



VALENTINA SARNO

The House of Blue



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First edition

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Foreword

Before you begin

I have destroyed this novel several times. Not metaphorically. I mean I have deleted drafts, taken it back from the people I had given it to, and put it aside. Then I would feel like I had betrayed myself, and so I would start revising it again, just so I could bear to look at a new version. I did this with my favourite toys as a child too, loved them with a ferocity that somehow always turned against itself, tore them apart, and then spent a long time in the particular anguish of self-inflicted loss. I do not think I am bipolar, and the few therapists I have had sessions with over the years do not think so either. I think I am someone who has never quite known how to hold the things that matter most to her, including herself. I know for a fact, because I have met so many people in my life and across so many places, that a great many people identify with this feeling. Nevertheless, here it is.

This version is the one closest to the first draft, and it needs to be this way.

The novel was written in November 2012 during Nanowrimo, which gives you one month to write fifty thousand words. I needed that constraint. I had been writing my whole life but my life kept interrupting, being too chaotic, too full, too exhausting and too eventful to ever allow me to stay with a single piece of writing long enough to finish it. The sprint gave me permission

to let everything else wait for once, and what came out was not quite the novel I had intended. I had wanted Sebastian, the fifteen year old boy at the centre of the story, to carry the whole thing in his own voice, and that ambition turned out to be far too optimistic, mainly because in my head already resided many voices, including a perennial fifteen year old of my own. It was too difficult to expect him to remain consistent when my own voice changed many times a month, a week, a day. What emerged instead was something closer to a fever dream, part ghost story, part elegy, part wish fulfilment, and part the author talking quietly and quite urgently to herself in the dark.

Nila is me. Or rather, Nila is who I was trying to become, or perhaps who I already was in some other life that ran parallel to my own, surrounded by the people I loved most, in a house I had willed into existence through sheer wilfulness and longing, still there at the end with the ones who mattered. Many of the other characters are drawn from real people, people I have loved and lost and sometimes lost even before they were gone from this world. The setting is invented. The feelings are all raw and real.

I grew up moving. New Zealand saw me scampering about as a toddler, Venezuela was a shock in many ways, my father's lovers, profound loneliness in huge apartments, the family scattered, then Peru, wonderful Arequipa and its surroundings, my dog and I walking all over the city and countryside, a smack on a bully's face that made him cry to the teacher who then told me off, and then at twelve years old, Italy, where appearances are what matters most, the country I was born in but had never known, its apparent civility the greatest shock of all. Each move meant new challenges, but as I was alone most of the time I never had an issue with who I was, I was what I was, a little wild creature responding to consistently wild and interesting

environments. But in Italy I realised I was expected to have a self, a fixed and legible identity, or I would simply become whatever they decided to call me. I became practised at assembling one quickly and making it convincing and as endearing as possible to whoever was watching.

The adolescence that followed deserves its own book, which I intend to write, and which will contain more chaos and more joy and more sheer improbable adventure than most people would believe. For now it is enough to say that I was unconstrained, and that unconstrained things get damaged and also get to see everything.

I am fifty-four now. What I have understood recently, in no small measure thanks to my beautiful son and daughter-in-law, during the time I spent in their home for their wedding in Guayaquil, Ecuador, is that the instability I spent my life trying to correct is not in fact a flaw requiring correction. I am impermanent by nature. I can be nothing, and then solidify into everything someone might need from a mother or a friend or a lover or simply a stranger on a train, and then dissolve back into nothing again, or simply quietly be myself. As a young woman I could be the centre of a hurricane where you would find peace and calm when life tore up around you, but also the chaos and the destruction wreaked by its fury. It is what I am, and I feel that the sooner one stops fighting one's own nature, the more energy becomes available for everything else.

Writing Nila's death was, I think now with some distance, a way of dying peacefully on my own terms at a moment in my life when the alternative felt genuinely close. She got to die having made the house she had always dreamed of, surrounded by the people she loved, in no pain and at peace with the world. That was what I needed to imagine in 2012, and the novel did its job

well. I realised, as I worked on this introduction, that I have not felt quite as sad since.

I am publishing it now in the hope that it might find and perhaps comfort someone else who has spent their life trying to be a steady and consistent presence and discovered it to be exhausting and finally impossible. You do not need to be steady. You can show up, in whatever state you happen to arrive, and the house will hold you. We should all have such a house, and I have always wanted to offer something like it, through my ancient dreams and the associations and projects I started and then left and sometimes returned to.

A few things worth knowing before you begin. The novel moves between voices without much warning, between a dead man wandering through his own funeral, a teenage boy trying to make sense of a world built by people much older and stranger than himself, and occasionally the author bleeding through both of them when the membrane between them becomes too thin to maintain. There is no plot in the conventional sense of the word. People arrive at the house, stay for a while, leave or die, and the house continues. There is grief here, and talk of suicide, and something that might be ghosts or might be grief wearing a different coat. There is also a very great deal of warmth, and desire, and fireplaces, and Norwegian winters, and animals, and food cooked with love, and laughter, and a house so completely and specifically imagined that even now I can still smell it.

There is a list of characters at the back of the book. I would suggest finding it before you begin.

Valentina Sarno, Gallipoli, 2026

Preface

Moments

The moments of my life I treasure like no other are the moments spent intensely with my family and friends. The moment I swam in the ferociously strong current of the river near my house in Italy, at dawn, with my friends from University. We'd all come off a trip, true, and it might have been irresponsible, but it was hot, we were happy, and it was oh! So beautiful. The moment I met your father, following him up and down the steps of a concert arena, and knew as I watched his bum and back while he walked that I would, and I could, follow him my whole life. I, who was everything but a follower till then. The moment I danced around happily with my boys in that room of windows and sunshine, because the man I had a fantastic crush on was coming over to see me. To see us. There were moments. The moments I thought I felt my friends' painful heroin death. The moment I saw the flower-drenched towns and hills of Alsace. The moment my friend Linda and I, many moments of Linda and I. The moment I saw your faces, you, my angels, the most incredibly beautiful thing that ever, ever came from me. There were just so many moments. Perhaps one day I will tell you all. The moments were many, and in-between it was so hard, so hard for someone like me. All I wanted was rest. The House of Blue was where I found my rest. I was with the few who loved me, and some who didn't, but it didn't matter anymore. I just

wanted the quiet, the calm, the beauty all around me, in my House of Blue.

Prologue

List of characters.

Nila — House founder and core

Claudio — Nila's husband, architect, illustrator

Sebastian — Nila's 15-year-old grandson, visiting from San Francisco

Victoria — Nila and Claudio's friend and co-owner, artist and retired civil servant.

Tony — Nila's oldest friend and co-owner, photographer.

Peter — Nila and Claudio's friend and co-owner, retired aerospace engineer and artist.

Deirdre — Peter's partner, Dean's mother

Dean — Peter and Deirdre's son, grew up in the house

Sarah — Daniel's daughter, Sebastian's cousin, a vet

Linda — Nila's oldest friend

Travis — Linda's husband and Nila and Asmund's old friend.

Jane — Travis and Linda's daughter

Daniel — Nila and Claudio's firstborn son

Jared — Nila and Claudio's second son, Sebastian's father

Francesca — Nila and Claudio's daughter

Asmund — Old friend of Nila's, Swedish, independent, a writer

Hans — Victoria's partner, lives in town

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Chapter 1

Nila and Hercules walk idly in front of the house, embraced by the setting sun. She loves that time of day when light becomes golden, and most creatures settle down to rest. She sits on the rock near the drop to the valley, and looks out at the landscape stretching beyond her for miles, and then further, the sea. “It is a good place”, you hear her say aloud.

She looks all around her and then lingers on in her house. On the left it looks like a normal house, with normal windows and doors. On the right, there is a large enclosed area, and many windows.

Above the flat roof, a huge dome of crystal panes.

Right behind it, the forest, climbing up the steep mountain. Beyond the drop, at the end of the little plateau the house stands on, there are mountains, and the river slides towards them through a large valley.

Sheep, Scottish “Coos”, goats, and a donkey. Hercules the dog and a couple of cats, and then Pretty, her daughter Francesca’s

“Posh Dog”, a Parisian poodle who just refuses to die. Her fur that used to be pink has turned to a sorry looking grey with a reddish tinge.

The sun sinks below the gap between the mountains. Nila sighs – is she thinking about you? Is she remembering you how you were?

You used to be friends, you and Nila. You were the one who would never be stopped from visiting, and you always visited at the “wrong time”. The right time, she later found out, because you were there to look out for her, to protect her. You were her guardian angel, and once, while she was tripping, and you were the only lucid, sane and peaceful voice that could get through to her (it was a bad trip, Nila remembered with a smile), she laughed with joy at the realisation of who you were: you were an angel! Of course! Oh how she laughed. She felt drenched and inundated in the joyful realisation. You were her angel, her protector? Maybe, but mainly, you were there for her, you would guide her if she needed to come out of the insanity that was her death, the death she was sure she was going through at that very moment, and she would come out all right.

Nila frowns, remembering who knows what other terrifying thoughts she was having in that acid-induced mind of hers. But you remember, that when she spoke to you, yes she sounded insane, but you wouldn't let her see that, you had no judgement for her, you, the judge, you passed no judgement for her, only concern, only love, calm.

Nila smiles again, throws off her cigarette after one last long inhalation, and seems about to get up and go back inside.

She doesn't know you are standing, leaning against the side of

the house, looking at her from the back. You are back to your old self, you can't see yourself but you can feel it, you are long, and lean, with your long black hair and the eyes Nila always swore were green... but you know they were blue.

Who knows – you think – I may have green eyes for her now, if she would only see me...

Nila turns around sharply, looking straight at you. No, she can't see you. But she looks up and down, left and right, all round where you are standing. Would she see me with green eyes? You know she would run to you and hug you if she could see you. Nila was like that, always so emotional. You liked her hugs though, do you remember? You just forgot.

Nila looks straight ahead again. The sun has gone now, the twilight lingers, bright and cold. Nila has lit another cigarette and is weeping ever so gently. She really will miss you, even though you had left her many years before. You know what she's thinking: she won't ever be able to see you again. All those years secretly waiting for you to return to her, to her embrace, to her love, they were for nothing. Because now, she sighs and weeps a little more shakily, now you are really really gone.

Hercules nuzzles her. He might be feeling a little chilly, he is an old dog after all. Plus he never did like to see her sad.

You look at the handsome large dog. You smile at him and uncross your arms and try to call him to you. He turns around and looks straight at you, wags his tail a little, then returns his attention to his friend. He's there for her, not for you. And you never did anything to reach out to him while you were there.

Nila says “Ok Herc, ok”. Pats him and fondles his face and ears and gives him a kiss, throws away her last cigarette, sighs again, then says “Damn it Travis. Damn it. Damn you. Why did you leave me alone?”

You know she doesn’t mean it, the damning part. She is just upset.

She turns around and goes back inside.

You leave Nila to her duties, and start exploring the house. After all, you never really got the chance to do it before.

A room to your left, door shut, its handle a translucent blue. Further, a corner and turning right. This part of the corridor is suddenly very dark. Only one very small window on the whole wall, and around the window a mural. A small lamp on each end, lighting the way, just barely. A little creepy to walk through. It looks cold, shivery. At the end and turning right again, another long corridor, more doors to the right. Each door handle is different. Ornate brass ones, a deep red bauble, a very simple and elegant silver one.

Looking outside the windows, the twilight is making it difficult to see. You think you see a shadow running into the woods. A lone, mournful howl chills you to the bone, you feel like it sucks you towards it, it calls you.

Let it go, let it run through you.

It was the saddest sound you ever heard.

For a moment you feel a bit lost and lonely, and wonder whether it would be best to go back to your room and go the other way, but the spell is broken by Dean's warm voice further along the corridor. He is making some sort of joke about Claudio's cooking.

You like Dean. He really is a cheerful sort of guy, handsome as hell, everyone likes him. You used to be like that once, remember? "Everyone is in love with Travis" was the response anyone who said they had a crush on you to your friends would get. You knew they thought that about you. You never really paid any mind to whether or not you really were as hot as they implied. Nila had been the only one to enquire further, and find out you quietly suffered through some deep, unrequited love. You were not gay, as many thought and most women hoped, because why else would you ignore them so? You didn't mind the many crushes many men had on you either.

You come upon a balcony looking down onto a huge open space, the underground living area they called the Lula, in remembrance of an old dog that used to live there but also because it stood for "Large Underground Living Area". Or something along those lines. Cosy, warm, wooden. Though somehow the fires are not as bright as you feel they ought to be, and the spirit in the place is just not right. There is a slight gloom, a stillness, a silence.

Well, someone did just die.

You go down to the big table. Everyone is there, even Linda, your wife. You don't see Jane, who'd been peeping into your bedroom

earlier. You wonder if she was the one you saw running into the woods.

Nila begins to talk as Dean and Claudio bring some food to the table, to all of them and to no-one in particular.

“Well, we all know tonight’s the night we say goodbye. There are no words. This should not happen and is so unfair, and we are all ready to live the rest of our lives to help you overcome this. But please, do say goodbye. Let us not keep anybody here who does not belong.”

You really are not sure who she’s talking to. Then they all start eating, and that is that. They didn’t see you there.

Later, you follow the silent stream of people outside. It is very foggy and eerie and you can almost feel the damp cold creeping under the woollen jumpers they are wearing.

Dean, Peter, Deirdre and Tony are carrying a wooden frame with carrying handles and a body is lying on top. You can’t see who, as it is covered with a twilight blue funeral shroud. Everybody is solemn and serious, nobody is crying. Jane is not there. They walk towards and into the woods, and as they do so you feel sure there are shadows running ahead and on the side of them, on the right and then on the left. You can’t tell if they are animals or people, but something is moving within those woods. You follow the procession. They climb a little, winding through tall trees, berry bushes around them and all through the forest as far as you can see, which is not very far, because the fog is so thick. You just know they carry on for miles.

They arrive at a clearing. There is a large rectangular hole already dug just under a tree. The bearers place the frame carefully down. They wait silently, perhaps in case anybody wants to say anything. Nobody does. Everyone stares at the frame and the shrouded body. Then, as though there had been a secret signal, they all hoist up the frame with the ropes and then slowly lower it down into the hole. It looks very heavy and they struggle, but they manage not to dump it in.

They pause for a moment then, without a word, Nila starts back down to the house. Two of them fill in the hole, the others go back to the house too. Linda lingers a little longer, leaves the group, catches up with Nila, and takes her by the hand.

You stay behind, in the woods.

This was your funeral, and you are not supposed to return with them.

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Chapter 2

Victoria made tea. Her natural authority, her queenly stance and her innate grace made her a good, natural leader, so it only made sense she should put the tea on.

They warmed up scones and placed cream and jam on the big wooden table. Smiles slowly returned to their faces. Linda, looking more fragile, frail and barely tangible than usual sat a while, barely touched her tea, then left without a word.

Twelve-year old Jane had reappeared. She served herself some tea and took half a scone, then went and sat in an armchair in the living area. She seemed to talk to someone around her. Whatever (or whoever) it was must have floated around a lot, as she kept changing the direction of her gaze.

Lanky tall angel-faced Tony sat close to an older-looking-than-usual Nila. Her blonde hair seemed a little messier than usual, her usually barely visible wrinkles were showing a little more, she looked a little more curved, a little less sharp. Ageless Claudio sat at one of the computers and started playing a game, while purple-haired Deirdre headed out for her usual midday bike ride. She looked exactly the same as when anyone had first

met her. She never did look young, but now they were all in their sixties and she in her fifties, she never looked old either.

Twenty-year old Sarah moved to the sofa next to Jane, took out a kindle and started to read. The older brigade, Peter, Tony and Nila sat at the table, with Nila in the middle, staring into her mug. The two men sat and said nothing.

A loud clanging like a huge bell ringing sounded, but Nila, Peter and Tony didn't bat an eyelid. Instead, Sarah ran upstairs and soon there was a very loud and happy "Ahh!!! ahahahahah!" after she opened the front door. Sarah rushed along the top corridor and ran down the stairs, dragging behind her a huge man with a long coat flapping behind him, long blond-white curls flapping behind him too, a large generous face and gingery beard surrounding an amused mouth.

Sarah almost shouted, coming down the stairs: "Look ma, it's Asmund!". Nila smiled, looked up, and said "I thought it might be". She got up, walked towards him, and hugged him. He hugged her back and said "Hi" and rubbed her back gently.

He sat down and looked around. Nila asked him if he wanted anything.

"Yeah. A beer, thanks. But it's ok, I'll get it"

With two big strides he was at the fridge, opened it, took a beer out and sat back down. He barely acknowledged Peter and Tony, nor did they seem to expect him to. Tony then smiled a little and said hello, to which Asmund responded with a wave while he swigged his first beer down in one gulp.

&&

You remember Asmund.

He used to be your close friend too, back in the day when you were all young. Not everybody was in love with him, because he was sometimes a little excessive, but he was an angel, you remember everyone saying it. Well, he looked like an angel. His eyes were most definitely blue like a clear sky, and he had long curls of golden hair. He was tall, like you, nobody ever did find out which one of you was tallest.

Asmund had stayed in the house for long stretches on various occasions in the past. Once while he had been here, he snuck into your and Linda's room. He wanted to talk to you, no doubt, to prove that he could shake you out of your stupor, your utter isolation. He was so sure of himself, the healer he thought he was.

Instead, he walked out, dejected, confused.

You were too sick at the time, were you sick? Your mind was clouded, you couldn't really make out friend and foe, and it didn't really matter to you either way anyway. You realised it must have been very painful for your friends to see you that way.

You can see a lot more now, you can see how fat you were, enormous, a walrus. Perhaps some of that fat got to your brain, you giggled to yourself.

The Lula was very quiet that evening. Sometimes you could hear someone come and go upstairs. Most movements had something to do with the fact that you had died.

Linda had not seen Asmund arrive, but he and Nila hugged for

some time. Nila wept quietly in his arms.

You know she loved you, so did Asmund, even though you played dead to them many years before. It was too late to explain why at this point. Also, nobody could really talk to you anymore.

&&

They sat down at the table, and they all sat around it. No Linda, no Jane... Katharine and Deirdre were there but they looked like they were going to get up and go soon enough... and so they did. To Nila's big relief, it seemed: this wasn't their drama.

Nila sat next to young Sebastian, her grandchild who had come to visit from the States. He sure looked confused and a little unhappy. You wondered whether he'd been given any choice to come all the way from California to this cold remote part of Europe, with a bunch of old geezers.

Nila began to talk to the assembled group:

“Travis was the purest creature you never met. He used to be very handsome, beautiful. We were all in love with him once, weren't we Asmund?”

Asmund nodded.

“He was fair, he was always around when you needed him, though you wouldn't know you needed him at the time. You would realise it later. He never bothered to call to say he was

coming, he would just appear. He brought wisdom, comfortable silence, crazy Chinese and Swedish horror films. He never did any drugs, he drank beer but even when he had drunk loads he was the same as when he had drunk nothing. Yet he used to be the best person to have around if you were having a bad time. He would always calm you down, reassure you, make you feel like you needn't worry, like you were not weird at all, and that he was there to protect you."

She paused, a little shakily, like she was trying to stop herself from crying.

You felt a remembrance of sadness.

Peter poured her some more wine, which she gratefully waited for until it filled her glass and then drank a few unladylike gulps of it. Peter. He was the one to take over from you.

Nila was married to Claudio, and you knew she loved him very much, but from your vantage point you could see that the one she was drawing her strength, and her courage from, was Peter. You wondered about him, as you never got to know him before, of course.

He was a big chap, with a wide, generous face. Blue eyes too, full lips, something on his face that could easily turn into a ginger beard, just like yours, given enough time. You knew he was with Deirdre, in fact, as you look at Dean and Deirdre you could tell Dean is their son. But really, who he was with emotionally, right

now at least, in this moment of pain for your loss, was Nila.

His wide shoulders were slightly turned towards her, as though to envelop her in his aura of protection. He was hugging her, though he was not touching her, and seemed to desperately want to hold her and give her strength, but instead he gave her wine.

Nila seemed happy with that, it was all she needed, she understood.

You had a feeling there was going to be a lot of wine flowing that day.

&&

“Then one day, he fell in love with Linda. I was happy at first, miserable later. I never got to see him anymore, couldn’t even directly talk to him anymore. It took years for me to accept the fact that if it was like that, and he said nothing to the contrary, it probably meant that he was happy with the way things were. He was beloved by us all, but through Linda, he was no longer available as our friend. The few times we saw him after that he had grown a beard, and had started to grow fat. Still he was kind, funny... then slowly he began to really disappear. My contacts were just with Linda, and even those were sparse.”

I’m sorry Nila, you couldn’t help thinking, though the sadness and regret you felt you should feel were like distant echoes. I really let you down didn’t I? I didn’t realise at the time how much my presence in your life meant to you. Surely I didn’t, otherwise why would I have left you alone?

You realise you were echoing Nila's words from earlier that day. You assumed she meant you left her alone because you died. But of course, she meant before that. Many, many years before. You had abandoned her, after you had come to her rescue, in response to her request. But then Linda had taken over.

