

WOLF

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BANTAM PRESS

LONDON • TORONTO • SYDNEY • AUCKLAND • JOHANNESBURG

Part One

Picking Elderflowers in the Evening, Near Litton, Somerset

AMY IS FIVE years old and in all of those five years she's never seen Mummy acting like this before. Mummy's in front of her on the grass, standing in a weird way, as if she's been frozen by one of those ice guns what the man in *The Incredibles* have got in his hand most of the time. She's on one leg, with one arm out, like she's been running and got told to stop and stay still as a statue. Her mouth is open too and her face is white. It would be really funny if her eyes weren't all opened up and weird, the way her face goes when she's looking at something scary on the television. Behind her is a line of fluffy white clouds in the sky – like on *The Simpsons* – except the sky's a bit darker, because it's nearly night-time.

'Amy?' After a while Mum puts her foot down. Stops balancing on it. She does this funny little sideways dance like a puppet what's about to fall over, and when she gets her balance again her face changes. 'AMY?'

She starts running and as she runs she's screaming, 'Brian!?! Brian, I've found her. *Brian?* Come NOW. I've found her. Over here in the trees.'

Before Amy can say anything Mum has grabbed her up. She's still screaming out to Dad, 'Brian Brian *Brian*,' and she's hugging Amy the way she hugged her that day she was about to go into the road and almost got squished by a bus, which Mum says is the most scary thing what ever happened to her, but Amy didn't think

was even *half* as scary as the Puzzler man off of *Numberjacks* on CBeebies.

‘Where’ve you *been?*’ Mum puts her back down on the ground with a bump. She squats and runs her hands up and down her arms and legs, straightening her blue dress and pushing her hair out of her face. Staring at her, all worried. ‘Amy? *Amy*, are you all right? Are you all right, darling?’

‘I’m all right, Mummy. Why?’

‘Why?’ Mum shakes her head, like the times when Dad says something really stupid. ‘*Why?* Oh baby, baby, baby. My baby.’ She closes her eyes, drops her head against Amy’s chest and squeezes her. It’s a really hard hug and Amy can feel her insides squishing up, but she doesn’t want to squiggle away coz it might upset Mum.

‘Amy!’ Dad comes running along the path. The field is very big and very green and sloping and all the people from the cars that were parked here before have got out and they’re all standing staring at her. ‘AMY?’ Dad’s not carrying the container they were putting their flowers into any longer, instead he’s got his phone in his hand. He’s taken off his nice jumper and his shirt’s all wet and yucky under the armpits. Mum says that’s where he leaks when he runs too fast so he must of been running for a long time. His face is just like Mum’s, all white and scared, and Amy wants to laugh a bit, coz they do look funny both of them, all white like Halloween masks, except it’s hard to tell if Dad’s really cross or really sad.

‘Where were you? Where have you *been?*’ His voice is really shouty. ‘How many times have I told you not to go out of our sight?’ He turns and yells at the people over at the cars. ‘We’ve found her. We’ve found her.’ Then he turns back to Amy. He’s cross, definitely cross – you can tell by how squinty his eyes have gone. ‘You’ve been ages, you’ve made your mother *cry* now. This is the last time we pick elderflowers. The *last* time.’

‘Brian, be quiet. She’s all right, that’s the main thing.’

‘Is she?’ He puts a hand on Mum’s shoulder and moves her out of the way so he can bend and look into Amy’s face. His eyes go

up and down and side to side, taking in every inch. ‘Are you all right? Amy? Where’ve you been? Have you spoken to anyone?’

She bites her lip. Her head feels all nasty and hot and there are some tears in her eyes that fall out of under her eyelids and go running down her cheeks.

‘Amy?’ Dad shakes her arm. ‘Did you speak to anyone?’

‘Only the man. That’s all.’

Dad goes all funny when she says this. Suddenly his hands aren’t nice any more but are like bird’s claws, digging into Amy’s arms. ‘The *man*?’

‘Yes.’

Mum’s mouth starts quivering. The black make-up stuff on her eyes has gone runny and it’s all trickling down her face. ‘I told you we shouldn’t be out here at this time of day, Brian, this is when they all come out – all of them. And we’re not far from the Donkey Pitch. Remember? The Donkey Pitch?’

