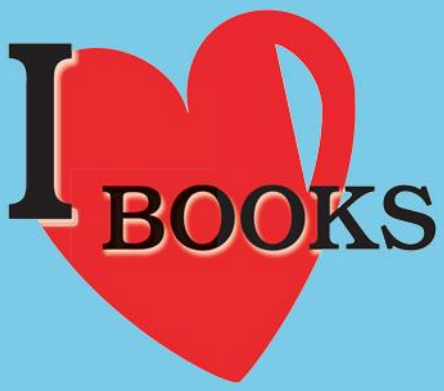


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Written by

Rachel Hickman

Illustrated by

Helen Crawford-White

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rachel hickman

Old Barn Books



AN OLD BARN BOOK

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For my family

"Why is summer mist romantic and autumn mist just sad?"
— Dodie Smith, *I Capture the Castle*

"You understand now . . . how simple life becomes when things like mirrors are forgotten."
— Daphne du Maurier, *Frenchman's Creek*



1

ALEXANDER

Alex squared his shoulders in the hand-me-down, black tail-coat that tugged across his back because he was broader than his father. He loosened his white tie and too-tight collar and ran a hand through his dishevelled hair, still damp from the shower. He was dreading the party below him.

Music poured in from the main hall and a shriek of laughter carried up the great staircase, hairspray meeting the whiff of old sports kit.

So this was it, the Summer Ball. The one night a year when the girls from across the river were allowed inside these ancient boys' school walls. At the foot of the stairs, Alex could see Plum waiting, pretending that she wasn't, ruffling her hair and laughing too obviously with her friends. Plum Benoist. *Ben wah*. Her name sounded like the air kiss that would soon skim past his ear. He knew why the best-looking girl at the ball was standing there, and it had nothing to do with him. Not the real him.

Alex wished he could clear his head, but a jumble of thoughts kept going around and around. What he'd learned from the reporter with the hard red smile who'd stalked him from the riverbank that day: "Alexander, is your mother heartbroken at the split with your father?" He'd stopped rowing, the boat rocking a little as a jolt of pain passed through him. The anger came later, when his father called him. Too late. His son should've been told first, before it got out. Was it really so hard for his parents to remember him?

So there he was now, hands in his pockets, scuffing his way down, expected to carry on and pretend that nothing was wrong. So bloody British. With every step, he could feel the eyes of the crowd below. The girls fluttered like moths as Plum stepped into the light to meet him. Her hair smelled of perfume and her grip was small and vice-like.

"At last." She blinked up at him, her lashes sweeping the room behind his back. "Come on, let's dance before we get surrounded."

"I don't feel like. . ."

Almond eyes took him in, narrowing slightly. They glinted like a cat's, as if to say he should be pleased that she'd waited. And he was, he supposed. His mate Gully winked at him from a doorway. No help there. Alex glanced at Plum again, took a deep breath, and kept it together. She looked amazing. And she was rescuing him from himself, which was a good thing. Brooding never got him anywhere.

"Okay, why not? I like this song." Music was his escape, along with rowing. Only riding a horse was better than the reach and dip of oars, and the run of a boat over water.

"Oh?" Plum wasn't listening. "What's playing? I hadn't noticed." She swished her hair.

Alex looked down at her. Her skin was flawless, unless it was her make-up. Blonde hair fell about her shoulders and a slight smile flitted on her lips as everyone parted to let them through. Alex could almost hear the murmurs as he shunted her clumsily towards the darker edges of the dance floor and pulled her closer than he intended. From the corner of his eye, a master stepped forward, saw it was Alex, and stepped back.

"Feeling better now?" Plum asked, her mouth so close to his ear that the music stuttered.

"Yeah. Sorry I was late." He made a bigger effort to speak. "Parent stuff, you know?"

Plum had been there when that reporter screeched across the water. The first girl to ever steer the First VIII boat since their cox got suspended.

"Divorce," she said with a knowing smile. "You get used to it, and there is an upside, you know?"

"What's that?"

"You can ask them for almost anything, and —" she looked up and locked eyes — "you can confide in me."

Arms around his neck, she wriggled closer. Did she expect him to kiss her in front of everyone? He took a clumsy step back, hitting a wall. It would be so easy to give in, body

over brain. He could feel the heat of her skin and the bones of her hips … and yet it didn't feel right. He swallowed. It was too public. And just … wrong.

As the clock struck midnight, the girls piled back on their coach. Plum was the last, and Alex still hadn't made a move, so she leaned up and kissed him instead, to a chorus of wolf whistles. Surprised, he didn't close his eyes, and all he remembered later were the blinding flashes from the cameras camped at the school gates.

