



'Alive, vivid, gripping'
ABIGAIL DEAN

WEYWARD

EMILIA HART

'Humming with a sly,
exhilarating magic'
BRIDGET COLLINS

WEYWARD

Emilia Hart



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Dedication

For my family

Epigraph

*The Weyward Sisters, hand in hand,
Posters of the sea and land,
Thus do go, about, about,
Thrice to thine, thrice to mine,
And thrice again to make up nine.
Peace, the charm's wound up.*

Macbeth

'Weyward' is used in the First Folio edition of *Macbeth*.
In later versions, 'Weyward' was replaced by 'Weird'.

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PART ONE

PROLOGUE

ALTHA

1619

Ten days they'd held me there. Ten days, with only the stink of my own flesh for company. Not even a rat graced me with its presence. There was nothing to attract it; they had brought me no food. Only ale.

Footsteps. Then, the wrench of metal on metal as the bolt was drawn back. The light hurt my eyes. For a moment, the men in the doorway shimmered as if they were not of this world and had come to take me away from it.

The prosecutor's men.

They had come to take me to trial.

1

KATE

2019

Kate is staring into the mirror when she hears it.

The key, scraping in the lock.

Her fingers shake as she hurries to fix her make-up, dark threads of mascara spidering onto her lower lids.

In the yellow light, she watches her pulse jump at her throat, beneath the necklace he gave her for their last anniversary. The chain is silver and thick, cold against her skin. She doesn't wear it during the day, when he's at work.

The front door clicks shut. The slap of his shoes on the floorboards. Wine, gurgling into a glass.

Panic flutters in her, like a bird. She takes a deep breath, touches the ribbon of scar on her left arm. Smiles one last time into the bathroom mirror. She can't let him see that anything is different. That anything is wrong.

Simon leans against the kitchen counter, wine glass in hand. Her blood pounds at the sight. The long, dark lines of him in his suit, the cut of his cheekbones. His golden hair.

He watches her walk towards him in the dress she knows he likes. Stiff fabric, taut across her hips. Red. The same colour as her underwear. Lace, with little bows. As if Kate herself is something to be unwrapped, to be torn open.

She looks for clues. His tie is gone, three buttons of his shirt open to reveal fine curls. The whites of his eyes glow pink. He hands her a glass of wine and she catches the alcohol on his breath, sweet and pungent. Perspiration beads her back, under her arms.

The wine is chardonnay, usually her favourite. But now the smell turns her stomach, makes her think of rot. She presses the glass to her lips without taking a sip.

‘Hi, babe,’ she says in a bright voice, polished just for him. ‘How was work?’

But the words catch in her throat.

His eyes narrow. He moves quickly, despite the alcohol: his fingers digging into the soft flesh of her bicep.

‘Where did you go today?’

She knows better than to twist out of his grasp, though every cell of her wants to. Instead, she places her hand on his chest.

‘Nowhere,’ she says, trying to keep her voice steady. ‘I’ve been home all day.’ She’d been careful to leave her iPhone at the flat when she walked to the pharmacy, to take only cash with her. She smiles, leans in to kiss him.

His cheek is rough with stubble. Another smell mingles with the alcohol, something heady and floral. Perfume, maybe. It wouldn’t be the first time. A tiny flare of hope in her gut. It could work to her advantage, if there’s someone else.

But she’s miscalculated. He shifts away from her and then— ‘Liar.’

Kate barely hears the word as Simon’s hand connects with her cheek, the pain dizzying like a bright light. At the edges of her vision, the colours of the room slide together: the gold-lit floorboards, the white leather couch, the kaleidoscope of the London skyline through the window.

A distant crashing sound: she has dropped her glass of wine.

She grips the counter, her breath coming out of her in ragged bursts, blood pulsing in her cheek. Simon is putting on his coat, picking up his keys from the dining table.

‘Stay here,’ he says. ‘I’ll know if you don’t.’

