Chapter One

We arrived in summer when the landscape was in full bloom and the days were long and hot and the light was soft. I roamed shirtless and sweated cleanly and enjoyed the hug of the thick air. In those months I picked up freckles on my bony shoulders and the sun set slowly and the evenings were pewter before they were black, before the mornings seeped through again. Rabbits gambolled in the fields and when we were lucky, when the wind was still and a veil settled on the hills, we saw a hare.

Farmers shot vermin and we trapped rabbits for food. But not the hare. Not my hare. A dam, she lived with her drove in a nest in the shadow of the tracks. She was hardened to the passing of the trains and when I saw her I saw her alone as if she had
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crept out of the nest unseen and unheard. It was a rare thing for creatures of her kind to leave their young in summer and run through the fields. She was searching. Searching for food or for a mate. She searched as if she were a hunting animal, as if she were a hare who had thought again and decided not to be prey but rather to run and to hunt, as if she were a hare who found herself chased one day by a fox and stopped suddenly and turned and chased back.

Whatever the reason, she was unlike any other. When she darted I could barely see her but when she stopped for a moment she was the stillest thing for miles around. Stiller than the oaks and pines. Stiller even than the rocks and pylons. Stiller than the railway tracks. It was as if she had grabbed hold of the earth and pinned it down with her at its centre, and even the quietest, most benign landmarks spun outrageously around, while all of it, the whole scene, was suckered in by her exaggerated, globular, amber eye.

And if the hare was made of myths then so too was the land at which she scratched. Now pocked with clutches of trees, once the whole county had been woodland and the ghosts of the ancient forest could be marked when the wind blew. The soil was alive with ruptured stories that cascaded and rotted then found form once more and pushed up through
the undergrowth and back into our lives. Tales of green men peering from thickets with foliate faces and legs of gnarled timber. The calls of half-starved hounds rushing and panting as they snatched at charging quarry. Robyn Hode and his pack of scrawny vagrants, whistling and wrestling and feasting as freely as the birds whose plumes they stole. An ancient forest ran in a grand strip from north to south. Boars and bears and wolves. Does, harts, stags. Miles of underground fungi. Snowdrops, bluebells, primroses. The trees had long since given way to crops and pasture and roads and houses and railway tracks and little copses, like ours, were all that was left.

Daddy and Cathy and I lived in a small house that Daddy built with materials from the land here about. He chose for us a small ash copse two fields from the east coast main line, far enough not to be seen, close enough to know the trains well. We heard them often enough: the hum and ring of the passenger trains, the choke and gulp of the freight, passing by with their cargo tucked behind in painted metal tanks. They had timetables and intervals of their own, drawing growth rings around our house with each journey, ringing past us like prayer chimes. The long, indigo Adelantes and Pendolinos that streaked from London to Edinburgh. The smaller trains that bore more years, with rust on their rattling
pantographs. Old carthorse-trains chugging up to the knacker, they moved too slowly for the younger tracks and slipped on the hot-rolled steel like old men on ice.

On the day we arrived an old squaddy drove up the hill in an articulated lorry filled with cracked and discarded stone from an abandoned builders’ yard. The squaddy let Daddy do most of the unloading while he sat on a freshly cut log and smoked cigarette after cigarette that Cathy rolled from her own tobacco and papers. He watched her closely as she spun them with her fingers and tipped tongue over teeth to lick the seal. He looked at her right thigh as she rested the tobacco pouch upon it and more than once leaned over to pick it up, brushing his hand against her as he did so, then pretending to read the text on the packet. He offered to light her cigarettes for her each time. He held out the flame eagerly and took offence, like a child, when she continued to light them herself. He could not see that she was scowling the whole time and frowning at her hands as she did his work. He was not a man who could look and see and understand faces well enough to tell. He was not one of those who know what eyes and lips mean or who can imagine that a pretty face might not be closed around pretty thoughts.
The squaddy talked all afternoon about the army and the fighting he had done in Iraq and in Bosnia and how he had seen boys as young as me slashed open with knives, their innards a passing blue. There was little darkness in him when he told us this. Daddy worked on the house during the day and in the evening the two grown men went down the hill to drink some of the cider the squaddy had brought in a plastic pop bottle. Daddy did not stay long. He did not like drinking much and he did not like company save for me and my sister.

