39It was the first trace of spring that summoned Sara to the summer house. Abandoned all winter, and for most of the autumn, the summer house was a ghost of itself. The floorboards groaned beneath her feet and the boards on the windows had cracked in the anguish of snow and wind and winter’s sun. Shadows of spring kept the house alive, a corkscrew of veins across the rotting timber and tear-stained walls. Cobwebs caught in her hair as she entered. The trapped air condensed her bones and gave her a chill that she could not shake until she tore down the eroding boards and let the budding light flood the summer house.

The first winter she had greeted this task with resounding vigour. In truth, that winter had been dry and mild and she had waited until all the snowdrops had returned to the soil and the daffodils were in full bloom. She had set about on that first day brushing away the cobwebs, scrubbing the window frames and polishing the windows until she could see her newlywed reflection within them. She wrote a list, plotted her tasks on the calendar and completed them dutifully. By midsummer the doors were open for all to see, and share in, what she had achieved, and they did not close again until the clocks turned back and the nights stole a little more of each day.

Three more winters passed. Each spring there was something new. A fresh challenge, another skill to learn, and the result was a renovated portrait of her life planted within the summer house. People came and went with resources and sundries, ideas and advice, and Sara always welcomed these with delight. She had just one rule. Don’t look now.

For the first time, Sara surveyed what needed to be done and was tempted to call for help. Friends and family would readily take pity on her, but perhaps a builder would be better, someone she could detach from her life when the work had been done. But in that detachment there would be no personality. At least, not hers. This was, as it always had been, a job that owned her.

Those first few weeks were the hardest. Pulling out the rotten floorboards and window frames was back-wrenching work. The smell plummeted through her nostrils and down into her already churning stomach. The sickness and backache were to be expected but they would soon pass. She took it slowly, starting work only when the sun had warmed the porch and breaking at lunch for steaming mint tea and whatever food that day’s companion had brought around. By May, Sara hoped the summerhouse would have running water and a gas stove of its own and she could continue her work uninterrupted. They had good intentions, but they thought the work was too much for her just now and they were frequently telling her so.

‘I need to do this,’ she explained over vegetable soup and shepherd’s pie and lasagne. ‘I’ve thought about getting help for the more laborious tasks, but it just wouldn’t be the same.’

‘Alex wouldn’t want you to do this alone.’

‘Do I look like I’m alone?’ Sara always replied, although they didn’t get the hint. Someone turned up every day regardless, like they had worked out a rota, a cleaning schedule and a meal plan between them. The main house was sterile. She was rarely there anymore and it was cleaned so frequently that any life had been scrubbed out of it. There would be little to do when she put it on the market.

When spring eventually raised its head in all its fragrant vibrant glory, Sara was hit by renewed melancholy. It took her by surprise that her despair could rear its maleficent head when that terrible winter had finally passed. The summerhouse was bright in the sun throughout the daylight hours. The floorboards were finished and she had varnished them until they shone. Perhaps it was then that the sadness came, when she saw her skewed reflection in the wood. Or maybe it was when she turned on the water to test the new sink. She’d never had utilities in the summer house before and the plumbing had been the biggest challenge so far. The old butler sink had spent the last three years as their herb garden and she had fondly transplanted each herb into the freshly composted soil in front of the summer house. With each herb she saw Alex in the kitchen grinding basil into a pesto, sprinkling oregano onto pizza, snuggling thyme and rosemary among chicken and potatoes.

Sara fell so hard and so quickly this time. She was barely aware of her friends and family moving around her, strict in their schedule, trying to force feed her the food that Alex used to make with such gusto that with every mouthful it was like devouring a piece of his soul. But none of their food could satiate her appetite. None of their words could fill the gap that had been growing since the first leaves turned to red and gold.

Then one night she woke quite suddenly. Whoever had been caring for her that night had neglected to close the curtains – or perhaps, chose not to. A full moon lit up her room as if it were a ghost of a forgotten time. There was a name for a moon like that. Alex would know. There wasn’t much Alex didn’t know. Sara turned to ask him and when she found the space beside her she pulled the duvet over her head to succumb to the darkness again. But even smothered in feathers it was not truly dark. The moon was humming their wedding song and it churned something inside of her. No words could fill the growing gap, but something else was.

Sara crept out of the house. The lawn was damp with silver dew. The summerhouse was a beacon calling her home. She knelt down among the herbs and picked a sprig of each, devouring each one in turn, their raw flavour a biting reminder and a bittersweet memory. Alex was gone and nothing could bring him back, but she was not alone. She was never alone.

She worked all night. The moonlight was a silent companion of the sort that worked alongside her without question, just as Alex had always done. As the moon set, Sara curled up on the futon – the one thing in the summer house that never changed. She must have slept for she was awoken by a persistent pounding on the door.

‘Read the sign!’ she shouted.

‘Geez, I’m just checking you’re still alive.’ It was her self-involved sister, and for that Sara was relieved. They shared breakfast in the garden, flaky croissants and frothy coffee from their favourite bakery, and Sara listened as her sister chattered on about the problems at work, her latest crush, and mindless gossip about people Sara didn’t know. In turn, Sara told her that she was moving into the summer house that day.

‘Do you want me to help you move anything down here?’

Sara nodded.

‘Will you be ready for midsummer?’

Spring was already passing too quickly. It was not yet May. Despite everything, she was ahead of schedule. Yet Sara felt as though something had changed. She had finally accepted that life goes on. But if she could put it on hold for just a little longer, she would.

That evening Sara locked the summer house door and lowered the blinds. For the next two months her guardians held vigil in the garden but the sign on the door continued to read ‘Don’t Look Now’. Inside, Sara was as a mother hen is to her nest. She had a purpose, there was no one to interrupt her, except – On midsummer’s eve the pain came and it was excruciating. Where the melancholy caused her to rage inside herself, this pain broke the silence and tore open the void in which she had been sheltering.

They had respected her desire for privacy until then, but even as her screams turned to pants Sara forbade them entry.

The sun was rising when her sister finally pleaded with her. ‘Please let me in, Sara. The sun is rising, midsummer is here! Let me help you. There are some things that you cannot do on your own.’

An owl hooted as it returned to its nest. Birds called to one another. A car started somewhere down the road. The key turned in the lock and the door opened. When the door opened again the sun had risen and the sign on the door read ‘All Welcome’.

The summer house had been transformed once more and for the first time it was not a retreat. It was a home. And Sara sat on the futon with a babe in her arms, welcoming all those people who had stood by her.