Prologue

Marianne

1955

Marianne bent over the ragged remains of the poor butterfly's broken wing. The insect held still, as if it knew she was only trying to help.

The wing was damaged beyond repair, and she gripped the tweezers in her left hand and, with great care, lifted the replacement silken waxed wing she had made, stopping to consider it in mid-air. It was a perfect match to the quaking peacock butterfly's remaining wing, even down to the glittering dust that coated its surface.

She painted a fine dab of clear glue onto its edge and brought it fluidly in to the broken wing, holding it in place with motionless hands. Four shimmering blue eyes aligned on the wings and gazed up at her, and she allowed herself a small smile.

Carefully, she opened the tweezers, and the butterfly lay pulsing on the desk, unaware it was free.

'Go,' she said, wishing it upwards.

Slowly, delicately, it lifted its wings, both the real and the manufactured, until they closed above it. Marianne frowned as the silk wing lagged slightly, but then, with sudden weightlessness, the butterfly took off.

It flew around the great panelled room, and Marianne sat back in her chair, following its path with her eyes, a surge of joy bursting through her as she watched it in its jagged, miraculous flight.

Turning back to her desk, she began to clear away her work. The remains of the damaged wing lay like a spent husk on the leather surface. It had been torn away, almost down to the core, the pattern of the two eyes smeared and disfigured, and for a brief moment, she had the feeling that it was looking at her, the eyes penetrating her in a way that she didn't understand.

Above her, the repaired butterfly danced high in the air, unaware that anything was wrong.

Chapter One

Tartelin

Summer 2018

'I do not require nappy changing, I do not require spoon feeding, I do not require my ego massaging. What I do require is someone with a deft pair of hands. I asked for someone with experience in dealing with little things, delicate things. A scientist, perhaps. Is that you?'

I nod.

'Show me your hands then, child.'

I hold them out, palm side downwards, and she wheels herself over and inspects them.

Her own hands, I see now, have a tremor.

‘You’re a pretty girl,’ she says, her eyes drifting over my face, glancing off my cheek, and I feel my skin redden. ‘Not very robust though. Are you sure this is the right job for you?’ I open my mouth to speak, but she cuts me off. ‘What did you do, before you came here? How is it that you are suited to this vacancy?’

I frown. We went over all this in our letters, back and forth, back and forth. Written on paper, not sent by email, each one signed ‘Miss Marianne Stourbridge’ in her regimented, barbed wire scrawl. My life back home was the reason she chose me. But then she is old, and she can’t be expected to remember everything.

‘I grew up around my mother’s artwork, helping her out in her studio,’ I say, more loudly than I mean to. ‘And then I went to art school myself. Mum’s work was focused on found objects…making art from bits of nature: feathers, leaves and twigs -’

‘- Lepidoptera aren’t ‘bits of nature’, Miss Brown.’

‘She also made sculptures out of grains of rice in her spare time. I helped her.’

‘Why on earth would anyone do that?’ She leaves the question hanging in the air and turns her chair abruptly, wheeling herself back to her desk.

The chair is made from cane. It looks like an antique, and I’m surprised it still works. It must be exhausting to propel.

‘It’s a shame you don’t have a scientific background, but now you’re here, you’ll have to do. Here, hold this.’ She lifts a pair of gold tweezers into the air and I hasten forward and take them. ‘No, not like that. Pinch. Gently. That’s it.’

I adjust my hold, and feel how the spring of the tines is like an extension of my fingers and I’m back with my mother and she’s saying, ‘Careful Tartelin, don’t squeeze too hard, feather barbs bruise easily.’ But before I can use this new-found body part, the tweezers are whisked away from me, and she’s turning again to the desk and bending over her work. I stand by her side and wait, wondering if I’m allowed to go. The clock on the mantel chimes loudly. I count eight. I look at my watch. It’s ten past two.

‘Miss Stourbridge? Shall I adjust your clock?’

‘No point. It’ll only go back to eight o’clock.’

I look over at it, frowning. The second hand is juddering in jerky movements. It makes me dizzy to look at it, as if it’s measuring a different kind of time. I turn back to my employer.

Miss Stourbridge is so still as she works. I can see her teasing the body of a dead moth from a cocoon, her fingers moving infinitesimally slowly. I look around the room. It is lined in dark panels of wood, and every surface has frames and frames of butterflies and moths, glinting pins plunged into husked bodies.

‘Did you catch all these butterflies?’

She is silent, and at first I think she hasn’t heard me. But then I see she’s holding her breath so as not to disturb the moth’s delicate wings. I watch closely, the clock ticking behind us. I’m not looking at her work, but at her ribs, waiting for them to inflate, waiting for her nostrils to swell, anything that shows air is passing into her chest. My eyes sting from the pain of staring. She is so still that she has

become a part of the chair she sits in. Only her finger and thumb move achingly slowly, and the minutes tick by.