Nila went on.

“He was my friend. He was Asmund's friend. We loved him dearly. He left us all behind.

Travis was a huge loss to the world, although we do not know what he had really become. I know that in her own, very private way, Linda adored this man and did everything for him and with him.

“I have no idea how she will be now that he has gone. Please do be patient, be kind to her. I loved her very much too. She was never completely sane, but none of us really ever are.”

Yep, Sebastian thought, that's a given.

Nila turned sharply to look at him, with a mixture of surprise and amusement. You heard it too. Sebastian had not said it out loud, but Nila and you heard it anyway. Poor Sebastian was very puzzled at Nila staring at him.

You like him too, this 15-year-old from California, the son of Nila's youngest boy. You couldn't help but smile thinking how it must have felt for this boy to leave behind the sun and fun of California for a gloomy Norwegian funeral of someone he didn't even know!

Nila looked back at her glass, seemed to stifle a smile, took a long sip of the wine and then carried on talking.

“In honour of Travis, I will now have one big fat cigarette. I’m sure he would disapprove.”

She began to roll a cigarette. You disapproved, as she had guessed. You always did tell her off about her smoking. Nila, now that she was older, wiser, and what have you, smoked very rarely, and never in the house. Since you died, she had resumed with great enthusiasm.

She went inside the fireplace and lit up. The others stayed at the table. Nobody said anything. Nobody joined her at first as none of them smoked. Then Asmund joined her, brought her a drink, and rolled one for himself. He normally chewed his tobacco, but sometimes having a fag together is the right thing to do.

Linda came back down. Asmund got up and left the fireplace and headed to his room and put some of his stuff down. Linda didn’t even seem to notice him, she just went and sat in the fireplace with Nila, and looked at her. There was something different about her. Something... focused. Something alive! Something had definitely changed. She smiled sadly, and took Nila’s hand. She held it up to her lips and said “Thank you”.

Nila said nothing, she just stared. Linda got up, almost brisk and bouncy, and put the kettle on. She looked across the living area, as though looking for someone. She saw Jane, sitting on the steps of one of the little balconies above the library, lost in thought or just looking down at her feet. Victoria looked up from her usual spot and saw her. Victoria always knew what was

going on, even when she sat quietly minding her own business.

Linda headed towards Jane, and Jane perceived her coming. Linda went and sat down next to her. Nobody was worried about them sitting together in the one-person-only balconies: their combined weight was probably less than any of the others'. Linda put her arm across her shoulders and hugged her, whispering something in her ear. Jane opened her eyes wide and leant on Linda, then started to sob very gently. Then they both came down and Linda made some tea for both.

They were all pretty stunned. Everyone had noticed what you had noticed. It was like Linda had come back to earth, somehow, and was slowly helping Jane come back to life too.

&&

You hear the howl again. Long, mournful, desperately sad but commanding. You can barely resist it now. You uncross your arms, stand away from the wall you'd been leaning on, observing all this, then slowly and reluctantly walk away from the Lula, the people, the friendly faces you had known, and those you hadn't. You look over the love of your life, Linda, as she hugs and jokes and holds onto Jane tight. Where is Juno? You distractedly think. But the howl commands you, and you heed it, and you make your way out, you feel a little evanescent, a little less clear around the edges.

Some echo of regret returns. Of the time you wasted not getting to know these people. You walk past Nila and blow her a kiss, she distractedly puts a hand to where it landed. You give Linda

a big kiss on the forehead, and Jane too. They both hug a little tighter. You put your hand on Claudio's shoulders, a good man. You put your hands on Peter, and Tony: be there for Nila please. You are being pulled away, lured away by the howl, and as you walk up the stairs, the fog from the outside has come inside, and is covering the Lula more and more, and the whole house is shrouded, getting foggier and foggier but the howl guides you, you walk outside, walk around the house in the darkness and the incredible sight of stars above you, a glint and a shimmer of a northern lights spectacle, but it's all too misty for you. You walk along the path and into the woods. A wolf awaits you. He seems friendly enough. You walk towards him, look back one more time to the house, the lights, the people who are inside, and walk deeper into the woods, with no idea but no fear of where the wolf will guide you.

3

Chapter 3

Sebastian waited patiently for the funeral days to pass. He had watched his father pack his bags as he explained to him that he was better off staying at the House for a while, that he would only be staying in Moscow for a short time – three or four months at the most – then he would come back this way and pick him up and they'd fly back to California together.

Sebastian was really not enthused with this unexpected early summer holiday. He would miss his friends, and he had nothing to do, here in Norway.

After his dad took off, he ambled about the house, not really sure what to do. He wasn't sure how to approach all these people. He knew grandma Nila a little, as she had come to visit on a few occasions in the States. The others, not so much.

This state of affairs was odd as hell. The house was creepy, he didn't know anybody and there were all these awesome computers, but nobody had told him whether he could use any of them!

All in all, not a happy bunny, as his grandma would say.

One day he decided enough was enough. He got up early as his nerves woke him up, he went down to the Lula and sure enough, there was Nila having the first of many cups of coffee. At least a couple of weeks had gone by since Travis' funeral, so there was no risk of appearing "insensitive", Sebastian thought.

"Hi Nila, good morning"

"Oh Hello Sebby, how are you today?"

That grated. He didn't like being called Sebby. He was not a baby!

"Uh, I'm fine."

"Did you sleep ok?"

"Huh? Oh yeah, yes, I mean I slept very well thank you grandma. Hey listen, I wondered if I could talk to you for a minute?"

"Hah sure! Let's sit down here"

That was another quirk of his grandma's, and he noticed a couple of other people doing it too. They chose the place they'd sit depending on what they wanted to discuss! Or maybe he was just making it up.

Nila guided him towards what was probably her favourite spot, a small table with a blue mosaic on it, three super-comfy chairs around it, a wooden room screen with elephants marching across it, and plants climbing all over them. He had to admit it was a really cosy corner.

He wasn't sure how to start, so he just blurted it out.

“Say, I was wondering... do you think you might tell me why I'm here?”

Nila didn't even miss a beat.

“Oh darling, but that's because your dad brought you here!”

Seb didn't expect that. All he could muster was an “uh...”

Nila picked up her cup of coffee and sat down in the armchair closest to him. Sebastian sat in front of the bowl of cereal he had absent-mindedly prepared for himself in stunned silence. Then he shook himself and resumed:

“Uhm yeah grandma I know he brought me here and that is - literally - why I'm here but... I mean.... You do realise he took me out of school, and brought me to the funeral of a person I didn't even know... and then left? You know I live in San Francisco and kind of actually liked it there?”

“But of course dear! I mean, you do know I'm your grandma and I keep up with such matters, right?”

He wasn't sure whether she was taking the piss or just being a little batty. He'd just have to spell things out for her.

“Yeah. I do. I would like to know why I am here, and why I'm not back where my school, my life is. I'm not saying I'm not grateful for all the food provided, and stuff. And, I mean, Dean does talk to me, Victoria is kind enough, you occasionally acknowledge

me, but, you know, it's nice to be where you're supposed to be, and I'm not sure I'm supposed to be here. If I am, I wish you'd tell me about it."

"Your Dad is going to act in a movie" she began. Wow, Sebastian didn't expect that. So that's why he had gone to Moscow. "Your mum is away in Senegal as you know. Your dad didn't know what to do with you, so he thought he'd drop you off here. At least while he gets the movie done".

Sebastian was not convinced.

"That's it? I mean, my dad's always told me everything, why on earth would he not tell me about this now?"

Nila got up to put another kettle on, and asked him if he wanted any tea or coffee. Sebastian said no, thank you. She waited for the kettle to boil, got her coffee ready, and went back to sit down, grabbing a biscuit from the tin on her way there. She gestured towards Sebastian about the biscuit but he shook his head.

"Well, this is different from all the other travelling you have done, you have to admit. This is a place full of some elderly people and some people you don't really know... let's see. Who do you know here? Apart from me and Claudio I mean."

"I know Sarah"

"Yes, of course. And that's it."

Sarah was the daughter of Daniel, Nila's eldest son. Sebastian's cousin. She was a few years older than him, and had been studying to be a vet in Switzerland. She graduated, but instead of continuing her studies abroad as she'd initially planned, she left and went to live with their grandmother. Sebastian wasn't

really sure why she'd done that, whether it was just because she loved Norway or because, more likely, she had had some sort of breakdown in Geneva and needed some time out. She sure was useful around the house, with all the animals that came and went, and contributed lots of money to the upkeep of the house with her own work. She was a call-in vet for the nearby practice, and was often on call all over the region, cows and goats and lots of other farm and domestic animals. Sebastian felt she was slightly aloof, keeping mostly to herself, reading, pottering about here and there. She would talk with Nila and the other housemates often enough, but the one resident who could make her laugh out loud was Dean.

Dean had been a pleasant surprise for Sarah, though at first she had tried to ignore him. Sarah's blond hair and black eyes went very well with Dean's dark blond hair and deep blue eyes, plus Dean was tall, handsome, and fit... Sebastian's thoughts trailed away until he snapped them back to Nila.

She had paused, as if she were thinking about what to say next.

"Well, there you go. I mean, your dad was planning to drop you off here with people you barely knew or didn't know at all. You're here in Norway, far away from the happy San Francisco light. Would you have come, given the option?"

"It's not like I ever refused to go anywhere else. If he'd explained it to me, I guess, yes, I'd have come, of course."

"Ah. Well I guess he misjudged you then."

And that was the end of that.

4

Chapter 4

The house is big, more like a farmhouse, with many windows and a huge area downstairs, underground. The downstairs area is almost like a bunker. It gets cold in the winter in Norway, but it is pretty cosy in the Large Underground Living Area (Lula, they call it).

There is a huge fireplace, of the sort you can sit inside right in front of the fire and chat and roast chestnuts or boil a huge pail of water. They make lots of peppermint tea or, if Asmund is around, soup. The kitchen spreads out from there, airy and spacious.

There is a massive old oak table in the middle and they love sitting round it.

They have a few animals and they grow raspberries, and quite a few vegetables. They have many nut trees: mostly almonds and hazelnuts, which they roast and salt and either sell at the market or chomp away at while they read a book, or play/write/surf on their laptops or pads. They call it the Big Table, to distinguish it from all the other little coffee tables, shorter tables, stunted tables scattered around the Lula.

At the opposite side of the kitchen area there are some smaller alcoves, each with its own peculiar features, decided by whoever in the house likes to use that particular alcove most.

There is a video-game station here and there, basically some space with a computer, usually a Windows PC for gaming. Around it there are smaller tables with space to put anything you might need for gaming purposes, like snacks, drinks, headphones, the plates from a lunch you had while playing, mobile phones, tablets. These places are often decorated with the maps of the worlds the games are set in.

There is a smaller table, with chairs and armchairs around it, where people can sit together and have coffee, tea, biscuits and so on. "Quiet cosy conversation area", Nila calls it.

There are other, smaller fireplaces around the big room. There are chimes and other decorations hanging, from trellises or wooden structures meant as short roof replacements, "to give a feeling of cosiness if one wants to feel more closely surrounded, a feeling of sitting out on a Mediterranean veranda". That's Nila again.

Nila is the one who willed all this to happen. Her friends occasionally told her she was more wilful than strong-willed, but there was no use in trying to explain to her that "wilful" was not meant as a compliment. She just refuses to see it that way.

She is 61, but she feels much older, as she sometimes confides to her husband. Something about her makes her change from ageing teenager to wise old crone in a heartbeat.

Nila started this place. She got some money from the death of a

distant relative, but it was too little to do anything meaningful in England, where she was living at the time. So she managed to convince Claudio, her husband, that it was time they headed off.

She looked into places where she thought her misty and unclear plan (to everybody except her) could become a reality, and came up with Norway.

The blue flecks everywhere around the house are for her. All people who come to stay, seeking advice or respite, hospitality or leisure, instantly become aware of what they are stepping into and whose house this really is.

As a sign of acceptance of the house rule of mutual respect and leaving out one's prejudices, people are asked to come bearing a gift. This gift can be of any size, material, value or significance, as long as it is blue.

Thus the house got filled with all the things and objects and living appendages you'd expect to find in any large house inhabited by varying and various people, but there is everywhere an air of blueness, caused by so many objects here and there, a chandelier, a door handle, scattered tiles, a pair of curtains, some beads, a statuette.

The cosy tea spaces are usually surrounded by lush plants. Bamboo, ficus, ivy. There is a clever trick to let sunlight in during the summer especially, but they are also pretty resilient plants. Nila also kind of "trains" these plants to thrive in this odd atmosphere, and they do. There is a mini-bar or two near the coffee tables, so people can snack and pour themselves a drink without having to trek all the way to the main kitchen area (yeah, they do get cosy and lazy).

The other end of the bunker, the whole end wall and some on the side, is covered in books. It is a high-ceilinged room so there

is room for plenty of them. The most obscure of these, or those that are used occasionally and just for reference, are on the upper levels, accessible by little platforms connected to the lower floor through spiral staircases. From the upper floor there are little gates built into the balustrade, just in case the books are needed for sleeping or pooping purposes (big bathroom upstairs) and people can't be bothered to go back downstairs.

There are plants and couches and armchairs distributed around the whole "range" of the library. It's very peaceful and there are all sorts of lights: cosy but bright lights, spot lights, diffuse lights... all depending on what people fancy.

The alternation of spaces then continues onto the other side. There are four different stairs (two zig zags, two twirly ones) that take you up to the walkway at the top.

The walkway is part of a pulley system that allows them to ceiling the whole of the living area when the really cold weather arrives in the winter. Otherwise it's completely open, and the whole of the walkway is sided by double-glazed windows, out of which there is a full view of the house's surroundings. People can walk around it with a mug in their hands and gaze at the forest or the fields or the river and the lake beyond, or they can throw a glance down to see who's in the living area and what they're up to. It is quite a beautiful feature of the house, designed by Peter and Claudio and built by Jurich, their carpenter and woodcarver friend in town.

Pete and Claudio had started off as work colleagues about thirty years earlier, but they soon found they had a lot in common, in terms of combining a passion for the scientific as well as for their art. Claudio has an architect's background, Peter an aerospace

engineer's, so together they devised this wonderful system. Like themselves, it looked cool and worked wonders too.

At the West side of this rectangle, is the upstairs. Underneath it, there is the rest of the underground area, a barn, where the animals are kept in the winter.

There are Scottish Coos, who make excellent milk and cheese as well as great pets, goats and sheep, and a donkey (Nila's favourite. Hercules doesn't count, he's part of her soul), a couple of other dogs and a few cats here and there. There are also birds in the barn, they come and go as they please but of course tend to stay in during the winter. They also get the occasional badger or fox coming for shelter, none are ever turned away, for Tony's great pleasure. He is the one that taught the others to shelter and cherish mice and even the occasional rat. Nila's lifelong, oldest friend, her best friend since they were 16, he has a kind soul and a fiery heart. He is a retired cameraman and black and white photographer. His collection of works seems endless, as occasionally he up and leaves for somewhere in the world he hasn't been yet, and captures moments of life and nature there.

Upstairs is a living room and a kitchen to welcome those who come to the house but don't plan on joining the others in the downstairs bunker.

The bedrooms all have their own windows, and the whole place is quite filled with light. Some rooms are darker than others, depending on the preference of their occupiers, and some remain quite private and shut down for most of the year.

There is a third floor: shaped like the inside of a crystal, it is a dome, all made of glass and steel, under which one can meditate, ponder, write, or just gaze at plants. It is empty except for mats and cushions and a ledge all around to rest incense, a book, a cup of tea. There is a smaller device from which you can select music

from any digital source via Bluetooth or Wi-Fi, very discreetly hidden among the plants, to create a chosen atmosphere. The whole world can be seen from this dome, the whole 360 degrees.

The bedrooms are some bigger, some smaller. Some of them have an en-suite bathroom, but there are two big bathrooms for everybody's use. They too are filled with plants, beautiful atmosphere and light.

There is something similar to a labyrinth of semi-walls outside the dome, where those who like to paint can hang their paintings up to dry or archive them for future use or wait till they know what to do with them, whether to hang them up in the house somewhere or give them away or sell them at the local market or online. In and around them, places for tools, paintbrushes, colours, easels.

5

Chapter 5

Nila likes to think of them as a tribe. Sebastian wasn't sure any of them felt the same way (it is, after all, 2035), but they indulge her. She certainly does seem to be the common link between them all. She's the hub, and yet she is pretty unobtrusive. She tends to disappear when she gets in a bad mood, which she does quite easily. Then she comes back and she is just herself, like nothing ever happened, and you find yourself believing her instantly and you just get on with whatever you were doing, her presence making it somehow easier, lighter, more natural.

She is rounder than she is tall, she is stocky with big breasts and strong. Her arms seem muscular and used to milking and kneading, but actually her strength only works for sudden bursts, she can't really keep up any effort, due to an ailment nobody in the house ever quite understood. It does annoy her greatly.

Her reddish-blond hair is usually tied up or split into pony-tails in complete chaos, but if she lets it down it is long, flowing, thick, and very wild. It says something of who she was, who knows when, before she was their Nila.

Nila has blue eyes, and when she is in the sun for long (which in Norway means all the time for those 3 months of sunshine) she flowers with freckles. If anybody points them out to her she will groan and mumble something. When she smiles at someone, they feel they must have done something very cool. She really is mum to them all, they just don't tell her to her face, she doesn't like it.

Then there is Claudio, the one behind most of Nila's bad moods, admittedly, yet she loves him to bits, and he's behind most of her good moods too. She tells him off all the time, sometimes she sounds quite patronising to him, but try and criticise him or speak ill of him and she'll bite your head off.

He is often going on about the lack of sun, and how he misses the sea. So Nila and him take off twice a year, once in June and once in September, to soak him in the sea and sunshine for a bit, and keep him happy.

He also complains about the lack of certain foods: they do what they can here, asides from what they get delivered or pick up in the nearby town, they try as much as possible to make their own bread, their own pizza and even their own pasta, filled and egg pasta and dried pasta (Claudio is behind most of these). But there are certain things you just cannot get, like a lot of different cheeses, and most meat. Sometimes someone comes to visit bringing hams and cheeses in a suitcase, then the whole house rejoices.

Claudio is also the one responsible for the beautiful painted walls around the house. Every free wall, in every room and living space, has some sort of decoration. Some are entire murals depicting detailed scenery, some are animals pouncing on you (Nila has a huge tiger treading slowly out of a jungle in her room, in an arch within the wall. On another wall, she has an

entire autumn woods scenery). Some are just random patterns of objects: flowers, clouds, penguins for the Linux lovers (like Claudio).

The birds that appear here and there, (the swallow, a personal favourite of Nila's, appears a lot here and there) would be down to Pete, as Peter prefers to be called. The birds as well as the strange contraptions he likes to build in his free time. He likes aerodynamics, his designs are always "jet".

Linda just comes and goes, and does her own thing, drinks her tea, reads her books, occasionally logs onto some computer and nobody knows what she's up to. Nobody dares ask: if you speak to her she'll turn around and look at you, curiously, as though a monkey had suddenly talked to her, then sighs, shrugs her shoulders and goes back to whatever she was doing. She is as skinny as you can get without falling over. Her dresses are always flowing and light and breezy in the summer and heavy velvety in the winter, but they're always dresses. If they go outside to bury someone, or look into some strange happening in the garden and in the surrounding fields, she will always come carrying her book, or with closed fists. She will come, silently, observe whatever's happening, and then go back to the house. She never talks. They know she has a voice, as she will occasionally pass by Nila on her way to somewhere, and say something to her. Nila will then look at someone, or something, or just nod her head and perhaps touch or rub her chin, occasionally put her hand to her forehead, then say something to her and Linda will walk on and continue on her way to wherever she was headed. She never talks to anyone else.

Nobody is ever quite sure why Linda is there. Yet somehow she is an integral part of the House of Blue. They all know she

was a very old, very close friend of Nila's.

She always has something blue on her dress, if the dress itself isn't blue. Her hair is long and white with lots of raven black still in it. Her eyes are pretty cloudy but you can still see the green specks in them. She must have been quite a beauty, ancient years ago, when she was young. Sometimes the younger ones ask Nila how old she was. Nila, as she always will whenever they speak of Linda, looks towards her pensively, then says "She's a year older than me". Unfailingly, whoever asked will look at Nila, then look over at Linda, who seems ancient beyond counting, and leave the subject, as though clearly Nila is telling a lie, but nobody knows why. There is no way Linda could be the same age as vibrant, energetic Nila.

Nobody is allowed to enter Linda's room, or they would risk being banished from the house (or worse, some whisper). Some even whispered Linda might have a collection of ghosts in that room, and never hang them out to dry. If people happen to pass her room as she enters or leaves it, they'll catch a whiff of not entirely unpleasant, but very odd musty smell. Like mushrooms and undergrowth in a damp wood further south. Not unpleasant, but completely baffling.

