

CREATURES OF FLYN
BOOK 1

MORDICAY



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Published in 2022 by FeedARead Publishing

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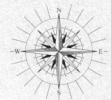
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County of Astershire
IN THE KINGDOM
OF ALVERN

TO ESTLESHIRE



Norling

WELDEN
WOODS

River Wilber

MOOR

Asterbey

Witherbey

River Aster

Skraling

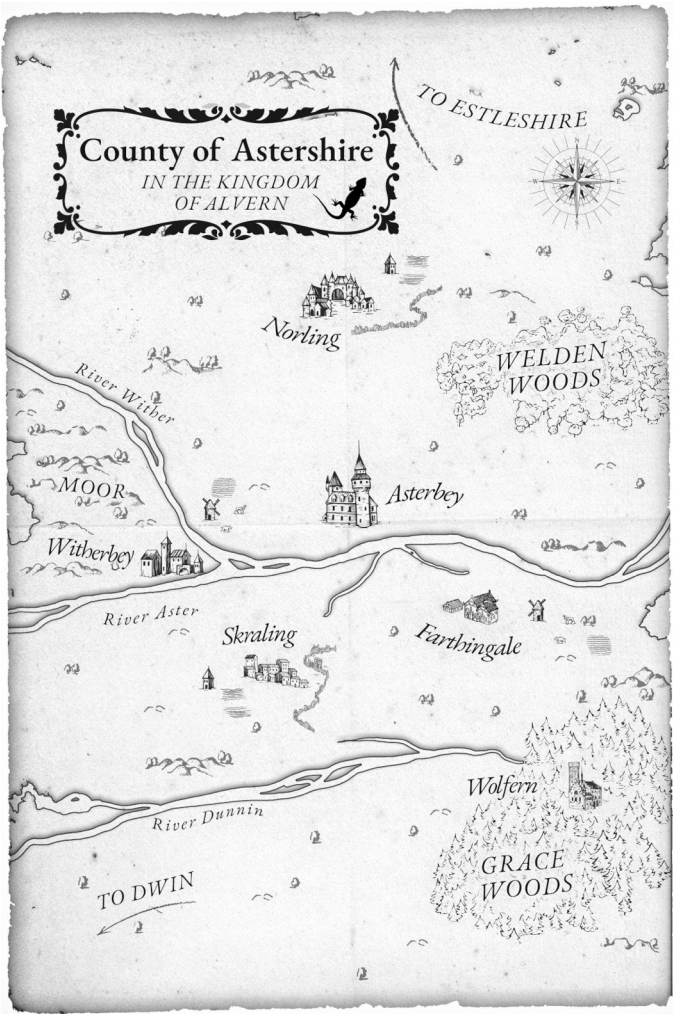
Farthingale

River Dunning

Wolfen

GRACE
WOODS

TO DWIN



CHAPTER I

One night, Jeremy Whitelock died and went to hell.

That's what they said.

He collapsed right outside the church. Black grit clouded his eyes. He babbled in a weird tongue. And who but the devil himself made those yellow pustules grow and burst upon his face?

Then he died.

Make no mistake, they said. Old Haw marked that man for his own.

He was five days sick, and dead on the sixth.

He wasn't the last.

Tommy Wherwill was a master thatcher, and he'd been thatching the roof on Jeremy's cottage before the old man had died. Mrs Wherwill had found Tommy staggering across the village green one afternoon, and thought he'd had one beer too many at The Cock Robin. Then she saw his eyes, misty at first, but growing dull, dark and gritty.

She took him to his bed.

On the second day, he was gibbering in words nobody could understand. Three days, and big boils were sprouting over his face and neck. Five days, and they were leaking pus. Six days, and he was dead.

The day after the burial, Tommy's brother went to see the widow, and found her eyes speckled like hens' eggs. He ran from the house. Two days later the parson found him, gritty-eyed and muttering beneath the old elm tree. By Sunday, the whole Wherwill family was dead.

Some of the men chopped down that elm tree and burned it. They burned down the Wherwill and Whitelock cottages, too. The parson stood over the ashy remains and said a prayer.

A week later, all of those men were dead.

Word spread, and the sheriff set a watch on our parish bounds: nobody could leave Witherbey. Summer wore on, and the parson – the new parson – had to consecrate more ground beside the churchyard, where the churchwardens dug a great dark pit. After all, they said, folk might start dying quicker than they could dig graves, and it was as well to get the bodies in the ground sooner rather than later.

Body by body, the pit started to fill.

We didn't live in the village, thank goodness. We lived on Wren Farm, a little way out: me, my sister Alice, our mother and father, Lankin the steward, and five hands. Father told us not to go to the village until the plague had gone.

