Victoria Scott

The Women who Wouldn't Leave



An Aria Book

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For Teil, Raphie and Ella, always.

PART ONE

— 1 —

June

Constance

It was 5 a.m. The sun was just glinting over the horizon, inching off the starting blocks of another scorching day. The air was saturated both with the scent of baked bracken and the sweet song of the dawn chorus, and the earth beneath Connie's feet was pockmarked by the impact of hooves into dense mud; spring's adventures fossilised by summer.

She picked her footing with care to avoid twisting an ankle or bruising a knee – both of which she had done in the past few weeks. Despite having spent most of her childhood marching through these fields, she now felt like a stranger to them, and them to her, and her bruises and aches were confirmation of this. Or perhaps it was just her age. Were you already over the hill at twenty-nine, she wondered. How bloody depressing to think her best years might already be behind her, given what a mess she'd made of her life so far.

Connie halted her ambling abruptly. She could make out several dark shapes on the other side of the field. There were cows resting in a circle around their water trough, she was sure of it.

Adrenaline shot through her. Her stomach lurched. Her mouth went dry. She shut her eyes to try to stop the memory recurring, but it did anyway. It was too powerful to ignore or suppress.

She can't breathe, even though she keeps trying to take air in. She's trying to find room for some oxygen to ward off the asphyxiation which will surely come. She is panicking, truly panicking now. And the pain – the pain is searing. She has never known pain like this. And so, she decides to surrender. For this is a fight she is going to lose – is already losing.

Connie opened her eyes to try to break the spell, and sprinted for the gate. They were probably sleeping, she knew that, but it didn't matter to her. Her fear of them was real, and she had a good reason for it. What she had been through was not easy to forget.

She arrived at the gate, panting, unhooked the catch and slammed it shut behind her, mindful of the need to make sure the livestock didn't escape. She'd read in the local paper that someone had actually died driving into a cow on a single-track, high-banked road in Worcestershire last month. They'd been in a normal car, not one of those Chelsea tractors the wealthy second-home owners drove, and both the cow and the driver had met each other with extreme force – glass, bones and bonnet folding up on contact. The result had been a tangled, bloody, raw mess, one she was sure the fire brigade would not forget in a hurry, and neither would that woman's family, the poor sods.

Often, visitors to this forgotten part of Worcestershire were sent down these old sheep tracks by navigation apps, the programs naively assuming this route was both passable for cars and a handy B-road shortcut, rather than a dirt-strewn dug-out populated by slow-moving tractors and overconfident locals with ageing cars which wore scratches as a badge of honour. Yes, these roads needed to be treated with respect and approached with caution. And that was something the council planners, keen to meet their government-set target for new homes, had definitely failed to account for in recent years. At least, that's what her mum said, and she read the local paper and cared about these things.

A nearby village now had thirty brand-new houses built on

its outskirts, almost all of which were far from affordable for local people, despite promises made at the planning stage. The village's new residents, tempted into the area from cities like Hereford, Worcester and Gloucester by the prospect of a larger garden, a garage and an extra bedroom, all had at least two cars per household, and the village's narrow, winding roads, two-class primary school and two-doctor GP surgery were all struggling to keep up with the surge in numbers. Her mum had been trying and failing to get an appointment with a doctor for two weeks now. Apparently you had to log on to the website at 8 a.m. sharp every morning to request an appointment, or you would find yourself—

There was a terrible noise, a deafening screech like a banshee, and Connie's thoughts evaporated.

Her head whipped left just in time to see a tractor tyre on a collision course with her head. And just as she had when that raging bull had charged at her, she shut her eyes and waited for the impact.

'*Why don't you look where you're bloody going?*'

Connie's heart was going like the clappers. A man was shouting at her. She didn't want to look at him, she really didn't, but she knew she was going to have to, or he'd probably tell everyone he knew that she was crazy, and she'd gone through enough of that kind of shit already.

She glanced up at the tractor driver. She recognised him immediately as Dean Collins, a ruddy-faced man in his twenties whose dad ran a local farm. He'd been a good few years below her at school, but she remembered a freckly, ginger-haired kid who'd once come to school on dress-up day in a black plastic bin liner with random bits of loo roll stuck on it (he'd been a fly, apparently). No one had said anything mean, though, not that she remembered anyway, probably because they all knew that his dad spent most of his time at the Farmer's Arms and his mum worked twelve-hour days as a cleaner to keep him and his brothers fed and her husband in beer. Did he remember

her? Probably not. She looked very different now. She hoped he didn't, anyway.