Claudio said he had painted something in her room, before Linda arrived at the house, under her instruction (through Nila of course). It was a cave, lit from within, a cave of crystals as high as basketball players, a little higher perhaps. He said he was asked to make this cavern as misleading as possible, to trick the viewer into believing there really is an opening into a cave.

&&

"It's called *Trompe-l'œil*, google it." Dean mocked me. Bloody

hell I hate it when he looks over my shoulder as I write.

He is right of course. I was going to look it up, eventually! I wish he'd just... hm well no, actually, I kind of like him coming up to me as often as he can, for whatever reason he chooses. I like Dean, I like having him around, hearing his voice, plus, he smells so good... anyway, I told him; "I know!"

"Sure you do! But if there's a name for something, don't you want to use that name? I mean, how many years have people been describing a painting on the wall that tricks the viewer into thinking that thing is really there and that there's an opening into some other place with the name *trompe-l'œil*? I mean they'd still be here talking about it if it weren't for that word. So, if I were you, and there's a word for something that involves using far less words than the description itself, I'd use that word. But hey, I'm not you! Tut tut Sebastian, are you daydreaming again?"

And off he goes, messing up my hair first. I know I should feel embarrassed and upset but... I don't. He means well, there is nothing Dean can do that could contain any ill-intent.

&&

Dean is Peter's son. Nila has a soft spot for him. He's always being a bit of a smart-ass, always having new things in mind, doing new stuff, making everyone laugh, sometimes at Sebastian's expense, as "he is the runt here", he says.

While Sebastian's dad was there, he spent some time chatting with everyone. Sebastian played a few video-games, watched some films, walked as little as possible round the grounds, and kept mostly to himself.

Of young people, there was Dean, who was a few years older

than Sebastian. He had pretty much grown up in the House, so he knew all the ins and outs and was cocky and comfortable in ways one couldn't count.

There was Sarah, Sebastian's cousin, and Jane, Linda's daughter. Apart from Nila and Claudio, there were also Peter's partner Deirdre, Tony, and Victoria, whose boyfriend Hans, a strapping woodcutter and book-store owner, lived in town. Victoria liked to keep some of her life private.

The house constantly morphs, changes, adapts to whoever is around at the time. All the residents have pretty strong and diverse personalities, so depending on who is more "present" at any given time, the house changes too.

Some people linger more and some people disappear sooner depending on who is relaxing in the Lula.

Of the residents, Dean is definitely the most energetic, the "life of the party". Him and Sarah are usually at it sharing jokes, although Dean does do most of the joking, and Sarah laughs and contradicts him as much as possible.

Near Victoria's favourite library spot there is another mini-armchair/chair spot, a small fireplace and an ornate liberty style cabinet (cats in glass, a gift from one of the house's visitors, a cousin of Nila's who could work and paint on glass, and it depicted various cat figures in different poses, with blue and green and orange and red backgrounds). It's always stocked with some good wine, some port, a few assorted various drinks preferred by those who will more often come to see her from afar, and some snacks. Next to this is another computer station, this one a Mac, where both her and Nila often sit to write (the computers are all available to everyone, there are plenty of private accounts on each). Victoria is not often seen typing:

she will sit in front of the computer, think, stare at an open file, look around after a bit, play some games, browse lazily over her friends' updates around the world, pour herself a drink, have a chat with Hans on the phone, perhaps arrange to meet later, go back to looking at the file she opened, sit back, and sometimes just fall asleep in her chair, or she will nonchalantly go back to the library or chat to someone.

Victoria also often uses the upstairs dome. She gets her easel and paints out, and sets up in the dome, during the months where there is natural light. She'll occasionally continue painting one of her big feline creatures, but she'll also quite happily roost in the sun, with a glass of something good in her hand. Victoria has the best sense of humour there. She can become quite harsh sometimes, but she is always super nice once she's had her sleep. She doesn't like to be crowded, so everyone kind of always lets her decide when she's ready to go over to someone and chat, it's rare that someone will bother her while she's reading or something.

Tony on the other hand, is always available for interruptions and distractions. He is really tall, rather strikingly beautiful even as an old guy (every lady who comes into this place points it out), with brown eyes and blondish hair and a nicely trimmed beard and he always looks like he just made a very naughty joke.

Nila sometimes laughs at his jokes as she would if a five year old were trying to say something funny, rather than because she is amused. His sense of humour is kind of wacky. He also giggles a lot whenever there is any reference, or any reference can be made, to anything sexual. If Sebastian is around he'll often turn to him as if to get confirmation that something was crazy funny, and he will laugh along and say "Ahhaha yeah", but really Sebastian probably doesn't find his jokes that entertaining, as

he is more serious than most teenagers. His grandchildren, on the other hand, adore his sense of humour, and spend as much time as they can around him every time they come to visit.

Tony is often visited by his girlfriend, Katharine, and what a lady she is. She is the most glamorous of all here, despite being by far the oldest, and she travels constantly, so she is often seen around. She's only tiny with still-black hair and blue eyes, she's got class and she's always very pleasant to talk to, though she always leaves people wondering whether she was thinking of something else, or planning her next move, instead of listening to them. Her and Linda ignore each other with the greatest care and ease, like two witches keeping one another at bay.

There is also Deirdre, Dean's mum. An outsider might think she doesn't interact with her son that much, and that outsider would be right. She doesn't really interact with many people at all. Victoria will always find something to ask her or talk to her about, but her and Nila kind of keep a distance, in a very relaxed kind of way, they seem to have nothing really to discuss. She is the youngest of the elders, but she cycles to England every couple of years which is pretty impressive, to visit some friends and stay there for a few months. Peter and her always used to go together, but she has been increasingly going just by herself.

Sometimes her friends come to visit and when they do they sit around and play and have beer and they are quite fun and geeky sorts of people. Then she lights up and is fun and talkative and expressive, but only with them. She also looks quite happy though slightly anxious when she's with Peter, but if caught alone she will just not talk to you. She'll answer with a single word or even not answer at all, even if you ask her a straightforward question.

Most residents just stopped asking her anything. Dean will

sometimes walk by her, give her a gentle smack on the backside and say, really loud, “HI MUM”, and keep going. This will make her blush and make her laugh out loud. After that she smiles for a while and looks like a much nicer person.

She does the accounts for this place, which everyone is more than happy and grateful to entrust to her, and it seems to make her happy too.

Peter will go quiet for hours, play video-games and drink. But when he’s facing you, you feel like you’re the only one in the house, no, in the world. He is tall, though nowhere near as tall as Tony. He has a big hearty chest and is really hairy and looks a bit like a Viking, except that he’s bald with a bit of a beer belly and his eyes are a clear blue. The eyes are what keep you on your toes. He’s always kind and nice but you can see in his eyes that he is smart, and knows everything about you and everything else too. Somehow however, you want to trust Peter more than anyone else. You feel you could tell him anything.

Him and Nila sometimes look like they are one and the same, complementing each other perfectly. The more people are at the table or around them, the more these two seem to get really close and always understand each other. Sometimes, when they are alone, you kind of feel like they should be alone, even though they’re not doing anything in particular.

Jared is Nila’s second son and Sebastian’s dad, and Peter says he reminds him a lot of Nila when she was younger. Jared was always quick with thoughts and words, and active. He feels a little restless in the house, but he will talk to anyone who talks to him. If you don’t approach him, though or specifically ask for his attention, he will just spend his time on the phone or on the computer sorting out his own stuff, keeping in contact with his people, and occasionally just leaving the house not telling

anybody and going off for really long walks. Jared was always a little detached from other people, but if you need him, he's always there for you. He is very quick to explain and understand people's behaviour: because of that, people always seek him out.

There is just one left, and that's Jane. Jane is around 12, maybe 13. She is a sad-looking skinny girl with huge eyes, a small heart-shaped face and an almost intangible body. She seems to flutter from place to place. She will stop and gaze at a wall or something in the air you cannot see, and sometimes talk to herself. She makes a decision, she takes things out of the air, she looks at them and cradles them in her hands. Then she'll sneak off somewhere, or sit all curled up in a chair, grab a book and start reading, and smile at you if you passed her by and attracted her attention as though nothing had happened. Occasionally Sarah will come by and sit by her and they'll chat. She is extremely wary of Dean, kind of cringes when he walks near her. Dean being Dean, he'll go up to her and say "Boo!". Or, if he's not feeling cheeky that day, he'll sit down dramatically in a chair in front of her, or let himself sink in an armchair, and say "Hey Jane, how's things then?" and she will invariably mumble some sort of reply, pick up her things and change places.

Dean will push his hair back with his hand, sit and stay there a bit, then get up, and carry on with whatever he is doing. Occasionally, he will go outside and chop wood like they needed all the wood by tomorrow.

6

Chapter 6

Sebastian left his room and instead of turning left towards the Lula as usual, something called him to go right, and turn that corridor, which he always used to avoid, as it was strange. The corner had an uncanny effect, as though the corridor would go on forever. In the distance you could normally see the other light, again, looking distant. This time the light was off, and since there was only a tiny window in the corridor, it was dark, and Sebastian couldn't make out what was that bulk moving at the end of it, in the gloom. It made some strange noises too, low and breathy and... he approached, slowly, carefully. He was entering the gloom, and his hand was outstretched into the dark, and he felt... flesh! It was flesh, soft and warm, and there was movement and then he realised the mass of flesh was Sarah entwined with Dean and they were very steamy and very carried away, kissing and sighing and breathing heavily and caressing, everywhere. Not surprising that they didn't even hear him approach.

Sebastian withdrew, possibly a little too slowly, taking in the feel of flesh against flesh, of passion, of warmth, and he just

breathed it all in till he was out of sight, then he turned around and smacked into an open door.

It was the door to Linda's perennially closed room. Sebastian couldn't resist the temptation and peered inside.

Linda's room was no longer dark and shaded, it was airy, fresh, and filled with the sunshine coming in through the skylight, and through the east-facing window. There were twinkly hanging crystals on the ceiling.

Linda was shaking out some bits of fabric, looking at them in the light, some might have been long dresses. She saw Sebastian and turned towards him and she was, incredibly, smiling. Unused to that from her, Sebastian briefly wondered whether she might be having a stroke and mumbled an apology and was taking his leave, when she put her hand out towards him (was it less bony? was she less grey and more white?), smiled broadly and said "Sebastian! Hi! Would you come here for a moment?"

"Uh, sure" Those were more words than she'd ever said to him since he'd arrived.

He went in, noticed how everything seemed different, new and shiny: the lace table cloth, the chairs, the little sofa, there were blue lilies in a delicate blue vase. It no longer smelled musty, it smelled sweet and flowery, of jasmine, had Sebastian been able to name the scent at the time.

"So, Sebastian". She said while she folded away the cloth. "I was wondering whether you'd like to help me out". She gestured towards a chair, so he sat down, and looked up at her.

"You see those? They are kind of fading and becoming horrible" she gestured towards the wooden shutters. "I wondered if you could paint them. Sky blue, like in Greece. Or perhaps deep blue". She mused towards the window. "Of course, you can get

Dean to help you”

He felt himself flushing and didn't know why. “Dean is so hot” is all he could think of. Sebastian had no idea of what was going on, and why he was thinking of Dean. “Sebastian?”

“Ah yes! Yes of course Linda, I'd love to help!”

“Thank you Sebastian, I knew I could count on you.”

“Knew? What do you know about me, lady? You strange lady who just kind of reappeared from a strange head space?” Sebastian was mightily confused.

She looked back down to the table and her folded fabrics, then headed towards a chest in the corner.

“Just ask Dean where the paints are, and to help you get started. I'm sure he'll know what to do.”

“Oh yeah, Dean knows what to do.” Thought Sebastian. “Damn. What the hell is going on in my head?”

He resolved to try and get him out of his head, and thought of the girls in his school instead. That wasn't difficult, some of them were really cute, and sexy. But then he thought of Dean's hands handling the shutters and the paintbrush with his nice, big hands...

“Hi!”

Dean startled him as he was heading straight into the wood banister around the corridor looking down into the living area.

“Oh Hi!” - Sebastian said, then thought “yummmm” immediately followed by “what the hell???” - “I was looking for you!”

Nice firm muscles under that t-shirt.

“Sebastian”

“Yes?”

“You're staring at my tummy”

“Sorry”. Sebastian blushed. He didn't even know he was

capable of blushing. He just felt himself going quite flush.

Dean put a hand on his shoulder and had a bit of a giggle. A very manly giggle. “What the hell is wrong with me?” – Seb worried.

“Sebastian, really, it’s fine. I know. This place brings out the sexiness in all of us. Also, something is actually particularly strong today. Not sure why but today is definitely special!” And he pointed towards the lounge, where Nila (Nila!) and Claudio were having a go, near the billiards table at the right end of the living area. Dean cleared his throat very loudly. Claudio and Nila got down and got off each other, all flustered. Seb wondered – “What the hell is going on in this crazy people’s old house?”

“So, Nila, what’s been happening? Buzzy day today isn’t it?”

“It sure is, Dean, I guess we had better find out what’s different before somebody gets up to something they shouldn’t.”

She winked and smacked his bottom as she went up the stairs.

Sebastian downed his Coke wishing it were that alcohol he hadn’t gotten around to trying yet. Whatever was going on was making him sweat.

Nila came back downstairs shortly afterwards with Linda, laughing and giggling like demented school girls.

They trafficked around the table and took out some biscuits and made some coffee, then sat and it was an endless flow. You could hear both their voices but mostly, and this was almost a shock to hear, it was Linda. Linda just could not stop talking. She was animated and alive and laughing and changing pitch constantly.

She must have felt Sebastian and Dean staring; she turned around towards them and said to Nila while looking at them: “Ah, I have asked Sebastian to paint my wooden shutters, I hope you don’t mind”.

“No, of course, Dean can help him!” Nila also seemed as happy as they’d never seen her, and she was usually a cheerful person.

Dean shook his puzzlement off and turned to Sebastian.

“Sebastian, shall we go get some paints?” he said.

This time Sebastian wasn’t going to let all this pass without an explanation.

“Can someone tell me what’s going on? Linda, I beg your pardon but, you never said a single word to me before today!”

“Yeah, Linda, why don’t you tell us?” Nila said, with a smile. She was ever so happy. She was infuriating.

“Well. I feel like a fog has been lifted, like I came out of a spell, something like that. I guess I was just getting deeper and deeper into my world with Travis, and lost track of everything, including our girls”. They saw a twitch of sadness in her eyes and mouth. “But right now I feel so incredibly alive and happy to be here, happy to see you, like I didn’t really see you before. Oh Nila I missed you so much! I’m not sure I even allowed myself to know it! Now it’s too late, I know, for some... for Juno for sure...” Another shudder and a moment’s pause. “But I feel like I have to start living again! I feel like exploding!”. Her voice became tremendously shrill.

Sebastian thought he might have preferred her when she was quiet.

“I want to look around, see what’s in the woods, and I am so grateful for the painting on the wall! I need to add some bluebells to that... I need to do stuff, get it all back together. I need to cuddle Jane! Where’s Jane?!”

Jane had quietly arrived, unnoticed, and had sat in an armchair near the table. Dean turned to look at her. She was scowling, unsure, biting her nails. “Jane,” said Linda. “Come here!”. Jane went to her, but very slowly. Linda hugged her tight and smelled

her hair (which seemed fairly clean, luckily for her). Jane was still a little uncertain, but seemed pleasantly surprised. She looked up at Linda and said “Yes, it is a bit late for Juno”. Linda and Jane hugged silently.

7

Chapter 7

The atmosphere went back to normal. Not sad or glum, just less buzzy and excited. Somehow it was all quiet and manageable again. Dean and Sebastian went down to the barn to get the paints and brushes for the wooden shutters.

Jane had become a completely different person.

It was autumn, the leaves were amazing hues of yellow and orange, and red, and the days were drastically shorter. Sebastian was really missing San Francisco, but the people were starting to grow on him.

He would often sit upstairs on a stool while Victoria painted in the dome. Jane would lean against the wall and just hear them chat, occasionally have a laugh herself, or would just sit there in silence like them. She had her own sketchpad and was doodling something, pyramids and stuff.

One day she stood up, pushed her fists and arms backwards as hard as she could, and screamed at the top of her lungs. Then she turned around, and walked away.

Victoria dipped her brush in water to clean it and then patted it with a paper towel, then said, clearly but calmly: "Ah, Jane?"

Could you come and put your sketchpad away please darling?"

Jane came back, picked up the sketchpad, placed it in her space in the shelving behind the dome, and went back out.

Poor Sebastian really felt surrounded by crazy people.

Attending school was odd for Sebastian. He did most of his studying at home, and they sent him e-mails with exercises to do online, and tests. Then three times a week he would head down to the town and attend a couple of lectures. Of course it meant he didn't really often get to meet new people, and even when he did he rarely got to see them. Greta was one exception.

&&

The first time Sebastian invited me over, I thought he was living in an old people's home. There weren't any adults, really: only elderly people and a couple of young ones. We were the youngest, but there was a girl called Jane. I couldn't say how old she was, she seemed a little younger than us. There was Sarah, a little older, and that young man, Dean. Not my type, but I guess you'd call him handsome. Sebastian was cuter, with his dark eyes and really dark brown hair. Sebastian was cute, foreign, exotic. I bet he was really tanned in San Francisco.

When I got to his house he immediately behaved a little odd before opening the door, like he was about to apologise or something. Then he must have changed his mind about it and we just walked in. There was a little sitting room and it was very pleasant and warm, with cute light blue curtains on the window, dried and fresh fruit and nuts on the table, a jar of water and a couple of clean glasses. He showed me his room and put on some music, then started telling me about this new game he'd got.

I looked at him as he talked and, to be honest, I soon stopped listening and focused on his lips instead, and on the whole... feel of him. I just felt a flush of warmth, had to go near him, put my hands around his lower back. I leant over and I kissed him.

&&

It was wonderful for Sebastian to have someone over, someone... “normal”. She was very pretty, and apparently into him too as she kissed him so soon after they came in.

After a little making out in his room, which was heaven, he wanted to show her the house. So he got up and rearranged his messed-up clothing and turned towards her to lead her out but

Greta was as white as a sheet. She looked past me open-mouthed, through my room towards the window on the other side of the house. Outside, the woods started their climb up to the top of the mountain plateau.

Whatever Greta was seeing was terrifying her. I ran to her and hugged her and she shook me off violently and pointed to the other side of the house, to that window in the distance. I turned to look but there was nothing there. She turned to me, her eyes still wide open and terrified, and she slowly started breathing, she had been holding her breath.

“I don’t care that you didn’t see it, there was something looking at me with a big toothy grin outside there. I want to go home. Can you please walk me to the bus stop, like, right away?”

“Sure, Greta, of course! But listen, the bus isn’t for another hour, would you rather sit out there and wait for it at the bus stop or come downstairs with me, and relax, and tell me more

about what you saw, and just chill for a bit?”

At last she closed her mouth and nodded softly.

They went downstairs into the living area, where Peter was working at one of the computers, Deirdre next to him playing, and texting on her tablet, both taking a swig of beer at exactly the same moment, without realising it. Claudio was also working with some headphones on, and Nila and Linda were chatting and laughing away, as though they'd always been best friends, as though they had never lived apart.

Sebastian didn't even know two women could talk as much as these two had for the past couple of months.

As they got to the bottom of the stairs, Nila and Linda became aware of Greta, and they noticed her trembling. At the back, near the library, Victoria was on the phone to Hans, presumably, whereas Tony and Katharine were probably out horse-back riding.

Nila and Linda came to Greta's side, and asked her to sit down. Linda put the kettle on, while Nila sat with her, a hand on her knee.

“Uh, grandma, this is Greta, a friend from school. I was just going to put some things away in my room and would have come to introduce her...”

Nila ignored Sebastian and started talking to Greta.

“What's up darling? Linda is making you some tea, or would you prefer some hot chocolate or some coffee?”

Peter had come up to them silently and offered her a glass with some beer, some of that strong dark stuff they sometimes drank. Greta, to their surprise, took it gratefully, glugged some down and then took a deep breath, looked at Nila and said:

“Hi, I'm Greta?”. She said it almost like she was no longer

quite sure herself.

She began to talk, staring blankly ahead of her, as though reliving the scene.

“I was gazing out the window in Sebastian’s room and saw a young girl all skinny and fleeting, with very short hair and a bony face with a toothy grin, but not like she was smiling, more like she was a skeleton...”

Greta shivered violently and sobbed

“... a skeleton, she looked at me and stared and grinned that toothy grin and she just looked... she looked awful, then she ran away... oh my god!”

Greta’s eyes opened enormously as she watched the lithe figure of Jane coming down the stairs near the library, no doubt to see what all the commotion was about..

“Her!” Greta shouted, pointing an accusatory finger at Jane. “It was her! I mean she wasn’t like this, she looks... normal now. But it was definitely her!”

Only Sebastian and Pete turned to look at Jane. Nila looked at Linda, who was standing holding up two mugs of tea. Linda had gone paler than usual, and was staring at Greta. She put the mugs down, looked at Nila with big, scared eyes.

