

Chapter One

Perhaps they were always there, the ghosts. Poppy had no way of knowing. Memories, leftovers, fragments. But very few facts, and until her fourteenth summer, not much imagination either. For a long time, like all young children whose lives seemed quite normal, Poppy made a lot of assumptions. The sun would rise next morning. The water in her shower would be too hot or too cold. And everything in her world, regardless of terrible things that went on outside it, would be more or less all right. Because she assumed that world of hers had always been all right, even before she was born into it.

She was ignoring the questions because she'd forgotten she couldn't answer them, in the same way that she forgot to ask why the grass was green and water had no colour at all. But then when she was eight, a question mark that had been hanging invisibly blackened up on paper. Her new topic at school was the Victorians, and her homework was to find out about her family tree. The teacher hoped that someone would be able to trace back as far as the nineteenth century. And that was when the first clue appeared from nowhere. But it was not so much a clue as a fuzzy sort of space where the truth should have been.

Poppy had always known she only had one set of grandparents, from her American mum, Anna Beth, but

because they lived in California Poppy only saw them once every couple of years. So she was used to a life without grannies, nans, gramps or pops in it, and she had more than enough brothers (three) to fill anyone's world, sometimes to bursting point. Because of all her American cousins, it took ages to work her way back to the generation before hers.

"But who was Daddy's mum?" she asked, her pencil pointing to the space on the tree above his name. David Golding looked very lonely, with no brothers or sisters alongside him and no parents above him.

No one answered at first so Poppy repeated the question, in a louder and more irresistible voice.

Her brother Nick, who was fourteen then, was staring at the computer screen as usual. It was how he did most of his studying, sometimes with moving images and music that didn't seem like work to Poppy. At last he looked up.

"Hasn't got one," he said.

Poppy knew that couldn't be right. Everybody had one, to begin with anyway.

"Has she died?"

"I suppose," said Nick, after rather a long pause and without looking away from the screen.

"No," said Ed, who was eleven, and drawing a football stadium even though Poppy didn't believe that was homework either. "Don't think so."

"Why?" asked Poppy.

"Children stop asking *why* all the time when they're about three or four," said Nick.

"Not eight," said Ed.

The two of them exchanged looks that weren't quite grins or laughs but meant the same thing. Poppy knew it was some kind of joke at her expense, even though she couldn't help being younger than them.

"See?" said Nick. "Even Tim's not asking why all the time."

Tim was five and building something from another planet.

"What?" he said, looking up, and when Nick and Ed exchanged looks again he repeated it, eyebrows up: "WHAT?"

But whatever the question, there were no answers on offer.

Poppy didn't give up, not at first. But when she asked her mother, she just said Dad didn't have a mum any more.

"Just a lovely auntie who brought him up ..."

"Lanky?"

"Yes, your Great Auntie Lanky."

Poppy liked her great aunt and the donkeys she looked after at the sanctuary. For a while, when she was very small, she'd thought this must be her gran, but a young, tough one.

"Did my real grandma die?"

When Poppy heard the question, it sounded different that time. It sounded bigger and shakier. Her mum looked away and stirred the pan busily. For a few moments the only sound was the crisping of the stir-fry and the fan above it.

"It's a long story, darling," she said, "and not a very happy one for Daddy."

Poppy knew what that meant. It meant it was a story nobody was going to tell her. When she explained about her homework, Mum said she'd fill in that bit for her later.

She didn't forget. Poppy saw her creep into the bedroom and slip the family tree into her book bag. She pretended to be asleep, but when Mum had gone she unfolded it and fetched her torch to see what she had written in the space.

Before Lanky, who was really Amelanchier Golding, there was a boy called Joe who only lived to be four. And then there was Sorrel. Sorrel Golding, David's mum and Poppy's grandmother.

Beside Sorrel's name, Anna Beth had written a b. for born, and a date with a question mark: 1945? She hadn't put a d. for died, or another date after it.

Poppy was in the top group for Maths. It was one of the reasons Nick and Ed called her Mini Boff. It was 2003 so the backwards calculation was easy. Her grandmother Sorrel was only fifty-eight, not nearly old enough to be dead.

Poppy hadn't quite finished with her Maths brain. Her dad, David Golding, had 1963 beside his name. So when he was born, Sorrel was only eighteen. She was a teenage mum.

And there was another question, because there was still a space. There was no m. for married beside Sorrel's name, as if Dad had no dad at all.

Three years later, when Tim had the same homework, it was Poppy's job to help him.

“Don’t ask Dad who his mum was,” she said. “He doesn’t like to talk about her.”

“Why?” he asked. “Who was his mum?”

“It’s a mystery,” said Poppy.

Of course that was a mistake because at that time Tim would only read books with mysteries to be solved, preferably with a sword or laser gun. He started trying to make up titles like *The Mystery of the Missing Gran*, and Nick and Ed joined in.

“How do you solve the mystery of the missing gran?” asked Nick. “Follow the trail of wool.”

“Or the grey hairs,” said Ed.

Nick scowled suddenly. “What about the mystery of the invisible dad?”

Ed screwed up his face like a mole in the spotlight.