His shoes ring out across the floorboards. The door slams. She doesn’t move until she hears the creak of the lift down the shaft.

He’s gone.

The floor glitters with broken glass. Wine hangs sour in the air.

A copper taste in her mouth brings her back to herself. Her lip is bleeding, caught against her teeth by the force of his hand.

Something switches in her brain. *I’ll know if you don’t.*

It hadn’t been enough, leaving her phone at home. He’s found another way. Another way to track her. She remembers how the doorman eyed her in the lobby: had Simon slipped him a wad of crisp notes to spy on her? Her blood freezes at the thought.

If he finds out where she went – what she did – earlier today, who knows what else he might do. Install cameras, take away her keys.

And all her plans will come to nothing. She'll never get out.

But no. She's ready enough, isn't she?

If she leaves now, she could get there by morning. The drive will take seven hours. She's plotted it carefully on her second phone, the one he doesn't know about. Tracing the blue line on the screen, curling up the country like a ribbon. She's practically memorised it.

Yes, she'll go now. She *has* to go now. Before he returns, before she loses her nerve.

She retrieves the Motorola from its hiding place, an envelope taped to the back of her bedside table. Takes a hold-all from the top shelf of the wardrobe, fills it with clothes. From the en-suite, she grabs her toiletries, the box she hid in the cupboard earlier that day.

Quickly, she changes out of her red dress into dark jeans and a tight pink top. Her fingers tremble as she unclasps the necklace. She leaves it on the bed, coiled like a noose. Next to her iPhone with its gold case: the one Simon pays for, knows the passcode to. The one he can track.

She rummages through the jewellery box on her bedside table, fingers closing around the gold bee-shaped brooch she's had since childhood. She pockets it and pauses, looking around the bedroom: the cream duvet and curtains, the sharp angles of the Scandi-style furniture. There should be other things to pack, shouldn't there? She had loads of stuff, once – piles and piles of dog-eared books, art prints, mugs. Now, everything belongs to him.

In the lift, adrenalin crackles in her blood. What if he comes back, intercepts her as she's leaving? She presses the button for the basement garage but the lift jerks to a stop at the ground floor, the doors creaking open. Her heart pounds. The doorman's broad back is turned: he's talking to another resident. Barely breathing, Kate presses herself small into the lift, exhaling only when no one else appears and the doors judder shut.

In the garage, she unlocks the Honda, which she bought before they met and is registered in her name. He can't – surely – ask the police to put a call out if she's driving her own car? She's watched enough crime shows. *Left of her own volition*, they'll say.

Volition is a nice word. It makes her think of flying.

She turns the key in the ignition, then taps her great-aunt's address into Google Maps. For months, she's repeated the words in her head like a mantra.

Weyward Cottage, Crows Beck. Cumbria.

2

VIOLET

1942

Violet hated Graham. She absolutely loathed him. Why did he get to study interesting things all day, like science and Latin and someone called Pythagoras, while she was supposed to be content sticking needles through a canvas? The worst part, she reflected as her wool skirt itched against her legs, was that he got to do all this in *trousers*.

She ran down the main staircase as quietly as she could, to avoid the wrath of Father, who thoroughly disapproved of female exertion (and, it often seemed, of Violet). She stifled a giggle at the sound of Graham puffing behind her. Even in her stuffy clothes she could outrun him easily.

And to think that only last night he'd boasted about wanting to go to war! Pigs had a greater chance of flying. And anyway, he was only fifteen – a year younger than Violet – and therefore far too young. It was for the best, really. Nearly all the men in the village had gone, and half of them had died (or so Violet had overheard), along with the butler, the footman, and *both* the under-gardeners. Besides, Graham was her brother. She didn't want him to *die*. She supposed.

'Give it here!' Graham hissed.

Turning around, she saw that his round face was pink with effort and fury. He was angry because she'd stolen his Latin workbook and told him that he'd declined all his feminine nouns incorrectly.

