

MY MOTHER'S SECRET

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'If I were to marry you, you would kill me.'

Reader, I married him.

Jane Eyre by Charlotte Brontë

EMMA

It's as if we've stepped into a Constable painting, a bucolic vision of England. There's a single oak ahead of us in the heart of the valley; the grass is lime-green and the steep sides of the Cotswold escarpment are covered in dense woodland. Even though it's May, the sky is shale-grey; there's a brooding mass of clouds on the horizon.

'We could have parked right there! Why did you make us walk all this way?' Ava whines.

'Because you'll appreciate it even more,' says Jack.

Stella snorts. 'Yeah, like anyone but you is going to "appreciate" a mouldering old church.'

'It's so creepy. I don't like it,' Ava says.

I have to admit, the lowering sky and the dark green of the trees surrounding us make me feel a bit hemmed in.

'I've been bitten!' she shrieks and jumps about, slapping at her ankles.

'I did see a horsefly back there,' I say.

'It's probably nothing. Just a scratch,' says Jack.

'Let me have a look.' I turn Ava's slim calf in my hands.

Sure enough, there's a large red lump starting to form above her ankle bone.

'Don't worry, I've got some ointment,' I say, sliding my backpack off my shoulders.

Stella rolls her eyes.

‘Of course,’ says Jack, ‘your mum is prepared for anything. Break a leg, and she’ll wrap you in her space-blanket while we wait for mountain rescue on speed-dial.’

‘You’re kidding, right?’ says Stella. ‘A *space-blanket*.’

‘I do have a space-blanket, as it happens. You never know when you might need one . . .’ I rub antihistamine into Ava’s leg and she stops whimpering. ‘It’s so light, it would be stupid not to bring it.’

‘I told you,’ says Jack.

‘Oh my God, you are insane.’

‘We could use it to fly to the moon,’ says Ava.

‘Jesus, Mum, the Taliban carry those things to stop the US spying on them with thermal cameras,’ says Stella.

‘Multi-purpose,’ murmurs my husband.

I finish putting away my first-aid kit. Ahead of us are a tiny stream and the remains of an old bridge.

‘Look! The people who once owned this place probably swept down here in their coach and horses, right over that bridge and up to the big house,’ I say brightly.

‘Like, that’s even interesting,’ says Stella.

There’s a sign saying the ruined bridge is unsafe. A round, stone ball lies to one side, as if it has tumbled from the crumbling turrets. It’s now half-obsured by long grass. There’s a cowpat next to it. We head to the right; buttery-coloured Cotswold stones poke through the soil.

I start singing ‘Follow the Yellow Brick Road’.

‘Spare me,’ mutters Jack under his breath, striding ahead of us. He’s smiling, though.

Ava joins in with the chorus, and we keep singing and she forgets to moan as the hill curves steeply upwards.

I don’t have my husband’s strength or resilience in the face of concerted opposition: I would never have managed to drag a fourteen-year-old and an eleven-year-old out of the house when

they'd much rather be Snapchatting (Stella) or practising ballet (Ava). So I'm pleased Jack's cheerily ignored any opposition to his plans, as he normally does, even if it means visiting yet another church. We haven't been to see this one in a while, but sadly there's no cafe nearby that the girls and I can escape to.

I'm out of breath. I really should lose some weight, I think, as I always do when Jack is marching us up some hill. He's as fit as a flea. He goes to a posh gym in town and does kettlebells and something called HIIT in his lunch hour.

At the top, there's a mansion that a family actually lives in, rather than opening it up to the public and allowing the whole world to traipse through the living room to raise money to repair the roof, plus a walled garden with stables and greenhouses that are also off-limits. The church is open but to reach it you have to walk round in a loop and double-back to give the owners a modicum of privacy. I get distracted by a lily pool and stop to take some photos on my phone. It's surprisingly dark: there's a thick hedge behind me, and beech trees overhead. I imagine this must have led to the main driveway for the house at one time. I lean over the fence, the metal cold against my stomach, and try and get a water lily to fill the frame in my camera. When I finally manage to take a halfway decent photo, I look up, ready to show Ava.

She's gone. I can't hear her or Stella and Jack, either. There's the faint smell of horses and leather. It's silent. It appears darker than before. The first spot of rain hits my cheek. I look round, but the narrow path is empty of walkers or my family.

I start jogging and call out, 'Ava? Stella?'

I still can't see them. The path grows narrower, the trees tower over me and it's impossible to see over the hedge. Shrubs encroach. Something snaps across my face, stinging my cheek. I cry out. It's a branch. I feel as if I'm in a tunnel. I run faster. A black shape explodes out of the bushes and I jump back. It's a blackbird, disappearing

into the wood in a flurry of feathers. I can't breathe. There's no sign of them, no sign that anyone else even passed this way.

I start screaming their names, over and over, the names of my family, my loved ones, the people I cannot live without. My heart is beating so hard it's painful.

I must have missed the turn for the church, because now I'm on a wide driveway flanked by those giant beech trees, last year's masts crunching beneath my feet, and the house is behind me, the windows shuttered against tourists. There's still no one else around. No walkers. No one appears at the window. I can't stop shouting; the silence will choke me. I feel as if my chest is in a giant vice that's squeezing my ribs. I run to a fence and look down into the valley. There's a girl on horseback a long way below me. She isn't even aware that I'm up here, shouting for help. The path twists to the left, away from the fields, and disappears into a dark thicket of laurels. Is that where they are? I'm frozen. I don't know where to search next, what to do.

And then Jack is running towards me. He puts one hand on my shoulder and looks straight into my eyes.

'Take it easy. Deep breath. In. We're all here. We're safe. Breathe out.'

I see the girls peeking round a trellis draped with pink tea roses. Their faces are white. They're fine, though, just as Jack said they were.