“Who’s Dad?”

“Is he that moody guy who stops by now and then and is gone by breakfast?” said Nick.

Poppy told them they were being mean and stupid. It wasn’t her dad’s fault that his job took him away a lot and tired him out. She wasn’t surprised he got cross with them sometimes because they were very annoying, and always wanting new phones and computer games that cost a lot of money.

“You would say that,” said Nick.

“Yes,” said Ed. “You’re his favourite.”

Poppy knew she felt closer to him than they did, but that was partly because of the music. They both loved it. It was

her dad who really listened to her piano pieces and understood how hard it was, how disappointing and exhilarating, to learn and play and perform. She often wished he was a cuddlier sort of dad, but then she couldn't imagine Lanky doing a lot of that when he was small. She'd be more of a *Let's-climb-Kilimanjaro-before-lunch* kind of mother.

So Poppy decided her father was doing all right. He wasn't really that much of a grump or a misery guts, not for someone with blanks and question marks and mysteries where his mum and dad should be.

Poppy thought then that time was moving on, and Sorrel the teenage mum who had become her secret grandma was not so young any more. But she had never seen a picture of her, not even a black and white one, or heard anyone say her name out loud.

"Sorrel Golding," she said to herself, in a whisper, in the bath that night. "Don't get too old and die."

Poppy didn't want to lose the grandma she'd never had, not before she understood.

Chapter Two

The summer Poppy would soon be fourteen was different from the start. Her eldest brother, Nick, who had come back from university quite human, rather good-looking and fairly clean, had soon packed and gone away again. Poppy was very proud of him because he'd volunteered to help out in a school that needed rebuilding because it had been destroyed. Another war. There were lots of them and Poppy didn't want to get used to them on screen, grey and smoky and full of rubble and sirens, wrapped bodies and torn faces.

Sorrel Golding was born the year a war ended. World War Two, the big one. Poppy made the connection because it was almost the only fact she knew about her grandma. If Ed and Tim had known, they would have said she was becoming obsessed. Nick wouldn't, because he wasn't mean any more, but he wasn't around to listen to her new obsession. He had his own. He was on the other side of the world, and he didn't phone or email much, but he sent pictures on Facebook, and Ed brought them up on screen so everyone could see. Poppy found it weird because everything and everyone around him was unfamiliar, and even Nick looked altered. Mum said he'd come back changed and Tim said, "Like Clark Kent from the phone box!" but Poppy could see Mum wasn't talking underpants or glasses.

Poppy missed him quite a lot and thought how funny it was the way people changed – a kind of growing on the inside that nobody could track, even the person doing it.

Ed might start changing soon, with luck. He was sixteen and had just finished exams, which had left him in shock and mostly in bed. He rarely emerged, dazed and crumpled, before lunch. Then he needed recovery time online before he could manage a huge bowl of sugary cereal or two. Poppy thought that if she added up the words that stared at her from street signs, buses and shop windows in an average day it would be double the total Ed dredged up for her in a week.

And Tim was on some kind of training camp for people who were mad about sports, especially *high up* or *upside down* sports, the kind that required a safety helmet or a rope, rushing water or sheer drops down into nothing. Poppy had to admit that for someone so exhausting and annoying he was quite brave. Or, as Ed said, barking. And he did yap rather a lot at times, making about as much sense as a terrier.

Poppy didn't mind time on her own, and in any case had plenty of friends, but when Katie and Min both went away on holiday in the same week she remarked to her mum that she might as well be an only child.

"Are you bored, honey?" asked Anna Beth, looking up from her accounts.

"No," said Poppy. "I don't do bored."

Anna Beth smiled.

"No, you don't, do you?" she said. "You're like me that way. Inner resources."

Poppy nearly made some smart remark along the lines of her mother being rather more obviously *in a rush* or *in a muddle*. Still, inner resources sounded cool.

“Can I go and stay with Lanky?” she asked suddenly.

Her mum took off her glasses to think, which could sometimes be ominous. It meant whatever she was thinking about was a big deal.

“That’s a surprise,” she said.

“We used to visit,” Poppy remembered. She’d liked the feel of a donkey’s mouth when it snaffled food from her hand.

“Yes,” sighed Anna Beth, as if everything had got more complicated and troublesome since. “When you four could be moved around as a set, before you all developed your own different moves in different directions. And before Uncle Derek got ill.”

Poppy looked sympathetic even though she didn’t remember much about Uncle Derek. Dad had been to the funeral a few months earlier and she knew it had hit him hard.

“Well?” she asked. “Will you ask Lanky? I’ll help around the place. She won’t have to entertain me.” She waited while her mum looked dubious. “Tell her about my inner resources.”

Anna Beth smiled. “I’d miss you,” she said.

“Call every night.”

Poppy hoped her dad wouldn’t miss her too much. He wouldn’t say, but she wouldn’t be able to play the piano for him before she went to bed and the thought of that suddenly

made her sad. Still, absence was supposed to make the heart grow fonder.

“Okay,” said Mum. “Sure. I’ll put it to her.”

“Tell her it’s a good deal,” said Poppy. “And I’ll take a home-made cake.”

