



THE HURTING

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Chicken
House

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*For all my boys;
Nick, Archie, and our beloved Luke.*

*To sacrifice what you are,
and live without belief.
That is a fate more terrible than dying.*

JOAN OF ARC



PART I

Love



I

I stole a baby.

The words peck away at me as I climb high above the fjord and stand on Preken Rock. The white night is full with pine gum and birdsong, but I'm gasping and only getting snippets of air. It's the cold mountain wind that makes my eyes water up. Not the hundred metres of nothingness to the sea. Not the sound of his crying.

I stole a baby.

Does that make me a bad person?

Yeah. It does.

I drag his baby carrier off my back, jam it upright between my knees and flip out the metal stand. His dirty nappy makes my stomach heave, but I get the carrier on a flat rock and straighten his fur headdress.

One blue baby shoe falls off like always, I struggle to get it back on, and grab the camera.

'I'll put this right,' I promise him.

He's beyond hearing me. His muffled cries build to a crescendo, and my legs shake like they're possessed, tiny

stones twisting into the rock under my boots. I have to crawl to the overhang and make myself look down. No one is there.

Everything spins.

Lights strobe behind my eyes. The purple clouds, the edgeless sky, the fjords and the forest all swirl together and blur past me like I'm on a runaway train. I want it to stop. I've been running for so long, I want it all to stop.

The world just keeps on spinning. And the camera flies out of my fingers. It spins in an arc over the fjord, and snaps back and forth on the strap, snagged on my quartz bracelet. Holy crap. I lose this Leica, and it's game over.

I wriggle back, check the camera still works, scanning the horizon. Norway stuns me, always.

Green mountains drop into the sea like emerald icebergs. And the fjord is so clear, I can see all the way to the bottom. The crystal sea has burnt the grass off the mountains and the bare rock looks like ribs of underwater cathedrals. I used to love all that. But now I know what's down there.

The wind throws tantrums at the wickedness of it all; howling, and hurling matted red hair across my mouth. And I know it's shallow, but I don't want to die like this. I want one more day.

One more day.

It's not so much to ask. Is it? To walk through my life again and appreciate the ordinary stuff. Toothpaste. Hot

water. Catching a bus. My family? I never even said goodbye. Never said I loved them. I binned my life like toilet paper, and never noticed.

Skylarks swoop through the Nordic night, singing. Song-flight gobbles up their energy; the skylarks still sing as the sun casts silvery shrouds over the fjord. The Midnight Sun. They call it Black Sun here.

The Black Son? That's him all right. Can I really stop him? Yeah. Maybe. If I keep my head.

The wind drops. I film my last words. 'I'm Nell Lamb,' I say on camera. 'If you're watching this, I'm dead already. Don't freak out on me. It's way worse for me. And I need you to listen. I die, and this baby gets to live, but only if you listen.'

No. No. No. It sounds horribly wrong, a stupid, indulgent snuff-selfie. Who will believe me? What if I bottle it again? What if this doesn't work? What if they find him?

Pray louder than your thoughts, Nell.

My sister's voice is so clear in my head I half turn to hug her. But it's a cruel trick of the wind. I'm alone on Preken Rock. No one will save me. No one will listen.

I tilt my head to eavesdrop on the world around me. Purple shadows lengthen and sneak up the trail, over moss-covered rocks and arrow-straight birch trees. The skylarks stop singing. Hairs on the back of my neck tingle. Then a rush of power surges through the air, over the land, through the forests, and into the rock.

Its pulse terrifies me. *Rage. Rage. Longing.* And all I can hear is the thrashing and pounding inside my own head.

He's here.