'*Are. You. Deaf?*'

Connie took a deep breath, shook her head, threw herself against the hedge and closed her eyes, willing him to start up the engine and move on. She went out walking at this time every day so that she could avoid people. The last thing she wanted to do was engage in a conversation, or a row, or anything, in fact, with another human. All she needed to be happy, she now knew, was a daily walk, comforting TV and booze. It was her new recipe for unfettered joy, a magic combination she wished she'd discovered years ago.

'*Fine*,' he said. She heard the tractor splutter back into life and the giant tyres begin to turn.

She opened her eyes when the sound of the diesel engine began to fade. Dean was heading down the lane at some speed towards a large grassy field where, she suspected, he was going to be making hay. Quite literally, she thought, as the sun shone. The nature of an English summer was such that you never knew when the next deluge was going to come, even during a hot spell like this one. Farmers knew to grasp an opportunity when it presented itself.

As Dean disappeared around the corner, Connie inhaled deeply and breathed out to five slow beats. She'd learned that trick from a counsellor she'd gone to see to appease her mum. That counsellor had told her that it would slow her heartbeat and calm her down. It did seem to help, particularly at night when she woke up after a nightmare, her mind polluted with screams, locked doors she could not escape through and fights she would never be able to win. She would lie there with the covers thrown off, the streetlight making her swirly Artex ceiling look like a labyrinth, her heart feeling like a thrashing serpent hunting for prey. But if she counted her breaths, both in and out, she would feel them come under her control, like she'd suddenly become an accomplished snake-charmer.

Once she felt her heart begin to slow, she resumed her walk. She checked her watch; it was now 5.45 a.m. She had just under a mile left to go. She'd be home before 6.15 a.m., just in time to miss Mr and Mrs Chicken. Those weren't their real names, of course, because she'd never spoken to them and had deliberately avoided meeting anyone since she'd moved back here. So she'd given people random names based on what she thought they did for a living, and she reckoned this pair worked at a nearby chicken processing plant.

Connie could see their house from her bedroom window, so she knew they were on day shifts this week. It must be a punishing schedule, she thought, all that toing and froing, however nice it might be to be able to work the same shifts in the same place. From the gap between her roller blind and the window frame, she could see they looked pale and a bit beaten. She thought she'd feel a bit like that too, if she spent her working hours washing and gutting chicken carcasses.

Connie looked up as she passed the sign that marked the beginning of the village. It said, 'Welcome to Stonecastle', with a little picture of a grey stone keep; which was optimistic, she thought, given that all that was left of the ancient building was a grass mound and a few heavy rocks the locals hadn't been able to lift and take away for use to build their own homes in the intervening centuries.

Next she passed the bus stop, which had neither a shelter nor a seat and offered only six services a day – three in the morning and three in the afternoon – and then a boarded-up pub, The Old Swan, whose death certificate had been drafted by the indoor smoking ban and signed and stamped by the fact that it had failed to introduce food. On the other side of the village there was another pub, the newly christened The Plucky Duck, which had been bought out by a chain a couple of years previously. It was now painted gunship grey throughout, served food on pieces of slate and offered a tasting menu and a bottomless brunch every Saturday. It was rammed

at weekends, its car park packed with utility vehicles, four-by-fours and electric sports cars.

A few minutes later, she rounded the corner into Roseacre Close. It was home to eight semi-detached houses, all built in the 1950s by a local council eager to provide decent homes for local workers. How times have changed, thought Connie.

She walked at pace past Mr and Mrs Chicken's place on the corner, to make sure she avoided bumping into them. Then she passed its adjoining semi, which was currently occupied by a woman she'd nicknamed Mrs Posh Hospital and her son, Master Skiver.

She reckoned that Mrs Posh Hospital worked as a nurse at a private clinic in Gloucester. Her mum, Ellen, had told her she'd moved in about a decade ago, when her son had been about six. In that time he'd gone from being a cute, blond chubby child to a surly, chubby spotty teenager who rarely left the house, except when his mum drove him to the bus stop to wait for the school bus, which wasn't every day. Sometimes, Connie saw him returning about twenty minutes afterwards. Clearly he felt education wasn't his bag.

Connie kept her head down as she passed the houses to the left. First there was the home of Mr Hoarder and his much younger lodger, Mr Road Fixer. Their front garden was full of old cars, sofas, sinks and doors. She suspected Mr Hoarder went out in the middle of the night and brought home other people's fly-tipped furniture as if it were treasure. Mr Road Fixer, meanwhile, when he wasn't working for the local council mending potholes, seemed to spend most of his time shagging random women, if the scenes she'd witnessed in the wee hours were anything to go by.