‘What *man*?’ Dad says. ‘Amy, tell me in the most grown-up way you can, because this is serious. What man?’

She turns towards the woods, lifting her hand to point. But as she does she sees that he’s gone – the man who likes dogs. He’s gone away. And he must of taken the puppy, coz that’s gone too.

‘He was really cute.’

‘Cute?’ Mum says. ‘*Cute*?’

‘The puppy was called Bear.’

‘The puppy?’

‘Oh, for God’s sake!’ Dad rubs hard at his forehead. ‘There’s always a puppy. Always a shagging puppy.’

‘Brian, *please*.’

‘It’s the oldest trick in the book: *I’ve got a poorly puppy – come into the woods and I’ll show you*. We’re taking her to the police. She needs an examination.’

Amy frowns. The man in the woods didn’t say that the puppy was poorly, and he didn’t ask her to come into the woods to look at it. She was the one what found the puppy, before she met the man.

‘I don’t want no exam, Mum – I don’t want one of them.’

‘See, Brian, you’ve scared her. Now, Amy . . .’ Mum sits down on the grass. She pats her leg. ‘Come here, sweetie. Sit down.’

Amy sits on Mum’s lap. She wipes her nose with her hand. Sniffs up the rest of the snot, which is yucky. She wishes Dad wasn’t cross – she doesn’t understand why he’s cross, coz the man wasn’t horrid. He looked a bit funny, with a big hairy beard like a goblin, or like a Santa Claus in reverse, because his beard was black, but he spoke to her very *very* nice and made her a promise, a proper pinkie-promise which everyone in the world knows is the most proper. And another thing is that he called her Crocus, which was the bit she liked the best – when he said she was as pretty as a crocus. Because crocuses are really pretty and they’re sometimes purple and sometimes yellow and sometimes both. Miss Redhill at school says they’re the second flower of spring after the snowdrops have died and gone back into the ground.

‘Amy,’ Mum asks. ‘This man . . . was he nice to you?’

‘Yes. And he was nice to the puppy.’

‘Was it his puppy?’

‘No.’

‘Then whose puppy was it?’

‘I don’t know.’ She puts her finger in her nose and picks it thoughtfully. She thinks that maybe the puppy wasn’t a puppy for real but a grown-up dog – sometimes a big dog can be little if it’s a puppy and sometimes an old dog can be smaller than a puppy, even though it’s really lots older. It’s all about something called ‘breeds’ what can be small or big. ‘He came after I found the puppy. I just said that, didn’t I?’

Dad straightens up. ‘Come on. Show me where you found this puppy.’

Mum lets Amy jump off her lap. She holds her hand as they walk into the trees. It’s a bit more spooky in the wood coz it’s dark in here now. But she can see Dad’s white shirt, and Mum does that thing as they go, with her hand, where she squeezes Amy’s thumb to let her know everything’s OK. Amy squeezes her hand in return.

Amy takes Mum and Dad to the place she met the puppy. It's getting really night-time now and the trees are all silent and dark. No puppy. The man made a promise to take the puppy somewhere safe.

'I was here,' she says. 'And I was putting the flowers in the . . . There it is!' She sees the Tupperware container. She goes and picks it up and turns round to show Mum and Dad all the flowers inside. Which are the best flowers without none of them worms like the ones Dad found earlier.

'I was only getting the flowers off of here and I was getting the flowers and this puppy comes up and he's got a poorly paw.'

'A poorly paw?' Dad looks at Mum with his eyebrows all arched.

'Yes, with blood and stuff. And the person of it wasn't there and the man didn't know who the grown-up of the puppy was neither, so I was going oh puppy puppy and I was going to bring it back to you, Daddy, because if it didn't have a nowner, it needed to be—'

'*An owner*,' Mum says.

'An owner,' Amy repeats. 'And if it didn't have *an owner* then it needed one and I thought that it could of lived at our house, under the cooker – coz there's that place that gets really warm, and I don't mind giving it my pocket money, Mum, to buy it some milk.'

Mum wipes her eyes and laughs a little. Which is nice. She hasn't laughed at all since all of this happened.

'Amy . . .' She gives her a hug. More gentle this one. 'He didn't touch you, Amy, did he? Did he ask you to do anything you didn't like?'

Amy sucks her fingers for a while. They taste of grass and the stems off of the flowers. She wishes she could of kept the puppy.