Poppy wondered whether it was the cake that swung it, because her mother came off the phone with a yes which made her feel more excited than she’d expected. She also reached for the cookery book. But it was a complicated recipe and developments went slightly off-target, which brought out what Anna Beth called the *drama queen* in her, the part that pouted, took the whole thing to the bin and had to be stopped from tipping it in. Her mum said Lanky would enjoy it all the more for being a carrot cake without the carrots that were patiently grated and still waiting in the fridge.

“An oddball. Amelanchier Jones will rejoice in a cake like that.”

“Has she always been odd?” asked Poppy, realising how good the cake smelt after all and picking a rather delicious fragment from the worktop.

“Eccentric? I think so. Your dad says all the women on his side of the family were unusual.” Anna Beth looked for a piece of paper and said they needed a list but Poppy wasn’t going to let the subject change, not yet.

“And named after flowers?”

“Yes. A really neat family tradition. I told your dad we must hold on to it.”

“So they were unusual but sad?” suggested Poppy, and her mum did her *busy-with-other-things* evasion tactic, mumbling through a packing list. Her only answer,

sandwiched between socks and pyjamas, was that she didn't know about that. Poppy wasn't sure she believed her, not entirely, but if she really didn't know about the flower girls, Lanky must. After all, she was one of them.

Poppy knew her dad wasn't sure about the visit because she heard some sort of discussion going on that night which was threatening to become an argument. But her mum must have brought him round as usual and in the morning he said goodbye softly and hugged her as if it really was a big deal, a much bigger one than Poppy understood. It made her tearful after he'd gone.

A few hours or so later Poppy was delivered to the sanctuary with a bulging sports bag, carrying a bunch of flowers from a motorway service station and a few contributions to her bed and board, like digestives and a whole box of teabags.

Lanky was up a tree – “Pollarding!” she cried – in her front garden, and waved a rusty old saw at the sight of them as if it weighed no more than a conductor's baton. She was wearing dungarees and a sun hat, and her face had aged since the last visit a couple of years earlier. She hadn't been a widow then, just a full-time nurse to Derek, but they'd both been cheerful even though they had rather more to complain about than certain brothers Poppy knew.

She seemed pleased to see them and said Poppy's dad (she called him Davy boy) hadn't dropped by for a while. Poppy didn't know he ever did; he'd never said. Anna Beth said he hadn't been working in the area for some time. She was sure he'd visit soon.

“No good expecting a man to pick up a phone,” grinned Lanky.

“Why?” asked Poppy, because she really wanted to know, but the two women only shrugged and sighed.

Lanky took Poppy by the shoulders as if to stand her straight and still for inspection. She bit her lip before she smiled.

“Well!” she said, and Poppy waited for a crazy, offbeat comment to follow, but it never did. “Just look at you, Poppy Golding!”

Then, as they dumped everything in Lanky’s already overcrowded kitchen, she added that it would be best if Poppy herself never did look. “I’d get shot of any mirrors round the house,” she told Anna Beth, “a.s.a.p.”

“I know,” smiled Anna Beth, who seemed to understand.

Poppy took a moment, but then she smiled awkwardly as she realised what Lanky meant. Not what Ed might mean, which would be an insult to do with ugliness and breaking glass. Lanky meant the opposite. Poppy was pretty; she knew she was and had been used to it ever since old ladies had told her mother so in shops. Could anyone be too good-looking? It was a weird idea. But it struck her that people probably didn’t contradict Lanky.

Poppy didn’t intend to keep that rule, and she didn’t think Lanky would respect her if she did.

Anna Beth had diverted conversation to the flowers in their cellophane and Lanky seized them with a war dance of a whoop. In seconds the flowers became twice as beautiful as her aunt arranged them while she talked. Her mum stayed chatting in the kitchen so long that Poppy wondered whether

she'd ever leave. Lanky could see Poppy was itching to go outside and after a while she suggested that she wander out and find a few donkeys.

“Introduce yourself,” she said. “Lay down your terms. Firm but fair: tough love.” She smiled and Poppy thought her mouth did rather wobbly, donkeyish things. It must be catching. “I’m all talk,” added Lanky. “Soft love is what they get. Spoilt rotten, they are.”

“They need it, don’t they?” said Poppy, rooting out her wellies. “They’re ... you know ... damaged, aren’t they?”

“Ah,” said Lanky. “Yes, they are. Aren’t we all?”

But Poppy didn’t think she was expected to answer so she disappeared instead.

Like most summer days Poppy could remember, apart from the ones she’d spent in California with her mum’s family, it wasn’t really hot. Everywhere was moist and green, and in places the ground was sodden, as if it had never really recovered from the winter snow. The pale, streaky sky couldn’t make up its mind whether to give the sun a chance, and no part of it could be described as bright, never mind blue. Poppy wasn’t really warm enough in her WILD AND FREE T-shirt but she had no intention of shivering like some city airhead who had a thing against wind because it messed her hair. Poppy pinned hers up with grips, in a tumble and spill, mirror-free style, and made her way up to the field, the paddock and the stables.