It was as if he'd mistakenly stumbled on a stage and the audience had clapped. Back in his study bedroom, he didn't bother to change, but slumped on his bed with his whole world spinning. How could he face them all tomorrow? He couldn't stand another minute in this place. The ball had been the final straw. People might dream of sending their sons here, but for him it was all wrong. The pressure to be someone he wasn't. Pressure to impress. Pressure to stand out. Pressure to be smarter, row faster, pass the ball, hit a six…

He sat up and swung his legs to the floor. Why didn't he just go? Get up and walk out before term ended? Find his own way home. He could already hear the sea in his ears.



2

SASKIA

Panic seized Sass like a hand to the back of her neck. Breathe, Sass. Breathe, Saskia reminded herself. She lifted her eyes to the horizon, where the sea and sky collided in a flat line of shadow. Her heart was already in pieces. The distance didn't help. Even three thousand miles from home, she could still hear the skid of tyres and a horn that went on for ever.

Ducking through a fence on the other side of the cliff path, she began to run away from the unfamiliar house full of sympathetic stares. She didn't care about the thistles and thorns that caught the backs of her legs. She barely even noticed the smudge of blood and sweat trickling down her left calf. She thought that if she stopped, she'd fall and slide all the way down the steep Cornish hillside into the cold blue sea, so she raced away, desperate to feel like herself again. A girl who, not three months ago, had trained for the swim

team and dived from the uppermost board. Not the girl she was now, shivering by herself on the side.

Sass came to a standstill at a battered gate hanging off a dry-stone wall, blood pumping and breath ragged. She looked around, swiping at a cloud of insects near her head. Beyond the gate, a shaded tunnel of trees showed her a way through the fields ahead.

She was about to set off again when a sudden scuffle behind her made her jump and a panting scruff of black hurtled up.

It was her uncle David's dog, a terrier rescued from the pound not so long ago. He seemed super pleased to see her and was so black-eyed cute that she couldn't help smiling. She'd liked him from the first moment he'd jumped up at her, all four legs off the ground, his tail wagging like a crazy speedometer.

"Hey, Harry, come here, boy." She squatted down and held out a stale potato chip from her pocket. The dog lay down flat on his belly, legs out behind him, tongue lolling. He cocked his head as if to say, "Don't you speak Dog?" but then reached forward and sniffed her hand with his grey-speckled muzzle. Ever so gently, he took the chip, and Sass caught him by the collar. "Got you," she whispered.

And in that moment, Sass felt the pain ease just a little. Harry didn't keep asking if she was okay; his thumping tail said, "Get on with it, there's no other choice," and she liked that. It was honest. Truthful.

But he didn't do sitting. Or sadness. Not when there were rabbits and cowpats and foxes to sniff out. He wriggled from her grip and under the gate, his wet nose glued to the ground. Sass glanced down at the tarnished sign as she climbed over it: TRIST HOUSE ESTATE. KEEP OUT. NO TRESPASSING. Ever since she'd set foot in England, she'd been in someone's way. Well, she couldn't leave the dog, even if he was a runaway train down a bumpy track.

Harry slowed at last, zigzagging from tree trunk to burrow. Sass did the same, picking her way through the mud and the nettles. She was about as far from the city as you could get, stranded at the furthest westerly tip of England. All around her was silent except for the rustle of leaves.

Through the bowed trees ahead, the track channelled up to something that she couldn't quite make out. She squinted harder. The way ahead was blocked by a pair of tall arched doors set in a high brick wall. Were they carriage gates, as in a horse and carriage? Who, she wondered, had clattered through here in the past? She liked it when history peeked through paint cracks. If you looked closely, nothing ever disappeared. Even at home in New York there was hidden cool behind the shabbiest buildings. Like wearing vintage clothes instead of new. Whoever wore them before had lived between those stitches, their dreams and secrets held together by coloured threads. Sass pushed up the sleeves of her mom's old sweater. The smell of her had gone now and the bottom edge had begun to unravel, but she still wore it. Just because...

Beside the arched gates was an ivy-covered door. Sass rattled the old latch. It was locked. She rattled it again. There was no getting through. Disappointed, she picked up Harry, who was sniffing a plant that smelled a lot like garlic, and turned to head back. It was then, framed by a tangle of wild roses, that she saw the silver horse.

Sass peered through the thorns. Hugging Harry closer, she knelt down and shuffled up on her knees. In the half-light, the quiet meadow beyond was lush and green. A field of flowers turned to gold by a last burst of sun, the air heavy with the earthy scent of a forgotten wildness.

As a city girl, Sass didn't know much about horses, but she'd always felt sure that if she'd had the chance, she'd have liked them. When she was younger, she'd stuck a poster of a rearing black stallion on her wall, all flying mane and glossy tail, at the head of a herd of wild horses. This one was all on her own and she was a girl, Sass was sure of it. Shabby, covered in burrs and mud patches, shaking her head from flies. Made more beautiful for being real, standing there resting her back foot as she grazed in the shadows.