'Shan't,' she hissed back, clutching the workbook to her chest. 'You don't deserve it. You've put *amor* instead of *arbor*, for heaven's sake.'

At the bottom of the staircase, she scowled at one of the many portraits of Father that hung in the hall, then turned left, weaving through the wood-panelled corridors before bursting into the kitchens.

‘What are ye playing at?’ barked Mrs Kirkby, gripping a meat cleaver in one hand and the pearly carcass of a rabbit in the other. ‘Could’ve chopped me finger off!’

‘Sorry!’ Violet shouted as she wrenched open the French windows, Graham panting behind her. They ran through the kitchen gardens, heady with the scent of mint and rosemary, and then they were in her favourite place in the world: the grounds. She turned around and grinned at Graham. Now that they were outside, he had no chance of catching up with her if she didn’t want him to. He opened his mouth and sneezed. He had terrible hay fever.

‘Aw,’ she said. ‘Do you need a hanky?’

‘Shut up,’ he said, reaching for the book. She skipped neatly away. He stood there for a moment, heaving. It was a particularly warm day: a layer of gauzy cloud had trapped the heat and stiffened the air. Sweat trickled in Violet’s armpits, and the skirt itched dreadfully, but she no longer cared.

She had reached her special tree: a silver beech that Dinsdale, the gardener, said was hundreds of years old. Violet could hear it humming with life behind her: the weevils searching for its cool sap; the ladybirds trembling on its leaves; the damselflies, moths and finches flitting through its branches. She held out her hand and a damselfly came to rest on her palm, its wings glittering in the sunlight. Golden warmth spread through her.

‘Ugh,’ said Graham, who had finally caught her up. ‘How can you let that *thing* touch you like that? Squash it!’

‘I’m not going to *squash* it, Graham,’ said Violet. ‘It has as much right to exist as you or I do. And look, it’s so pretty. The wings are rather like crystals, don’t you think?’

‘You’re ... not normal,’ said Graham, backing away. ‘With your insect obsession. Father doesn’t think so, either.’

‘I don’t care a fig what Father thinks,’ Violet lied. ‘And I certainly don’t care what *you* think, though judging by your workbook, you should spend less time thinking about my *insect obsession* and more time thinking about Latin nouns.’

He lumbered forward, nostrils flaring. Before he could make it within five paces of her, she flung the book at him – a little harder than she intended – and swung herself into the tree.

Graham swore and turned back towards the Hall, muttering.

She felt a pang of guilt as she watched the angry retreat of his back. Things hadn’t always been like this between them. Once, Graham had been her constant shadow. She remembered the way he used to crawl into

her bed in the nursery to hide from a nightmare or a thunderstorm, burrowing against her until his breath was loud in her ears. They'd had all sorts of japes – ripping across the grounds until their knees were black with mud, marvelling at the tiny silver fish in the beck, the red-breasted flutter of a robin.

Until that awful summer's day – a day not unlike this one, in fact, with the same honey-coloured light on the hills and the trees. She remembered the two of them lying on the grass behind the beech tree, breathing in meadow thistle and dandelions. She had been eight, Graham only seven. There were bees somewhere – calling out to her, beckoning. She had wandered over to the tree and found the hive, hanging from a branch like a nugget of gold. The bees glimmering, circling. She drew closer, stretched out her arms and grinned as she felt them land, the tickle of their tiny legs against her skin.

She had turned to Graham, laughing at the wonder that shone from his face.

'Can I've a go?' he'd said, eyes wide.

She hadn't known what would happen, she'd sobbed to her father later, as his cane flashed through the air towards her. She didn't hear what he said, didn't see the dark fury of his face. She saw only Graham, screaming as Nanny Metcalfe rushed him inside, the stings on his arm glowing pink. Father's cane split her palm open, and Violet felt it was less than she deserved.