Nila got up and started towards Linda, who had begun to retreat and go back upstairs. “Linda...” but she just ran off, stopped near Jane for a moment, holding her arms. The others couldn’t see her expression, but Jane looked puzzled and concerned, then Linda ran away from them all.

As I walked back to the house after seeing Greta off on the bus, I saw something out of the corner of my eye, near the barn.

I ignored it and went inside, back to the Lula. Everything was as before, except Victoria was now sitting at the computer, Jane

was sitting at a table doing homework or something, nodding her head along to some music in her earphones. Nila sat at the computer nearest Claudio and was typing something, occasionally lifting her head and distractedly looking around at the walls. I picked up Greta's glass and finished off the little beer that was left, just to try it. It was disgusting. I looked at them, all sitting relatively quiet, and sat down myself. I looked around at the big big room.

Tony and Katharine came back a little later, laughing about something that had happened, and went straight to the kitchen.

Dean appeared an hour or so after them. He was quiet but in a good mood, said hi and something else to his mum, then came over and sat close to me.

He had this presence, this coolness about him... I was much better with it now, though, thanks to my little interaction with Greta.

“So, how's it going, Sebastian?”

“Hm, fine.”

“My mum said there was some girl here, shouting, a little while ago, who was it?”

“Oh, that would have been Greta. We were... ahem... sorting some stuff out in my room, then I went to the toilet and when I came back she was petrified looking through the window at the end of the house and screaming and all white like a sheet. She said she saw someone outside that looked like Jane, but was more like a skeleton. She was completely freaked out. I brought her down here and Nila calmed her down and then we played billiards and then I showed her the jukebox and then took her to the bus stop”.

Sebastian took a long swig of tea, while Dean watched him from behind the bottle he was taking a big long swig from.

“So”, he said, grinning “you’ve been snogging then?”

Seb thought he’d never ask.

“Yes man it was awesome! I mean I don’t understand why we’re not all just doing it all the time, all the time! It was brilliant! Girls are soft, warm, and lovely. Girls are great!”

“Uhm yeah, I’m glad Sebastian, really glad. I’m guessing it’s your first time as well?”

“Well, yes, yes it was. I’d never kissed a girl before. Actually, she kissed me. It was awesome. And all the hands and everything... wow” He was blushing.

“I’m glad”. He got up and put a hand on his back. “I really am glad, but hey, girls can be a hell of a lot of trouble as well. So, watch your back, ok?”

“Ok.”

And that’s how they ended their evening. Sebastian moved to a computer to watch a TV show, Dean went off somewhere, perhaps to look for Sarah, as they seemed to spend more and more time together.

8

Chapter 8

Sebastian had only just fallen asleep when Sarah woke him up. When he checked his mobile he saw it was actually 5 am. Why was she waking him up so early?

He sat up rubbing his eyes and looked outside. The west was still very dark, whereas he could just about see some light coming from beyond the trees and the mountains in the east. Sarah was saying “wake up, wake up Sebastian, wake up please!” and rushed out, then went back after a couple of minutes and said “oh please Sebastian, get up, get dressed, please come with me”.

He got up, got dressed, and followed Sarah out and over to Dean’s room, where he was already getting dressed as well. He then followed them, still in a bit of a dream, and they walked into the barn.

The barn? Why were they in the barn?

He then realised Sarah was sobbing. How could he not notice it before? Dean had his arm across her shoulders, and asked her softly “What is it Sarah, what happened?”. Sarah stopped and then pointed up. They both looked up. There was an evanescent

blue dress floating gently above them, two skinny legs sticking out from the bottom. Long white and dark hair, flowing down the shoulders and back. Her eyes open, looking distant, and sad. Linda had hanged herself. The two young men froze in horror as Sarah wept.

I was still staring up when Dean ran back with a ladder and told me: “get ready to catch her!” as he climbed up. I wondered why she did it, she seemed so happy, I didn’t get it.

“Sebastian!” Dean shouted me out of my stupor.

“Yes! Catch her? No! YOU catch her!”.

“Ok, just hurry, get on the ladder, undo that rope!”

I climbed up the ladder, though I didn’t feel the rush that Dean seemed to feel... she was clearly very dead. It was a scary sight all right. Was I just in shock? I realised I was thinking, overthinking, thinking more...

Sebastian undid the rope and the body that was Linda flopped down into Dean’s arms. He laid her down carefully and asked Sarah gently if she could go fetch Nila and Claudio, and all the others, or should he go himself? Sarah remained silent, so Dean went.

Sebastian stayed with Sarah and Linda, whose eyes Dean had shut. They stared down at her till Nila arrived, all the others following. Everybody was horrified and saddened, Deirdre seemed to be mainly irritated. Katharine also seemed aghast but also vaguely annoyed, somehow.

Then Jane arrived, timidly. She looked at Linda’s limp form for a bit, then ran outside. They looked for her, half-heartedly as they realised she might not want to be found, but didn’t see her

the whole of that day.

Once again they prepared the wooden bed. Wood was taken from the store and sticks and branches were used to make the carrying surface. Nila brushed Linda's hair and left her in the dress she was wearing, flowing blue and white.

Nila's tears came, flowed steadily, and went. She made no sound. She just caressed her friend's head and hair, and kept caressing it like a daughter's.

They were ready, but Nila was not ready to let go. She held her head in her lap, while some more tears streamed silently from her eyes.

Her chest shook with contained sobs.

After some time, she picked up her hand, kissed it, then moved away from the body.

Peter, Tony, Claudio and Dean took it as a sign for them to move forward. They picked Linda up and gently placed her on the wooden bed. Then they lifted it up to their shoulders and they began their silent procession towards the clearing.

It was an adequately foggy, sad day, drenched with humidity and droplets. Nila waited for them at the approach to the woods. They walked slowly up to the clearing, where once again Nila started the fire. Linda went up in flames and smoke.

Chapter 9

Then, they all dispersed to their different destinations.

It was getting colder and darker outside. Nila often sat in the living area with some tea or coffee, gazing into nothingness. If Claudio or Peter went up to her and started joking around she would promptly take part, but there was no denying she was sad. Eventually, as expected, Asmund came. He had to come, he had been Linda's love for many years. Nila sat with him and gave him a few of Linda's things that had been his or given by him and that she had, surprisingly, kept. One was an opal ring.

He was sad, and often put his head in his hands and bowed low, and Nila put her hand on his shoulder. He looked at Jane. Jane stared back at him until he shook his head and looked away.

&&

I wondered about Sarah, who had found Linda, and suddenly wondered why she was in the barn that early. She didn't normally feed the animals till about six in the morning.

I walked out to see her while she was brushing the coat of one

of the Scottish Coos. I vaguely also thought what a pain those cows must be to brush.

“Hi Sarah”

“Oh, hi Sebastian”

“How are you feeling?”

“Not very good I’m afraid. But what can you do?”

“Finding Linda must have been horrible for you, Sarah. I’m so sorry you had to go through that.”

“It’s not your fault.”

“I know. But can I ask you something?”

“Sure.”

“Why were you in the barn so early? I don’t mean to pry. I am a little curious though.”

Sarah smiled tiredly, looking away towards the mountains. She patted Moira the cow, who mumbled a moo of acknowledgment, then walked towards the balcony. It was starting to be a bit chilly but the sun was out, so they sat on the rocky edge.

“Where shall I start?”

Sarah looked at her feet, then at the valley and beyond.

“Ever since Juno died a year back or so, Jane has been “talking” to her. Jane told me Juno was the smart one. After Juno died, she would go to Jane’s bed and shush her and tell her to go with her into the woods. There they would sit on stones and logs and talk. Jane didn’t think it was weird. She just thought it natural that Juno would find a way to escape the physical bonds of a dead body and come to see her.”

Sarah paused and looked at me, maybe she was checking whether I thought she was crazy. Then she continued:

“The truth is, and I haven’t told anybody else about this, I would hear Jane talk to Juno, of course, but I also heard Juno’s

voice. It was similar to Jane's, but a little more evanescent, more insubstantial. One of the things she would say was that she had a crush on Dean, and it just wasn't fair she should have died before she could act on that crush. She said she was sure Dean would have totally gone for her, if only she'd had the courage to tell him she liked him. Jane responded that Dean was way too old for her and how she could even think such a thing. Juno would sneer and Jane would call her silly and that would be that.

On one particular occasion I crept closer to try and hear them, checking I wasn't making things up in my head. I saw Jane and..."

She sighed, then stole a look at me to check... I was still neutral.

"I saw Juno. She turned around towards me. She was misty and not very clear, but she was there. She looked at me, and her eyes were hollowed out, her features bonier than ever. Then she hissed at me, like a devil cat. I stumbled back and ran off.

"It was twilight, so I might have had some sort of hallucination. But whenever I saw Jane talking to herself after that, I tried to look and listen the other way.

"After Juno died, and after Travis followed a few months later, I felt something for Dean. I mean Dean and I were becoming really good friends, we lived together here for so long we were becoming like brother and sister. But after that night when Juno looked at me, I felt odd around him.

It was just sheer lust. I felt constantly compelled to just go up to him and kiss him, possess him and get him in me."

Again she looked at me. I was very good at keeping my own thoughts of lusting after Dean to myself, feeling stupid for feeling like that while she was telling me these absurdities.

"I felt like something had gotten a hold of me that wasn't me. I felt it was wrong to release it onto Dean.

“Once, in the barn, I lost control completely. I threw myself at him. He held me and talked me down, looked into my eyes and saw something that frightened him a little. We sat in the hay and I told him everything, about Jane and Juno and the possession I felt. He didn’t laugh. Then he kissed me, very gently, and something real started to happen between us, until we both heard a scream from the entrance. Juno, or Jane. She ran away. We didn’t discuss what had happened.”

Sarah paused for a bit, then continued:

“When Travis died, something cleared the air, something happened.”

“Yes, I remember, I felt it too.”

“It was like he’d released a hold on everybody that lived with him. Jane was merrier, well, as merry as Jane can be I suppose. I rarely saw her talking to herself anymore, she’d go up to the woods and walk around but she was far more present in the house. And I mean you saw what happened to Linda: she seemed alive, happy, cheerful...”

They sat in silence a bit longer. It was starting to get chilly. Sarah started playing with some grass, as she continued.

“As crazy as I know this sounds, to me it felt like Juno was one of the most evil components of that family, and perhaps Travis wasn’t too good for them either. Travis hadn’t always been like that, according to Nila. He used to be one of the best and nicest men alive. My guess is that upon death, Travis’ spirit returned to his original peaceful and free way of being, whereas Juno remained the little manipulative bitch she always was.”

Sebastian was taken aback by Sarah’s harshness, but kept his cool.

“I have the feeling that Travis sort of harnessed Juno’s spirit and took it away from here. Which is why we all felt so alive, so trusting, so happy. He must have sort of “released” Linda too, making her feel like she could finally be alive again, be herself again, and sort of waking her for that dream she was living in all those years.”

Sarah’s theory certainly didn’t lack creativity and imagination. But I kept those thoughts to myself.

“You must have felt it too... in any case Dean and I definitely relished it, in the corridor...”

She sighed. This was more of a lusty sigh, I could tell. I could tell what lusty sounded like. My mind went to Greta, then to Dean, then back to Greta, all in a moment.

“We suddenly felt free to be with each other, it wasn’t really planned or anything...”

Sarah went on, abruptly:

“So, yeah. Basically your friend Greta did it.”

Ah! Of course! Damn I had forgotten about that incident or rather I hadn’t connected it at all. That is why Sarah was giving me the whole low down on the whole crazy ghost story. Greta freaked out thinking she saw Juno, or anyway a rotting distorted version of Juno more like, and she went and told us and Linda was within earshot, she must have heard it all and thought that Juno had come back to haunt her and to demand her sacrifice, selfishly deciding to enjoy her new-found freedom and aliveness! Damn these crazy old and young gits, of course Greta had just seen Jane and there’s probably something wrong with the glass in the windows in my room, and now they all believed it was a bloody ghost story!

While this was going on in my mind, I must have betrayed a little emotion on my face, and Sarah said:

“Oh I know how you must feel, but believe me it wasn’t Greta’s fault. It was Linda’s decision to let it get to her. Unless...”

“Unless what?”

“Well”

She said as she started getting up, our limbs achy and sore and cold and chilled through. Humidity was setting in and the afternoon was bringing on a sunset. We started heading in.

“Unless it was Juno who actually came to her and spoke to her and threatened her, or something”.

Again, I thought it best not to interject, lest she should perceive my growing frustration and irritation with this crazy talk.

“You asked me why I was there that early in the morning. It was because Jane came to me and told me to hush, and when we were in the corridor she told me to follow Juno as Juno had something to show me. So I went into the corridor and there was Jane next to me, and Juno ahead of me. They were there, together. I felt cold and terrified but also compelled to follow. So I did, and she brought me to the barn, showed me her mother hanging, and grinned.”

Sarah shook violently; we took our coats off and headed for the warm Lula.

I was in a state of disbelief and yet a little chilled to the bone. I did think Sarah was over-imaginative and a little kooky, but I didn’t think she would make up for the presence of someone who wasn’t there. And I knew she wasn’t lying, Sarah wasn’t in the habit of lying.

I sat down, or rather I flopped down. Suddenly the whole, crazy scenario made a hell of a lot of sense, but without any rational basis.

Back inside, I stared at the little wood stove, all covered in deep lapis lazuli tiles. It was rather beautiful. I thought about how something as tragic and nonsensical as Linda's death could be explained away by a few spiritual musings, and there it was, acceptable. Now what would happen to Jane?

I started thinking about Jane, this strange girl I never quite bonded with. Well, nobody did. Now she had the whole room to herself, a large room with a dining table, a library, armchairs and sofas and a double bed. I guessed she'd probably move out, and go... where? There were other single rooms, I felt sure they'd find a good place for her... or would they let her do the finding??

I traced the relief of the blue tiles on the stove. I sensed there was someone behind me. She grabbed a chair and sat next to me. It was Jane.

"I was just thinking about you"

"I could have guessed. Everyone seems to be thinking about me. Nobody's talking to me though."

"Oh?"

"Yeah... I don't know. They probably don't know what to say to me. I mean now everyone sees my mother hanging from the ceiling every time they talk to me."

"I don't. And I don't think the others do either. I suppose it's difficult to know what to say to someone who has lost their sister, their dad and their mum over a few months."

"Yes."

We sat quietly, she stared at the stove as well, while I looked at her, and then turned back to the stove. The stove burnt a quiet heat, it was extremely pleasant to be around it.

"I wonder who gave Nila this"

“I don’t know, actually. I thought Claudio brought it with him when they moved into this place.”

“Ah really? They told you this?”

“No, I just thought.”

“Ah.”

10

Chapter 10

December came, and they got into camp-down mode. Tony and Deirdre would go get wood with the cart or truck, while Asmund and Dean chopped it. Asmund was around for longer in the winter.

Occasionally when days were fine they'd go get some more. Just in case.

They needed to be able to survive in the house for a while if they were ever buried by snow. Dean and Sebastian would help sometimes. The policy there was that nobody was forced to do what they didn't like doing, but the range of people and people's experience and skills was so varied that all requirements were covered.

Sometimes they had paying visitors too, to help pay for expenses in the house. One of them was a writer from Hokkaido. He arrived after all the death and drama had subsided, and it was such a welcome relief that Sebastian wondered whether it had been a deliberate choice by Nila, or just a happy coincidence.

Nila was the focus of this house, and there was no doubting it

was ultimately her house, despite it being everyone else's home. She had the final say in everything, though she would never interfere, almost appearing uninterested, in a lot of decisions. If she did have an opinion about something, especially if it concerned whether someone could come and stay or not, for example, she would make her opinion loud and clear.

Tetsuo Korimara was a renowned and wealthy Japanese author. He was a friend of Katharine's originally, and had been complaining to her that he just couldn't concentrate in London, there was just too much buzz and confusion. He was thinking, he had said, of hiring a cottage in Wales to write his fourteenth novel in. Katharine told him about this place, and he immediately jumped at the opportunity.

He arrived one day in October. He had long white hair, glasses, a deep blue suitcase (Nila liked him straight away) and a wolf. An actual wolf, as his companion and "pet".

He was like a character out of a movie, although if you took away the wolf and the long white hair, he was just a guy who liked his quiet, sat for hours at the computer, and went for walks. He brought Nila a beautiful full-length standing mirror, decorated all around with a mosaic of lapis lazuli. He said it was a bit magical, with a twinkle in his eye, so Nila placed it near the corridor, the one that was dark most of the day, just at the entrance to the corridor. It was close enough to the main entrance that you could nip down to it and quickly look at yourself before going out if you wanted to impress the fashion-conscious Norwegians (that's a bit of a joke, actually), but it also stood apart enough for you to creep up to it and check out its "magic", which consisted in apparently showing you what your true mood was. Sebastian always looked pretty much the same, fairly indifferent-looking. "Maybe it's broken", he thought.

Mr Korimara arrived in a four by four Land Rover that looked like it had had its fair bit of true off-road adventures, and thus was looked at favourably by Claudio (he basically thought anyone owning a four-by-four just to drive around a city or on a motorway had a small penis). He was told to park in the garage next to the barn. Sebastian was there to help him get his suitcase inside, so he saw him walk up with his cool white-grey wolf. The wolf set off at once towards the forest, and nobody said anything about him or the wolf. Whenever Tetsuo (as he insisted they should call him) came out of the house he would whistle, then wait a while. Taking the air in, looking at the sunset if it was happening, watching the surroundings. Then the wolf would come, and they would set off for a walk in the woods and to the plateau above. Once, the wolf arrived and Tetsuo must have felt him looking, as he leaned against a rock resting from some heavy raking, watching Tetsuo and waiting to see if the beautiful animal would appear. When he did, Tetsuo gently said to him, "Please wait", then turned around to Sebastian and gestured for him to come close. He then gestured towards the wolf and said "Please, go ahead". So Sebastian let him smell his hand the way he'd seen dog trainers do with dogs, then put his hands in his thickening fur, and the wolf felt amazing. Then Tetsuo and his furry friend set off.

Another guest that arrived towards December was a very old lady, she must have been eighty or ninety-something.

She arrived with a bag full of wool balls, and spent a lot of her time knitting in the crystal dome. She'd knit and knit, knit jumpers for them all, and cardigans, and waistcoats, only stopping to come down and make herself some tea, unless

someone had come up and offered her some (to which she'd always reply oh yes thank you very much! with her peculiar Spanish accent) and then she'd carry on knitting for the cats, and for the dogs, and she knitted a wonderful pattern to go around medium sized mirrors for individual rooms, and then she'd knit frames to be glued on wooden supports to be used around the houses' guests paintings and photographs, if they wanted to.

She paid for her stay, she didn't want to pay only with her work, much of which would then be sold in the local market (along with artefacts from many past guests): they would send her a percentage of any sales they made even if she really didn't need the money, they knew.

She came regularly. Once, she stayed for Winterfest as her children and grandchildren were all holidaying away and she didn't want to celebrate Midwinter by herself. She was great, she knitted around all the trays and the bowls and then she knitted some lovely mug holders too.

Some might have said she was a crazy knitting lady but she was fantastic and ever so nice. She knitted a lovely blue bracelet for Nila, who wore it all the time: it helped her use a mouse in the best position for her aching hands, without hurting the skin on her wrist. Rosy had added a couple of deep blue stones and some old looking gold metal. Nila said those were from a very old pair of broken earrings she had been keeping with her all her life, which she'd bought in Spain whilst travelling with her mum when she was 12.

This lady, her name was Rosy, short for Rosario Bendita Gonzalez del Vidrio, took these earrings that were all broken and missing parts and knitted them into her bracelets.

Nila was so happy it brought tears to her eyes when she saw

them, not even flinching at the fact that Rosy had evidently gone rummaging through her things and taken them out and decided to do that. It was a surprise, Rosy had explained, she'd have spoiled the surprise had she asked for permission. Nila was so happy she didn't even seem the same woman who claimed she hated surprises and wasn't too fond of people rummaging through her stuff.

Nila was open about everything and anything, except the things she wasn't. It was really as simple as that: you could never take for granted what she would or wouldn't mind about what you went to look into.

Rosario Bendita Gonzalez del Vidrio used to be a flamenco dancer. That's what they'd found out. She had gone through all the motions, she had been 15 in Andalusia, she had her fantastic dress, riding along the beautiful horses, in the Andalusian festivals, in Malaga especially. That was her triumphant time.

She told all this to Sarah, one day. She told her how one day she was wearing her favourite dress, a grand, marvellous blue gown. And she had this beautiful comb, all in silver with lapis lazuli decorations in the shape of roses. And then, she fell in love with one of the riders in one of the festivals. He was so dashing, so dishy, she couldn't do anything except fall in love with him. They courted each other and then they became lovers, and friends, and bonded closely, for years. And then more years. And then they had children. And they were happy with their children. They had a flamenco and horse-riding school and became renowned across Andalusia. They couldn't have wished for a better life. But of course as it sometimes turns out, it was all too good to be true. Something changed, and Alfonso became erratic, and distracted.