'Will that be when everyone else is dead?' I said.

He said, 'Hold your tongue and do as I say.'

He was blind, crippled by war, and terrified of disease.

‘Nothing but age will rob me of my flyn,’ he declared.

I wanted to believe it.

One morning, Sister Reseda came to our door. She was a big sturdy nun with a hairy mole on her chin. By some arcane decree from goodness knows when, the old priory at Wolfert always sent a nun to live in Witherbey, in a special cottage beside Drake’s Copse. The monks and nuns at Wolfert were healers and herbalists, and Sister Reseda was the nearest thing that Witherbey had to a doctor. And once the plague – the dreaded grit – started to spread, she barely had a moment’s rest.

‘Harriet,’ she said. ‘Harriet, come with me.’

I held back.

‘What?’ said the Sister.

‘You reek of the plague.’

‘Do I? Well, hold your nose, if you must.’

I still held back. The Sister leaned towards me and I leaned away.

‘Look at my eyes,’ she said. ‘Gritty?’

‘No.’

‘Then come with me. Do I have to drag you out?’

‘Where are we going?’

‘To the village, of course.’

‘Father says –’

‘Yes, I expect he does. Now come on.’

She really would have dragged me out, so I took my cloak and followed her. As we walked across the farmyard, Alice came out of the milking sheds.

‘Milking done?’ boomed Sister Reseda.

‘Yes, Sister.’

‘Then follow me.’

We marched out of the farmyard with Alice following in our wake.

‘Where are we going?’ said Alice, struggling to keep up.

‘To the village,’ said the Sister.

‘Do you need us to help you with something?’

‘I have too much to do,’ said the nun. ‘Too many people have the grit. You and your sister are going to help me. Don’t worry, I won’t make you touch the sick, or their beds, or anything like that. I need you to fetch and carry for me, light fires, draw water and boil it, burn soiled linen... That sort of thing.’

‘Why us?’ I asked. ‘Father won’t—’

‘Because the farm can manage without you, at least until harvest. Your father can’t work, I know, but you have Lankin and the hands, and maybe even your mother can do something.’ She cast a glance at Alice. ‘And maybe this will help to keep you out of Lankin’s way. I know how he treats you, Alice.’

Alice looked away but her bruised cheek was painfully obvious.

Halfway to the village, we ran into a group of lads: Jack Tully, Odwin Wagg, that lot.

‘Stop,’ barked Sister Reseda, and she inspected the eyes of each boy in turn.

‘You’re all clean,’ she said, ‘for now.’

Jack swaggered up to me. ‘What about you, Harriet?’ he said, gazing into my eyes. Behind him, the other silly lads gawped at me and grinned their stupid grins.

‘I haven’t got the grit,’ I said.

‘Nice to have a look, all the same, buttercup.’

Half of me wanted to slap him, the other half

wanted to flash him a smile. So I just raised an eyebrow, half-smiled, and followed Sister Reseda. The boys carried on to whatever work they had to do. Jack glanced back over his shoulder at me. They didn't spare a glance for Alice, of course, which was a mixed blessing for her, I suppose.

We came to the first cottage and heard violent coughing inside. A window flew open and bright vomit spewed out.

Sister Reseda turned to us. 'Alice, fetch water. Harriet, bring firewood. There's a stack outside The Cock Robin.'

Then she disappeared into the cottage.

Alice looked at me. Her eyes were wide. The pink had gone from her cheeks.

I looked down at my hands – my clean, beautiful hands – and said, 'We're going to die.'

So it went on, day after day after day. An early autumn came with red and gold, vomit and bile. Life became a matter of waking early, working late, boiling water, burning bed sheets, running between the Sister's cottage and the village to bring herbs, bandages, poultices, powders and bottles. Sister Reseda was tireless, working in a trance. I felt thin, bone-tired and disgusted. Plump little Alice seemed constantly puffed out and on the verge of tears. How she kept on caring, I don't know.

'That girl has a bottomless heart,' sighed Sister Reseda.

Charlie Partridge started helping us. The Partridge family lived right by the village green, and Charlie, the youngest son, had done odd jobs for

Jeremy Whitelock from time to time. We thought he'd be one of the first to go. But he still hadn't caught the grit, and none of his family were sick either. We guessed that, like Sister Reseda, they were all somehow naturally safe from the plague and it couldn't sap their fly.

'Like them cows that survived the blight fifty years back,' said Charlie. 'My old grandad told me about that, and he ought to know, because they was his cows, they was.'

