

The light is fading now. Jed calls out from the front, 'Come on, you lot. Only a couple of miles to go but we'd better speed up if we're going to get there by nightfall. Don't know about you, but I need my beauty sleep.'

This causes a few feeble laughs. Someone even yells, 'Take more than a night's sleep to make a beauty of you, Jed!' or some such predictable comment. I don't laugh. I know Jed's voice well enough to detect the edge of worry in his words. Still, the others don't seem to have noticed anything wrong and the pace picks up a little.

The path is narrow here and bounded by blackthorn trees. The slender lower branches, caught up by the worsening wind, whip at our faces. I keep my head down, trying both to protect my eyes and to focus on the indistinct edges of the stony path.

There is a commotion up ahead. A muffled exclamation, a thud. A short silence when we all stop in confusion and then a sudden narrow keening, carried weirdly on the wind, sounding more animal than human. I am stuck to the spot, the breath caught in my throat by a terror of childhood-behind-the-sofa proportions. I glance to either side: my companions seem similarly rooted, their silhouettes, caught in the first shards of moonlight, like Hammer Horror freeze-frames. The keening carries on and at once I understand. Ellie. It's Ellie. And I'm moving at last, lurching forward, running fast, toward the sound, slapping aside the snapping branches, stumbling over root and stone, almost falling but driving on, the keening growing louder as I close in.

'Ellie! Elle! Where are you?' I yell and she hears me, the keening breaking into a frantic, high-pitched, 'Here I'm here I'm here help me help me,' and I follow the sound, along the path then downhill into the tangled woodland, a yard, five, ten, reaching her at the same moment as Jed, the two of us sliding to a jolting halt on our knees beside her in a drift of bone-dry leaves. Her eyes are wide and I realise she doesn't yet recognise me. 'It's Martha, Ellie, it's alright, you're safe,' I say as I gather her to me but her slight frame seems all angles, elbows and heels, fighting me with a strength which should not be possible in her weakened state. 'Mummy!' she shrieks, 'Mummy! Where is my mummy? Let me go!' Her punch catches me in the stomach and, my grip momentarily loosening, she breaks free. She would be off but Jed catches her and holds her, steadily, as the others gather round us in the gloom.

'What happened, Ellie?' Jed asks gently and, at his voice, she gives up, crumpling into him and gulping, 'She fell over and dropped me. Then she rolled away, over there.' Her arm emerges from Jed's greatcoat, the tiny forefinger extended toward the thicket beyond us. Jed looks at me and jerks his head in the thicket's direction. I can't see his expression but I know what he wants. I get up. No mad dash now. My steps are hesitant, my arms outstretched, as I make my way blindly into the murk. No one follows me. Typical, that. Just bloody typical.

And I only find her because my foot catches on her cloak. She is so still and quiet that I'd never have noticed her otherwise. I drop to my haunches, feeling along her arm, her shoulder, up to her face. 'Caro?' Her skin is cold and wet to the touch as though filmed with tears. 'Caro? Can you hear me?' She doesn't answer and I'm thinking no, please not that, but then her body twitches and I hear the shuddering of a shallow intake of breath.

‘We did it, Martha.’ Her voice catches, distressingly, and a thick, viscous bubbling sounds deep in her throat. Not good. That can’t be good. ‘Don’t try to speak,’ I’m saying but she carries on. ‘No, look, here...’ Her body shifts as she reaches out to the dark void beyond us. I start, confused at the jarring noise, then I realise that Caro’s hand has struck something and I lean forward, stretching my own hand out to follow hers. My trembling fingers meet – what? Plastic? Metal? Both: the slender criss-cross of a wire fence. My fingers lace with the strands. ‘The lab, Caro, it’s the lab. We’re here – ’ But she’s not speaking anymore.

Then, through the heavy blanket of foliage, the others emerge and cluster close. Jed’s beside me, I can tell from the smell of him and the rasp of his coarse-grained jacket on my cheek. Ellie’s still in his arms and he hisses, ‘Is she...?’ I understand and let go of the fence to check. ‘Breathing, at least,’ I say, shortly.