Poppy remembered her mum calling the sanctuary a mess and her dad asking what she expected of a place coated in dung. She felt unsettled by the thought that he’d been stopping by to see Lanky now and then but never bothered to mention it. Not to her, anyway. But looking around her,

Poppy decided her mother was right. A large skip would certainly come in handy. The corrugated iron didn't help, and the old caravan that Lanky used as an on-site office looked more dilapidated than ever. The place seemed to be full of wheelbarrows tipped up against walls.

As she approached the black wood stables the wind chimes tinkled, reminding her to look over the low wall at the home-made plaques in the donkey cemetery. Poppy didn't remember so many. But of course, she told herself, this place was like a hospice. The last part of the journey. Lanky believed they'd all lived other lives, and would be back, one way or another. She reckoned some of them had been around since Roman times, but Poppy thought that if that was true they'd have had enough long ago and God should say *Enough*.

Reading the names and dates of the departed donkeys, burnt black into sliced wood, Poppy saw how long some of their lives had been (Ziggy, fifty-five), while others had been much too short (Frannie, only nine). She felt Lanky's fondness for them all. Like a doctor in intensive care she lived close to death, and Poppy thought that sometimes, when she wasn't talking, smiling, or laughing wildly, it showed.

Poppy was relieved not to find the name of George among the dead, even though in Lanky's words he'd been well past his sell-by date last time she visited. Poppy was especially fond of the small, spindly-legged roan because he'd been gentler and less frightening than the others when she was tiny. Opening the gate into the paddock, she saw Joss the cat registering her with a brief stare before padding across and lying down in a sunlit patch of dirt. None of the donkeys gathered in the stable area seemed to take much notice of Poppy at first. She didn't want to scare any that might have

poor eyesight or hearing, so she called out in the most harmless way possible, introducing herself softly.

One piebald rubbed its backside against the fence. Another walked into a bucket but didn't seem startled. Many of those scattered around stayed still and quiet, intent on being. But the nearest three all stirred at once and moved towards her, heads down to be stroked or rumped. She used to find that alarming when she felt small enough to fit inside a donkey belly. Now she felt tough enough to cope.

Then she saw George, his colours less than glowing and his progress towards her slow. The others didn't seem too pleased when she transferred her attention, but she liked to think George knew her, even in what must be his donkey dotage. Could it be her smell, or the intonation of her voice? Because she liked to think she looked rather different from the child he'd seen last time.

Poppy counted eleven in the stable area, but saw that in the field that curved up the hill several more were standing, mostly in shady spots, courtesy of trees that edged the boundaries. The big, rusted brown gate was locked but she was sure Lanky expected her to climb it. As she swung herself over, Mo the dog waddled over, her torso rounder and lower to the grass than it used to be, and shook her fluffy head without barking. Officially, she was resident at the vicarage with Lanky's best friends, but she seemed to feel at home among donkeys. Poppy leaned down to muss and chat, but this Mo was a low-volume, more sedate version of the one she remembered and didn't bother to lick her face.

For a moment as she strode up towards them, the donkeys in the field were motionless, like a photograph or an old watercolour in a gallery. Among them was a couple, the jenny small and skewbald and the jack a shade darker and a

ruler's length taller. Standing close together like an old married couple in conversation, one leaning in as if to say, *Pardon, love?*, they ignored her so completely that Poppy wondered whether age had dulled their senses, or whether they only had eyes and ears for each other.

Up on the brow of the hill, looking down on her and advancing suddenly, was a jenny even scruffier than she felt herself. But from the eyes it fixed on her she suspected it was not an OAP but a teenager. Its greeting was loud as the average siren. As it brayed it uncovered teeth that were far from pretty, and tangled with green stalks.

"Hullo to you too," she said. "Have you not heard of flossing?"

The jenny didn't look amused.

"What's your name, darlin'?" she asked, careful not to get too close because she knew that donkeys could be nervous of new people or situations.

"Freda," said someone. But although the jaws were grinding as if for conversation, Poppy didn't think it was Freda herself. The voice was deep, even for a difficult donkey.

She didn't see the boy at first. He was in the hut, or rather emerging from it with a bucket. She heard the rustle of loose jeans that straggled over trainers. One bare, bony arm was pulled tense while the other only trailed, but both were long, and more freckled than tanned. His hair was shaved to a soft fuzz that reminded Poppy of a dandelion clock before the wind broke it, but its colour was a faint red blond. In one ear was a pearly drop of a silver stud; around the other swung a hoop with something dangling from it. His nose was turned up, a cartoon kid's nose, but his forehead stretched deep and

wide, and his cheekbones were tight because there wasn't much flesh on him. Underneath the egg-like speckling he was pale as the morning, the creamy dawn colour of a sky that hadn't caught on to summer.

Poppy wondered whether he'd looked at her like that, noticing. She blushed at the thought that she'd stared, taking in every long inch of him like a list she had to memorise. But if he'd been scrutinising from the hut, he'd stopped now, and looked away to the donkeys. Freda seemed interested in the contents of the bucket. He patted her muzzle; she seemed used to him, her agitation over.

“What's your name, darlin'?”