He rabbited on, but he was big and strong for his age and we couldn't have carried on without him. He kept sighing and saying how sad it all was: 'It's a blight, that's what it is. We've got a blight in Witherbey, and a right sorry state we're in.'

Meanwhile he took a real shine to Alice, and kept asking if she was all right, which of course she wasn't, she was wrung out. It scarcely seemed possible, but he was growing sweet on my roly-poly sister. Still, he had always been a bit simple. He was fascinated by the moon, so maybe that explained his liking for round-faced Alice.

None of it really mattered, of course. Sister Reseda worked and worked, but her patients always died. She made some of them more comfortable. She made none of them better.

'Perhaps there is no cure,' she said eventually, and despair punched me in the stomach.

The sextant buried thirty more people before the harvest moon.

A week later, we buried the sextant.

Then the pit was full, and Charlie and his dad

spent a day shovelling soil over it to keep the badness inside.

I thought the corn was going to rot in the fields, the hay to sag in the meadows. There were barely enough of us fit to bring the harvest home – but we managed it, though we couldn't have done it without the servants from Witherbey Hall. Even Lady Elenda and her daughter Ismilla went so far as to pick the apples in their orchard and send them out into the village for us to devour in a weary, miserable feast.

'That's all that, then,' said Charlie, dusting down his hands and gazing at the full barn and ricks. 'That'll keep body and flyn together. Wheat and barley and good sweet hay.'

I turned to him. 'So there'll be bread. But will anyone be left to eat it?'

'We might see it through,' said Rosie Salter, my best friend.

I looked at her, and saw black grit in her eyes.

There were no good days, but some of the worst were when we saw Polly Weaver. She was a mad, revolting old crone who burned foul-smelling herbs in her home outside the village. It was a squat little hovel, swathed in ivy and an acrid, smoky fug, just off the path through Pipit Wood. I hated the place, and some of the simple folk, like Charlie Partridge and his brothers, were afraid of her. 'A witch lady from the Welden Woods,' they called her. But the Welden Woods were miles away, and nobody could name any evil things she had done in her long life. Yes, she was always muttering things to herself – but no wonder, after living on her own for goodness knows how many

years. And yes, she had a face like a dead toad, but she had done me a kindness more than once, mixing a lotion to keep pimples from my face.

So I went to help Sister Reseda when she tended to old Polly, even though it made me feel sick. She was fighting the plague amazingly well for such an ancient woman, still hobbling around the cottage by herself, and sharing her thoughts with the blackbirds and the trees. But the disease was taking its toll on body and fly. She had always been ugly, but the scabrous spread of the pox along with the grit in her eyes made her hideous.

One afternoon in early winter, while Sister Reseda went out to fetch kindling, Polly beckoned me to her bedside. I inched a little closer, but not within coughing distance.

‘You are clean,’ she creaked.

‘It’s no small mercy.’

‘Mayhap my mixtures have kept more than pimples from your pretty cheeks.’

I said nothing.

‘Surely you remember?’

‘Oh, I remember, Polly, of course I remember.’ I touched my cheeks. They were still soft, still beautiful. ‘I’m grateful, you know, Polly. I know you’ve always been kind to me.’

She smiled. Her teeth were horrible, but she still had a full set.

‘Harriet Wren,’ she said. ‘Will you do something for me? Will you listen to this old woman who has been kind to you, and kept you the most beautiful maiden in Witherbey?’

I nodded, but shuffled slightly away from her.

‘You do not think me a witch, do you, Harriet?’

‘No, of course I don’t. I’m not like those silly boys. You know I’ve got more brains than them.’

‘Then listen to me. I will not be here to make mixtures for you much longer, but I will share with you my wisdom, for I am very old, and I have learned much.’ Her crusty eyebrows drew together. ‘Do not trust him.’

Despite myself, I stepped closer. ‘Who?’

‘The boy.’

‘Who?’ I spread my hands. ‘Charlie? Jack? Odwin?’ I cast about for inspiration. ‘Bob?’

‘The Lightfoot boy.’

Was the grit making her babble?

I shook my head. ‘There is no Lightfoot boy. Not around here.’

‘He will come,’ she said. ‘You do not know him yet, Harriet. Never has he passed this way before, though mayhap his handiwork has graced Witherbey before now.’ She paused and looked me straight in the eye. ‘He is coming to Witherbey. He is coming to help, but there is no good in him.’

I frowned, clueless.

A dark look came over her crabbed face. ‘The Lightfoot boy, he is coming from the Priory. From Wolfern. The Sister, oh, she thinks that he’s coming to help. But no, not him, not that boy.’ She screwed up her ugly face. ‘That unnatural bairn! That sinners’ brood from out of the south!’