After that, Father sent Graham to boarding school. Now, he only came home for holidays, and grew more and more unfamiliar. She knew, deep down, that she shouldn't taunt him so. She was only doing it because as much as she couldn't forgive herself for the day of the bees, she couldn't forgive Graham, either.

He'd made her different.

Violet shook the memory away and looked at her wristwatch. It was only 3 p.m. She had finished her lessons for the day – or rather, her governess, Miss Poole, had admitted defeat. Hoping she wouldn't be missed for at least another hour, Violet climbed higher, enjoying the rough warmth of bark under her palms.

In the hollow between two branches, she found the hairy seed of a beech nut. It would be perfect for her collection – the windowsill of her bedroom was lined with such treasures: the gold spiral of a snail's shell, the silken remains of a butterfly's cocoon. Grinning, she stowed the beech nut in the pocket of her skirt and kept climbing.

Soon she was high enough to see the whole of Orton Hall, which with its sprawling stone buildings rather reminded her of a majestic spider, lurking on the hillside. Higher still, and she could see the village, Crows Beck, on the other side of the fells. It was beautiful. But something about it made her feel sad. It was like looking out over a prison. A green, beautiful prison, with birdsong and damselflies and the glowing, amber waters of the beck, but a prison nonetheless.

For Violet had never left Orton Hall. She'd never even been to Crows Beck.

'But *why* can't I go?' She used to ask Nanny Metcalfe when she was younger, as the nurse set off for her Sunday walks with Mrs Kirkby.

'You know the rule,' Nanny Metcalfe would murmur, a glint of pity in her eyes. 'Your father's orders.'

But, as Violet reflected, knowing a rule was not the same as understanding it. For years, she assumed the village was rife with danger – she imagined pick-pockets and cut-throats lurking behind thatched cottages. (This only enhanced its allure.)

Last year, she'd badgered Graham into giving her details. 'I don't know what you're getting so worked up about,' he'd grimaced. 'The village is dull as anything – there isn't even a pub!' Sometimes, Violet wondered whether Father wasn't trying to protect her from the village. Whether it was, in fact, the other way around.

In any case, her seclusion would soon come to an end – of sorts. In two years, when she turned eighteen, Father planned to throw a big party for her 'coming out'. Then – he hoped – she would catch the eye of some eligible young man, a lord-to-be, perhaps, and swap this prison for another one.

'You'll soon meet some dashing gentleman who'll whisk you off your feet,' Nanny Metcalfe was always saying.

Violet didn't want to be whisked. What she actually wanted was to see the world, the way Father had when he was a young man. She had found all sorts of geography books and atlases in the library – books about the Orient, full of steaming rainforests and moths the size of dinner plates ('ghastly things', according to Father), and about Africa, where scorpions glittered like jewels in the sand.

Yes, one day she would leave Orton Hall and travel the world – as a scientist.

A biologist, she hoped, or maybe an entomologist? Something to do with animals, anyway, which in her experience were far preferable to humans. Nanny Metcalfe often spoke of the terrible fright Violet had given

her when she was little: she had walked into the nursery one night to find a weasel, of all things, in Violet's cot.

'I screamed blue murder,' Nanny Metcalfe would say, 'but there you were, right as rain, and that weasel curled up next to you, purring like a kitten.'

It was just as well that Father never learned of this incident. As far as he was concerned, animals belonged on one's plate or mounted on one's wall. The only exception to this rule was Cecil, his Rhodesian ridgeback: a fearsome beast he had beaten into viciousness over the years. Violet was forever rescuing all manner of small creatures from his slobbering jaws. Most recently, a jumping spider that now resided in a hatbox under her bed, lined with an old petticoat. She had named him – or her, it was rather hard to tell – Goldie, for the colourful stripes on his legs.

Nanny Metcalfe was sworn to secrecy.