When Daddy came back he told us that he had an argument with the squaddy. He had clouted the squaddy about the head with his left fist and now had a bloody nick in his skin just by the thumb knuckle.

I asked him what had started the argument.

“He were a bastard, Daniel,” Daddy said to me. “He were a bastard.”

Cathy and I thought that was fair enough.

Our house was laid out like any bungalow or park home on the outskirts of any smallish city where old people and poor families live. Daddy was no architect but he could follow a grey and white schematic rustled from the local council offices.

Our house was stronger than others of its type.
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though. It was built with better bricks, better mortar, better stones and timber. I knew it would last many dozen seasons longer than those houses we saw on the roads into town. And it was more beautiful. The green mosses and ivies from the wood were more eager to grip at its sides, more ready to pull it back into the landscape. Every season the house looked older than it was and the longer it looked to have been there the longer we knew it would last. Like all real houses and all those that call them home.

As soon as the external walls were up I planted seeds and bulbs. The earth was still open from the foundations Daddy dug. I extended the troughs and filled them with compost and fresh manure we got from a stable eight miles down the way where little girls in fawn jodhpurs and shining leather boots rode ponies around a floodlit gymkhana. I planted pansies and daffodils and roses of all different colours and a cutting taken from a white-flowering climbing plant I found spewing out of an old drystone wall. It was the wrong time of year to plant but some shoots came up and more came the following year. Waiting is what a true house is about. Making it ours, making it settle, pinning it and us to the seasons, to the months and to the years.

We came there soon before my fourteenth birthday when Cathy had just turned fifteen. It was early
summer, which gave Daddy the time to build. He knew we would be finished well before winter and there was enough of a structure to live in by the middle of September. Before then we made our home from two decommissioned army vans that Daddy had bought from a thief in Doncaster and driven to the site down back roads and tracks. We hooked them together with steel rope and tarpaulin was stretched over the top, expertly and securely, to give us shelter beneath. Daddy slept in one van and Cathy and I in the other. Under the tarpaulin there were weathered, plastic garden chairs and after some time a sunken blue sofa. We used that as our living room. We used upturned boxes to rest our mugs and plates above the ground and to rest our feet too, on warm summer evenings when there was nothing to do but sit and talk and sing.

On the clearest evenings we stayed out until morning. We clicked on the radios from both vans and Cathy and I danced on the leafy earth to our woodland stereo, safe in the knowledge any neighbour was too far to hear. Sometimes we sat and sang without the radios. Years ago, Daddy had bought me a wooden recorder and Cathy a violin. We had had free lessons when we were still at school. We were not experts but made a decent sound because of the instruments we played. Daddy had chosen well. He knew nothing of music but a great deal
about fine objects. He could pick out craft and quality by the woods and the glues and the smell of the varnish and the smoothness of the edges. We had driven all the way to Leeds for them.

He knew about different woods, you see. He got to know the trees that lived in our copse early on and showed them to me. Almost all were between saplings and fifty years old as the copse had been coppiced well since long before we had moved there, for hundreds of years, even, Daddy thought. In the centre, right at the heart, there were older trees and one was the oldest of them all. The mother, Daddy said, from which all the others had come. She had been there for over two hundred years and her bark was set hard like scraped kauri gum.