We heard Sister Reseda’s footsteps on the leaves outside.

‘Do not trust him, Harriet,’ said Polly. ‘Whatever the good Sister says, don’t you trust him.’

. . .

Towards evening, I went alone to see Parson James. He was supposed to be very clever, but he was only a young man and he always looked lost.

‘Parson,’ I asked him, ‘what is a sinners’ brood?’

‘Oh, Mistress Wren. Surely you must know?’

I shook my head. ‘I don’t think so.’

‘Well, a sinners’ brood is... the brood of... sinners. That is to say, the offspring of sinners. By which I mean, the children of sinful people. Do you see?’

‘Well, yes.’ I took a deep breath. ‘But aren’t we all sinners?’

‘Oh, we are, we are.’

‘Then we’re all a sinners’ brood?’

‘No, no. Not at all. You should not say that.’ He stuttered a little. ‘I would venture that the phrase means something rather more specific.’

I waited for him to explain.

He coughed. ‘It may mean that the parents of the child were never married, never even betrothed. Or that there was something unusual – something unnatural – about the birth.’

‘But what could there be that’s unnatural? Babies are just... born, aren’t they?’

His eyes darted this way and that. ‘Yes,’ he said eventually. ‘Babes are just born. As it should be.’ He tried and failed to stifle a yawn. ‘I’m afraid I must rest now, Mistress Wren. As you know only too well, there are so many sick people to visit. It is a trial for the soul, for us all.’

‘Some are saying that God sent the grit to punish us. Is that true?’

He wearily shook his head. ‘I do not believe that. If anything, it is the work of the devil – Old Haw, as

they call him in these parts. It most certainly is not a curse from God.'

A question that was often in the shadows of my mind came to the fore.

'But does God know how much we suffer?'

'Oh, He does. Most certainly, He does.'

'And does He...?' I searched for the right word. 'Does He care about it? Does He understand?'

Parson James nodded vigorously. 'The Maker best understands what He has made. The world lives through Him.' He crossed himself. 'If we suffer, it is because He suffers too.'

None the wiser, I went to see Rosie. She was fighting the plague better than most. Her flyn was strong and her spirit, like her hair, was fiery.

'Rosie,' I asked her, once she'd reassured me that she hadn't got any worse overnight. 'What do you know of boys from the south?'

'Boys from the south,' she said, and smiled. 'They're right handsome.'

'Are they?'

She laughed, painfully. 'Well, I don't know, do I? I've never met any more than you have, Hattie. There was that tinker that came by, a year or two back, he'd come up from Forreton, I think. A nice lad, do you remember? Had a funny accent.'

'But your uncle's travelled, hasn't he?' Rosie's uncle was a roving conjuror, of all things. 'Hasn't he said anything about the people down south, what they're like?'

Rosie shrugged. 'Maybe they're a bit less keen to part with their pennies. And like I say, some of them

talk funny. But no, they're no different from us, as far as I know.'

She leaned away from me and coughed something up.

I touched her trembling arm. 'Can I—'

She breathed heavily but shook her head. 'No, get along, Hattie. Come with the Sister tomorrow. I'll be well enough for tonight.'

She scratched lightly behind her ear, where the pustules were beginning to rise.

On my way home, I passed the Partridges' house and stopped to knock on the door. I didn't want to go home just yet. And the Partridges were a talkative family, so maybe they could take my mind off Polly's warning and Rosie's pustules.

It was the eldest daughter, Molly, who answered and ushered me in.

'Charlie's not home yet,' she said.

'I haven't come to see him.'

'Oh?'

'I just want to talk to someone.'

She shrugged. 'Will I do?'

I shrugged back. 'Yes, I suppose so.'

She looked flustered, distracted, and I wasn't surprised. She was betrothed to a man from the town, and his family wouldn't let him come to Witherbey now that the plague had struck. And she couldn't leave the parish either, thanks to the sheriff's watch on the bounds.

'Does he write letters to you?' I asked.

'He can't write,' she said. 'And I can't read.'

Anyroad, Harriet, you look puzzled over something. You been taxing your brains again?’

I frowned. ‘Molly, have you ever heard of an unnatural birth?’

Hands on hips, she pondered. ‘Well, our grandad, him that kept the cows, he delivered a two-headed calf once. I’d call that unnatural, wouldn’t you? Didn’t live that long, mind, poor thing.’

My frown deepened. Surely there was no chance of this Lightfoot boy having two heads?

There was silence for a few moments. Somehow the two-headed calf had killed the conversation. Finally, for want of anything better, I said, ‘Are your father’s sheep thriving?’