The boy didn't quite smile at his joke but Poppy knew he thought he was being funny. Her brothers often wore that look when they were teasing her. It was quite a good impression but he shouldn't have been listening when she didn't know he existed.

“It's rude to eavesdrop,” she said quietly, eyes on the donkey.

“I wasn't,” he said. “I was just there.”

But he didn't explain why. His accent wasn't the same as Lanky's. It took short cuts, knocking off beginnings and ends. Poppy wondered how old he was. Sixteen, like Ed? His jeans hung low like Ed's, as if three other backsides could fit inside them. A small beaded bracelet was tied around his narrow wrist. She thought he must be cold, but she couldn't spot any goose pimples like the ones that were bumping under her own skin.

He moved across to the older donkeys and started to mutter things in their ears. Poppy knew she shouldn't assume

he was whispering about her. He'd probably already forgotten she was there and she didn't want to follow him around like a child with a hero.

"You're Poppy," he said. "Like the flower. The one that causes so much trouble."

She'd heard it before, and of course when she was small she hadn't understood. But now she knew what he meant. The drugs trade: big business and endless misery. She'd shouted at Ed the last time he'd made a smart remark because misery wasn't funny. But she couldn't call this boy a stupid, lazy pig. So there was nothing she could say, except *Yes, but poppies are gorgeous too*. She knew enough about boys to realise how vulnerable that would make her.

Poppy said nothing. She just waited, but perhaps the boy wasn't a big talker. Except, of course, to donkeys, and that seemed to be a private conversation.

"Who are you?" she asked in the end, feeling a little jealous because the donkeys showed so much more interest in this boy than in her. For the first time she realised that he must be kind because they trusted him.

"I help out," he said.

"I can see that," said Poppy. "They like you."

"Impeccable taste, donkeys," he said, hurrying the adjective. "Seen what they eat?"

She smiled. She couldn't remember whether she was wearing mascara. And there was nowhere to check the wildness of her hair, but she found herself fingering it like a comb.

"You didn't think I'd know that kind of word," he said. "You look fine, by the way. Not impeccable, but fine."

Poppy didn't want him to think she cared either way.

"Auntie Lanky didn't say you worked here," she said, looking away to the hills where the sun was battling through.

"Just a volunteer really," he said. "Sort of. Got addicted."

"Oh," she said weakly.

"To the mud and smell."

"Ah," she said, wishing she could edit out these non-words that were all she could find. "I'd better go."

The boy took no notice. He was ruffling the donkey pair just where they liked it, around their ears. Poppy headed back towards the house, a little sudden warmth stroking the back of her neck. She heard herself all the way, wellies rubbery, ground squelchy. Ed had told her she didn't walk like a girl and she'd said models on catwalks couldn't walk at all; they looked like they hadn't been screwed together properly and limbs might drop off. Her friend Min had a pair of four-inch heels she couldn't stand in, never mind walk. Poppy was pretty certain this boy wouldn't have watched her now even if she'd been in a red mini dress and thigh-high boots.

"I'm Kane," she heard behind her.

There must be all sorts of smart remarks, thought Poppy, *that I could throw casually over my shoulder.* Naughty boys and canes. But smart remarks weren't really her style. She'd rather talk straight, like Lanky.

"Oh," she said.

When she looked around at the gate she couldn't see him. Wondering whether he was watching her from the hut, she walked on. Her face felt rosy now. It must be the wind.

She walked quickly past the stables, mumbling affectionately to the donkeys that were too slow to butt her this time. Then she almost ran to the house. Taking her boots off at the back door, she found her mum hugging Auntie Lanky goodbye.

“Kinda cute,” said Anna Beth, in what Poppy called her *best U.S. teen*.

Poppy gave her a hard look that judged her tone, her accent and her words as well as the spying. Then she reflected that without her glasses all her mother would have seen as far away as the top of the field was a stringy blob. So she was fishing. Poppy decided to pretend she hadn’t heard.

“He’s all right, young Kane,” said Lanky. “In fact he’s actually very able.”

The two women laughed as if they’d been drinking wine instead of a whole pot of tea.

“Biblical references will be lost on my daughter, I’m afraid,” said Anna Beth.

“What?” asked Poppy, feeling shut out and young. Her mum said there were two brothers called Cain and Abel and one killed the other.

“Cain was the murderer,” said Lanky. “But this Kane is spelled differently, and wasn’t such a good citizen in the past.” From the laughter Poppy could tell this was another story she didn’t know. “But he’s rehabilitating well.”

“Poppy’s not much of a film buff either,” said Anna Beth, and told her *Citizen Kane* was a famous, classic movie from way before her time. “But don’t ask me for a plot summary, because I haven’t seen it for thirty years and I can barely remember what happened yesterday.”

“Yesterday,” said Poppy, “you said the same thing.”

Anna Beth looked at Lanky, who smiled and said it must be nice to be young. Poppy gave her mother a look that wondered whether she was going now.

“I’m off, honey,” said Anna Beth. “Be good.”

Poppy’s raised eyebrows meant *Mum do you have to?* Anna Beth apologised as she kissed her cheek. She hung on tightly as if she might not see Poppy for another six months instead of three days and Poppy remembered how tearful she’d been when they’d waved Nick off at the airport.

