about her neck. She rears once more, furious, and the ice will crack, I’m sure of it. I let the rope through my hands so I’m not yanked from my feet but make sure to keep a good hold. When she lands I don’t give her the chance to rear again, I pull on the rope to

force her head down and then I move in close to lift her foreleg. The two motions cause the horse to bend her other front leg and almost with relief she lowers herself to the ice and tilts heavily onto her side. I drape myself over her body, stroking her forehead and neck, whispering to her. *Good girl*. Her heart is thundering. I can feel the rope about my own neck.

‘The ice,’ says the man, because there are a thousand fine lines now.

When she’s ready I slide my leg over her back and give her a squeeze with my knees, a few clicks of the tongue and an *up, up*. She surges and I slide onto her properly, getting my other leg into place and tightening my knees. The rope is still about her neck but I don’t need it, I take hold of her mane and manoeuvre her towards the steep embankment as the cracks shudder beneath us. *This will hurt*, I tell her but she leaps up the edge, tilting me back. I’m ready for it, and I move with her, legs firm enough to keep my seat. She strains upwards as her hooves scabble for purchase and the ground gives way beneath her and then we are up and over, and the thrill that runs through her burns straight through me. Behind us the icy river has cracked open.

I press myself flat to her neck once more. *Good girl. Brave girl*. She’s calm now, but I don’t know for how long. She’s not standing on her bad leg. Getting free might have harmed it beyond repair. I dismount and pass the rope to the man. It’s rough in his bare palm, in mine. ‘Be gentle.’

‘Much appreciated,’ he says with a nod. ‘You’re a horsewoman?’

A quirk of my lips. ‘No.’

‘Would you ride her home? She’s from the Burns farm, not far north.’

‘Why’d you come get her if she’s not yours?’

‘I just saw her, same as you.’

I consider him. ‘Her leg’s injured. She shouldn’t be ridden.’

‘I’ll radio in a float then. You’re not from around here?’

‘I just moved here.’

‘Whereabouts?’ he asks, and I wonder if he’s one of those people who make it their business to know everyone in a hundred-mile radius. He has a heavy brow and a dark look about his eyes; I can’t tell if he’s handsome but there is something unsettling about him. ‘What brings you here then?’

I turn away. ‘Don’t you have someone to radio about that horse?’

'You with the wolves?' he asks, and I stop. 'We got told to expect an Australian lassie. Now how does that come about? Aren't there enough koalas for you to be cuddling?'

'Not really,' I say. 'Most have died in bushfires.'

'Oh.'

That shut him up.

After a moment he asks, 'They free yet?'

'Not yet. But they will be.'

'I'll alert the villagers to lock up their wives and daughters. The big bad wolves are coming.'

I meet his eyes. 'If I were you I'd be more worried about the wives and daughters going out to run with the wolves.'

He gazes at me, taken aback.

I turn in the direction of my car. 'Next time you've got an animal to track, call someone who's up to the task instead of bulldozing your monster truck through protected undergrowth.' *Prick*.

I hear him laugh. 'Yes, ma'am.'

When I glance back it's at the horse. *Bye*, I bid her. And, *I'm sorry*. Because that damaged leg might mean freedom of a different kind.