Before she could answer, we heard the front door bang.

‘Hello,’ piped Charlie. ‘It’s me. Moon’s getting bright!’

‘Hello Charlie,’ called Molly. ‘Harriet Wren’s here. She’s come to talk about father’s sheep, or something.’

‘Fancy that,’ said Charlie, coming in and rubbing his cold hands together. ‘Anyway, Harriet, how are you? All right?’

‘Yes, but —’

‘Good. So that means we’ve got two visitors, Moll, and here’s the second one. I met this chap coming into the village along the Asterbey road. He’s all right, this chap.’

A boy followed Charlie into the room. He was skinny, twitchy, sandy, and freckled. His eyes were big and summer-sky blue. He stared dumbly at us all, like a lunatic.

Then he blinked and said, ‘I’m Adam Lightfoot.’

CHAPTER 2

‘The tall girl’s my sister Molly,’ Charlie was saying. ‘And this one’s Harriet Wren. She’s got a sister called Alice – a nice lass, she is. They help Sister Reseda and me, so you’ll get to know all of us soon, right enough.’

Adam was looking around with a kind of wild look in his eyes, like some shrewd little bird.

I was staring at him, and felt repulsed.

Suddenly he turned his thin face my way, looked right through me, and for a moment my heart stopped.

‘Adam’s come from Wolfern Priory to help us with the grit,’ Charlie explained. ‘He’s a novice healer, he is. That’s what he says.’

‘Bless you, Adam,’ said Molly. ‘But you’ll wish you’d never come.’

I could tell what she was thinking. How long would a slight boy like that last against the grit? I guessed that we’d be burying Adam Lightfoot within three weeks. Polly needn’t have worried about this unnatural bairn.

‘Your front door wants mending,’ Adam told Molly. ‘The hinge at the bottom is broken.’

She shook her head. ‘That jimmy’s been cracking for years, Adam. Don’t fret.’

‘I’ll mend it for you,’ said Adam. ‘I just need three nails and a mallet.’

‘Save your strength, you poor daft lad. You’ll need every ounce of your flyn when you start working with the Sister.’

‘It won’t take me long, and it won’t tire me out,’ Adam said. ‘Fixing the door, I mean.’

Molly sighed and looked to heaven. ‘Maybe tomorrow. Maybe then. Just go and see Sister Reseda for now. She’ll want to meet you as soon as she can, won’t she?’

‘I’ll say,’ Charlie chipped in. ‘Adam’s going to stay with her, you know, seeing as he’ll be working with her. Come on, Adam. I’ll show you where to go. Keep my dinner hot, won’t you, Moll? I’ll be starving when I get back. Starving like a sparrow.’

With one more concerned glance at the broken hinge, Adam followed Charlie back outside into the gathering night.

Molly and I looked at each other.

‘Why did they send us a skinny boy like that?’ I said. ‘Why him, of all people?’

‘Sounds like a southerner.’ She shrugged and sighed. ‘Anyroad, they’ve sent him here to an early grave, I reckon.’

‘Maybe they can afford to lose him,’ I said. ‘Maybe they don’t want him back. Would you?’

‘Shame on you, Harriet.’

‘But there’s something not right about him,’ I said,

past caring what anyone thought of me. ‘He looks like an animal, doesn’t he?’

‘He’s a strange lad, I suppose, but so’s our moon-struck Charlie, heaven help him.’ She thought for a moment. ‘Well, it don’t much matter what we make of him, Harriet. The Wolfern folks won’t be getting their Adam back, not unless he turns out like you and me, strong against the grit. Which he could be, I suppose.’

I shivered. ‘We’ll know soon enough.’

I gave Alice a shove.

‘Come on, you lazy lump. It’s time to get up.’

Alice rolled over. ‘Sorry, Harriet. I’m so tired.’

‘Aren’t we all? Anyway, I’m already up and dressed, so come on.’

She staggered out of bed, looking pale and puffy. Looking sick. My heart and flyn lurched.

‘Alice, come here, let me look in your eyes.’ A breathless pause. ‘You’re clean, thank heavens. For a minute there, I thought you had the grit.’

‘I don’t, do I?’

‘Of course not.’

Which was just as well for both of us, since we shared a bed.

‘You’re just tired,’ I said. ‘And no wonder. Now get a move on before Lankin comes.’

We tramped out to Sister Reseda’s cottage as usual, and met Charlie on the way. He came up beside Alice and very nearly took her hand, but changed his mind at the last moment and patted her elbow instead.

‘There’s a boy come here to help us,’ he told her. ‘Adam Lightfoot, from Wolfern Priory.’