Then there was the woman Connie had named Little Miss Perfect. Little Miss P was a young single mother with an unfathomably perfect figure and two meticulously turned-out little boys, who lived in the semi that was attached to Mr Hoarder's house. She was lucky to have been given that house,

Connie thought; old Keith, its previous resident, had died suddenly and Little Miss P must have topped the council's list. She wondered how long she had been on that list. It was apparently incredibly long and very inflexible, with people being told to take the house they were offered, wherever it was, or to go back to the bottom of the queue. That meant people often ended up miles away from their families, their kids' schools and their workplaces.

The contrast between the two houses was striking. Little Miss P's front garden was sparse but tidy, and Connie could see, by craning her neck to look down the side passage next to her house, that she'd left her washing out in the back garden overnight. A luminous yellow G-string was glistening with morning dew.

Connie was nearly home. To the right of her were two more semis. Colonel Mustard – so-called due to the military quality of his moustache – and his wife Mrs Mustard lived in the one on the right. They were both in their eighties and quite clearly devoted to each other. They always walked out of the house holding hands. And to their left lived Ms Yoga Mat, a woman in her sixties whose constant companion was a very angry Alsatian actually named – because Connie regularly heard her shouting at it – Snuggles. Ms Yoga Mat seemed to run some sort of exercise class for other older women, because a group of them pulled up in cars every Wednesday morning in comfortable clothes and trooped in for an hour or so. She had a very beautiful front garden, one of those that looked unplanned, but you just knew its planting had been laid out to within an inch of its life. It was completely different in style to Connie's own back garden, which was pruned and edged meticulously.

Finally, Connie had reached her own front door. Well, their own front door. Or maybe just her mother's? It was, after all, her mother who paid the rent to the council, so it was probably just hers, frankly.

As Connie fumbled for the keys in her jeans pocket, she glanced at the front window of old Matilda's place. Matilda

was the only neighbour Connie genuinely knew the name of, because she had known Matilda – or rather, known *of* her – since childhood.

At that moment, Connie saw movement in the curtains in Matilda's front room. It had been just a twitch, the sort of movement she'd have written off as being caused by the wind, if the air hadn't been so incredibly still.

What on earth was that mad old bird doing up at this time of day, Connie wondered. She had nothing to get up for, surely, unless it was to shovel up the poo produced by her multitude of cats and random menagerie of other smelly animals, and to lob it over theirs and Ms Yoga Mat's fences, something she did fairly regularly – mostly, Connie suspected, under cover of darkness. Yes, she was either doing that, or digging up yet another part of her garden to grow things.

From her mum's bedroom at the rear of the house, you could see into Matilda's back garden – if you could actually call it a garden. It was a holy mess, frankly. There were several random lean-to sheds which Connie presumed her neighbour kept her animals in, various bits of old metal and plastic strewn around, and then piles of earth, surrounded by high wire fences, in which a random collection of crops seemed to grow quite well. It amazed Connie that anything could grow in that mess, but grow they had, year after year, apparently, according to the season.

Matilda had been their neighbour since Connie's mother Ellen had been allocated their home by the council in the 1990s, and so she had probably been living there many years before that. She was an odd woman, Connie thought. An outsider; definitely a loner. She was almost never seen outside, was prone to screaming at any children who played near her front door, and had an unknown number of animals living with her, whose number only seemed to grow. Connie knew that Matilda threw food out into her back garden for her animals twice a day. Well, they all heard it, everyone on the estate, as the cockerel made a huge racket when he was hungry, and the goats were incredibly

vocal around feeding time. Not to mention the cats, who seemed to view her mother's garden as a toilet. *Jesus*, she thought, it was like living on a bloody farm.

When Connie had been a child, the other kids at school had been too scared to walk past her house in case Matilda cast a spell on them and turned them into toads. Now, Connie wasn't so much scared of her as disgusted. Just by standing outside you could see that the house was packed to the brim with crap – both living and dead, she suspected. What on earth did that woman do with all of the animals when they died, for example? She never came out, so… Connie shivered at the thought. What sort of person lived in that kind of squalor? The house was dilapidated. Her mum had apparently written to the council several times over the years asking for them to visit the house and fix its roof, gutters and leaky windows on health grounds, but no one had ever replied, and nothing had ever been done.

Connie took a deep breath, put the key in the lock, turned it and pushed the door open. Their house, by contrast, always smelled nice. Her mum was very house-proud, which was both a blessing and a curse.