There were hazel trees too and some of those dropped nuts. Daddy cut branches away from the trunks and showed me how to work the greenwood with a sharp folding knife. I spent days trying to fashion a thin flute from fresh greenwood, whittling the soft bark away from the sinew and gouging out the fleshy innards. I worked precisely to make the outside as smooth as I could, curved like a finger. But the flute did not sound and after that I moved towards making things that were useful, objects that required less skill, or rather, things that were able to exist even if they were not precisely so. As long as a bowl holds its charge it is easy to define even
if it is ugly and rough. But if a flute does not make a musical note it cannot be called a flute.

Our home in the woods had a kitchen and a large oak table. When we still camped, Daddy cooked on a barbecue he had made from pieces of corrugated iron and charcoal that he had baked in two oil drums in the heart of the copse near the old mother tree.

We ate too much meat in those days. We followed Daddy’s diet so ate the food he had cooked for himself before we had come to live with him permanently. This was mainly the meat he hunted. He did not care for fruit or vegetables. He hunted wood pigeon, rock dove, collared dove, pheasant and woodcock, if he caught them in the evenings coming out of cover. There were muntjac deer around too and when there was too little to hunt or when he had cash in his pocket or when he just fancied a change he went into the village and bargained for joints of beef, lamb or pork sausages. In the right season there was smaller game for breakfast. A man in the village had a merlin and with it he caught too many skylarks to eat alone so gave them to us in exchange for birds that were too big for the merlin to steal. We ate the skylarks on toast, almost whole, with mugs of hot, milky tea.

Once Daddy went away with the travellers for four days and returned with a hessian sack of plucked ducks and five crates of live chickens. He constructed
a coop for the chickens near where the back door of the house was going to be. We ate eggs after that but still hardly any vegetables or fruit except berries from the sides of the roads.

It was later, when the house was built, that I planted apple and plum trees and asked Daddy to bring sacks of carrots and parsnips from the village when he went down there for business. I prepared what he brought on the scrubbed kitchen table with knives my Daddy had sharpened.

Before the house was built, in those few hot, dry months when we camped and sang, Daddy talked to us properly. He used few words but we heard much more. He spoke of the men he had fought and the men he had killed, in the peat fields of Ireland or that black mud of Lincolnshire that clings to the hands and feet like forensic ink. Daddy boxed for money with bare knuckles far from gymnasiums or auditoriums but the money could be big and men whose cash came from nowhere arrived from across the country to lay their bets on him to win. Anyone was a fool not to back my Daddy. He could knock a man out with just one punch and if it lasted longer it was because he wanted a full fight.

The bouts were arranged by travellers or rough men from around who desired the chance to test
themselves and earn a slice of cash. The travellers had fought in this way for centuries. “Prize Fights” or “Fair Fights” they called them. They wore no padded gloves nor did they divide the bouts into rounds with breaks. These men would not fight for the splitting peace-toll of the bell but until one surrendered or was bludgeoned cold. Sometimes the fights rested disputes between warring clans. As often as not they were for money. Tens of thousands of pounds could be settled and Daddy made a decent living from it.

There was a feud that had run for decades, Daddy told us, between the Joyces and the Quinn-McDonaghs. Every three years or so they would send their young men out against each other in one-on-one bare-knuckle matches that were moderated by older men from neutral families. In cases like these the families themselves could not be present in case a brawl broke out between one clan and the other, old and young, men and women, and a whole portion of the travelling community was wiped out or arrested by the police and packed into vans and taken off to jail.

There was much to gain. These feud fights were not divorced from high stakes. The Joyces and Quinn-McDonaghs competed on how much cash they were willing to front. Sometimes as much as £50,000 each and the winner would take it all back to their caravan.
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and treat the whole clan to an evening of whisky. Daddy said they wanted the fights. He said that after all this time the quarrel between the families meant little but each time one of the top men was short of money they would like as not start something up in the hope of gaining. It was more than pride; it was prize money.