When I was young, I used to try to be as still as she is now. My mother would sit me on her knee and tell me stories, and I would hold myself as still as a statue, bewitched by her tales.

'Long ago,' she always began, in a voice that was reserved only for when the moon was rising, 'I was a tiny jellied spawn no bigger than a pearl, floating in the earth's great oceans. The fish nibbled and swallowed my brothers and sisters up, snap, snap, snap, and I was left, coming at last to rest on the pebbled shore of a beach. And that is how I came to have these,' she would say, waving her hands in front of my face, so close that they skimmed my eyelashes and all I could see was the thin layer of webbed skin between each finger. To my unprejudiced four-year-old eyes, the webs were not a deformity: they were beautiful, useful; magical, and I wished with all my heart that I could be like her, could be from the sea.

I take my eyes from the poor moth on the desk, and look over Miss Stourbridge's head to the picture window that frames the sea beyond, and I remember anew that the sea surrounds us here, like a comforting arm holding the world at bay. A feeling of calm settles over me. However strange this woman is, whatever my job might entail, it was the right decision to come here, I can feel it.

I had seen the advertisement in one of Mum's ornithological magazines. Mum bought them for the photographs. She particularly liked the close-ups of the birds' eyes and feathers. The magazines were littered throughout our house, spattered with drops of paint, pages ripped out and twisted together into the vague forms of gulls and robins so that every surface was covered in paper birds made of paper birds.

But the latest magazine had landed on the doormat, pristine and untouched, and when I shook it from its clear plastic covering, it had fallen open on the advert.

PA required to assist lepidopterist. Must be able to start immediately. Must not be squeamish.

When I had written to ask for more information, the return address had intrigued me. Dogger Bank House, Dohhalund.

Dohhalund. An unusual word, not English-sounding at all. A bit of research showed me that it was a tiny island off the East Anglian coast, the long thin shape of it reminiscent of a fish leaping out of the water. Its heritage was a mixture of English and Dutch. Looking at it on a map on my phone, it had looked so small that I imagined you could walk its circumference in only a few hours. I had tried to picture what kind of an island it would be: a cold, hard rock grizzled with the droppings of thousands of seabirds, or a flat stretch of white sand, waiting for my footprints? Whatever it turned out to be, the isolation of it appealed to me.

Miss Stourbridge's letters had been vague about the position she was offering, but she did tell me, rather proudly, that the island had belonged to her family for hundreds of years. While I wait, I look about the room, searching for photographs, evidence of other people. Where is her family now?

I shift my weight carefully from foot to foot and I glance at my watch. Two twenty-three. Thirteen minutes. I wonder if I'm being paid to stand and do nothing. I look around the room. Next to the desk is a large clear glass box. Inside hang rows and rows of cocoons of all different shapes and sizes. One or two are twitching. I turn away with a sting of shame, feeling somehow as if I've looked at something I shouldn't have.

Over by the window, there is a huge black telescope on a stand. Unlike everything else in this place, it looks very modern. Next to it on the windowsill sits a battered pair of binoculars on a worn leather strap.

Quietly I back towards the chaise longue in the corner and lower myself onto its tattered silk cover. It's the first time I've sat down in hours, and my body sings with relief. I edge my hand into my pocket and pull out my phone. It's switched off: the battery ran low somewhere off the coast of Norfolk at around the same time that the signal disappeared. The lack of signal hadn't worried me: I'd been looking forward to charging my phone when I arrived, tapping in Miss Stourbridge's Wi-Fi code, the friendly glow of my phone's screen a comfort in this new place.

I look around for a socket in the room, and with a sudden slick shiver I find I can't see any. There must be electricity here, surely. But if not…realisation runs through me like a thrill: if there's no electricity in this house, there won't be any Wi-Fi either. And with no signal, there's no way of contacting the outside world. No way for the outside world to contact me. The roar of the sea appears to amplify through the thin glass of the window, rough and crashing as if it is rushing towards me like a tsunami. Suddenly England seems very far away.

I look down at my phone and contemplate turning it on. I have a desperate need to open the photos app, to gaze at a familiar face in order to find an anchor in this strange new world. I touch my finger to the button, trying to remember how much battery I have left. Two percent? Eight? My finger rests lightly on the button, undecided, the screen black and glaring.

Across the room, Miss Stourbridge sits back against her chair, and I tuck my phone away and approach the desk. I can feel it pressing against my skin, pulsing against me like the beat of a heart that isn't mine.

Miss Stourbridge sighs, her breath ruffling the damp wings of the newly hatched moth in front of her.