One day someone came to Rosy's door, a handsome looking woman, dressed in a red suit with high heels. A cascade of copious black hair fell over her shoulder, and she wore large sunglasses. She stood on Rosario's doorstep, her arms crossed, her toe inside her high heeled elegant sandals jutting out in a poised stance. She said: "I know you". And Rosario said: "I don't know you though!". The red woman continued: "I have seen you before, with my husband, on local TV and papers, and he always said you were his beloved sister. But you're not his sister, are you?"

"No, I'm his wife!"

"Hah, well."

So, the long and short of it was that Alfonso had begun seeing this woman, whom he had met on one of the many seminars he held in different parts of Andalusia for the school, then married her. She was an artist and travelled a lot, so she never minded or cared that she saw very little of him herself.

He basically had found this perfect combination of a terrific married life with three perfectly beautiful children, and the bohemian lifestyle he had with the artist and painter in Madrid, along with all that went with it: champagne parties and drug parties and absinthe parties and orgies... all the things you can imagine that go with the perfect Bohemian lifestyle.

Her eyes still looked crushed when she told this story. But the fact remains that on the very day that this woman appeared on her doorstep, and told her all about it, and showed her proof, photos of them together, letters that he'd written, and shown such an uncannily different Alfonso, whom she even manically began to hope had a twin, on the very same day, he died. She never even got the chance to confront him, to say "why?", or anything like that. He just died. So, she and the

woman eventually became friends, because neither of them had known about the other one, they had both been innocent. Rosario's children were now growing up, becoming strapping, healthy adolescents, so she would take them up to Madrid to visit Gabriela, and they all loved her, they were always happy to see her and be with her, and thought she was amazing, and wonderful, but of course, never as amazing and wonderful as their own mum. So these two became good friends and when the kids all grew up and started to move to universities and jobs in and out of Spain, Rosario was left alone, so she moved in with Gabriela, and with Gabriela the friendship that had begun moved forward and eventually they fell in love with each other and that's when Rosario felt happy again. They had a wonderful life now, for she was happy to do her own thing, and she became addicted to knitting, and she began to never leave their beautiful apartment in Madrid, so whenever Gabriela travelled to set up an exhibition she would always keep an eye out for knitting materials, precious wools and yarns or objects related to Rosario's knitting, and would send her samples. So, they were so happy and so in love they soon forgot about Alfonso altogether. And this was all very nice, and good and well, until in their fifties Gabriela got sick, and she was sick with cancer. And so throughout her illness Rosario looked after her, cherished her, cleaned her, healed her.

She knitted all these wonderful sceneries because it got to the stage that Gabriela couldn't do much beyond go from the bed to the lounging chair in the garden and back, and so she couldn't see all the beautiful places she used to travel to.

So, as Gabriela's illness progressed and she deteriorated steadily, the only thing Rosario could do was to create these increasingly intricate and fascinating sceneries and abstract

paintings. Sometimes she would attempt to replicate some favourite colour combination from the paintings that Gabriela loved, and when Gabriela realised just how good Rosario had become at this, she would say make me a Tuscan landscape with a spa, and so Rosario worked and she would do it. She knitted a curtain to keep mosquitoes away from her, and she would knit covers for everything from teapots to toasters, and she made a perfectly lovely gazpacho jug holder and she knit lovely soft blankets to put on Gabriela's increasingly sensitive skin and she used fine silks and precious yarns and that's how it went. Eventually Gabriela wasted away for good and died and left Rosario with her empty home, without her love, with her children all grown up and with their own families everywhere, so she just began to travel. She became a bit of a gypsy. She would stay a bit with one of her kids' families, just enough to be welcome, never too much to tire, and then she would carry on staying in different places, paid for with the vast amounts of money Gabriela had left her with, and one of the places where she often came by, and stayed a while, was the House of Blue.

It was thanks to these and other fleeting guests, some interesting, some less, that they managed to make their way towards Winterfest or Christmas for some, without excessive drama. Thoughts of the tragic family managed somehow to remain unobtrusive and under the surface.

11

Chapter 11

Nila thought it absurd to celebrate Christmas, with its religious connotations, and even more absurd considering how much she despised its hugely plastic and capitalistic connotations. However, she realised they just couldn't go through Winter without having some kind of a party in the darkest time of year, Midwinter. It was a way to say Hey we're all still here, we've come this far, we'll get through this winter too. Decorations and sparkles, little dolls hanging here and there, a large green tree, they just cheered and made cosy and they couldn't help but maintain the tradition. They shared gifts, and it was the time when the kids came to visit, if they could, and it was Christmas all right for them.

The kids of course were the children of sons and daughters or nephews and nieces any of them had. Or, as in Nila's case, some of them left and went to visit their offspring here and there around the world. It gave her an excuse to travel, as her kids would have been happy to come and visit her, but one person on the move was so much cheaper than a whole set of them.

This year, perhaps because Sebastian was there, Nila decided

to stay. His dad Jared was due to come over with his friend Rami, but there was a huge storm in San Francisco: the Central Valley was flooded and hundreds of thousands of people were evacuated. So they skipped that December.

Daniel came.

Sebastian hadn't seen his uncle in ages. Daniel was his dad's older brother and first-born and stories were told of him, how when he was little animals would go up to him, butterflies would land on him and stay, and how he smiled from the inside: people were naturally drawn to him and felt serene just by being close to him. Sebastian thought they sounded like they were talking about St Francis!

He was a piano player, a student of Science and Maths and got his degree in Experimental Physics before continuing to study for his Masters in Macro-Robotics at the University of Hanover. He received his first Nobel prize for Innovation in Technology in 2030, after devising the first, extremely highly acclaimed follow-me bot: it was basically a little airborne thing that would follow you around and, if commanded, would emit a sturdy magnetic pull that combined with the magnet on your back, built in your custom-made jacket, would pull you out and away from that spot up to 100 metres away.

It was still at prototype and development stage, and still extremely expensive, but the military were very happy to fund research into it to be used in the field of high-risk exploration. Daniel hoped that with this funding they would make it cheap enough to be used by all emergency personnel, firemen, police, and so on, and eventually even accessible to common people, pretty much at all times of known risk, whether walking along very dangerous roads on mountains or risky landscapes, or at night in very dodgy areas of town, and so on.

In any case, it was a massive hit and companies fought each other to have him work for them and develop new stuff.

His uncle Daniel was super cool, so he made sure he knew where every penny was going and how it was being used and always ensured no obscure contract clause would make it exclusive for the military alone, or that they modified it to make it an assault rather than defence mechanism.

Nila was very proud of him, and so they all were. When he would find the time he would come and visit, usually at Winterfest with his wife Martha, another scientist of some sort. They were chilled and the house would fill with music, or with the sounds of their younger kids, Mark and Ramona.

It's lovely when they come, there are a lot of people around and it's all very happy chaos. People come from all over. They get Aunt Fabiana, Claudio's sister, with her husband and her kid, Giacomo. Plus of course other people's friends and relatives.

Winterfest normally starts around the 21st of December. Some start slowing down whatever they're doing, getting out DVDs or preparing compilations of really lazy movies, such as a James Bond marathon or the entire Dr Who series collection, they take out illustrated books or specialised magazines and start leafing through them. Some will play video-games more than usual and tend to be interrupted less than usual too. Some will still write handwritten letters and cards to people round the world. Some will head off somewhere and call people. Some will start making dinner plans and preparing ingredients, going shopping in town for them and so on.

The local town is actually very pretty. They really do not interact with it much, they are always a little like tourists passing by, although the people in town probably recognise them quite

easily, and their guests (like the aforementioned Tetsuo) may sometimes stand out and people might say “Oh, they must be staying at the House of Blue” up there.

The naming began when Claudio was asked to make a poster about the House, it was back when they still needed to advertise the place, when they didn't have a lot of money and they needed the place to be better known, so Claudio did a lovely poster with the house, and the writing: “Do you need a retreat, a time to think, play, look around and stop for a while? Come to the House of Blue. Be sure to bring something blue with you”.

It looked amazing, of course, though the wording was a bit cheesy. Nila's words. However, because it looked good, many shopkeepers decided to gladly keep it in their windows, they made something of a poster out of it, like the Chat Noir one that people still hang in their homes and flats.

So yes, the town knew them, and they had their favourite places to go in town, their favourite shops... everybody was always polite, but... Their people, despite sharing a big house together, were pretty antisocial, really.

Take Nila: if someone talked to her a little too much or was a little too friendly when she stopped for a cup of coffee and a bit of cake, she'd avoid that place for months, until she believed she would be quite forgotten or even that the management and staff had changed.

Victoria could be quite the social lady when she wanted to, but she chose to stay home most of the time instead, unless she was out visiting Hans.

Tony still blushed if someone he didn't know spoke to him, unless he was talking about photography, then he'd become

confident and prattle on as much as he needed to. Tony was quite a famous black and white photographer, somewhat of a cult figure: he'd go somewhere in the world, take pictures, go back, work in his dark room, organise an exhibition (he did need some prodding), collect congratulations and thanks, refuse to work for any commercial ventures that might have actually provided him with substantial money, then come back to the house. He still had the sense of humour of a kid, though you could really tell there was a lot of wisdom concealed behind. He would occasionally read some cards with Nila, or just potter around the house, fixing this and that, usually starting something and not finishing it, until Peter would have a go at it, then he'd actually move and help him finish the job.

Deirdre would often complain when that happened, because she expected Peter to be doing something else, something others had a bit of trouble recognising as needing priority, something that involved her.

12

Chapter 12

Their woodcarver pal Jurich, who lived further down the road, came knocking on the door one day, and threw some splodges of what looked like putrid wood out of a bucket he was carrying onto the table in the entrance.

Nila, who'd opened the door, said:

“What?”

“What? This is what I found this morning in my workshop!”

“Well... what is it? And why is it on my table?”

“Your guy, you know the guy, was in the shop yesterday.”

“Which guy?”

“You know, Ray. I mean you really gotta do something about him!”

“Ray has come back? But that's wonderful!”

“Yeah, Nila, I'm glad you're happy, but this time he caused some serious damage. I mean look at this stuff. This is about 1500 krone worth of stuff I won't be selling!”

“Ok. You're right, Jurich. Here you go, for the damages”. She had her purse out and was handing him out money, with extras.

“Please” she said, “if he comes back your way, please tell him

to come see us. As you know, he may not remember the way.”

Jurich took the money, looking at her with a mixture of affection and despair, then shook his head, picked up his bucket, and left.

She waved him goodbye with a smile then looked at Sebastian, standing in the corner of the corridor, curious as always about whoever knocked on the door, and wide-eyed and happy she grabbed his shoulders.

&&

“It’s Ray, Sebastian! You’ll get to meet Ray!”

“That’s great grandma! Who is Ray?”

“Let me show you!” And I followed her towards the dome. We stood underneath it, and she looked around, still happily glowing and looking around in the air. Was she looking for something?

“Well, what do you think!?”

“Erm, about what, grandma?”

“The dome! What do you think of the Dome?”

“Oh, well, I do love the Dome, it’s been here since I got here though and... Oh” I suddenly realised.

“Yes, yes, it was Ray who built it. He’s a genius, Sebastian, a complete and utter genius. And I love him to bits, and he’s so sexy and smart...”

I wasn’t sure what the sexy part had to do with anything, but I was getting used to my grandmother’s twisted priorities.

We sat down in the dome, Nila still looking as excited as a little girl.

&&

“See, Ray first came along as a guest. He paid for his room, kept to himself, basically he didn’t really take part in any other aspect of our lives here. He brought me a beautiful blue crystal chandelier. He would just walk out, sometimes ask to borrow the van, then come back and unload mysterious things into the barn, though we didn’t know what.

“At one point Claudio said perhaps we should ask him what he was up to, for really he could be drug trafficking for all we know. So I sent Dean down to check for us, I mean after all Claudio had a point, we didn’t know Ray from Adam, and he never spoke to anyone. If he came into the Lula he would just sit and listen to whatever we were talking about or read something if all was quiet, and drink some beers, but he never said a word. Every time I talked to him he always replied politely, but left almost immediately so I stopped talking to him, I didn’t want to make him move every time!

“So we sent Dean, thinking perhaps he’d feel less intimidated by him, or something? Dean went downstairs to the barn and he found that Ray had been collecting sheets of glass, steel connectors, and all sorts of materials. I mean he had been at the house for over two months, he must have been collecting all of that for all this time, in the towns nearby, in recycling sites, who knows! Dean asked him what they were for. He said, “I want to build a dome here. Do you think I can build a dome?” So Dean tried to get some more information from him but he wouldn’t say another word, he would just look at his materials and take swigs of beer. So Dean came up to us and told us, and I was about to go downstairs but met Ray on the grass, getting ready to leave with the van again, so I asked him about the dome. “Nila, I just want to build a dome? Could you let me build a dome? Right there, above the house, can I build a dome?” I looked

at the house, thought about planning permits and municipal bureaucracy, then pictured the dome, and thought: we'll cross that bridge when we get to it. So I said to Ray: "Ok, Ray, thank you. You go ahead and build your dome".

"So he started working on it, and here it is. Then he left. He didn't say much more to us. He was happy and whistling while he worked. I mean I don't know if you realise what a masterpiece this is, a work of high architecture. We never even found out anything about Ray's story, his profession, or anything. He was a friend of Yàn's" (Sebastian had never heard of him before), an ancient friend of Asmund's. Yàn had only replied to our enquiries about Ray, "Ray is a good guy, don't worry about him", and had refused to give any further details.

"Ray left one day without saying goodbye to anyone, leaving us the payment for the room. I had wanted to tell him he didn't need to pay for anything considering he was building us something as grand as that, but I couldn't talk to him!

"I have no idea where he went, where he used to live (as you know, as long as people come from someone we know or we have other reasons to trust them, we don't ask them anything they don't want to tell us about themselves), nothing. And I didn't have an address to send him something that he's left behind."

She motioned for Sebastian to get up and he followed her to the library in her room. She took down a leather bound diary. It was closed with a simple strip of soft leather.

"After he'd left and I went back in the van, I cleared the seats as I always do and this fell out and opened. In it there are photos of a long haired woman, with dark eyes and a serious face, a strong nose and a sense of deeply intense beauty about her. There were bits and bobs, stuff that looked like receipts, handkerchiefs with stuff written on them, and I could see other writing too. The

photos of this woman: some looked like portrait photos, while some looked like they were taken from a distance, some were out of focus. In very few she was smiling or laughing and she was stunning, you could just see a passion for life exuding from her. Another bit that came out was a piece of paper that looked like it'd been held and placed back and held again countless times. It only said Ray: forgive me. Leda. So I knew it was Ray's."

She seemed saddened for a moment, but she soon started smiling again.

"So I put everything back in the diary, closed it, and have been holding onto it ever since, hoping he'd come back for it. Sebastian, that was almost twenty years ago! And now he's back and I can finally return this to him, thank him for the stunning dome, and offer him a cosy stay here!"

Sebastian sat in silence for a bit, then said:

"Grandma, that is a great story. But what's Ray got to do with Jurich, and his spoiled wood?"

"Ah well, you see", Nila was visibly embarrassed, looking at her hands, as though a naughty child of hers had been up to mischief, "while Ray was here and driving around, he would sometimes do ... how shall we put it, strange things. One of these odd things he did was to decide that the small dam up the river just shouldn't exist. So he went and opened it up and of course the river flooded some areas, poor Jurich's woodcarving shop among them. Like I said, this was 20 years ago!

"And now, when Jurich's creations got swamped, he must have remembered and realised it could only have been Ray's fault, while I didn't instantly make the connection. I suppose we all remember what affects us most! For me it was the dome, and the diary, of course."

“Right. So this isn’t necessarily Ray. It could be just any other guy, who decided to interfere with public works, or nature.”

“Darling, this is Norway, this is a small town: it was Ray.”

She patted Sebastian on the knee, then she got up and went back down to the living quarters, leaving the diary in the entrance bookshelf.

He couldn’t resist his curiosity, so he went and opened the diary and looked at the pictures again. He didn’t mean to read anything, but Nila came back and caught him, said “tut tut tut” and placed it back on the shelf. He went back to his room. Leda sure was beautiful.

Nila remained in a very bouncy happy mood, until three days later Sebastian heard her yell “Ray!” and laugh. He figured Ray had come to visit.

Ray was a tall, handsome black man, with a trimmed beard and long hair that started to show some white.

He hugged her, Sebastian thought, quite tenderly. She took his elbow and showed him to a room she had prepared for him.

Sebastian followed and saw the room she had been quietly preparing: it had lots of rope, iron bits, just lots of nice looking metallic, ropery and woody materials, casually arranged, it seemed, so as not to look deliberately placed. At the same time they looked so neat that one could have been fooled into thinking they were just decorations and nothing needed doing with them.

Ray was pretty tall, so Nila had given him the room that Asmund normally occupied, with long Nordic type Super King mattresses. The diary lay discreetly on the bed. Nila made no mention of it.

Sebastian realised that although one could hardly say she had

a job, Nila did her job well. The room had a shower and bathroom too.

Nila said: “Ray, I hoped you’d come back. I would like to hear all about where you’ve been and what you’ve been up to.”

(Sebastian knew from her story before that this was mostly wishful thinking)

“I want you to relax and of course if you’d like you could stay with us for Winterfest!”

Ray placed his bag on the chest in the corner and sat in the little armchair. Nila sat on the edge of the bed, put her hand on his knees, and looked up at him, waiting for a reply.

Ray smiled and didn’t say a word, but he did nod gently, so Nila got up and said: “Good. I’ll see you downstairs maybe. Or not. In any case, I want to talk to you this time Ray. You left us the most beautiful part of the whole House. I am grateful. Please don’t leave without letting us say goodbye again. I want to know who you are, chat with you, ok? Please.”

Ray nodded again. He looked up to Sebastian and lifted a hand, simply, as if to say hello, or even goodbye. He lifted his hand too and smiled, then they both left him to have a rest in his room.

Nila couldn’t contain her joy. When they got downstairs she went up to Claudio and hugged him from behind as he sat at his computer, and said “Ray! Ray is here!”.

“Yes, I know, Nila, I’m glad!”

“Oh, don’t pretend with me, I know you’re not that glad. If Ray were horrible and wrinkly you’d be happier. But I won’t let you spoil this for me, I’m so happy he’s finally back.”

Peter leaned across from his own computer and said to her:

“Nila, are you sure he won’t be creating trouble? I mean Jurich wasn’t very happy, and we don’t know what else he may have been up to round the area... we never even found out whether the

materials used for the dome were stolen, or what... shouldn't we ask him?"

"Oh for Christ's sake, no! You both leave Ray alone, let me enjoy his presence. If you can't see he is a perfectly fine person, who clearly picked up stuff that was lying around, and left us an amazing gift, then just shut up about it at least. Don't spoil it for me!"

Nila was upset.

She realised it too, breathed in deliberately, then breathed out and went to open a beer from the fridge. Neither Peter nor Claudio made a single gesture. The subject was clearly being dropped.

After a bit, Ray came downstairs. He sat down, and Nila asked him if he wanted a beer. He said "Thanks Nila, that'd be great" and sat at the table, his long legs stretched out underneath and he looked right ahead. Nila sat near him, quiet now. Sebastian could tell she wasn't as enthusiastic and energetic as before, she was probably just being cautious now. Ray took out his diary from under his jumper, showed it to her, and said: "Thank you."

"You're welcome. I would have sent it on to you but..."

"Yes I know, I left you no way to do it."

He took a swig of his beer.

He then lowered his head and looked down at the table. He sighed and lifted his head, then spoke up a little.

"The dome was made utilising materials I found scattered about throughout Norway, and Sweden too. The steel and some of the glass I found at a site that had been demolished."

Nila stopped herself from looking in Peter and Claudio's direction with an accusatory look. Tony lifted his head from the book he was reading and came to sit at the table with them.

Victoria nonchalantly approached the fridge and poured herself some wine, then placed it on the table and sat back in her chair.

Ray looked at his diary. “When you first met me, I was reeling from a breakup. I loved the most amazing woman I have ever known. She loved me back, but her family was from a very different scene than mine. They were race horse breeders, and she had exclusive friends and contacts. One day, she got offered a life in a shiny millionaire’s environment she felt she couldn’t refuse, and she took off.”

He looked as if into the distance, was he picturing her yacht sailing away?

“I was a bit of a layabout. I would sometimes take off for weeks, sleep in odd places and with odd women, mostly to get a place to stay. I loved Leda and I was stupid as fuck, thinking she loved me enough to put up with what I now know to be unforgivable behaviour.

“She loved my skill in building stuff, and she often asked me to build something for her, but I was always too busy, doing stuff at the studio, and when I got home I just wanted to chill and smoke pot. Maybe she got bored, and maybe she wanted to see the world. She tried to convince me to show my work, organise exhibitions. I refused her patronage and always said no, my work wasn’t ready. One day she took off, leaving only a note, where she said she was sorry, and that’s it.