'Amy? Did he ask you to do anything you didn't like?'

'No. *He didn't do nothing*. He was nice to me and he's going to help the puppy. Honest, Mum. Honest.'

Dad lets out his breath in a long sound like a balloon what's had a pin put in it. He shakes his head. He tucks the phone back

in his pocket and stands up and walks around a bit with his back to Amy and Mum, shouting into the woods.

‘Hello? Hello – do you want to come and have a chat with me? Any puppies you want to talk about, you fucker?’

There’s a long long silence. Then he comes back and it’s amazing coz Mum doesn’t say anything about the rude word he just said.

‘Come on, let’s go – you should have been in bed hours ago.’

Mum takes Amy’s hand and they follow Dad back to the van – Dad’s white van he drives for work. Amy uses her thumbnail to try to get rid of the green stains what’s got themselves all over the inside bits of her hands. The flowers here are supposed to be very puffy, which is why they’ve come here today, and you can make really really nice drinks out of them if you put in enough sugar, but that takes a grown-up because of the heat and how hot it gets. Hot enough to make your finger fall off if you put it into the saucepan. With blood and everything.

Amy’s teddy, Buttons, is on the front seat. She clambers in after Mum and snatches Buttons up, holding him to her face to get his fluffiness on her. When Dad turns the engine on with the keys, Amy moves the seat belt around so she can kneel up, put her nose to the window and look back at the woods. Mum doesn’t stop her.

Dad drives the van off of the grass and on to the road. It’s bumpy going along and Amy bounces around, but she doesn’t stop watching the trees. She wonders if the reverse Santa Claus man will find the puppy’s owners.

When the van gets further up the road and she can’t see the trees any more and can only see the road and the other cars and buildings whizzing past, she sits down and gets the seat belt more comfortable. She puts Buttons in her lap. He looks up at her with his nose what needs mending and his bad paw, just like the puppy.

‘Mummy,’ she says when they get to the place that’s at the end of their road, the place where someone has sprayed a picture of a Moshling on to the road sign. ‘Mummy, what word does it make if you put that “huh” letter Miss Redhill makes when she puffs on her hand—’

‘Aitch you mean?’ says Mum.

‘Yeah – what happens if you put aitch next to eggy “e” and lollipop “el” and the “puh” sound. You know, that letter you make when you blow out candles on your birthday cake? “Puh”?’

‘Aitch, ee, ell and peee?’ Mum says. ‘That spells “help”. Why?’
‘Help?’

‘Yes.’

‘And what about umbrella “uh”, and snakey “sssss”?’

‘You and esss? That spells “Us”. Help us.’ Mum looks down at Amy, a puzzled smile on her face. ‘Help us? Why? Why are you asking that?’

Amy bites her lip. Something was attached to the puppy-dog’s collar. A teeny-weeny piece of paper what had been written on in blue pen. It was all torn and the letters were all smudged and spread into big blue pools so you couldn’t read them properly. Except for those letters.

Help us.

‘Amy? Why’re you asking?’

Amy looks at the side of Dad’s head. If she mentions puppy-dog again, Dad’s going to start shouting. So she shakes her head.

‘Nothing,’ she says as they pull up outside the house. She wishes she had a little puppy-dog. And different parents. Parents what would not get cross when she told them things what are true. ‘Nuffink.’

Earlier that Day: the Pig Man

THE PIG MAN. That's how Oliver Anchor-Ferrers views himself. Like something lifted whole from the pages of a Victorian bestiary. Nine weeks ago the doctors in the Mayo Clinic in London gave him drugs to thin the blood. They opened his pericardium with stainless-steel rib retractors, connected multiple cannulas to his body and rerouted his blood to mechanical membrane oxygenators which carried out the job his heart should have been doing, delivering oxygen to his tissues and organs. His own heart the medics stopped by injecting a cardioplegic solution to induce paralysis. For almost an hour on the operating table Oliver was dead. Once they'd cut out the valves he'd had from birth and replaced them with valves from a specially bred pig, the surgeons closed the aorta and secured the sternum with steel wire. In spite of his appearance – that of a perfectly normal man in his sixties – the truth is that Oliver Anchor-Ferrers is being kept alive by a piece of foreign flesh flickering inside his heart. He's half man, half swine.