Once I've stopped hyperventilating, Jack folds me in his arms.

'We were inside the church,' he murmurs in my ear. 'You know I'd never let anything happen to them, don't you?'

I nod, and pull away. Ava comes and flings her arms around my waist.

'Are you all right, Mum? I'm sorry, I shouldn't have left you. I thought you saw . . .'

'It's okay,' I say. 'It's my fault, not yours. I should have kept up.'

Stella scowls at me. 'You screamed the whole bloody place down,' she says and stalks away.

It's obvious, now, where the path to the church was. I wipe a sheen of cold sweat from my forehead and hold Jack's hand tightly. I swallow uncomfortably and take a sip of water from the bottle I've brought with me.

The tiny church is cool, almost cold. I sit on a pew to try and pull myself together, while Jack strides about, pointing out features to Ava. I think she was humouring him, but now she's actually interested.

'It dates back to the twelfth century, but there was a pagan site here even before then. The whole church is in the shape of a cross. Take a look at the turret.'

'Oh! It's a hexagon,' she says, peering up into the rafters.

Someone has put vases full of roses next to the nave and their sweet, spicy scent fills the air. I try and keep my anxiety under control, but occasionally, particularly when I'm in unfamiliar places, it bubbles to the surface. I'd like to appear strong and unflappable for the girls, and sometimes I manage. The stained-glass windows are exquisite: Christ stands in a sea of white lilies, the bloodless marks where the nails were driven into his feet are tear-shaped.

'You always ruin everything,' hisses Stella. 'We're not little kids any more. You don't have to freak out when you can't see us for thirty fucking seconds.'

'Stella!' says Jack, pausing from his monologue. 'I don't want to hear you speak to your mum like that.'

Stella storms out of the church. I jump as the door cracks against the thousand-year-old stone frame. Jack follows her. Ava comes and curls into my side and I put my arm round her and tuck her soft blonde-haired head beneath my chin. Thank goodness for one sunny child who hasn't yet hit puberty.

STELLA

I'm standing by a stone angel when Dad comes out of the church. He has that look – his Dr Seuss expression. He really wants to bollock me, but he can't. He has to access his inner psychologist and work out how to 'connect' with a stropky teenager, so I'll feel 'heard', but will be put in my place. Dad is quietly spoken, but that can actually be quite frightening. The angrier he gets, the softer his voice goes, until he snaps. It's only happened twice and it was terrifying. Both times it was about Mum. He's so uber-protective of her.

'Look,' I say, 'have you seen this headstone?'

Sometimes distraction can work, especially if you act like you're interested in all this historical shit. The headstone is an angel, a weird one, though. She's a young girl, really realistic, and she's got a stone star on her forehead. She's looking at the ground and pointing at the sky. The angel's about the same height as me. Perhaps it's the grave of a girl who died when she was my age. That makes me feel a bit strange, so I don't look at the inscription. She's covered in orange-and-white lichen. It's kind of cool, I guess, although the last place I want to be on a Sunday afternoon is a Norman bloody churchyard with my dad.

Dad puts his hands in his pockets and rocks backwards and forwards on his toes. He makes his face go all sympathetic.

'Go easy on your mum, sweetheart. She only acts like that because she cares about you.'

'She's just nuts,' I say.

He sighs, and looks up at the sky. It's gone an even darker grey. Why isn't there a cafe here? It's going to tip down, and I want a hot chocolate.

'She gets anxious at times, you know that. It's how she is.'

'Yeah,' I say. 'The accident.' Like I haven't heard it all before.

'It's not only that,' he says sharply.

'No?' I say.

Out of the corner of my eye, I see Ava coming towards us. I start counting: one, two, three, four . . . Mum bursts out of the church. It's probably a record. She won't let Ava out of her sight for a second now. The next couple of days are going to be a nightmare.

'Well, what then?' I ask. I want him to hurry up before Ava gets here.

'I don't know,' he says. I look at him sharply. Dad never says he doesn't know anything. He takes a breath. 'Something else. She won't talk about it.'

Mum wanders over to a headstone with carved flowers round it and acts like she finds it fascinating.

'Then how do you know?' I say.

Ava leaps towards Dad and he catches her and spins her round, as if she weighs nothing instead of being a big lump of a girl, and she does that ballet-thing I detest, where she kicks her legs out and points her toes, like she's in *Sleeping* bloody *Beauty* and Dad is the handsome prince and she's in some pink frilly fucking tutu, instead of jeggings and Togz. She isn't really a lump. She's got those skinny-muscly dancers' legs. He puts her down and they hold hands. Dad doesn't hold my hand any more. Not that I want him to.

'Anyhow,' he says, turning back to me, 'while you're both here, there's something I want to tell you. It's a secret. Please don't say anything to your mum.'

Ava immediately jumps up and down with excitement.

‘It’s our fifteenth wedding anniversary in August. I’m going to hold a surprise party to celebrate. It’ll be small – friends and family. Maybe in the garden. We’ll get a marquee.’

He looks pleased with himself. By ‘family’ he means, Grossvater and Oma. No one from Mum’s side.

‘Yessss!’ stage-whispers Ava. ‘Will we have a giant cake? Can we have new dresses?’

‘Yes and yes,’ he says, and raises one eyebrow at me, because he knows there’s no way on God’s green earth I’ll wear some fancy fucking dress.

The heavens literally open at that point. Mum pulls her hood up and comes running over to us, calling, ‘Shall we go somewhere and have a hot chocolate?’

‘Mum, we’re in the middle of fucking nowhere.’

‘A pub then,’ she says cheerily and smiles at me, pretending I haven’t sworn at her. ‘I’ll find one.’

And the thing is, I know she will.