She stood with Lanky and they watched Anna Beth reverse out of the ridged, muddy track that ended in the house. She narrowly missed the tree that supported a washing line where sheets dragged out towards the stream.

Lanky yelled at the back of the car so loudly that Poppy flinched. “Remind Davy I’m still here, will you?” Then she put an arm around Poppy’s shoulder. “I’m glad you’re here, Poppy. I really am.”

Her aunt looked from the old bike leaning in the hallway to the swollen black bin liners gathered in the dining room ready for Oxfam. She ran her fingers back through the short, mannish hair at her temples, which was dark grey and woolly, with variegated white veining through. Her cheeks were a rather sore shade of red, and her eyebrows were growing a bit too close. But she looked like someone who mattered. An inventor or an artist, or an archbishop on a day off.

“But you’re much too beautiful for your own good, you know,” she added, as she put her hands on her narrow hips. “If you were my daughter, I’d keep you locked up. Now, where did I put the secateurs?”

Poppy shrugged and smiled.

“Don’t mind me,” said Lanky. “I get nuttier. Good carrot cake, by the way. Now that you’re here we’ll have flowers round the house again. Move on. Funeral over. Buds and shoots, you know? It was clever of you to guess.”

“I like flowers,” said Poppy.

“Of course you do,” said Lanky, with an *ah!* that suggested she’d found what she was looking for. “It’s in the blood. Like the beauty. Exactly like her.”

“Like who?” she asked. Everyone always said Poppy looked more like her dad than her mother.

“Oh, ignore me, Poppy. I chunter on. I’m not used to censoring myself for other people. Derek gave me free rein, bless him.” She looked at Poppy.

“That’s love, isn’t it,” asked Poppy, “accepting people the way they are?”

“Oh, it may be, Poppy. But it’s ourselves we want accepted, isn’t it, and other people we want to change?”

“But who am I like?” Poppy persisted, reluctant to let Lanky off with diversionary tactics.

“Maybe more like me than you’d choose, with a bit between your teeth, not letting go!”

She followed her aunt out into the garden where roses climbed a wall, their petals scattered on the dark earth beneath like confetti at a wedding. The smell was amazing. Lanky clipped and passed them back to her one by one, until she was holding five of them, stripped of thorns and beaded with night rain.

“These will jazz up those conservative ones you brought,” Lanky said, “and get them dancing!”

“Mmm,” said Poppy. “Roses are great dancers, aren’t they?”

“Great singers! Great artists! Such performers!” cried her aunt, taking a deep breath as she straightened herself up.

Back indoors, she invited Poppy to slip the roses into the vase and shake things up. Poppy hesitated.

“There’s no big secret to arranging flowers,” she told her. “Hang the theory. WILD AND FREE, that’s all, like your T-shirt. Ears and eyes and heart on full. You’ll feel it.”

So Poppy had a go while Lanky bustled about. Then she turned back to her aunt with a smile because she knew. She’d done it. Lanky laughed and told her she was a natural.

“Is Kane a natural?” Poppy asked, watching Lanky search for something as if only turning the kitchen upside down would help.

“Ah,” she said, “Kane’s a conundrum. Not so easy to read and that’s the way he wants it. No one gets too close without a mane and hooves. You mustn’t let yourself be fascinated, Poppy, not by him.”

Poppy didn’t like that. It was teacherly and mother-like and not what she expected from Lanky. Poppy sat down at the table with one hand under her chin. With the other she flicked a cake crumb around. The drawers shut with a shove and Lanky sat down opposite. She gave Poppy a searching look.

“Bossy old bat,” she said. “Sorry.”

“That’s okay,” said Poppy, who thought she had been getting better at forgiving people. “Don’t do it again!” she risked with a smile.

“I wouldn’t want anything to spoil our few days,” said Lanky. “And I’d rather talk about you than Kane Bradley or even roses. I want to get to know you, Poppy. It’s late in the day but important. Will you let me?”

Poppy could have used the *why?* word, but she worked out her own answer. Lanky had no children, her husband was dead and her sister was a question mark.

“So how shall we start? I don’t like chat show interviews. Silly, skimmy froth. But then again you won’t want a grilling. You’ll just have to tell me what you want to tell, and reveal the rest like a character in a book – in action.”

Poppy must have looked unsure but Lanky patted her hand and told her not to panic.

“Action! Plenty of that round here.”

Lanky had a list of possibilities and Poppy considered them. Muck-raking could wait. Shopping sounded urban and jam-making a bit too hot and sticky.

“I’d like to get to know the donkeys,” she said. She listed those she remembered, starting with George.

“Ah, George! I swear he’s older than I am! When we were girls we used to stop and stroke him, long before this place existed. It was cruel to keep him on his own like that, the way Mac Trandle did, but I don’t think people were so aware then how sensitive donkeys are and how lonely and depressed they can get. There might never have been a sanctuary at all if it hadn’t been for George.”

Poppy wanted to learn all their names and stories. Having ridden one that was almost white when she was small, she remembered the fear, the smell and the sway, the bump and wobble, the excitement and pride. But the OAPs

didn't look as if they'd be inclined to budge an inch for any rider and Freda would probably rather wrap Poppy's hair around her teeth and pull her along by it.