“I guess I deserved it, but she never even gave me a chance, she never told me she might do something like that... I might have changed! I wasn’t as good as the life that had been offered to her, by any means. I would occasionally seek her out in different countries and stand somewhere and look at her from a distance, I knew the places where the guy parked his yacht, and I would take secret pictures of her”.

He looked at the table again, shook his heavy black hair.

“Anyway, I travelled, people would give me a place to stay in exchange for work done, my work started to get known, people remembered my name. Eventually an architect offered me a job in his big study, and that was good, I made money. So much so that I met her at a party once. She didn’t recognise me. I looked at her, she seemed so sad. I went up to talk to her, but she barely saw me, she seemed glazed over, maybe drugs? I don’t know, she wasn’t the Leda I knew anymore.”

A bit of silence.

“So, here I am. I guess I just wanted a holiday. Also, I wanted to see a friendly face.” he grinned at Nila and of course Nila grinned back.

Nila put her hand on his arm and smiled.

A while back Sebastian would have wondered how someone who barely even spoke to anyone could think of other people as a friend. But since he had been living at the House he had learned that friends are those who accept your limitations, your awkwardnesses, your strangenesses. It was really something.

Ray turned to her, put his own hand on hers, smiled and said: “So, now I want to build you a greenhouse. Is that ok?”

“A greenhouse?! Of course it’s ok!”.

“But first, I’d like to watch some rubbish TV shows”.

So Ray got up and went towards the DVD player and the TV: “May I?” he said.

“Of course, Ray, you’re as good as in your own home!”.

Victoria went to join him and Tony settled back into his chair with a smile. Sebastian had the impression Claudio and Peter stopped listening and got on with whatever they were doing. Nila ignored them. Her point had been made, whether they acknowledged it or not.

CHAPTER 12

So that's how Ray arrived and settled himself in for Winterfest.

13

Chapter 13

Sarah was going back and forth filling the greenhouse with plants.

Dean helped her. They would crouch down and start fixing up containers, big vases squared containing the little tomatoes, and beans, and peas, and courgettes, and strawberries... the list went on. The greenhouse was really looking amazing.

Filled with plants, naturally cosy and warm, butterflies would soon come, and other insects that helped make the greenhouse more of a mini world than anything else. It was based on the principles that made up the Eden project in Cornwall.

Sebastian sat down with Nila inside, on wooden benches that had been made by their friend Jurich the woodcarver. Jurich had patched things up with Ray and they had become like long-lost friends. Ray had helped him fix up his workshop and even devised a flood prevention barrier that worked to actually improve the appearance as well as the functionality of his shop. Jurich was now more than pleased to help out with Ray's greenhouse project.

With their large mugs of coffee, Nila looked around the

greenhouse happily. Electricity didn't seem to concern them as an expense, so they could keep the lighting on for the Greenhouse to recreate a proper long day, something more Southern Mediterranean, compared with the total darkness that enveloped Norway for so much of the year, which certainly wasn't conducive to many flavoursome vegetables.

&&

One of these peaceful days, a day like any other, one of the days when Nila got up to go for one of her many walks, she called Hercules as usual and Hercules didn't come. It was as simple as that.

He wagged his heavy tail on the floor, plomp plomp plomp. But he didn't go to her. It had become increasingly painful for him to walk, and Nila had indeed shortened her walks, but then one day it was just too much.

She had bought joint supplements, and better beds. She had been extra careful with his food. But Hercules was a big dog and he was 15 years old and that is a lot of years for a big dog.

That day he just couldn't get up and go to her. She said to the people watching her: "Ah he'll be fine, he must have hurt his paw yesterday, he'll be better tomorrow."

But we noticed that what she did do was sit by him, spend all the time she could by him, read by him, eat by him, her hand on his head, until eventually, a few days later, he couldn't get up to eat and drink anymore, and then the day came he couldn't even wag his tail anymore. Hercules was in a sort of stupor for a day or so, and when he passed, Nila was in that same stupor for a week or two.

In the meantime, Joseph had carved the most beautiful statue

of Hercules the Dog, and they placed it over the place where he had been buried, in a special position compared to other burials of the house, overlooking the immense valley beyond.

&&

Weeks went by, and all seemed to have returned to normal, Nila back to her happy self, working in the greenhouse. Sebastian was helping her. Then, all of a sudden, Nila began to weep. Sebastian was almost shocked, he wasn't expecting it, though he'd gotten used to her mood swings and her occasional rages and her stomping outs... He didn't expect to see her crying, not like this, quietly, but deeply, abundantly. He wasn't prepared to deal with it. He said: "Grandma are you ok? What's the matter?"

"Oh I'm sorry, Sebastian, it's nothing really, it really is nothing. It's just one of those self-pity moments, you know?"

Pity for what? He wondered. She has everything, look at this place... Did she miss her daughter, who skipped Winterfest this year because she was having a baby? Did she miss Hercules that bad? Surely she should be happy he even lasted that long!

She got up, and said: "My goodness, this place is wonderful. I will be forever grateful to Ray for this".

Then she headed downstairs to fix them both a salad.

&&

Ray was still with them after Sebastian's uncle Daniel had left. Everyone else who was here just for that Winterfest had left. It had been good, chilled, relaxing, great food thanks to everyone but Nila (she disliked cooking for other people).

Asmund arrived around the beginning of March, when the

greenhouse was already finished. He said he was only dropping by. He left after a few days with Ray and Jurich to look for interesting stuff in the forest, with tents and all. They expected them back a few days later.

Asmund left his friend Alyssa with them. She was much younger than Asmund, Peter said she must have been around 30, perhaps 35. She was stunning. She was tall, with masses of curly dark auburn hair, big bodied and ample. She spent a lot of time just walking around the various libraries, checking out the books. Sebastian couldn't help but stare at her, trying to conceal himself as he did so.

She caught his eye at one point and smiled. What a smile she had, wide and toothy in a beautiful way. She called him down from the above corridor and waved her hand to signal to come down next to her. Oddly, there weren't many people in the Lula, just Dean, who was reading a book in a corner. He eyed him and smiled for no reason Sebastian could understand.

Sebastian came to stand next to Alyssa. He wasn't prepared for her scent. It was clearly perfume, but it seemed to have become completely part of her, it was so intense, heady, that it felt as though that were her natural odour. It got to his head and he thought he would spin, instead he breathed in deeply and tried to remain standing.

Alyssa must have heard his breath, which came out more like a sigh. She turned to look at him and smiled again, and said "Everything ok? Sebastian, right?" "Yeah, yes, Sebastian, that's me." "How old are you Sebastian?" "Sixteen" "Ah. Young man!" and she laughed. Her voice was velvety and soft, and he felt sure she would taste great too, as he looked at her mouth. He didn't know why he'd even thought such a thing, so he blushed crimson. She smiled, close mouthed this time, and looked at

him sideways.

“So, Sebastian” she said as she put the book away. “Would you be so kind as to show me around? Asmund just dumped me here and I have no idea where to go!” She had a slight accent, a soft French accent, perhaps? Or Swedish? It was enough to make her voice a little softer, a little sweeter. “Of course, it would be great!” he said, a little too enthusiastically perhaps.

He walked around the Lula at first, showing her all the various computers, telling her about the different operating systems, the drawing tools, the stereo, the books, the library, the kettles, the smaller tables, the kitchen, the fridge the larger ones and the smaller ones and ... all the while he couldn't stop focusing on her warmth, on the exuded presence of her, on that pervading scent. Somewhere in the back of his mind he was also strongly aware of Dean's amused smile, so when the circling was over he felt a mixture of huge relief for getting out of under Dean's nose, and at the same time he felt a stomach churning feeling that was very similar to fear, yet deeply exciting at the same time... He didn't want the feeling to go away, he wanted it deeper, to continue.

Sarah came bounding in and sat next to Dean, Sebastian was grateful for the distraction.

Just to recollect his thoughts, to have a moment's pause, he yelled over at Dean (whom he caught looking at him, now joined by Sarah's intrigued looks) “Hey, do you think it'll bother anyone if I show Alyssa around upstairs?”

“No, I'm sure it won't Sebastian, you go on ahead!”

Sebastian had the clever idea of letting Alyssa go first, so he just drank in her scent, even richer coming from underneath her thick skirt, as she climbed the steps.

They had a look at the various rooms, and he just thought his breath would leave him completely, until they got to his. He

only said "...and this is my room..." and she sat down on the bed, sighed happily and looked around. She said "Ah, I'm a little tired now. This is a big house!"

&&

"Yes, it is." I remained standing though. I really wanted to go sit next to her. She looked at me and said "It's ok, you can sit here, I won't bite!" So I did.

She said "Show me your favourite book". "Oh, ok." I got up and took out *Lost Thing* by Shaun Tan, sat down next to her and started leafing through it and reading it out for her. I turned the pages in silence so we could both absorb the beautiful images quietly.

As I turned the pages she put her hand on my thigh. She moved her hand, ever so slowly, up towards my crotch. I was sweating profusely, I think, but at the same time my mouth was completely dry, and getting dryer, and I was struggling to keep my reading straight.

Just before she got to the top of my leg she left it there and with the other hand she started caressing my cheek. I read on for a little bit then stopped and turned towards her. I was flushed, I felt all red, I felt dry mouthed, I felt memories of Greta flooding back to me, her skin, her breasts, oh my god her breasts so I turned around, closed my eyes and kissed her, kissed Alyssa.

She kept her hand on my cheek, then brought her other hand to my cheek, and so, holding my face within her two hands ever so gently, she kissed me. We kissed. It was gentle, smooth, warm... and scented as I imagined, sweet and heady and my movements... our movements, it seemed to me, naturally fell in time. It was when I naturally let my hands move towards

her breasts that she suddenly got up and started fidgeting and saying “I’m sorry, I’m sorry”.

“...”

She looked at me, in my confusion and speechlessness, and said “Oh my dear, I am so sorry. Asmund should have never left me alone!”

“Well... why...”

“I’m sorry” she said again, and rushed off.

&&

He saw her later, sitting in the Lula. She was writing a letter to someone, it seemed. It was in ink and on paper. He decided to go sit in the greenhouse for a bit. He felt odd: he felt like what they had done was probably wrong. She was, after all, around 35, and he was 16. But it just felt so good and desirable, he couldn’t help but feel, in his guts, that it was perfectly, absolutely, and unmistakably right.

He tried to get into his book, *The Raw Shark Texts*, and distract himself from the invisible cord he felt pulling him towards Alyssa, whom he was painfully aware of despite the different room.

Eventually he couldn’t stand it anymore and headed back downstairs, to the kitchen area, and opened a can from the fridge.

Dean and Sarah arrived, started up their lunch, then followed Peter and Deirdre, Tony and Katharine, Victoria chatting away with Hans who had come to visit, and finally Nila and Claudio. All the while, Alyssa kept writing in her chosen corner.

Sebastian tried not to stare at her and dove into his book with fierce resolve. He told himself he was really enjoying it, and he

also told himself he was telling himself that because he didn't want to leave her presence.

At about 5 pm she got up and went to the toilet, or to a bedroom. He got up and passed in front of where she had been writing, nonchalantly. He needn't have bothered, as everyone had left the Lula by now and he hadn't even noticed. The house was quiet. He threw a glance on the table and noticed plates and mugs... she was clearly a messy mouse. But he couldn't help noticing the long letter she had been writing too. He went to the sink and washed up, then came back to her table and cleared up her things, then sat in a chair near her table.

She wasn't coming back down.

He got up and went upstairs and went towards Asmund's room: the door was half open, he peeped inside and saw that she was sleeping, seemingly quite deeply.

He hovered a little outside the room trying to decide what to do.

Then he went downstairs and without thinking, or trying very hard not to think, he picked up the letter, moved to another chair nearer the library, and began to read.

"Dear Josephine,

"Here I am again, in a mess, as usual. I do hope you'll never get tired of listening to my confessions, because I don't know what I'd do without having you as my confidante.

"So far I've just been able to tell you all the chaos and disruption I bring, to myself even more than to others, and you have been so good as to accept me, love me and counsel me regardless. I am truly and forever grateful for that.

"What I've never told you about is my past, something nobody

really knows about. Those who know me better than anybody else know snippets here and there, but really nobody knows the whole story.

“I don’t suppose people would really care, it’s quite boring really, from certain points of view. But also, I’ve always been terrified of telling it, as I felt it would be judged very harshly, and to be honest, the fact that I myself, despite years of reading psychology and sociology and philosophy and any self-help text I could get my hands on could understand it, not really understand or justify it, leaves me uncertain and worried about sharing. But I must, because it’s like a great big load I carry around with me constantly.

“Ever since I was 12 I really wanted attention, male attention. So I kissed the first guy I liked, we were both 12 so I guess that was ok... then he became detached, not very sweet anymore, and the next guy I went for was 21 and had a dark car. I think he was the cousin of a friend, or something. I don’t really know where he came from, or how we became “friends”. I must have attracted his attention at some point, an incredibly shy yet completely forward little girl. Because I know now, Josephine, that at 12 you are still very much a little girl. Not how I felt. I couldn’t wait to get out of the classroom and go and get in his car. It was the best place, the warmest, always smelled so nice...

“We would sit and kiss, and his kiss was amazing. I still remember it! Then he would touch my breasts or what little had started of them. And that felt amazing. Then a while later he was the first one to touch me down there, and that, too, felt great.

“In between these experiences with him, I would sort of go and try out whatever I did with him with other guys. All they had to do was express an interest in me, and I was there, available,

and ready.

“Then one day, and I was 15 at the time, he made love to me: he wanted to be sure he was the first one I did it with. I was actually grateful: it was painful in the right amount, but he was ever so tender and to me it felt amazing. Of course I then made sure I did it with whoever asked, contrary to what he’d told me, which was to just do it with people who cared about me.

“Why didn’t I listen, Josephine?

“I couldn’t, I just couldn’t. All I heard was the other guy’s desire, and I had to respond to it, I had no choice but to do that. You can imagine how conflicting this was for me, the headstrong, wilful one who would do whatever she pleased, when whatever she pleased was just to please the first guy who came along who wished to do her.

“Yes, that just about sums it up. I can’t escape this curse, Josephine, I really can’t. I don’t know how to stop that mechanism, despite all the heartbreak and pain it has caused me. All the friendships I have ruined because perhaps I’d go on holiday with a friend, and then sneak out of the house or simply not go back for dinner or sometimes even to sleep, so I could hang out and have sex with the first guy that came along that wished it.

“I didn’t have very high standards, so I think I was lucky to be cute enough that many men refrained from even hoping to have anything happening with me. I don’t know. Perhaps I didn’t do one guy because I was simply busy doing another.

“I don’t know Josephine, this has always been my curse. One random guy I met in Lyon once said to me that it was something he couldn’t explain, (he was a smart German guy, what we would now call a geek, that’s why I asked him), but that it really was as though I had SEX tattooed on my forehead.

“Do you have any idea how much that hurt me Josephine? Because I knew it to be true, and I also knew I wasn’t going to be able to erase it. My only safety was in being with someone. If I was going steady with someone, I felt I couldn’t possibly give in, and also, other people would assume I was “Taken”, so they wouldn’t press so much.

“I was interested in everything except sex. I really was. I was interested in philosophy in life, in helping others, I was interested in friendship, love... I wanted friendship and love and wanted to be nice to everyone. I immediately responded to most other people’s needs as well, although these needs were sometimes more confusing and certainly less glaring to me than the sexual needs. But if someone had a sexual desire towards me, I was there to satisfy it.

“Imagine how this felt for me, Josephine. Imagine how many times I wished I could be alone and all the men in the world away from me. Then of course I’d have to contend with lesbians, but there weren’t many of them where I lived, so I was mostly ok on that score.

“I speak in the past, I shouldn’t. It’s still very much there. I am single now and that is devastating news. I travelled with Asmund to this house where he thought I’d be safe, but of course there is a young kid here who lusts after me, and I can’t help but respond... and then there’s a young man who is damn cute, but he seems to be having some sort of story with this other young woman, so it’s easy for me not to want to attract his attention. This kid is only 16.

“I am 35 now, Josephine, what on earth is going to be my life? I do nothing but avoid men when I can and as long as I can, as long as I can stand to be without them because then I will find a

place where they are.

“Oh Josephine what will ever be of me?”

“I want to find love, not so much because I need to have love, I mean I do but I am so weary of all the sex that’s involved that I’m not really that keen, but I want to find love because that has been, so far, the only way I could ever not throw myself at other men.

“I want to find it so I can relax and settle down and perhaps think about the other things I want in my life?”

“But it’s getting late. Isn’t it?”

“Oh Josephine, how can I change myself? I so often wish I could just die, I am so very very tired.

“There you go, this is me, this is how I feel, and this predominates in my whole life. I wish I could change it, I’ve been struggling all my life to change it, but don’t know how. I have been fattening up, avoiding make-up, helped by lack of money. I’ve been avoiding decent clothes, all in an effort to be as unattractive as possible.

“I am still a natural whore, Josephine. Perhaps in a past life I was a proper one and I am now paying my dues, or perhaps in my next one I will come back being able to build up some natural resilience. I wish I knew. It fills me with constant sadness, and yet I never somehow manage to ask people for help about it. Most men get turned on by it, and most women just despise me and look down on me for it.

“Thank you for hearing me out, Josephine, thank you for being there.”

Sebastian sat back in his chair and exhaled. He had understood, he thought, about half of it. The part about wanting love, that

made sense to him, everyone wanted love. The part about being tired, that too. The part about the man in Lyon and the tattoo on her forehead he understood in the way that a boy of sixteen understands something that his body grasps before his mind does. The rest, the twelve year old girl in the warm car, the counting, the curse she could not name or lift, that part he folded away somewhere he could not quite reach yet, and left it there.

The letter had cooled him off completely, he saw her now as a sad older woman. That's all.

When she came downstairs she smiled and went towards him and asked can I put the kettle on? He said of course and took out a mug for her as well. She must have sensed something different about him. She relaxed, and she was suddenly much closer to a girl his age. She was light-hearted, nice, and funny.

Clearly whatever vibes he was giving out before, he wasn't giving out anymore.

He felt sorry for her, but was also feeling pleased he had read her – very private – letter.

Somehow, in the back of his mind, he felt that reading the letter was the right thing to do. Not because he was certain she had meant for him to find it, but because whatever had been building between them, he understood now, had not really been about him at all. He was just the nearest warm body. The thought was uncomfortable enough that he cleared his head of it and wished for her sake that Asmund would come back soon.

The dynamics were clear, afterwards. Nila and Victoria were largely indifferent to her, although they would always, Nila especially, be super-kind if she spoke to them. It was clear,

however, that to them she was a guest who was the friend of a friend, and not a guest of the house. Katharine positively ignored her, and Deirdre seemed to be allergic to her, as whenever they were in the same room at the same time, Deirdre would drift as far away from her as possible, or get up and leave outright.

Peter and Tony would often talk to her and laugh, but Sebastian could tell Alyssa was holding back a little, and often would glance towards their partners (he only saw it because he was aware of it now, he didn't suppose any of them would have noticed), and she only relaxed with them and was playful and a tad flirty when their partners weren't around.

As the days passed, Tony was increasingly forward with her, increasingly jokey, and almost too eager to be near her, even when Katharine was in the room. Katharine seemed to be, appeared to be, busy with other stuff, so not noticing and not minding. But Alyssa minded, Sebastian could tell now. She had to be aware of the effect she was having on Tony, on the lust he was building up, and was shrinking away from it.

Peter, on the other hand, was a strong presence, who would joke with her and just be generally nice, gradually seemingly more receptive to whatever it was that Alyssa transmitted, and he could tell, now that he knew the background, that Peter was responding more and more as the drinking increased.

“Dear Josephine, I think I am in love. This man who lives here is just the sort of man I have always wanted. I like him loads, and he is nice to me, he is kind... he responds to me physically though I don't want him to, but we keep it under control. I say we, but it's probably just me. He has a partner, a woman who never talks and of course, hates me, and he doesn't seem to be attracted to me, not really. Perhaps when we drink a little he is

naturally attracted to whatever it is that I exude, that attracts all men, that kind of sexual pull. But he actually likes me, as a person, you know? Not as a woman he wants to bed, he really doesn't seem to want that of me, he just seems to like me, like a friend, and that baffles me, and it attracts me immensely.

I am so grateful, he is the only one that makes me feel welcome here.”

Sebastian never read this letter, so he couldn't understand the deep pain Alyssa felt as she felt closer and closer to Peter and yet couldn't do anything about it. Nor could he do anything, he was only 16, about her broken heart, as they would say goodbye and part ways, perhaps forever.

14

Chapter 14

Asmund, Ray and Jurich came back, the greenhouse was completed, then Jurich went back to his workshop. Asmund and Alyssa left, and Ray left too. This time he left with big hugs and having received great thanks and with all sorts of gifts given: a personal portrait by Peter, a beautiful painting of Ray at work on his greenhouse, with a stunning profile (Ray was an extremely handsome man and Peter conveyed that perfectly). Claudio painted him an impressive otherworldly fantasy scene, and gave him a CD with the high-resolution version so that Ray could make a poster. Tony gave him a stunning print of one of Ray's favourite photographs of his.