'Dusky brocade,' she says, nodding at the tiny brown body, 'they have such beautiful names, moths. They may not be as pretty as butterflies, but the names we have given them over the centuries means even Shakespeare was a fan. Beauty isn't everything, it turns out.'

I see her looking at my cheek as she says it, and for a moment I'm disappointed. Surely here, on an island in the middle of the North Sea, I am away from prejudice? It had been part of the reason the job appealed to me: to be able to stride across this island without the worry of others' stares. Or perhaps I'm naïve, and intolerance breeds in isolated outcrops like this, running within its very seams.

She sets down the delicate tweezers at last and, turning awkwardly in her chair, looks me in the eye for the first time since I got here. Her eyes are a deep grey-brown, not dissimilar to the moth on the desk. They are full of a cataclysmic wisdom, as if a fuse has been lit but the spark is not rushing along as intended.

'So, Tartelin, do you understand what I am doing, here on this island?'

'You're a lepidopterist.' I say, remembering the word from the advert. 'You catch and study butterflies and moths.'

'Yes and no. I think that's probably the closest term for what I'm trying to do. Dohhalund is a good place for finding the butterflies that get lost, the ones that get blown over from the Netherlands and Denmark. They rest on the ships, you see – and on the trawlers and Dogger boats the island is

named after. But in the last few years I've dedicated my life to mutations. Do you understand what that word means?'

'Yes.' I bite my tongue. Who doesn't know what a mutation is, living as we are in a world where viruses mutate in our bodies and on our screens every day? I think of my mother's webbed hands. I go to touch my face, but stop myself just in time.

'Take me over to the window,' she orders.

I push her across the uneven floorboards and she wobbles in her chair like a marionette. The room is large. It might once have been an upstairs sitting room, but now it is a workroom: a vast empty space of floorboards and wooden panelling. The desk, a huge, unfashionable mahogany lump inset with green leather, sits in front of the window facing the sea. A small Chinese cabinet on ornate legs has pride of place beneath a wall of pinned butterflies. There is an upright piano near the door, and the tattered chaise I sat on looks as if it's been pushed unceremoniously into a corner, as if to get it out of the way. Other than that, the room is empty, as long as you don't count the hundreds of pairs of butterflies' eyes watching you from the walls.

'What could cause mutation, Tartelin?'

'I…I'm not a scientist, Miss Stourbridge.' Panic begins to set in. This feels like an interview, but surely I already have the job? I've come all this way. With a prickle of tension, I wonder if she'll send me back on the next available boat.

'When I came back to the island two months ago,' she says, leaning forward and indicating I should open the large bay window, 'I saw a little white bird over the sea. Just there.' She points with a shaking liver-spotted hand.

Struggling to follow the darting direction of her thoughts, I edge past the telescope and unlatch the window. Immediately, the wet breeze skims off the North Sea and bursts into the room. A pile of papers ripples on the desk, barely held down by a lump of unpolished amber the size of a human skull.

'Swallows always return to the same nest, year after year,' she says. 'I remember the swallows nesting here when I was a girl. Their descendants are there now, just above the window. Have a look.'

I sit on the edge of the window, careful not to knock the binoculars off, and lean out, looking up. Immediately the wind wails in my ears. Just above the window frame a line of mud nests are glued to the eaves. Tiny voices can be heard from within.

'You've seen swallows before, I take it? You know what they look like?'

I lean back in. 'Of course.' I'm getting used to her short, sharp way of talking, like a school teacher to a child. It must just be uneasiness at having someone new in her house, a way of setting boundaries. I hope it will mellow with time.

'Tell me then.'

I think back to Mum's magazines. 'They're quite small, dark birds with a long, forked tail.'

'Good girl. Keep watching.'

I lean out again. The baby swallows are poking their heads out now. Three little navy blue and pale peach faces. With a faint whoosh the mother swoops in, narrowly missing the top of my head. Her body is white from head to toe. The fledgling swallows' mouths open, gaping wide. A fourth baby pops its head out, squealing for food. It, too, is white. I've never seen anything like it before.

'The term for an abnormally white bird is "leucistic",' Miss Stourbridge says. 'It's strange that she was able to find a mate. Most leucistic birds never manage it. They are considered freaks, and freaks are rarely accepted, even in the avian world.'

I watch the mother ignore the tiny white dot in the nest, shovelling dead insects into its three siblings' beaks instead. I have a feeling Miss Stourbridge is studying my cheek again. I stay on the windowsill, looking up, avoiding her gaze.

'I suspect there have been changes to a few species on this island since I was last here. Notably the winged ones. This is why I need you to catch some butterflies for me: so that I can know for sure.'

A movement out of the window catches my eye, and I stiffen.