"I don't hold with riding as a rule," Lanky told her. "It's the last thing most of them want. But they're all different ..."

"I don't have to ride," Poppy put in quickly. "I'm not a child ..."

It trailed away lamely. Spot the giveaway! Who protested like that except children? Poppy was used to Nick and Tim grinning together whenever she reminded them of her age as if she was a five-year-old telling the world she'd be six in three months and twelve days.

"Oh goodness, I can see that! Although why everyone's in such a fired-up hurry to leave childhood behind's a mystery to me! As if the teenage years were anything but a trial and a severing ..."

Poppy began to ask what that was all about, but Lanky was ready now, keys and phone collected, boots located. As they walked across she mentioned that Kane would have clocked off.

"One day he'll have the manners to say goodbye."

"You're not big on manners," Poppy pointed out, and Lanky laughed aloud and said she was guilty as charged.

They passed the donkey graveyard and through the gate to the paddock and stables.

Lanky introduced each donkey as they all milled around, and told her how each one liked to be stroked, patted or tickled. Misty, who only turned her head, had been lame, infested with worms and suffering from rain scald when she arrived. Stardust was petrified of trailers because she'd been

dragged around so much, first on photo shoots for promotional work and then from one market to another in search of the highest possible bid. Pinball Wizard had been skin and bones when Lanky bought him, his feet sawn short with a hacksaw. Poppy couldn't believe the horror stories but she had the feeling Lanky didn't think much of people. Joely's undershot jaw would cause problems with eating later on in life and Jerry, who had been in such good condition that he'd been intended for meat, was now the noisiest donkey in the sanctuary. As he proved in a conversation in which Lanky upped her own volume but couldn't compete.

She opened the gate into the field, calling softly to a very small jenny that poked her head from out from the lean-to as if suspicious of the sunshine breaking through. A couple of rabbits darted through the bushes into the copse on one side of the field, distracting Poppy with the whiteness of their tails and their speed and bounce. The sanctuary was a slow place, thick with age, caution and fear. It wasn't magic Lanky worked. Healing took time.

"Midge had enough rides to last a lifetime," she told Poppy. "Beach donkey. Bored out of her brains, back and forth, year after year, long after she was ready for a rest. And in between seasons, left to rot. Found her chained up, knee deep in her own mess, old stagnant water in a bucket and grass worn to mud."

"That's so evil!" cried Poppy. "Poor Midge!"

But which one was she?

"She hides," said Lanky. "All this space and she doesn't go far."

There wasn't much space to the side of the hut but as they crossed towards it, Poppy noticed a mottled, ragged

shape filling it. The head was tucked in blindly when it could have reached over the hedge.

“Here we come, Midge,” called Lanky, gently. “Only old Lanky and a friend.”

She slowed down and kept making chirruping sounds all the way, edging closer. Poppy noticed one crusted eye, and another sore not quite healed. She kept behind her aunt, only afraid that her unfamiliar breathing and stranger’s scent would make the donkey panic.

“There,” said Lanky, arm around Midge, who nuzzled in. “One old girl to another.” She patted the patchy coat and stroked the mane. “She won’t be with us long,” she told Poppy, “but I want her to venture out, feel the breeze, trust the sunshine, you know? If we ever get any.”

“Wilder and freer?” suggested Poppy.

“Exactly.”

The way Lanky said the word made it sound warm and breathy, like *I love you*. Midge was stirring herself like a cat in front of the fire but still asleep. She adjusted her feet without actually moving, just repositioning. Her hooves could do with some kind of polish. They looked as if they’d been eaten away from the inside, like the donkey herself.

“We’ll try,” said Lanky. “I’ve tried every day for a week.”

She made sure she was close enough for Midge to feel the warmth of her breath as she backed away, calling softly, hoping Midge would follow. But she didn’t move. No easing or edging. Just all four feet firmly in place on the worn grass between the shed and the hedge. Midge was staying where she was, in her corner.

“I want to tempt her out without the bridle and reins,” Lanky explained. “She’s had enough of them. I’ve tried food of all kinds but she isn’t bothered. Something of an eating disorder, our Midge. An anorexic donkey.”

Not far away, but in a different mood altogether, the old couple were still together. Mary and Ben.

“Ben’s OCD,” said Lanky. “Counts on routine, a bit like a husband. And he’s not as dozy as he looks. He has bursts of energy in between dreams, don’t you, Benjamin?”

He was one of the pair and knew his name when he heard it, stirring into an alertness that was almost frisky. Mary raised her head.

“That’s Mary,” said Lanky. “Late-life love.”

“Really?” asked Poppy. “They really are a couple?”

“Well, they seem more affectionate than most old marrieds,” said her aunt. “Bit past any hanky panky, though.”

Poppy thought of a joke but she didn’t ask the question: *Don’t you encourage hanky panky, Lanky?* Poppy knew what hanky panky meant. It sounded more fun than snogging or any of those words for sex.