This is what it was about for Daddy too, of course. We were not travellers so the feuds meant nothing to us. He fought at bouts that were arranged for money, where travellers or gypsies, rough farmers, criminals from the towns, owners of underground nightclubs and bars, drug dealers and thugs, or just men who saw their worth resting in their fists, met together and brought their money in the hope of winning more. Daddy arrived in a pair of blue jeans and a buttoned-up bomber jacket. He was given the time and place over the phone by a fixer or else just picked up by the travellers or by someone else. He waited quietly among his admirers. Daddy rarely talked more than he could help. He allowed very few men to meet his eyes. He turned away and paced calmly by himself while the men made their bargains and agreed their rates.

Daddy started the fight. He peeled off his jacket and jumper and stood in a white vest, revealing not the lean, stratiform muscles of an athlete but the kind of biceps that could be soft tight pillows if
they were not made from long chains of snap-rubber. There was little hair on his arms. Surprisingly little. Black hair reached up his back and stomach to his chest and the back of his neck and head to meet a full black beard and head of hair, but his arms were bare. He stepped towards the appointed ground and the other man fell into place. Daddy saw his opponent for the first time. He was unmoved. He did not hate this man. He walked towards him and boxed him and when it was over he heard measured applause and was taken over to a blue Peugeot behind the crowds and given from its boot a zipped duffle bag full of dirty cash.

Those men must have been satisfied by something they saw there. The gambling obscured the real pleasure. The cash had to be present, of course, to make it safe. To make it about business. To underpin the spectacle with something serious. To justify the performance. But if it was money they wanted there were other ways to get it and if it was a matter of business the fight would not have been with bare hands.

Yes, it was during this summer in the woods, before the new house was built, that Daddy told us these stories, confided in us, and Cathy and I listened like we were receiving precious heirlooms. Daddy’s eyes became wide when he spoke to us, flecked, light blue, like worn denim, and he would lean in and
open them generously then pinch them closed ever so slightly when he reached for a memory that was not quite clear. He sat forward in his chair with his long, thick legs apart, his elbows resting above his knees and his cavernous chest bearing broad, weighted shoulders.

I supposed that was how we made our money. From Daddy’s fighting. But for months there would be no fights and Daddy would find other work. He mentioned this other work but there were fewer stories. The men he worked with on these jobs were sometimes travellers but more often they were from further away.

On one Thursday evening in our first September, Cathy and I were sitting alone in our kitchen in the new home. It had been a windy afternoon and it was a windier evening. The foundations and joints of the house were tested for the first time and they creaked and groaned as they do in any building that has not yet set. The house was finding its position in the landscape, sitting down and relaxing into its trough, and we felt it sigh and moan for hours.

Daddy had been away since the afternoon before and we had not expected to see him again for days. We were surprised, then, when he came home that next morning just after dawn, while we were playing
cards and drinking mugs of tea. We heard his car arrive outside, rolling then braking gently atop the leaf litter, and his familiar footsteps coming to us. I ran out to the hall to open the door for him, unbolting it at the top and bottom then turning the key. I pulled it in and stood aside to let my Daddy past. He walked to the kitchen table, alert but exhausted, and sat on one of the three wooden chairs that bent under his weight.

He pressed Cathy for a cup of tea and she got up and shifted the kettle back onto the stove. Daddy stretched his legs under the table then pulled them back in towards himself to make a start on tightly knotted bootlaces. Cathy rolled him a cigarette while waiting on the water and when she handed it to him I saw that her face was suddenly awake, like his, like he had brought something bright and alive home for us to devour. This night, as at other times, I saw that she was truly his daughter.

He had been called up by a lad, he said. Somebody he knew from here and there. Peter had lived in the village since he was nine or ten when his mother had moved from Doncaster to work at the chip shop, taking the customers’ money then wrapping up the fish that the men fried. Peter had asked, through a friend of course, if Daddy could go over there to see him. He had heard that we had moved in nearby. That is to say, he had heard of Daddy’s reputation.
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Amongst certain types in the Yorkshire ridings and in Lincolnshire and in the counties around there were few who had not.