‘Oh, that’s good news! What’s he like?’

‘He’s a good chap.’

‘He’s not like us,’ I said. ‘He’s like a bird or something.’

‘A bird?’ Alice giggled. ‘He hasn’t got feathers, has he?’

‘He’s got a voice like a southerner, so I reckon as he’s from the south,’ Charlie said sagely. ‘But he’s come here from Wolfert Priory, and that ain’t so far south. He’s a novice there, he says, learning to make the medicines and all that. He knows all about medicaments for feet, he says, and other bits of the body too, I suppose. He’s going to be a healer, like the Sister, but not a Sister, of course. He’ll be a Brother. That’s how it works.’

Adam was waiting with Sister Reseda outside her cottage. He was weighed down in an oversized cloak with a small picture embroidered on the arm, like a golden flame on a stick. I’d seen something similar on Sister Reseda’s blue habit, which she only wore on holy days. A special symbol of Wolfert Priory, I guessed.

The Sister introduced him curtly, and Alice shook his hand. She was trying not to look surprised, but I knew that she had seen it too: that darting, skittish, wild look. Then we marched off to the village, where the parson blundered out of the joiners’ house towards us.

‘Too late, too late,’ he cried. ‘We have lost them all in the night.’

So, four more bodies for some poor soul to bury. Adam and the Sister crossed themselves. Adam was looking horrified already.

‘If he can’t cope with four dead of a morning,’ I muttered to Alice, ‘it’ll tear his fly to see the

churchyard filling up.'

First we went to the Salters' house, and on the way I showed Adam the graves. There had been ten plague-deaths in one day last week, and they were all buried beneath one grotesque, swollen black mound, smothered in ash to contain the deadly miasmas.

Adam quivered at the sight.

'Molly's right. You'll wish you'd never come.'

But he simply said, 'No.'

At the Salters' house, Charlie and Alice were set to work gathering and burning bedsheets, while I boiled water with herbs to sweeten the air. Adam stood back and watched Sister Reseda washing Rosie's sick parents.

I looked at him and frowned. 'Aren't you going to help us?'

'Leave him be,' said the Sister. 'Let him watch. Just get on with your work, Harriet.'

So much for Polly's warning. This Lightfoot boy wasn't dangerous, he was useless. Unnatural? True, he looked strange enough, but he wasn't a two-headed calf.

Everywhere we went, it was the same. He stood back and watched, and the only useful thing I saw him do was when he stopped at the Partridges' house to mend that rickety hinge.

'Maybe you'd be better off doing the joiners' work,' I said, 'now that they're all dead.'

He looked through me and said nothing.

The next day I went to the Sister's cottage alone. Lankin was getting more and more annoyed with us for leaving the farm and helping Sister Reseda all the

time, so today he had dragged Alice out to work with the other hands, cleaning the cowshed, as soon as she'd woken up.

It turned out that Charlie couldn't join us, either, because he'd tripped and banged his head earlier that morning and wasn't quite steady on his feet. So we did our rounds, just the three of us: Sister Reseda, Adam, and me.

Adam was carrying a bag full of powders, leaves, mixtures, potions, all manner of things from Sister Reseda's dwindling stores. He still didn't do any work, but he murmured things to the Sister when she was administering medicines and cleaning pustulous skin.

Halfway through the day, while we were resting and eating by the stream, the Sister said, 'I'll manage by myself this afternoon. You two can go to the woods.'

'Both of us?' I frowned at Adam, then at her. 'Why? How are you going to cope without me? And what are we supposed to do in the woods?'

'We need leaves from some of the rarer herbs and the younger trees, before the plants die back completely. There isn't much time, so I need you to work with Adam, and help him.'

'He doesn't need to come at all, does he?'

'Yes, he does, because he knows what we need.'

'Really, does he?' Suddenly my flynn felt hot. 'He's not been here long enough to spit. Charlie said he's an expert at curing feet. What good is that? Gritty feet aren't the problem. How can he possibly –'

'He knows what we need, Harriet,' said the Sister, iron-voiced. 'He knows a great many things, not just about curing feet.'

I scowled at him, feeling hurt. How could he

possibly know what to do? What did he know about Witherbey and the grit? He hadn't been here when we were working ourselves flyless, and scrubbing the stink off the floors. He'd not had blood and death clinging to his hands and feet and right up his nose, day after day after poxy day. Looking for grit in everyone's eyes, listening to the babbling, the gibberish from goodness-knows-where, spewing out of the poor souls when they snuffed it at the end.

But I couldn't say all that, not with Sister Reseda looking firm and stern beside me.

So Adam and I went to Pipit Wood together.