'Good morning, love,' shouted her mother from the kitchen. Connie walked through and saw that Ellen was already dressed in her carer's uniform – her sleek brown hair neatly tied back, her feet clad in flat black comfortable shoes, her legs in blue trousers, her torso in a white shirt and a blue tabard, with pockets for things like latex gloves and tissues. There was a lot of call for those sorts of things in her mother's job, and Connie was impressed she could cope with it. Connie wasn't keen on dealing with her own bodily fluids, let alone anyone else's.

'Morning,' she said, making her way towards the cupboard which held the mugs and the tea bags.

'Shoes off, Con.'

Connie looked down at her muddy boots. She had not yet reacquainted herself with her mother's high standards. She sighed inwardly, smiled outwardly and walked back to the front

door, where she took them off and put them on a plastic mat which had been placed there for exactly that purpose.

'Good walk? Did you see anyone out?' her mother asked.

'It was OK. Peaceful,' replied Connie.

'I do wish you'd at least take my phone, so you could call me if you needed to. What if anything happened to you? There's hardly anyone about that early.'

'You mean like being viciously attacked by a hay bale? Or verbally abused by a duck?' said Connie, keen to avoid their conversation returning to dark places.

'Very funny. Anyway, next time, if I'm home, take my phone. Or even better, get one of your own.'

Connie ignored her mother's suggestion about getting a phone. She simply didn't want one any more. No good could come from having one.

'By the way, you didn't trespass again, did you? I had old Mick on the phone yesterday, complaining you'd been walking through his wheat.'

'Nah,' lied Connie, taking a tea bag down from the cupboard. 'I won't go there again.'

'Good,' said Ellen, pulling her daughter in for a hug. Connie had to stop herself from bristling, and tried to reciprocate by rubbing her right hand up and down her mother's back. It was taking her a long time to get used to physical contact again.

Ellen snatched her car keys from the counter and picked up a reusable mug filled with tea. 'I've got to head off, love. What are your plans for today?'

'I thought I might catch the bus into Gloucester and have a wander.'

'Sounds good.' There was a brief pause, which Connie knew was because her mum was working up the confidence to ask her something difficult. 'You know, love, I do think that getting a job again might be good for you, you know,' she said, after a couple of seconds of dead air. 'Maybe have a look at the adverts in the shop windows while you're there? Or online, when you

get back? It would be great to get you back to your old self a bit, wouldn't it?'

Connie didn't reply. She threw her tea bag in her mug and stared at it. Her mum *knew* how she felt about her old job in PR, about the world of pain that lifestyle had brought her. She also knew that Connie was still unstable, still damaged. It wouldn't be fair on an employer, frankly, would it, to take her on? She didn't even trust *herself*.

'OK, well, let's talk about it later? Hope today goes well. And if you do go into town, could you see if you can get me some of that hydrocortisone cream from Boots, the one percent stuff? My eczema is flaring again.'

'Yeah, course,' said Connie, trying to crack a smile so that her mum would stop nagging her. She filled up the kettle and put it on to boil.

'Great. See you later then, love,' said Ellen, kissing her daughter on the cheek, grabbing her handbag, which was hanging over the bottom of the stair rail, opening the door and slamming it behind her.

As soon as she was sure her mother had gone, Connie put the teabag and mug away, switched the kettle off and climbed upstairs to her bedroom.

It was a small room overlooking the close, just about big enough for a single wooden bed with faded floral bed linen and matching curtains that had been bought from Laura Ashley in about 1995, a pine bedside table and a wonky white melamine wardrobe with a small television perched on top.

Connie opened the wardrobe door and fumbled in the murky darkness beneath her hanging clothes, an area home to a ramshackle pile of assorted shoes, a couple of spare handbags and several bottles of vodka. She pulled one of the bottles out, sat down on her bed, grabbed the remote control from her bedside table and selected Netflix. It took a few seconds to load, and only another few seconds for her to find what she wanted to watch, because for the last few months, she had watched just one

thing – *Gilmore Girls*. That was because it depicted a mother and daughter who were clever, beautiful and successful, who lived in a world populated by kooky characters and where, despite any really rather vanilla challenges the characters faced, everything always ended happily. And that was what she desperately needed right now: a happy ending.

As the familiar titles began to roll, she opened the bottle of vodka and took a swig.

Then another.

And another.

Within twenty minutes, Connie could no longer sit upright, so she lay down, threw the bottle in the direction of her wardrobe and closed her eyes.

No, she would not be going into town today.

Not today.

In fact, she had no intention of ever going there again.

— 2 —

July

Matilda

Brian was making a din, which meant that it was time to get up.

