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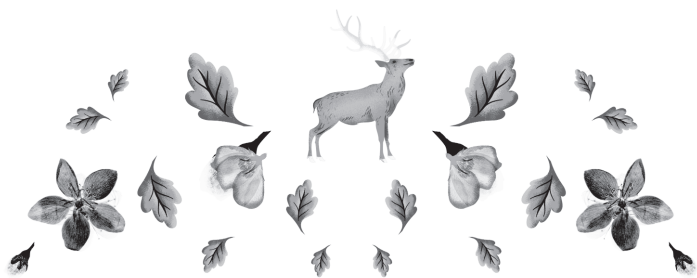
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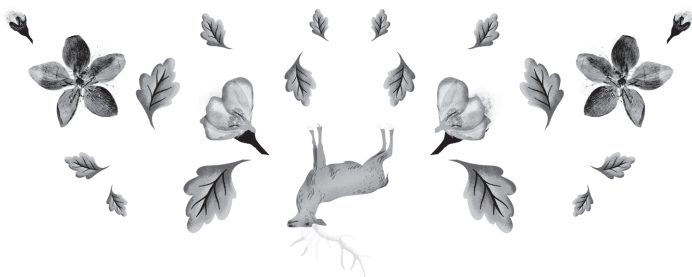
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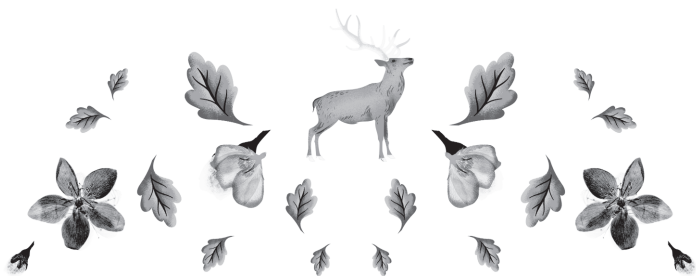
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For all the lost girls – may you find your way home.



Evelyn





1

February 1944

T*his is how an air raid begins: in the dead of night, with silence and normality shattered by the banshee wail of a siren.*

I roll out of bed and Philippa's already on her feet across from me, white-faced but holding out a hand. I'm lucky to have an elder sister and brother – they've been looking out for me ever since the war broke out. I grab on to Philippa's hand as if it's a lifeline, and we meet Jamie in the hall.

We've been taught well by our parents, and carried their instructions with us through every drill at school: look out for your siblings. Keep together whatever happens. Wait for no one else.

Not even Mum and Dad.

So we hurry out through the back door of our shabby terraced house and into the tiny garden, where the frost nips at our feet. It's strange, being out of doors so late at night. Shadows loom long and make our postage-stamp

lawn and shrubs seem eerily unfamiliar. Jamie helps Phil and me down into the Anderson shelter and stands at the entrance, staring back to the house with hunched shoulders and one foot tapping. Phil wraps a damp blanket around me and we sit side by side, shivering in the cold.

The siren wails on. Somewhere in the distance, bombs begin to fall.

'Do you see them?' Philippa asks anxiously.

Jamie shakes his head.

'No, I – wait.' His voice cracks with relief. 'There's Dad.'

Our father looks in at the entrance, and everything's suddenly a little less dreadful than it was before. Until he frowns and looks at Jamie. 'Didn't your mum come out?'

Before Jamie can answer, Dad sprints back across the lawn. The dull blast of explosions is growing louder, closer. I gnaw on my lower lip and Jamie joins Phil and me. We put our arms around each other and wait, and I would give anything to be away from here – to leave the dark and danger and fear behind.

'Where are—?' Philippa asks, choking with worry. But a bomb falls so close that it drowns out her last word and shakes the walls of our small shelter.

'Anywhere but here,' I whisper.

Phil pulls me close, as if her very presence can shield me from harm. Squeezing my eyes shut, I will away the present, picturing somewhere calm, somewhere peaceful – a haven of silence and golden light. When I was very small, before

the war, we visited the New Forest on holiday. It was the loveliest place I'd ever seen. I envision its trees, its open spaces, even the wild ponies.

'Anywhere but here. Anywhere but here.'

And then, silence.

The dark in the shelter grows, till I can make out nothing but my brother's and sister's pale faces.

After a moment a sound begins. It's neither air-raid siren nor bombshell. Ringing through the air, it's low and insistent, halfway between the bellow of a bull and the bugle of an elk. It pulls at my blood and bones until I want to crawl out of my own skin to answer it. Jamie, Phil and I stare at each other, stunned.

'Hold on to me,' Jamie orders, panic lacing his words. We join hands and I can barely breathe, I'm so afraid. Under that fear, though, there's something new and unexpected – anticipation.

The call grows louder and louder until at last light explodes around us. I blink and squint, eyes watering, sure I'll see only rubble and devastation when my vision clears. But the light stays constant, unlike the flash and sizzle of shelling. It resolves into afternoon sunshine and my heart leaps to find that, impossibly, we're standing in a wood.

After the confines of the bunker everything in me sings to be surrounded by sun and trees and good clean air. There's a pungent green smell all about, and a riot of bird-song undercut by the sound of running water. Wind lifts

the hair from my forehead, and it's not a bitter February blast but a soft spring breeze.

Jamie and Phil glance at each other, wide-eyed as a pair of ghosts.

'Did we—?' Philippa begins, and Jamie shrugs.

Ahead of us something steps from between the trees. It's a stag, his hide the colour of autumn leaves, a thick red ruff of fur around his broad shoulders. He wears his branching antlers like a crown.

Instinctively, Philippa pushes me behind her, but I pull away. There is something about this place – about the earth beneath my feet and the branches above my head and the stag stepping towards us and the wild rightness of it all. A moment ago I was afraid and broken, and now I feel as if the splintered pieces within me have begun knitting back together.

'Hello,' I say quietly. 'I'm Evelyn.'

In answer, the creature steps forward. He lowers his great head and presses his velvet muzzle to my cheek. I feel a whuff of hot air that smells of grass and leaves and wild flowers. When he speaks, it's a heart-deep rumble that comes up from his chest and there's a fierce joy in his strange voice.

'Little one. Welcome to the Woodlands.'

'This can't be happening,' I hear Phil mutter to Jamie behind me. 'Either we're dead or there's been a gas attack.'

'I don't know.' Jamie sounds torn. 'It looks real enough, Phil.'

'But it can't be . . .'

The stag fixes his fathomless dark eyes on me and for the first time that I can recall I am struck by a sudden and unshakeable impression that all shall be well.

Anywhere but here, I said.

Somehow, I've got my wish.