On the way, he described five different leaves that he wanted us to collect.

'Hewtips are this big, and shaped like shields,' he said, miming a leaf with his hands. 'This late in the year, there won't be many left, and they'll be the colour of Alice's eyes.'

I frowned. Alice's eyes? Why had he even noticed the colour of Alice's eyes? I couldn't remember the colour of Alice's eyes and I'd seen them every day for what, thirteen years? He'd seen them for one day.

Surely he wasn't sweet on her? Not him as well? On Alice?

But there was no warmth in his voice when he said it, and no dreamy look in his eyes, like when Charlie talked about her. No, Adam's eyes were wide, ice-blue, and fixed – like a fox out hunting.

We walked in different parts of the wood, but within sight of each other. I cast him glances now and then, but his eyes were turned to the woodland floor as he stooped his way through the mulch. He was

completely silent and, when the sun went behind a cloud, he seemed to vanish into the shadows. That's when I felt him watching me. Weird eyes hidden in the gloom. Then the sun came back and he was staring at the ground again, picking his careful way through the wood. If ever I turned towards him he flinched up like a startled fawn and looked straight through me. I tried not to catch his eye.

After a while I recognised the pungent smoke of Polly's hovel, somewhere off to the right. From farther off, out of sight, came a grating chorus of rooks.

'I'm going to look over this way,' I called to Adam.

He straightened up. 'Don't go too far. I don't know the wood and I could get lost.'

'I won't go far,' I said. 'But don't you follow me.'

'I won't. I still need to gather more leaves. But I don't want to lose you.'

He stooped again, and I followed the reek to Polly's cottage.

'What brings the young beauty of Witherbey to my door?' she croaked from her bed, as I walked in and my eyes adjusted to the dark.

'He's here,' I said. 'The Lightfoot boy. Adam.'

'You remember what I told you?'

I nodded. 'What's wrong with him, Polly?'

'Can you not tell for yourself?'

'Well, he's... he's not like us. I don't know. You said he was unnatural, Polly. What does that mean?'

'Polly does not know everything,' she smiled and coughed. 'I have but two eyes. And this shrunken body cannot always carry me out to learn all that I might. You will have to tell me what you have seen.'

'I don't know if I've seen anything yet. You called him an unnatural bairn, a sinners' brood. He's out

here in the forest with me now, and he's starting to frighten me.' I wouldn't have said that to anyone else. 'Sometimes there's a look in his eyes, like an animal. And anyway, he doesn't do anything when we're out with Sister Reseda. Anything at all. He just watches us. Just stands back and watches with those eyes of his.'

'Sometimes dark work needs bright eyes.'

'Well, his eyes are bright, Polly,' I said. Summer-sky blue and bright as ice, I thought. 'But he doesn't do any work.'

'Maybe he works unseen. Watch him. Watch his work. Then you will —'

Suddenly she erupted in a fit of coughs and retches, covering her bed with flecks of sick.

'Under — under — my —' A great heaving came up from her guts. 'Under my bed...'

But then she fell back with a violent shudder and started mumbling something through frothing spittle, something in a weird tongue.

'Oh, mercy,' I cried. 'Polly, I'm going to fetch help.'

I ran out onto the path to the village, and hesitated. I could see Adam in the distance, crouching over a sapling. He could get as lost as he liked in these woods, for all I cared. But if I ran and left him there, he might find Polly's cottage, and then what? Why was she afraid of him? What would he do to her?

I ran over to him.

'Adam! Adam, we have to go back to the village!'

'Why?'

My wits were quick. 'I saw a lot of smoke. I think there might be a roof on fire. Can you smell it?'

He sniffed. Thin odours from Polly's hearth still clung to my frock.

‘I can smell something. But it doesn’t smell like burning thatch.’

‘Adam, we have to go back, they’ll need our help.’

After a second, he nodded. We ran.

But on the way back to the village, we met old Ben, one of our farmhands, hurrying towards us.

‘Oh, Miss Harriet,’ he said, his voice trembling. ‘Miss Harriet, you’ve heard?’

‘What?’

‘Your sister, mistress! Miss Alice, she came over sick. The plague...’

‘Oh no, no, no!’

‘She fell right beside me and I carried her up to bed. She’s got the grit in her eyes, Miss Harriet.’

I pelted back home. My flynn was burning, my heart was galloping. I charged through the house and found Alice squirming in our bed, groaning. I saw the grit in her eyes.

‘Oh, mercy, Alice!’

I gripped her hands – her cold, grey hands – and tried to meet her cloudy gaze.

‘You shouldn’t touch me,’ she whispered.