Though there were lots of things Nanny Metcalfe hadn't told *her* either, Violet reflected later, as she dressed for dinner. After she'd changed into a soft linen frock – the offending wool skirt discarded on the floor – she turned to the looking glass. Her eyes were deep and dark, quite unlike Father and Graham's watery blue ones. Violet thought her face quite strange-looking, what with the unsightly red mole on her forehead, but she was proud of those eyes. And of her hair, which was dark too, with an opalescent sheen not unlike the feathers of the crows that lived in the trees surrounding the Hall.

'Do I look like my mother?' Violet had been asking for as long as she could remember. There were no pictures of her mother. All she had of her was an old necklace with a dented oval pendant. The pendant had a *W* engraved on it, and she asked anyone who'd listen if her mother's name had been Winifred or Wilhelmina. ('Was she called Wallis?' she asked Father once, having seen the name on the front page of his newspaper. He sent a bewildered Violet to her room without any dinner.)

Nanny Metcalfe was just as unhelpful.

'Can't quite recall your ma,' she'd say. 'I was not long arrived when she passed.'

'They met at the May Day Festival in 1925,' Mrs Kirkby would offer, nodding sagely. 'She were the May Queen, being so pretty. They were very much in love. But don't ask your father about it again, or you'll get a right whipping.'

These crumbs of information were hardly satisfactory. As a child, Violet wanted to know so much more – where did her parents marry? Did her

mother wear a veil, a flower crown (she pictured white stars of hawthorn, to match a delicate lace dress)? And did Father blink away tears as he promised to have and to hold, until death did them part?

In the absence of any real facts, Violet clung to this image until she became certain that it had really happened. Yes – her father *had* loved her mother desperately, and death *had* done them part (she had a shadowy idea that her mother had died giving birth to Graham). *That* was why he couldn't bear to talk about it.

But occasionally, something would blur the image in Violet's head, like a ripple disturbing the surface of a pond.

One night, when she was twelve, she'd been foraging for jam and bread in the pantry when Nanny Metcalfe and Mrs Kirkby walked into the kitchens with the newly employed Miss Poole.

She'd heard the scraping of chairs on stone and the great creak of the ancient kitchen table as they sat down, then the pop and clink of Mrs Kirkby opening a bottle of sherry and filling their glasses. Violet had frozen mid-chew.

'How are you finding it so far, dear?' Nanny Metcalfe had asked Miss Poole.

'Well – Lord knows I'm trying, but she seems such a difficult child,' Miss Poole had said. 'I spend half the day looking for her as she tears around the grounds, getting grass stains all over her clothes. And she – she ...'

Here, Miss Poole took an audibly deep breath.

'She *talks* to the animals! Even the insects!'

There was a pause.

'I suppose you think I'm ridiculous,' Miss Poole had said.

'Oh no, dear,' said Mrs Kirkby. 'Well, we'd be the first to tell you that there's something different about the child. She's quite ... how did you put it, Ruth?'

'Uncanny,' Nanny Metcalfe said.

'No wonder,' Mrs Kirkby continued, 'what with the mother, being how she was.'

'The mother?' Miss Poole asked. 'She died, didn't she?'

'Yes. Awful business,' said Nanny Metcalfe. 'Just after I arrived. Didn't have much chance to know her before that, though.'

'She were a local lass,' Mrs Kirkby said. 'From Crows Beck way. The master's parents would've been furious ... but they'd passed, just the month before the wedding. His older brother, too. Coach accident, it was. Very sudden.'

There was a sharp intake of breath from Miss Poole.

‘What – and they still went ahead with the wedding? Was Lady Ayres ... in the family way?’

Mrs Kirkby made a noncommittal noise before continuing.

‘He was very taken with her, I’ll say that much. At first, anyway. A rare beauty, she were. And so much like the young lady, not just in looks.’

‘How do you mean?’

Another pause.

‘Well, she were – what Ruth said. Uncanny. Strange.’