Valve replacement is a common enough procedure, an operation that's been in use for years – there must be several thousand pig men walking the planet, by his reckoning – but Oliver can't rest easy about it. Since the moment he woke in the ward he has been listening to his pulse, wondering how it is linked to his brain and whether the mechanical, ancient survival parts of his cerebellum have yet recognized the foreignness. Since the op he lies in bed at night listening to it thrum-thrumming in his chest.

He wonders what control he has over it. He wonders who is choosing to live – him or the pig.

Keep beating, he sometimes whispers under his breath, *pig-heart, keep beating . . .*

Oliver is sixty-four and he is worth several million pounds. England is his native country – he owns two properties here. His chief home, a Regency end-of-terrace, is in Knightsbridge. But it is in the second, where he is now, a rambling Victorian house set high on a hill in the Somerset Mendips, that he feels most at home. His favourite chair, scruffy and old and moulded to his skeleton, is in its usual place, next to the inglenook. He's been looking forward to this chair for what seems like ages. It's taken almost two months for the London doctors to give him the all-clear to come down here.

He stretches out his legs and settles back, gazing around in contentment. The fire isn't made, not now that it's summer, and there is a basket of dried flowers in the hearth to fill the space. But all the familiar hallmarks of a family visit are here. They left London at the crack of dawn and arrived late morning and it's a typical first day, passed in amiable chaos. Everywhere are dotted the groceries and bits and pieces that Matilda brings down from London: endless Waitrose bags and papery deli bundles and boxes of cereals and fruit juices. The only unwelcome addition is his pale pink medication tray on the windowsill.

Matilda comes hurrying in from the boot-room, all colour and fragrance. She is dressed in her blue-and-pink gardening apron – the one Kiran gave her years ago. She's tying a spotty-print tool pouch to her waist and Oliver notes that, as is her custom, she has wiped her face of London make-up. Instead of postbox-red lipstick and foundation her skin is bare and peach coloured. Her lips are their natural soft pink, like the inside of a fig. Matilda is sixty, and grey now, but her skin is as clear as a cloudless sky, and when Oliver looks at her the light still does the same strange dance around her that it has always done, from the moment they first met all those years ago.

'Sweetheart.' She stops and smiles at Oliver. It's a smile that

conveys everything: love and pity and a shared desperation that it's come to this – to heart surgery and medication in numbered boxes. 'Sweetheart, do you mind if I . . . ?'

She wants to go into the garden. It's less than half an hour since they've arrived and already she wants to be outside. In the twenty-eight years they've owned this house she has poured her heart into the flowers, shrubs and borders. He smiles. 'You must, darling. In fact, I think I can hear the plants calling you.'

'Are you sure you're all right?'

'Of course, of course, I am perfectly fine.'

Matilda finishes tying the belt and leans over him. She slides her hand into his shirt, presses the palm coolly across the scar on his chest.

'How's it feeling?'

'It's behaving.'

'Not grunting? Not squeaking or squealing? Doctor says I've got to listen out, especially for the squealing.'

He presses his fingers over hers and holds her hand tighter to his chest so she can feel the thud thud thud down there.

'Good.' She takes a moment to button up his shirt, smoothing it until she's satisfied. She kisses his head. 'Nurse Matilda's a bit of a dragon, so get ready for the regime. Drink your tea, pills in three hours. And that cake'll be ready in twenty minutes, so I'll be back.'

She leaves the room, rummaging in the tool belt for secateurs. He watches her straight back, her refined profile. No one would know how tender she is inside. Just like no one would look at him and think there were pig parts keeping him alive.

'You all right?'

He looks up. Lucia is sitting in the window seat, the kitchen table pulled up close, drawings and magazines and poems spread out everywhere. The sun is spilling in behind her, catching all the highlights in her spiky black hair. Her skin is white, and her eyes are outlined so many times with make-up they make deep smudged holes in her skull. She's studying him in her challenging way. Steady and dark. He and Matilda call it 'the Lucia look'.

Lucia might be nearly thirty, but she still behaves like a sullen teenager.

‘Yes. Why?’

‘Just . . .’ She puffs out a bored breath. Shrugs. ‘You know, just think I’ve got to ask. Be polite.’