Ben and Mary might be a bit old for that but most people would say Sorrel Golding had been too young to have a baby with no husband around.

“Dad thinks I’m too young to have a boyfriend,” she told Lanky, as they left the lovers alone.

“I should think so!” snorted Lanky. “He’s hit the nail on the proverbial head and I hope he hammers it hard!”

“I’m nearly fourteen!” protested Poppy.

“Innocence and experience,” said Lanky. She greeted Mo with rough affection as the dog slotted herself between the two of them, three scampering steps to each of Lanky’s paces. “Songs of. William Blake. Good title for a poetry collection, except that with experience most people stop singing. Sing while you can, Poppy. Once you’ve stopped you’ll miss the music.”

Poppy frowned.

“Can you explain?” she asked.

“I never explain!” cried Lanky. “Work it out!”

Poppy wondered whether things with Lanky were likely to go smoothly. Personally she felt a few corners rubbing and poking out already.

But it was a good afternoon. Later, before supper, they walked in the woods. On the way, down the lane, Poppy spotted a kestrel above a wheat-stacked field. She watched it, hanging fire without a shadow, and time seemed new. In the woods themselves they saw a single, high-speed hare with an athlete’s stride, one muntjac and a stream of deer led by a stag. They followed the brook and listened to the water mounting pebbles and tumbling through the weir. Poppy decided the country had lots of inner resources and they were all free.

She was so exhausted when she went to bed that night that she thought she’d do an Ed and sleep till afternoon. But the bed felt high and narrow and dated back way before Ikea, its firmness supported by some kind of metal, and the sheet

tucked in around a peachy blanket that felt thin as well as tickly.

As it was, she woke again before midnight and stared at the darkness, inside and out. The house had its creaks and the bed made most of them as she prized herself out of it. But the world it belonged in was as quiet as Lanky had warned her it would be, and when she crossed carefully to the window she was shocked by the thickness of it. No street lights, no station platforms running along behind lit-up shops, no cars shining a path in the distance, winding down through black to brightness. Just emptiness with stars scattered across it like daisies in a field.

Where are you, moon? she asked, head between the curtains. They were old and faded, the buttery yellow of the cotton blotted pale as cream in places. Who had slept in this room before her? Who had eased down under the blanket like a page of A4 into a see-through wallet?

“You look exactly like her.”

Not like Mum at all. She looked like Sorrel Golding. That was what Lanky had meant! And Sorrel had loved flowers too. Poppy felt cold beside the window and made her way back to bed, managing to stub her toe on what she thought was the metal leg of the frame. Gasping bravely so as not to wake the neighbourhood with a scream, she realised something was poking out under the bed. She knelt down and felt underneath, her fingers catching some fluff that gathered floatily like cyclamen in winter.

It was a picnic basket. Her fingers recognised the rough weave before her eyes adjusted. Poppy pulled it out and lifted the lid to a papery smell, a feathery kind of mustiness. Among the loose pages, some of them folded, was a book, a

soft one, like a wallpaper catalogue, almost too big to fit in the basket. She pulled it out and realised it was a photo album, from the days when people had the patience to stick on corners and tuck the pictures in.

Poppy reached back to the wall and found the switch on the lamp stand. She pushed it in and sat on the bed with the album on her lap as close as possible to the light. Her dressing gown was on the end of the bed so she put it over her shoulders in the hope that she'd stop shivering.

A baby boy, looking grumpy, and then a girl, in a flower-head kind of hat frilled like petals. Two children in play clothes, the girl a nurse with a red cross on her bib. The girl with a doll hanging from one hand as if its china arm would snap off.

When were these taken? After the war? A mother with lipstick and a best dress that showed her figure. A looker, film star-ish, with hair that might have been shaped by what her mother called a jello mould.

And the girl again, no longer busy and unaware of the camera, too old now to be caught while she was just being. She was posing this time, staring the camera out, not quite smiling but amused, maybe by herself. Tall and thin like Poppy, hair long and thick like hers, some of it dragged across her face by a sudden wind. Not a woman yet, but beginning to become one. No make-up, but lovely. She wore high-waisted trousers and a tucked-in blouse, and she was standing up to her ankles in bluebells. Even in black and white there was something hazy about them, melting into a gauze.

“Sorrel Golding,” Poppy whispered. “Is it you?”

And if it was, then the grumpy baby boy was poor Joe who hadn't lived to see Lanky born. And the little girl holding her hand in the next picture over the page was Amelanchier herself, looking up with a smile that meant this pretty big sister in a party dress with a bow at the waist and a ribbon in her hair was, in that moment anyway, the love of her life.

Poppy knew she wasn't meant to be looking even before she heard the step on the landing. Her aunt had seen the light under the door. She shoved the basket back under the bed with a scrape that might have been heard in Wales, shrugged off her dressing gown and slid into bed.

"You all right, Poppy?" came the voice.

Poppy switched off the lamp. She edged deeper down under the blanket and pushed its hem away from her chin so it wouldn't tickle.

"Fine!" she called thinly.

"Night night," said Lanky, and Poppy heard her bedroom door creak shut.

"Night!" she called, feeling sneaky and excited at the same time, and closed her eyes.