Peter had worked as a labourer on and off for the building companies in the area. Most had pulled back their work now and if it was not entirely dead then it was at least tethered. For two or more years Peter did not have much, Daddy told us. He had come through though. He had started to work for himself, privately, hiring himself out to anyone around who still had money. He built extensions, saw to bits of plumbing and knocked through sash windows. That sort of thing. Work that Daddy could have done but chose not to. Peter had been good at it, Daddy said. He had known how to manage his time and his money, which is half of anything. People spoke to their friends about him and he got more than enough work. For a time he did more than just live. There was pride, or something like it, and that was an almost-forgotten feeling in these parts. There became such things as futures and pasts and Peter began to take his place between them.

Two winters ago, he had taken a job at one of the big farms. He was building an extension to one of the outhouses when a fat dairy cow with two calves in her belly pulled her teats from the mechanical milking vise, kicked herself free from her trusses and galloped out the barn door. She knocked the
ladder from beneath Peter’s feet and he fell down beneath her hooves. She felt her grounding change as a hind leg found the soft lower back of the fallen man and she struck out against the outhouse wall then against Peter’s head and neck. He was knocked out and lay bleeding on the filthy, wet cement.

Farms can be lonely places. They can be lonely places to have skin torn and bones crushed. They can be lonely places to die. But not for Peter that day. One of the permanent hands found him and his broken body and wrapped him in his coat and took him to Doncaster hospital in the back of a horse box.

Peter no longer had use of his legs. He had to spend most of his time in a wheelchair. He could no longer work. He stopped going to the pub of an evening. He stayed in his house, waiting for visitors. Old friends still dropped by but he had disappeared from view so all but the best began to forget him. The council did a bit and so did the church. Peter had an elderly neighbour who helped him with the garden. She cut branches from the trees and bushes at the right times of year and swept the fallen petals and the fallen leaves and made sure the water was able to run down the drains after it rained. He had an aunt that he had come to know since his mother died and she brought cakes and newspapers and changed his bed sheets every other Sunday.
Things were all right but they could have been better. After his accident, Peter had had to call in the money he was owed for jobs from the previous year and for materials he had supplied. He had not needed immediate payment before because things were good for him. His situation was steady. He had trusted that he would be paid like he trusted his own body and resolve. He had not considered that he might be cheated because he had never understood weakness. Our world was about muscle, Daddy always said, and for the first time in his life Peter did not have it. He had called round and half had paid straight away or had begun to pay in instalments. He had called again and half of the rest had come through too. The remaining debtors paid up with a bit of persistence and some harsh words from other men, from friends of Peter's from his childhood or working life. One debtor remained. He was a greasy bastard, said Daddy, from one of the big detached houses in the nicer part of Doncaster that had windows on both sides of the front door and a drive laid over with stones, not concrete. He was not a good man, Daddy told us, and though he had got his money in plain sight of the law, he had not won it cleanly, nor had he worn it well. Not fairly nor honestly. He had not earned it by himself and with his wits and graft but with a league of other men, conspiring together to squeeze the remaining blood
from their home town. This man had bought and sold other men’s labour and owned dark clubs down dark alleys where women took off their clothes and danced. His money came from other people’s bodies, Daddy told us, men’s muscles and women’s skin.

Peter had built a conservatory for him. It was a beautiful thing, by all accounts. It had taken weeks and cost a fortune and Peter was still owed nearly five thousand pounds and a set of precision power tools he had left on site. He had called and written and shouted from the street but the man had felt no need to respond. And so, after months, and after the rapid onset of poverty, Peter had asked around, and a friend of a friend of a friend had told him about the bearded giant that lived in the woods with his little son and hawkish daughter.