She goes back to her work and Oliver watches her scribble and scratch her head, poring over her books, every few moments reaching automatically for one of the black grapes that sit in the bowl in front of her. Bear, their Border terrier, is asleep under the table, half draped across Lucia’s feet. Bear doesn’t look like a bear at all, more a small teddy with unevenly set ears that have to be cut differently to make them sit parallel. She is little but she runs like the wind and has to be tied up the first day they arrive here. She’s got a habit of making a bolt for it, heading for the forests, so she’s wearing her collar. The lead is under the leg of Lucia’s chair, Bear’s head is resting on Lucia’s boots – Doc Martens with pastel trolls’ faces covering them. Ridiculous children’s cartoons, all over her feet.

Oliver picks up his cup of tea and sips slowly. The familiar musty tartan blanket he loves so much is over his legs, there’s the smell of Matilda’s cake in the oven and he’s holding tea in the chipped mug she sometimes uses when she’s gardening. It’s got a cheesy photo of Kiran and Lucia on it, their arms around the old golden retriever they used to have when they were children. A year ago he wouldn’t have drunk from this mug, he’d have been embarrassed by its sentimentality.

‘Oliver.’

Matilda has reappeared in the doorway, secateurs still in her hand. Her expression is no longer calm – it is wary and alarmed. Immediately the pig valve flutters.

‘Yes?’ he says guardedly.

At the table Lucia lifts her chin and stares curiously at her mother. ‘Mum?’

‘Oliver,’ Matilda says, levelly, ignoring her daughter. ‘Have you got a moment? A chat?’

‘What sort of chat?’ Lucia says.

Matilda won't meet her daughter's eye. Instead she tips her head meaningfully at Oliver, suggesting they need to speak in private. With an effort he gets to his feet, ignoring the now familiar swoop of nausea that sudden movement brings. He clutches up the walking stick and crosses the room as fast as he can, feeling Lucia's eyes on him all the way. When he draws level with the pantry Matilda puts a finger to her mouth and touches his wrist, pulling him out of the kitchen.

'I'm so sorry,' she whispers. 'Sorry to do this to you. But you've got to see it. Or else I'll think I'm going mad. I'm so sorry.'

Silently beckoning him to follow, she steps out of the back door. He moves after her, conscious of the air wheezing in and out of his lungs. *Keep beating. Pig heart.*

Outside, the sun has almost reached its midday summit and is glaring down on the hilltop. Matilda puts a hand under his elbow to help him walk away from the house. They go slowly. In spite of its location, high up on the hill, surrounded on all four sides by sky, the garden feels more like a series of rooms than an open space. A path leads from walled garden to a walnut orchard, through a hedge into a formal knot garden, then through a gate to three descending parterres with crumbling, ornamented balustrade steps. One can wander through the areas in any imaginable sequence, from a paddock of grass that sways knee-high, studded in the summer months by meadow flowers, to the moss-covered stone walls of the kitchen garden where giant rhubarbs spring from the ground like fountains. It's a maze, a maze and a monument to Matilda's love. Her energy.

Every now and then the eye catches on a black spot. Like dots of fungus. Or a scatter of pathogens on a Petri dish. These are the places Lucia has sabotaged Matilda's colour scheme on the many occasions she comes back to live with them. She sneaks into the garden and secretly plants black tulips and blood-purple hellebores; her way of staking a claim on the property, making sure her mark is made. It drives Matilda mad and the moment Lucia leaves home again, the moment she appears, even

temporarily, to have got her life back on track, Matilda takes the opportunity to weed out the offenders.

At the bottom of the flights of steps the land drops away, leading to a series of small, half-sunken coppices; from afar they resemble a puckered string in the landscape. At the first coppice Matilda lets go of his arm and hurries on ahead. He follows at a short distance, using his stick for support. She stops about twenty yards away in a small clearing where a rake leans against one of the trees. Next to it is a trug, cast aside, as if Matilda has been interrupted in the middle of picking up leaves.

‘There.’ She turns to him. Her grey hair is pulled back from her face, her lips aren’t pink any more but white. The bottoms of her teeth where they meet the gums are visible. ‘There. See what I mean? Or am I going mad?’

His eyes track back to the silver birches beyond her. He sees what is there and for a moment has to lean against a tree for support. Every muscle begins to shake.

It can’t be. It just *cannot* be.