‘Alice, Alice, it’s all right! I’ll get Sister Reseda. She’ll come and we’ll heal you. God help us, Alice, we’ll make you better, we’ll make you better.’

Jane the milkmaid was standing by, helpless. I grabbed her and screamed, ‘Get the Sister!’

She went, just as Lankin came in, looking thunderous and swinging his vicious blackthorn stick.

‘That pig’s brought a curse on this house,’ he growled, glaring at Alice. ‘If the grit don’t kill her then I’ll thrash the living flynn out of—’

‘Get out!’ I shrieked.

He snarled, but backed away, blaspheming. Maybe I would pay for that later, but I didn't care.

A moment later, Adam appeared.

'You get out too!' I snapped.

'Harriet, I can help.'

'How?' I laughed and choked. 'Are you going to mend the door, Adam? Are you going to nail in a few old hinges? And then maybe you could – you could – you could collect some leaves the colour of her eyes?'

'I've got the leaves here with me. Let me in. Please.' His eyes flashed. 'Please.'

His weird gaze held me for a moment. I stepped back and let him in, but watched his every move.

'Alice, open your mouth,' he said. 'Stick your tongue out, if you can.'

She did, and he placed a small heart-shaped leaf upon it.

'Close your eyes, Alice, and your mouth.'

She closed them. He crushed some tiny round leaves between finger and thumb and smeared the stuff on her eyelids.

'Harriet?' He looked at me again, and pressed some soft stems into my hand. 'Boil some milk with these.' He glanced at the little fireplace in our room, dark and cold. 'I need to light a fire. Tell someone to bring more wood. And unspun wool, if you have it.' He thought, then added, 'And somebody should fetch Charlie Partridge.'

I gripped his shoulder. 'Can we save her?'

His blazing, frightening eyes met mine. 'We might.'

I ran downstairs, told Ben to fetch Charlie, and put a pan of milk on the stove. Then I remembered.

'Polly!'

But I couldn't leave now. I felt sick, and swallowed.

Polly and everyone else would have to wait. I wiped my eyes and, out of nowhere, crystal-eyed Adam appeared beside me.

'Is there honey?'

I cast about, wishing that I hadn't sent Jane to the village. She would have known about honey.

'I don't know, Adam, you'll have to look.'

So he hurried about the kitchen and the larder, checking every nook, skittering around like a mouse, then darting back upstairs with a jar and a jug.

Moments later Sister Reseda arrived, red in the face.

'Where is Alice?'

The milk was sizzling. I took the steaming pan and led the way.

The room was hot. Adam had stoked up the fire and piled blankets onto Alice. There were green stains around her eyes and neck, from Adam's leaves. I gave him the milk. He tested the temperature with his little finger, and waited a few moments before tipping it into his jug.

'Alice, open your mouth and swallow this,' he said.

She tried but coughed it back up.

'Try again.'

She swallowed some but most dribbled down her puffy face.

He turned and gave me the jug.

'Wait for it to cool a little more,' he said, 'then pour some into her hair.'

'Her hair?'

'And rub it in.'

I looked at Sister Reseda in disbelief, but her attention was fixed on Adam.

‘What do I need to do, Adam?’ she said.

‘Do you have any dove’s mercury?’

‘Some, yes.’

‘Throw a pinch on the fire. Robin’s root too, if you have it.’

‘What else?’

‘Is there any of that rust-coloured paste left?’

‘No. I could make some more, but it would take a day to boil down.’

He shook his head. ‘That’s too long. Does anyone else have it? The parson? The lady of the manor?’

‘Lady Elenda won’t have any,’ she said. ‘The parson might – I did give him a little, some days ago. As for anyone else...’

I caught her eye. ‘Polly Weaver? Could she have any?’

‘She might. And she’s closer than the parson, as the crow flies.’

‘She’s dying,’ I said. ‘I saw her just now, before I heard about Alice.’

A dozen thoughts flitted through the Sister’s mind.

‘I will go to Polly,’ she said. ‘You go to the parson. Bring him here with all the medicines he has, and waste no time.’

I wasted no time in getting to the parson’s door, but he floundered and dropped things, and it felt like hours before we finally got back home.

‘Do you have the rust-coloured paste?’ asked Adam.

The parson spilled his items onto the floor and scabbled amongst them.

‘It is here,’ he cried, holding up a little pot.

Adam took it.

‘Alice, open your mouth.’

She didn’t move.

‘Alice, can you open your mouth?’

Her lips parted slightly but her mouth didn’t open.

Adam looked at the parson and then at me.

‘Pray for her flyn,’ he said, ‘and open her mouth.’