“I went up to see him yesterday afternoon,” said Daddy. “He still lives in his mother’s house, which I knew from years back when I used to live round there and mowed all lawns on that street. He told me all this. Gave me details. Put forward his case, so to speak. Well, he put it in such a way I were persuaded. You two know better than any I don’t fight for nowt. And I’m not talking about money or prizes here. With this sort of fight there has to be a reason, and Pete had one. This Mr Coxswain owed him properly, and you know I don’t like to see it. A
man in Pete’s position taken advantage of like that, brought lower when he’s already low. I’m not a thug, I won’t have you thinking that, but by God it makes me angry. Pete told me where Coxswain would be and when. Most nights he drinks and plays cards at a back-room casino on edge of town. It’s owned by an old colleague of his and pair of them set place up to make money for their lot. Coxswain takes home thousands some nights from desperate fools who don’t understand they’re fated to lose. I went then, on that same night when I knew he’d be there because I knew he’d have money on him. There’d be no point in going and doing all that I needed to do and at end of it coming away without Pete’s cash. It’s only half justice, you see. Other half is living. Getting done what needs to be done.”

Daddy had drunk his tea before it had cooled.

“So I borrowed Pete’s car. He said to do that and he were right to. If car was seen it would be linked to him but nobody would think he could have done owt like what I were about to do. Pete can’t even drive it any more, poor man. But nobody were going to see anyway. I parked ten minutes away and went to casino near two o’clock that morning and waited until after four, until after most of men had left, careful not to be seen, standing in cover of some plane trees. Well, Coxswain were one of last to leave. Tired but not drunk. Too alert for that. And too set
on winning game. He came out to his car, which were parked near me. I’d have liked to have said I planned it that way—I should have—but I admit I were lucky. I were slow though. He opened boot and put his bag inside and I only got to him as he were closing it. He of course turned round, of course wondering who I were, guessing rightly that I were trouble for him, but not understanding why. Not then. He squared up but I started with a question first. Asked him if he were who I thought he were. He should have said no but he said that he were. Brave. A small amount of respect crept in. But then he messed up. Showed his true self. I asked for money he owed Pete. I asked for exact amount—I’m no thief. I said I’d take it to him. Made it clear I’d be taking it that evening and that I knew he had money on him. At first I thought he were doing all right. He said he were getting it from boot, and he went to open it. Men other than me might have been more suspicious, but I don’t have time for that. I don’t need to be suspicious. Suspicion comes from fear, see. If he’d pulled out a gun or knife I’d have known how to handle it. I’m not fussed. He opened up boot as if to get his bag of cash, but instead brought out a golf club. He lifted it. He tried to take it to me, but . . .”

Daddy looked down at the scrubbed oak table. A slight smile shifted his wet lips. Then he raised his
blue eyes to Cathy. She had listened to the story but seemed unmoved. Her expression was mute, her eyes were clear.

“Well. It dindt matter,” he said. Cathy’s irises widened then narrowed like the bobbing designs on an old spinning top.

Daddy told us what he had done next. He recounted how he had put up his arm to catch the club. How he had bent it in half with his two bare hands. How Mr Coxswain had ended up sprawled and choking on the tarmac, beaten so badly he should have been unconscious. But Daddy was expert in the consequences of time. He knew how to lengthen an engagement. He knew how to make a man suffer.

He detailed it all. Told us everything. Until it seemed like tears were coming to my eyes.

Then he stopped. Stopped suddenly. He rose from his chair and wrapped me in his arms, said he was sorry and that he should not have told us anything.

“You got Peter’s money, then?” Cathy asked.

He turned back to her and sat down, still gripping my hand.

“I did,” he said. “I did and I gave it back to him. All of it. And I’ll show you what he gave me in return.”

Daddy raised himself onto his feet and slipped through the front door. He returned cradling two black puppies in his huge, bloodied hands. Two
lurchers. Greyhounds crossed with border collies. We named them Jess and Becky that morning and made a snug den for them in the hallway. No floor had yet been laid in that room so it would be like outside and inside at the same time. Daddy said that would suit them.