The silver horse raised her head, ears pricked. She gazed at Sass, her black eyes hopeful, before nodding her nose and going back to the grass, nibbling lips searching out the best dandelions and thistles. It was a moment of perfect stillness, like a kiss on the forehead, or the soft squeeze of a hand. Watching her, Sass felt like she'd met a friend.

An owl broke the silence, followed by Harry scrabbling to get down. Sass hung on, refusing to let go. In her stubbornness, she stumbled sideways and fell on her elbow. The horse flung up her head, wheeled around, and cantered away.

"Look what you did," she muttered in the dog's ear, rubbing her arm. "That hurt!"

A fat, wet droplet landed on her skin, followed by another. In a minute, it would pour. Sass looked up at the ever-darkening sky. What was it about this place? One minute a glimpse of magic, and then came the rain.

She got up, her arms covered in goosebumps, her back soon soaked by her hair. Tomorrow, she thought. Tomorrow, she promised herself. She'd come back and find the horse again, because however wet she was now, something warm and bright sheltered on the other side of that hedgerow.



3
TRIST

Alex got off the bus at the top of the hill and pulled his hood low. The air brakes of the number 37 hissed loudly as it rolled off down toward the village and disappeared between the tall hedgerows bordering the lane. It was the first and last time he'd ever take a bus. It took ages: no wonder people moaned. Glancing around, he crossed the road and ducked down an overgrown short cut.

Walking out had been unexpectedly easy. He wondered why he hadn't done it before. They'd catch up with him, no question, but perhaps he'd get a few more hours by himself. Alex looked at his watch: an old Rolex. The police were slow off the mark; his father would be less than impressed.

He kicked up a stone and it arced across his first view of the sea in months. *His* sea. Black and blue, under a scrum of cloud. So endless that Alex felt invisible. He grinned at last and let his shoulders relax. Head up, he breathed it in: tasted

the salt on his tongue and in the air that clung to him like a second skin. A skin he felt good in.

He strode on as weeks of weariness drained from his legs, tugging at the hoodie he'd worn all day over his uniform, the only anonymous piece of kit in his wardrobe. He pulled out his school shirt, which had stuck to his back. His school tie was stuffed in a pocket. It was unlikely that he'd be spotted now; he was almost home. The sky was stirring with possibility, and somewhere under the cover of the trees ahead, an owl hooted.

Where the path forked between the beach and the old cart track up to the house, it began to rain, lightly at first, before chucking it down. Alex enjoyed the cool on his face, and for a moment thought about going for a swim, stripping off and diving into the cold sea and letting it wash over him, but it would only cause a bigger fuss. He was better off behind the walls of Trist, where he could forget about mobile phones and the photos that would be circulating like wildfire.

Half running now, he couldn't get to the back gates fast enough. As he rounded the next bend, he wasn't looking where he was going, and almost smacked straight into someone. *A girl*. He stopped dead and flattened himself in the shadow of a tree.

She hadn't noticed. Too busy peering through the hedge into the meadow. Who was she? What was she doing here? He scowled. Trespassing, that was for sure, in the one place that was his.

The girl crouched in a short, flimsy skirt with a baggy jumper that made it look like she wasn't wearing very much

except mucky red Converse on her feet. Her black tights had a snag in them that ran the length of one of her legs and her hair dripped like seaweed between her narrow shoulders. She was in his way, and worse, the terrier in her arms had spotted him. Dogs were never as stupid as their owners.

It yapped and wrestled to get down, but the girl wasn't having it. She hung on determinedly, falling on her arm with a swallowed cry. Alex almost stepped forward to help, but then stopped himself in time. The girl scrabbled up and started back down the path, muttering at the dog. An American. Probably some gawpy tourist with a camera.

He had other things to worry about. They'd have worked out where he'd gone; there was nowhere else he'd go. Alex felt the key to the side gate crushed in his palm. The door was right there. He could smell the garlic that grew near it. He looked around him one last time and put the key in the lock. A creak of the door and he was through. With a sigh, he slammed it shut behind him and leaned against it. Alone at last.

Sliding down on his heels, Alex took in the line of oaks in the distance, standing sentry to the most beautiful house for miles around. Trist. Haunting in her granite-faced sadness. This was where he belonged, where he could be himself, without worrying that he was falling short of what people wanted him to be. Who they needed him to be.

Here, he was free.

4

THE HORSE IN THE MEADOW

Sass woke early and burrowed under her duvet, safe from the screeching gulls outside. Pale sunlight filled the whitewashed studio above the boat-shed where her uncle David painted during the day and at night she slept. She was getting used to the smell of paint and turpentine, and didn't mind being on her own because, lying in the dark, it was easier to imagine she was back home in her room with her things. Not that the lights ever went out in New York: you could see the city from space. She lay there and mentally listed everything she used to listen to before she opened her eyes at home:

1. The rattle of the shutter on the deli across the street.
2. The honk of delivery trucks.
3. The neighbours upstairs stomping overhead.
4. The buzz of her phone on the floor.
5. Mom telling her she was late.