After they all left, Nila called the town's loudest and chattiest woman, Chiara, who also happened to have an extensive knowledge of plants, up for a visit.

They spent hours in the greenhouse, and walking around the immediate grounds, forest included. Chiara explained to Tony, Claudio, Deirdre and Nila all about what plants would thrive better and which wouldn't, and what they could grow and what they couldn't, how each plant got on with each other and where

to purchase them from, as well as which flowering plants would flower into what.

She was extremely helpful and resourceful as usual, and of course at the end of the day they had to offer her dinner and refreshments, and by the time she left they were all shattered by her continuous presence and talk, but grateful. It even caused Deirdre and Nila to share a rare joke between them, and Victoria came out of hiding to tease them (Victoria always hid carefully or feigned illness when Chiara came to visit).

Tony was exhausted but probably the most receptive of all the information, which he then often discussed with Deirdre, in that cordial co-participation way they had.

Spring's arrival was incredible. The days were growing noticeably longer, and the whole of nature was reawakening, to such brilliance and shine it seemed like it was all being created anew. All the inhabitants of the house seemed happy, and happier.

Sebastian started seeing someone new, or rather, someone, properly. Her name was Matilda and she sometimes came back with him after school, sometimes he'd stay at her house in town and come back before nightfall, taking the bus up to Karskta and then walking the rest of the way. The days getting longer helped make the long journey back more pleasant.

He was doing nicely with his studies so when his dad finally came back, in May, he could be proud of his achievements. He told him he was quite happy to stay there until he finished high school, and he was relieved to hear that. Him and his friend Rami left a couple of days before Jeremy and Dave arrived to stay, the most resident-like visitors, who came to visit and stay regularly from their beautiful bed and breakfast in Tuscany. This luckily freed up the best double room for them. The timing in this house

seemed to transcend everything, it was always perfect.

&&

A man came in the spring, out of nowhere, as far as anybody could tell.

Sarah, Dean and I stood outside watching him unload his truck. He tipped his hat at Sarah (was he a cowboy of sorts?) He was unloading some huge boulders of what seemed like marble. He then went into the Lula and made himself a cup of tea, and another one for a woman in her 40s who was with him, who looked like a Native American.

She took something from the front of the truck, wrapped in some cloth, and handed it to Nila, who was at the front of the house, overlooking operations with a smile.

Nila unwrapped the cloth. It was a white marble statuette with blue iridescent inlays, hands crossed over her chest as she leant forward as though in prayer. Down her back, something like wings at rest. It was an incredibly beautiful object.

Nila bent low to thank them then left them to settle their things and went inside. I followed her as did Sarah and we saw her placing the statuette in a corner of the greenhouse.

I went back outside and saw the man munching on a leg of something meaty that someone had roasted yesterday.

He was sitting on one of our stones and looking at the large marble clumps, I sat near him and watched them as well, though nothing seemed to be happening there to warrant his complete undivided attention and concentration. The cats came up to him and started purring and furring around his legs. He threw the bone far into the distance behind him and one of the dogs went to get it, happily.

Then he cleaned his hands on a dirty rag he carried in his pocket and petted the cats. All this whilst still looking at the marble. He said, to no-one in particular or to me, I wasn't sure: "So, whaddy think?"

He was American! Of course!

I felt at home, I felt relieved, even though I'd often lived in Europe, San Francisco was my home, an American accent felt like home too. While we were sitting there, the woman had been taking luggage inside, then dumped a whole lot of rattan material and sat down behind it in a low low chair, and was starting to weave it and work it.

Just in case he had indeed been talking to me I replied.

"Um. Nice blocks of marble?"

"Hahha yes I see, I see. But that's not what I'm talking about, I'm saying, look what's inside, what's inside? Can you see it? All these blocks have a shape inside, and I have to get it out. Can you see what the shape is? Take your time, boy".

I was almost choked up, and I didn't expect it. The way this guy was talking to me, the affectionate, down to earth way he was addressing me... it was somehow so real that I just felt a little emotional.

I sat, and let my mind wander, reminding myself of the hikes in the desert I had dreamed of doing, and then actually saw something, it was taking more and more shape, it was inside the stone, like the stone was translucent... I knew it wasn't possible but decided to ignore that thought. There it was, there was definitely a shape in there, and it looked like a woman lying down, hands under her head, sideways, very peaceful. I told him, and he smacked his thigh.

"Ha! Of course! Thank you, boy! What's your name, say?"

"Sebastian"

“Sebastian? My, my, now that’s a strange name. Nice though! Ok Sebastian, thank you! I believe you saw right. That’s exactly what’s sleeping in there. Guess I better get at taking it out, huh?”

&&

That evening at dinner everybody was present. Deirdre was either fascinated or horrified by this man, though she stayed characteristically quiet. He was loud and not her usual type of person.

Katharine asked a few questions but mostly was trying to get the Native American woman, whose name was Aiyana, to talk. She wasn’t very talkative, but she did offer some information, like how she and Joseph had been friends since childhood, when they were both orphaned, and they had remained friends ever since.

She made rattan baskets and furniture if they stayed in a place long enough, while he sculpted big things and small, or just helped with stonework when required. They got by and they did all right, and they moved from place to place.

She had slowly gotten a good reputation as a furniture “artist”. “I think being Native American helps, people assume I am an artist or something special because I’m Native American and travelling the world and that is still regarded as curious enough and interesting enough to call me an “artist”, when I’m actually no more an artist than all the other people who do rattan furniture and baskets, and admittedly I do believe they are, but you know what I mean” Katharine knew what she meant, I guessed, as she nodded vehemently and eventually she seemed to visibly relax, and become more real. Aiyana later knitted while at the table, as Joseph served her (and most of us actually) the

roast and potatoes we were having for dinner.

She explained to Nila who asked that she did it to keep her hands supple for rattaning, and Nila told her about our friend the knitting lady who would come and knit the place up a storm and agreed to show her all the various knitting works she had done.

Joseph was loud, generous, and had a booming laugh, but was also gentle. He was telling Claudio and Peter what he intended to do with the marble, “though you never know, she might change her mind, sleeping beauty and then you might end up with a Valkyrie!” and he boomed his laugh.

In the morning, at dawn, when the sun was barely over the edge of the hill behind us, I heard a soft chink chink chink and then silence. Then some more soft chink chink chink. I had left the double glazed window open just a touch, to let some air in. I got up and saw how it might be a little later than I thought, it was cloudy and raining ever so softly.

I peeped out, and there was Joseph and his hat, caressing and sitting around and doing a few chink chink chinks on the marble.

I got dressed and joined him. He didn't acknowledge my presence, but said “She's not helping, Sebastian, she's not wanting to come out. I am trying to coax her out but she fades in and out. Perhaps if you took the chisel and mallet and broke off a bit of the stone, it might work?”

He handed me the tools, and I gazed at him a little, a little worried I must admit. I wanted to ask him if there was no risk I would damage the marble. I was talking about it with Granddad the other day and we were discussing where Joseph gets his blocks and he said he was a bit funny like that, and preferred to get them from Carrara directly (often some Turkish marble

that was also white was marketed as real Carrara marble if you weren't careful). He would just drive there in his truck whenever he was in Europe. Ever since he started using real Carrara marble he couldn't bear to make a sculpture out of anything else.

A block like the one I was looking at must have cost him at least, I don't know, hundreds and hundreds of dollars! This was the most prestigious marble in the world, would I ruin it?

Reading my mind, Joseph said: "Go for it, go on, hack away at the lady!"

So I did. I hacked a little here and a little there. He was showing me how to better hold the chisel but at one point he stopped me. He said "ahhhhhh now I see it. Thank you Sebastian, you got her, I can see her properly now." So he started chink chinking and hacking a little here and a little there.

For days upon days I would sit there and watch him, or just sit and read or play on my tablet. For many days it seemed that no matter how much he chinked and caressed and clacked at the marble, it was pretty much the same to me. Then one day when I arrived, all sleepy and bearing coffee for him in the misty hours of a sunny morning, I saw it. He was getting somewhere, it was starting to show through.

I watched him more and more closely. The translucency of certain parts, the workmanship, was stupendous.

Months later, in the full glory of a bright summer morning, Joseph called everyone out, and asked them to come stand around the veiled sculpture. He removed the veil, smashed the bottle of Spumante that Nila had handed him onto the sleeping form, and then grabbed the one Peter was holding out to him and gurgled it down like fresh water. He finished the bottle, wiped his mouth, then smashed that against it too.

Everybody laughed and all the oohs and aaahs were spontaneous and real. There was a small plaque near it, a brass plate with Joseph's name, the month and the year. Underneath, it said: "Sculpted in situ for the House of Blue".

Needless to say, Joseph was never allowed to pay a single dollar towards food or lodging in this house. Nila wouldn't allow him. He did try, on occasion, to contribute some money behind her back and the answer was always "No, you're kidding! Nila would kill me if she found out, and she'd find out".

It was the most peaceful, delicate, beautiful sculpture I had ever seen. I was mesmerised by its whiteness, in love with the girl lying asleep on the grass, her hands under the head, uncannily like the one I'd "seen" in there. How did he do it? I had no idea. But I knew I wanted to learn.

I had been following Joseph almost religiously, so I hadn't noticed how in the meantime, quietly, Aiyana had been building a set of two rattan high backed chairs and a table, its glass all decorated with small blue inlays similar to the ones in the rattan statuette that sat in the greenhouse.

Joseph and Aiyana were amazing, and I was thrilled that they were there. During the days of summer, Peter announced he and Deirdre would be going away for a while: Deirdre's parents had both died and were leaving a large house in the south of the UK to be split and dealt with by her and her siblings. They would leave at the beginning of September, taking most of their stuff with them, but also leaving lots in the barn/storage area.

Aiyana and Joseph each had their own room, and Joseph had set up his workshop in the dome. Aiyana was given Peter and Deirdre's room so she had more space for her work, and some of it she would transport and do in the greenhouse.

I decided to ask Joseph if he'd take me as his apprentice. He seemed glad and amused at the same time and said, putting his hand on my shoulder: "Tell you what, I'll teach you in all the weeks I'll be staying here (I'd say at least till next spring, if not more) and you can see whether you really have a liking for it or not. If you do, I'll be happy to take you on when you have finished your university, and at any holidays you may want to spend time with me where I am. Deal?"

I was kind of hoping more for a Let's take off now and go sculpt the world, but I said "Deal", and shook his hands. I was mighty pleased. I was also very pleased that they would both stay for much longer than initially expected. I liked both him and the quiet but to-the-point Aiyana tremendously.

The spring of 2036 was one good spring.

15

Chapter 15

When Peter and Deirdre left, Deirdre had said her goodbyes, and was getting on her bike (their possessions had already been shipped), ready to cycle down to the station to catch the train for England. Peter took a while to come out. He was just hugging Nila, and then he left too. Tony and Katharine had also left, determined to spend this new fall/winter period in Miami.

Sarah and Dean were increasingly busy doing their things, I guess, so we saw very little of them. I had friends at school, and Jane we didn't really know what she was up to. But she came home from school and ate and we saw her reading in the library, so we knew she was "ok".

In October Victoria decided that she, too, wasn't keen on spending the winter here, so she booked a long-term stay in Cyprus, and offered for Jane to come along with her and Hans. She promised she would ensure she kept up her studies, and Jane, to our surprise, accepted. I guess she really needed some sunshine and a change of scenery.

So, in the end, it was Joseph, Aiyana, Nila, Claudio, Sarah, Dean and me who were left behind. It all became very peaceful.

Not that it wasn't before, but I suppose it was actually quite a few people we had, and despite nobody being especially noisy, there was a lot of coming and going.

Dean's increasing involvement in the University meant we heard less from him, and Sarah would look after the animals when she got back, so she was always fairly busy. She went out too, dated guys... I guess it was never meant to be, with Dean, but their friendship was never spoiled.

Joseph's laughter would occasionally, even often, boom across the house, accompanied by anybody's (Nila, Claudio, or even my own), but otherwise there was the hushed rustle of the rattaning, and the chink chink of Joseph's own work and his training of me, whenever I got back early from school, and at weekends.

Mr Korimara came back, and was immediately happy to join Joseph and Jane whenever they sat at the table for dinner, and even the knitting lady when she visited would sit and happily smile in agreement with conversations she wasn't part of, especially most of what Aiyana said. She never contributed though.

It was a very quiet and peaceful few months. We were all together most of the time for meals, and Aiyana and the knitting lady devised these beautiful smaller chairs, made in sturdy rattan and wood, with inlaid multicoloured embroidered decorations here and there: they were perfect for sitting around the low puzzle table, on the jukebox side of the living area.

The greenhouse was a constant source of delight for Nila, the dome was a wonderful place for Joseph to teach me his craft, Aiyana and the knitting lady (she managed to discover her name was Rosy) had a great time, and Claudio was very happy to sit in our sculpting sessions, have a go here and there, observe Joseph's movements and sketch.

The double-glazing prevented much of the sounds from the outside from coming in, but every day Nila opened the window here and there, to change the air, before the stoves and fireplaces were lit, and we could usually wake up with the tweeting of birds, until it became too cold and then the only natural sounds you'd hear were the occasional wind from the forest, and the mournful howl of Tetsuo Korimara's wolf.

Eventually, Sarah had arranged with our neighbours (a couple of miles down the road) a fee for them to look after our cattle and animals as well as their own, though still keeping them in our barn, which meant she could take off for three months and go to New York. Dean didn't sulk in her absence; he was out most of the time anyway.

The days went on peacefully, warmly and productively. All was good, and spring soon came again. I had my exams to think about, Rosy and Tetsuo left, and all progressed gently.

It was a good time in the House of Blue, and I had another year to go before I started the university path, and as yet hadn't decided what I was going to do. It didn't matter so much as the system there meant that I had to be very good at all subjects for me to achieve a high school diploma. I could then choose where to continue my studies, even next year.

&&

Nila had taken to walking into the forest with Korimara's wolf, and Claudio would be waiting for her with increased anxiety. Sebastian had never noticed Claudio being at all anxious about Nila. She was always so preponderant and seemed so independent. But when she came back after these long walks,

which sometimes took more than one day, following the wolf, she seemed increasingly vulnerable, more fragile than ever before.

Claudio would sometimes ask her quietly why she just didn't stop going out for so long, but she'd refuse. He would sit her down and cover her legs and make her some tea or coffee, and then place a book in her hands, which she accepted gratefully but pretty much never read. She would put her head to the side and just sleep. He had never seen her looking so old. And fragile.

Joseph kept Sebastian distracted with lots of work, and the rest just continued as normal.

Chapter 16

Mr Korimara and Rosy left, and Dean and Sarah were on holiday separately in different Mediterranean destinations. Aiyana and Joseph left as well, travelling again in their truck and that other big block of marble (some other smaller ones had been left here for Sebastian to practice on).

It was only Sebastian, Nila, and Claudio left in the House.

The House had never been so empty. It was early spring, and Claudio would be upstairs painting, while Nila rested more and more on the chair in the living area, near a fire. A book was always nearby but she rarely read it. Sometimes when Claudio came down he tried to talk to her and cheer her up: she always responded and smiled, but she soon would go quiet. They would also spend quite a lot of time watching stuff on the computer, holding hands and caressing each other. Claudio was worried, and saddened, but they weren't sure why exactly Nila had started being so still, so inactive. She didn't seem to be ill or anything, but Claudio prepared most of her meals, most of them she didn't

eat or she ate very little of. She was always in a pleasant mood whenever she did talk, but she didn't talk quite so much anymore. She would occasionally be on the phone to her children and grandchildren around the world, and always be cheerful and reassuring with them.

Claudio didn't talk to Sebastian a lot, though he was always very courteous when he did. When Claudio was worried or preoccupied, he became colder and more aloof.

&&

Having the whole house almost to myself was eerie, and yet cool at the same time. I felt strange movements and passages, whiffs of air, idly turning every corner. I checked every room for windows that had been left open.

I constantly had the feeling that someone was watching me, or that someone would be just around the corner. The small corridor at the end of the house where I saw Dean and Sarah being so alive and passionate just a few years ago I didn't even dare go near, for some reason I couldn't explain.

Nila started to spend more time in the greenhouse, occasionally reaching out to touch a plant, or just staring out into the forest beyond.

Claudio would often come and sit by her, hold her hand. They would sit in silence and when it was time he would help her back to bed. She didn't struggle to walk or anything, she was just... slower, somehow. And distracted, he seemed to need to guide her.

He started getting up earlier than she, and that was unusual. I would therefore often have breakfast with him, mostly in silence or commenting on whatever had been happening in town.

Occasionally Jurich or the lady at the coffee shop would pop up with some excuse, I knew it was an excuse as sometimes they'd come and Claudio would let them in and they would say nothing, they would just glance around towards Nila and pretend to do something, to talk about something, but they were mainly there to see Nila, who responded less and less to their queries.

Once Jurich helped Claudio take all the blue things that were scattered round the house to the Greenhouse, and had made Nila quite a comfortable bed/armchair in the rattan chaise longue. Her blue things all around her, or within view. As he came out of the greenhouse, I had the chance to finally ask him about the blue things.

“Nila just loves that blue. She loves having it around, it makes her happy, and peaceful. She makes this house, really, you must have noticed.”

“Yes, I have, she is the force behind this house”

Claudio nodded.

“She says everything is about a give and take, and those who can give give and those who can't, pay, and all that. But she says if she's to have people coming and going and taking her energy, which she is very happy to give, she must have her own energy boosts. Her blue things give her that, she says: every time she looks at one of those blue things she feels she is breathing in fresh air, she once told me. She is drinking pure liquid energy.”

He seemed to be getting choked up, though I knew Claudio wasn't one to want to show it. He rubbed his nose and left, and I finished his sentence for him in my mind.

So, I thought, he is putting all the blue things around her hoping she will derive enough energy from them to keep her going because Nila is letting go.

One day over a dinner where Nila refused to come away from the greenhouse to eat and just lay there, barely touching the soup that Claudio brought her, and had instead patted the floor as if to say “just sit by me”, Claudio excused himself from Nila and came to find me and told me “the time has come to tell people to return”.

I knew he wasn't expecting me to do anything, but I also knew he was somehow telling me something had changed, and Nila was dying.

&&

The thought struck me more violently than I would have expected. She wasn't ill, there was nothing wrong with her that I could see. She seemed to be happy, and she seemed to have no pain. But it was true, she was letting go, it was almost as though her love for Claudio was there, present, palpable, but falling in the background. In the foreground, was her preoccupation with the world outside, almost as though she were trying to will herself out into the woods with the wolf again, the wolf who was outside more often than not, watching her, watching the house, just padding along the edge of the forest, sometimes howling... was he waiting? There was an especially bright aurora that night, as Claudio wrote an email to those who had it and a telegram to the others, then he went back to sit with her and watch the aurora above them.

&&

They all came back, all of them whom I'd met, and some I hadn't. They all came back, and when they all came back, once they were

all back and just talking to her as though nothing was happening, some sitting by her for a while, in silence, taking her hand, just in silence, or talking, and when they were all back, her children, her grandchildren, her friends, her relatives, their children and grandchildren, all her friends that were living, and if I could be so allowed to say, even those who were no longer alive, as Nila seemed to be smiling at people and animals who weren't there for me to see, most of them had started to be around the house even earlier than the living that had returned, they all came back and on the day of October 15th, she gently passed.

17

Chapter 17

They all had come.

The funeral was held as usual in the clearing in the woods. The feeling of sadness was huge, and Daniel played the piano from the house, so that it pervaded the air, all the way through to the setting of the fire and the body of what used to be you going up into the air in ash. Then they all returned to the house.

You were definitely gone.

The house was quiet, and everybody spoke in hushed tones. People spoke to other people very briefly, mostly for practical matters: who was staying at the house, who was going to the nearby hotel, who was going to the town, and then gradually they all scattered.

All the visitors went within a few days, the ones who remained were those who had lived in the house, and they sat around Claudio one day, so they could decide what to do with the house, and what to do with the objects.

Your son Jared and Sebastian stayed behind. Jared was one of the heirs along with Daniel and Francesca, as you had decided with Claudio upon purchasing this place, and they were to decide

what to do with it. They all agreed, even Francesca, who had been doing her own thing for many, many years, that it should be up to Claudio: if he wanted to stay there, he was of course entitled to stay and so was everyone else. Everyone agreed to stay, though nobody was really into talking. The only thing to do was to do nothing, right now, and nothing was done.

Everything stayed the way it was, Francesca, Daniel and Jared and Sebastian prepared to leave, Claudio and the others returned to their daily things. Sebastian told his dad he would stay behind and re-join him a little later. Jared said he could stay for as long as he wanted, he was almost a legal adult now.

Everyone left except for the Wolf, who had refused to leave with Mr Korimara. Mr Korimara didn't even attempt to dissuade him, he had too much respect for the creature to try.

The Wolf padded slowly outside the House. He would occasionally stop, and howl miserably, as though the sadness in the air weren't enough.

He would go hunting, then return, as though he were waiting for someone. He would sit outside, just outside the border of the forest, and wait.

The sculpture of the girl lying down seemed to weep in the rain, the tears seemed to come out of her eyes.

The greenhouse was crying, and the rain drenched every bit of it. It was perfectly dry inside though, Ray had done an amazing job.

Rosy the knitting lady had knitted a wall hanging, on it, it said: "House keep thyself safe, shelter thy truest soul"

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Claudio was unrecognisable. His face constantly darkened, he spoke as little as he could. Not a smile could be pried from him.

Sebastian felt bewildered, and lost. He never realised just how much she had been the true centre, the focus, the core of this whole house.

Katharine and Deirdre went to visit friends and family, but Peter and Tony had stayed, unsure what to do as well.

They also were lost.

Nila had clearly been a guiding star for them for longer than Sebastian could imagine, they weren't sure where to turn to now, they weren't sure where to look.

After a while, he packed his bags, and went back to California. There was nothing left for him to do.

18

Chapter 18

Five years passed before I returned to Europe.

I had enrolled in University early and finished my degree and then immediately started working, as is the custom in America where youth is still your greatest asset.

I tried to stay in touch with the people at the House as much as I could but received no answers, my dad would occasionally tell me “they are probably trying to get back to normality, don’t worry about it”.

So much time passed with no contact that it just stayed there, at the back of my mind, and I waited for the chance to go see what happened.

One day, cheerfully and happily inviting a friend of mine to come with me, we packed our bags and headed out to Oslo. We took the bus out to the house, and stopped at Jurich’s on the way. I was sure he’d be made up to see me.

He wasn’t. He wasn’t even there. There was the workshop with the brilliant flood prevention structure that Ray had built for him, but it wasn’t Jurich inside, it was a young woman with an apron and a nice smile. She said Jurich moved out, let me

think, about a year ago at least. She took over the shop, and she hadn't seen him since. She had heard rumours that he might have moved to Thailand.

I was a little disappointed, I had been telling my friend Jonathan all about Jurich and he was eager to meet him (or at least I thought so), but oh well, I thought, - "wait till you see the house" - I said.

We walked the remainder of the way, and I was drinking in all the air, and showing him how beautiful the mountains looked, and showing him when we came round that bend where the sun would go down, and what a spectacular effect it caused, usually at sunset, especially for those days it went down exactly between the two peaks. Sometimes, I told Jonathan, sometimes the mountain would light up and the whole of it would seem to be burning, like it was on fire.

One day Dean had come running happily into the house to tell us all to come outside, that the mountain is on fire! I couldn't stop talking, as we walked. Jonathan looked at me throughout the journey, all smiley and listening avidly (or so I hoped).

I finally went quiet for a bit, my friend Jonathan kept respectfully quiet, perhaps a little overwhelmed by my monologue, and we walked on in silence for a while.

We came to the dirt road (or rather grass road) that took from the tarmac road to the House. We waded through the grass and started the turns towards the House while I reminisced about that time when Deirdre had cracked everybody up, one day when she was tackling the sharp turn on her bike and had fallen sprawled on the ground and everybody held their breath but then she started to laugh, laugh herself silly, and we all laughed with her and that was the happiest I'd seen Deirdre for as long as I could remember.

Then we turned the corner. That was the corner where the house suddenly stood over there on the plateau, animals around it, the dome on top. But today... there was nothing. Nothing at all. Not the walls, not any debris, not bricks or even upset grass. There was nothing, nothing in the least.

It was like the grass lay undisturbed, and there had never ever been anything there. It was like it was all a dream, and I made it up, and I had been telling lies, tall stories... it was all gone.

Jonathan looked at me. He looked towards the plateau of grass, and towards me. "Are we near yet, Sebastian? Cause I'm starting to get kind of tired, you know?"

He grinned, trying to make light of the heavy air he could tell I was breathing, but not knowing why I was as stunned, as petrified, as I was.

"There is nothing left. It's all gone!"

"What? What do you mean Sebastian? What was supposed to be here?"

"The house! The House of Blue! This is where it was!"

I walked towards the ghost of the House of Blue, it was so clear in my head and in my eyes I almost believed it was actually still there, that I had had a moment's hallucination. I walked to the spot where the centre of the house would have been. Where the barn and the living area had been, it had been dug out, I supposed, and then filled in with earth, so long ago that the grass had had the time to settle quite nicely. I dropped to my knees, completely disbelieving.

"The House was here? It seems like nothing was ever built here, ever!"

I looked around, I felt around. There were ghosts here, I could feel them, though not identify them. Linda was the one I felt the strongest, as though she were there sitting next to me. Waiting.

Waiting for what?

I sat in silence. Jonathan sat in silence too.

After a while he must have resolved that I hadn't been bullshitting him, that there had been a house there, a house filled with loads of people, some who stayed permanently, some semi, and some that came and went. Some people who came for just the once and some people who came on a regular basis. People that had laughed and cried and built and created and loved and... where were they? Where had the house gone?

As I slowly turned around, and was vaguely aware of Jonathan sitting next to me quietly, quietly taking out some rest of a sandwich, and eating it, and drinking some water, I turned towards the woods and saw the outline of a dog... or was it.. a wolf? By the way I felt its stare, I was sure it was a wolf. It must have been Mr Korimara's wolf. How had he not left yet? I slowly got up and made my way very slowly towards him. I was vaguely aware of Jonathan, who decided to remain seated and let me look around. I don't suppose he'd seen the wolf himself or he might have been a little alarmed.

I slowly progressed towards the wolf; the wolf looked at me, and didn't budge. When I was almost at the edge of the forest, he started away, but stopped after a few paces and looked at me. Did he want me to follow him? I went up the path, enough to realise there was still a path there, as though it were still used. I guessed holiday makers still came up to this beautiful patch for hikes and stuff. And maybe hunters, or just hikers of all sorts.

I walked up the path and carried on, and on. Past the plateau where all our funerals had been held, and went further. I had always been lazy, so I'd never ventured past that funeral plateau. The ghosts present on that plateau were almost tangible, almost visible, but at the same time not threatening at all, the area felt

serene and fine, as though all was fine, all was well.

I followed the wolf through the woods. There were other plateaus, and the vegetation was lush, but not impassable. It was pleasant, and peaceful, and we carried on climbing higher.

We reached a plateau, a large one, and carried on walking along the heights. The breeze was crisp and the view below was breath-taking.

After an hour's walk at least we arrived at a sheltered place under the rocks. The wolf went right under the rocks and then stepped to the side and sat down. I thought it funny how a wolf would suggest we rested, but felt appreciative.

I was about to sit down, but then saw that there was a naturally concealed entrance, and through it, the shelter opened up into a large cavern, one that was completely sheltered from the wind and felt warm, welcoming. I looked around and saw that somehow it wasn't dark at all, as holes above permitted the light to shine in. As my eyes adjusted, I saw that the rocks were white/yellowy, indeed very warm. What a wonderful place, I thought. But then I saw them: all the objects, all the blue objects that had been given to Nila throughout the years, they were there, every single one of them - and I took my time looking around - they were all there.

They were all placed around the cave in a wonderful array. There were a couple of chairs as well, mostly the rattan ones, and the blue and rattan chairs as well, and the ones with the knitting.

I sat in one of them, and fell asleep.

I woke up with the feeling of being surrounded. When I opened my eyes there was nobody in my immediate vicinity, but I could see shapes moving among the objects. Evanescent shapes that

reminded me of people I knew. I could see Jane over there, and Juno! and Linda, and Travis. I also saw other people I didn't know, and then I saw her, Nila, smiling and seemingly chatting, though I could not hear her voice. She was chatting away with Linda, they were both laughing. Juno and Jane were also smiling and talking to each other. Travis, I realised, though somehow I recognised him, was not the way I'd seen him last, he was skinny, and with medium length hair, and looked good! Think of it, Linda and Nila were younger too, they looked healthy and no later than their 30s. They were all evanescent, a little blurry, but I could see them perfectly. I wanted to get up and talk to them, but I found I couldn't. It wasn't a bad feeling though, so I sat relaxed, stayed in my laid back position, and continued to watch the scene before me. There were even some cats and some dogs, and lots of people I had never met before. It was all fascinating, and there seemed to be the sound of water running too...

I must have fallen asleep again, and when I awoke this time there was someone shaking me, I opened my eyes and it was Claudio. It was a bit of a shock seeing him, he had aged at least 10 years, and looked frail and weak.

He still had a serious face, and he said to me "why are you here?"

"Hi Granddad?!"

"Yes, yes hi. Why are you here?"

"Um, the wolf led me here, I found this place, it is incredible, and just earlier, I swear, I was sitting in this chair and I saw lots of movement, people moving around, laughing, chatting... where have they gone?"

"You saw them huh?"

He sighed, and grabbed a chair, and sat down weary from the walk, and from life, it seemed to me. He sat down beside me.

“So, how are things in San Francisco?”

“Pretty good actually...oh!

“What?”

“I just realised that I left a friend of mine down... by the way where did the house go???”

“I saw your friend, told him you were likely to be there for a while, so I gave him directions to the hotel down the road. He’ll wait for you there, don’t worry about him. The house. Well, the house is gone.”

“No shit!”

“Don’t you be sarcastic with me, young man, not with your American accent. It doesn’t suit you.”

“What, the American accent?”

“Sarcasm.”

“Ah. But hell, Granddad, there isn’t a pebble left of the house, what happened to it?!”

“It got bulldozed, and all the debris carried away.”

“I figured as much, but WHY? It was an incredible house. Does my dad know about it?”

Claudio sighed.

“All right. It wasn’t completely bulldozed. Some of the best furniture, the glass dome and the greenhouse, everything, was taken to a house in Spain. Then the walls of this one were torn down and bulldozed.”

I noticed then he had a picnic basket of sorts. He took out two beers and offered me one, which I took with relish, then he took out two sandwiches and offered me one.

We ate in silence for a bit.

“Sarah’s got it”.

“Ah.”

“She’s there, with Dean. They are running a new house. It’s called the House of Red.”

“Right.”

“They are sort of together, sort of not, it’s difficult to know. They are still best friends. They have new people with them, their own friends, people I don’t know.”

“I see.”

“Peter and Deirdre live in England now, they own a brewery.”

“Right. Yes, that’s good. I remember they liked their beer.”

“That’s right. Katharine has left, gone to spend her pensioner’s years between the south coast of France and Paris. She and Tony are still friends, I hear.

“Tony moved to Japan, I think he has a younger wife there, and he has a small house in a small town, where he teaches photography to kids. He learnt enough Japanese to get by before he set off, and teaches in English, so that the kids are fluent at least technically in the language they will be travelling and working with.”

“Granddad, I thought I saw Jane in the cavern too.”

He sighed.

“Yes, Jane also died. She died quietly, unobtrusively. It was a couple of years after her return from Cyprus. The doctor said it was just her heart that let go.

“Victoria moved back to England, where she bought a bookstore with her new husband, Hans, and lives between England and a nice little town in Tuscany. Our old friends Jeremy and David are also down there, running their B&B and doing pretty well, I hear.”

“Right.”

“So, pretty much everyone is happy then?”

“I guess, yes, all very happy.”

“And you? What are you doing?”

“I am waiting to rejoin Nila.”

He looked wistfully into the cavern. I could see nothing now.

“I see. And while you wait, how are you living?”

“I have a little studio in the town just at the bottom of the road, and a one bedroom flat, that suits me fine. I still do work on commission, play video-games... They bring me pizza. Francesca and her family own the flat next door, and often come and spend the summer with me.”

He was still staring into the cavern, seeing nothing, I guessed.

“Who brings you pizza granddad?”

“Oh, the kids, the young kids at the college, and other people too. I have plenty of town people looking after me, you don’t need to worry.”

He smiled, patted my leg, and then got up and stretched.

“So, who brought all of these here, did you, the other... when?”

“I’ll see you later Sebastian. Be sure to pop in for a coffee before you go back to San Francisco”.

And he went out of the cave.

I remained seated and a little baffled.

I remained for a while, and just felt the warmth envelop me. I fell asleep again. When I awoke, I saw Nila, kneeling in front of me and leaning on my knee. I could just open my eyes and see her but not move. She was smiling, and caressed my cheek. Then she motioned with her hand towards her right, and I could barely make out, given my leaning head position that I couldn’t move, the statue that Joseph and I had sculpted. She rose, and with both arms outstretched towards the statue gestured “this is for you, it’s yours, take it”.

I frowned and started to wonder how the hell they had gotten

that up there among the paths and all, and for that matter how did it appear from wherever it must have been in the cave and materialise next to me?

And then I fell asleep again.

When I woke up the next time the statue was still there, I could tell from the silence and the cold that it was dark outside. I lay down close to it on a mat that I found lying around (it had beautiful blue embroidery, I saw in the morning), spooned the statue and continued to sleep until morning.

Chapter 19

I was in my thirties when I got officially invited over to the House of Red.

It was a beautiful large white house in the South of Spain, with two large courtyards absolutely chock-full with plants, azulejos, and apartments and rooms all around it, as well as a huge kitchen and a couple of smaller ones, and one room that served as a library. There was a stunning Turkish bath (this was all tiled in blue and green, with coral red and orange pebbles at the bottom. It was apparently a place where Sarah felt Nila's presence when she "came to visit").

All Nila's and Claudio's grandchildren were invited at the same time, I soon found out, and we soon shared stories.

I told them how I had gotten a removal company to come and get the statue and relocate it to my home in San Francisco, where I eventually became a sculptor myself. Joseph had come to visit me on various occasions and helped me set up, always accompanied by his friend and partner Aiyana.

It was a joyful gathering, Dean and Sarah looked happy as bees, and they told us all their permanent guests had gone off

on holiday so that they could accommodate us and any of our relatives or close friends who wanted to come. Francesca, Daniel and my dad were all there. So was Claudio's sister and her kids and grandchildren and her husband.

We spent the day chatting and drinking ice cold beers on the patio, and then in the evening we all moved out to the large dome, made out of wood and bamboo, that was outside. Its sides were open so that the coolness could come in, and we had a big fire in the centre that was lit and we all sat around it. A local friend of theirs came over with his wife and a guitar, she dressed in her fabulous flamenco attire, and they played and danced and we danced too and we had a wonderful time.

We drank rivers of sangria and cocktails of ginger and honey. Sarah said Nila had learnt the magical recipe from an American acquaintance, a while back, and when the guests left we sat around the fire some more.

Sarah nodded to Dean who went inside and came back with a chest, all carved wood. The scent of incense and spices was strong when he opened it.

In it were various letters, USB keys, and what were probably diaries, of all colours, materials and conditions of wear.

Sarah read a letter she took out. It said

“Hello you all, you kids, you the future.

“I feel my time to re-join my beloved Nila will come soon, so I thought it best to arrange for you to have this before it's too late.

“This chest contains the most precious thing of all. More precious than the house we dismantled, than all the Blue Bits in the Blue Cavern, more precious than any jewellery or gold or money you ever had. This chest contains all of Nila's thoughts, and dreams, angers, and worries, and questions, and answers,

and her friends' letters. Please treasure it as your most treasured possession. Please also find one of the last letters that Nila wrote, which I didn't even know about until I opened her chest, quite a while after her death, and found it, addressed to me.

Hopefully by the time you read this I will have gone to re-join my beloved Nila. I miss her so much it just pains me to draw another breath. Be happy for me. Live your life, enjoy it as much as you can, please, do it for us. We will come and visit you as much as we can, and we'll always be happy to know you're happy.

Claudio.”

We were all hushed, as Sarah took out another letter, and began to read.

“Dear Claudio, please hand this down to our children, and to their children, until they write a new one themselves, then hopefully mine won't be needed anymore. I love you so much and I look forward to meeting you when it's your time as well, but please, be happy in the meantime. Find something or even someone to give you comfort, to keep you warm and happy, to be stupid with, to make stupid jokes with. Please be happy, do it for me, don't rush to meet me.

“Children, and children's children, some of you I am sure I've met, some of you perhaps not! I hope you are healthy, and if not, that you have the love of someone dear to help you go through life as best you can, with any disabilities or challenges life has provided you with, striving always to be as happy as you can possibly be, and without ever ever losing the will to make your life even just a little bit better, every time, every day. Fight to be happy.

Be whatever your heart desires.

Try not to harm anyone, emotionally or physically.

Help others when you can.”

Nobody said anything for a long time.

Chapter 20

Many years have passed. Jonathan and I have returned to the House of Red, to see my cousin Sarah and Dean. They have had three children in the meantime, though nobody says whether they are together or not. I believe there never were two people who were more together than those two, but what the hell. Jonathan and I have adopted two children, they are called Mica and Lewis, and we adore them. It turned out my predilection for women was not as defined as I once thought. The first time I felt that incredible rush of passion and desire when I saw Dean, that was it, the telling moment. Dean and Sarah, but Dean. It doesn't matter now. We all know by now that we can be turned on by so many different varieties of people and genders, and it really doesn't matter anymore. Before Jonathan, I had a very intense relationship with a woman, with whom I am still friends, but I soon realised that the one I couldn't be without was Jonathan. It didn't take long to realise the same for him so we got together, and then decided to start a family. Daniel was a superstar of science by then, and my dad was the director of the New York theatre, as well as an acclaimed cinema director.

My aunt Francesca had finally forgiven my grandma for forcing her to choose between staying in continental Europe where she studied and worked as the International Human rights lawyer that has changed the world for so many of us, and staying with her, the mother she loved so much. They had been in touch constantly via letters and visits, mostly from my grandma to her, and re-reading it all in the end Francesca realised that by her staying and Nila's going, they were fulfilling their wildest dreams, and neither could have done so by choosing to spend any more time close together. Francesca spent a lot of time visiting her dad Claudio in Norway and brought him a lot of joy every time she visited with her two little kiddies, often looked after by her aunt and Claudio's sister Fabiana, when Francesca was called away for some big case that just couldn't do without her presence. Nila's siblings also often visited Claudio at first, then it started becoming a little difficult for them too, as they became older and more clogged down with their own families and children and grandchildren. When we arrived it was just us four, but the next day, when I awoke, there was an excitement in the air, and we were told to come to breakfast under the egg, come to breakfast under the egg! (The egg was the name given to that big wood and bamboo dome). So we did, and we discovered that the House of Red was full of people! There were people, children, various dogs and the occasional resident donkey, even, everywhere. There were lots of people I knew, relatives and friends of Sarah and Dean's, and lots I didn't but could recognise as being local people of the town and perhaps nearby. There was a long long table set up in the middle, filled with pineapples and various fruits and breads and brioches and various juices and Spumante and Portuguese pink bubbly in a crazy opulence of delicious things, and behind the table, stood a very big man

with a huge and well looked after white-grey beard grinning mischievously. He lifted his arms into the air and boomed “Are Sarah and Dean in the house?”

From one side arrived Sarah, beautiful in a fluttery white summer’s dress, and on the other arrived Dean, handsome as always with an open shirt and short trousers (it does get hot in the South of Spain) and they both arrived saying “Yes!” and they each lifted one arm up to grab one of the Mayor’s (I guessed he was, he certainly looked the part!).

The Mayor continued:

“Great! Can you all see them here with me?”

And everyone shouted happily:

“Yes!”

“Sarah and Dean promise today that they will love each other, support each other and cherish each other for always and always, until their death. Is that right Sarah and Dean?”

“Yes!” They both shouted together.

“Is everyone OK with that?”

“Yes!” all of us shouted, giddy by now.

“Sarah and Dean have chosen to exchange a ring as a symbol of this promise, to remind them of it, and to show everyone they are together. Can I have these rings please?”

Two friends of theirs arrived from either side and gave them a ring.

They put it on each other’s ring finger and smiled.

The Mayor said:

“Let this be known by all, that Sarah and Dean promise to love each other and do everything they can to help each other be happy, and strive to never make the other one unhappy, and help each other make this world a better place by their living in it and through their actions.

“Let it be known by all, and forgotten by none. Sarah and Dean, with this promise you made, and before these witnesses, and acting as an official recorder of this momentous decision, I declare you Husband and Wife! Let us all celebrate this joyous promise!”

And we did.

We all clapped and cheered, they kissed and kissed, then we all went over there and hugged them, then we followed them running into the creek by the garden, whilst the most elderly among us (many of them ex inhabitants of the House of Blue) happily stayed under the shelter of the Egg. As I dashed out of the water and cleared my eyes, I was sure I saw among them, the smiling shadows of Nila and all the others, dancing and weaving and laughing among the others.

It was a good day.

About the Author

Valentina Sarno was born in Rome in 1971 and spent her childhood moving across four continents, from New Zealand to Venezuela, Peru, the Philippines and back to Italy, arriving for good at twelve into a country she had to learn to belong to all over again. She has lived in many places since, including London and Spain, and has called Salento, in the south of Italy, home since 2017. She has worked as a translator and in various other lives. *The House of Blue* is her first published novel. She is currently working on a memoir.