Matilda rolled over on the mattress, its wonky springs digging into her wasting muscles as she did so. Then she pulled her knees as far up as they would go – not particularly far, to be honest, these days – hauled herself over onto her front, and pushed herself up onto all fours, pain shooting down her back leg as she did so. Blinking sciatica, she thought; blinking sciatica in my blinking ancient back.

After what felt like an eternity, she managed to roll over the three or four inches onto the dimpled lino floor and raise herself to standing using the solid oak dining table for support. She stood there for a minute or so while her breath and heart caught up, and smoothed down her long, black cotton dress, which had stuck to her in places. It had been a hot and sweaty night.

It was then that she saw Constance, Ellen's girl, through the net curtains. She pulled them aside gently and looked her up and down in the dim morning light. She had been such a lively thing when she'd been young; so full of joy. She'd often seen her skipping off down the pavement, or heard her playing hide and seek with friends through the fence, her delighted cries a constant reminder of her own loss, long ago.

Matilda let the curtain fall back and set off on her slow journey

to the kitchen. Constance had changed beyond recognition, she thought. She was older, of course, but the spark she used to have seemed to have gone out of her, too. Not to mention the fact that she was looking *far too thin*, she decided, holding onto the stacks of boxes, books and newspapers either side of her to help her stay upright because her ninety-year-old hips and knees were no longer reliable. 'It's just not *safe* to be like that,' she muttered, as she continued her slow journey through the house. 'That girl is *so scrawny* and out at silly hours, traipsing all over the place at all hours. *Anything could happen to her.*'

Why didn't Ellen do something about it, she wondered. Tell her to stop? Although Constance must be in her twenties, she now realised; her grasp of the passing of time was loose, verging on completely absent. That was partly because she could no longer see the lounge clock, and the one on the kitchen wall had run out of batteries a decade ago. Not that she cared much for time. She went to sleep when she was tired, woke up when she was rested and ate when she was hungry. And anyway, she had the animals. They functioned as her alarm clock.

Yes, the girl *must* be in her twenties, maybe even late twenties, so an adult, you'd think. She could be a mother right now, in charge of little lives, but instead she was living back with her own poor mother, and behaving like *that*. Well, there was nothing she could do about the world outside, she thought, the idea her own familiar mantra. Yes, that was something Matilda had accepted a long time ago. She needed to stop being distracted by that poor girl next door and her odd habits, and just focus on the things she *did* have control over: namely, maintaining a roof over her head and keeping herself and the animals alive, all things she was proud that she'd managed to do for so long by herself. Yes, this was her sanctuary. She was safe here.

'*I will say of the Lord, He is my refuge and my fortress, my God, in whom I trust*,' recited Matilda, the familiar lines from Psalm 91 tripping off her tongue as she reached the kitchen, their contents a salve to her soul.

The galley kitchen was perfectly large enough for her needs, and the cabinet doors, which had been white when she'd moved in, now appeared yellow, their surfaces sticky. Not that Matilda cared. Years of scrubbing surfaces until her skin had bled had rid her of any desire to maintain high levels of cleanliness, when she had no one barking at her. And she didn't cook much these days anyway. She left a ring clear on her hob for heating things, had a tin opener that she stored in her saucepan, and one cup, bowl and spoon, and those were sufficient for her needs. When she wanted to eat, she just went into the hall and selected an unopened can. Whether it was tinned peaches, tomato soup or stewed steak, Matilda didn't care. She ate everything she had, and never left a drop. Afterwards, she washed the can out (if Brian or one of his hens wasn't sleeping in the sink) and put it back where she'd found it. Tins, she knew, were useful for storing things like pens and keys and receipts, and it didn't do to send stuff like that to landfill, to pollute the planet. After all, the countryside she could see from the fence at the end of her garden was being threatened enough.

The view out of her kitchen used to be an uninterrupted one of undulating fields divided by ancient hedgerows, but she could now see a development of new houses in the far distance, built on the site of a disused rural petrol station, spilling out beyond its original boundaries on all sides. Those houses, clad in fake white stone, had been designed, she assumed, to mimic the chocolate-box charm of the Cotswolds, which were about twenty miles away. In reality, however, the new houses looked like gigantic rectangles of lard, and she felt angry every time she looked at them.

It all seemed a bit ridiculous. After all, the red brick her own home was built from was far cheaper and still nice to look at. But what did she know? She had never kept up with trends, and her only windows on the world these days, now she could no longer get to the TV, were her beloved radio set and the free newspaper that came through her door every week. Recently the

latter seemed to mostly contain adverts selling science-fiction-sounding things like *earbuds*, *vapes* and *electric scooters*. She no longer understood the world, she thought, and that was fine. Good riddance. It had never understood her, either.

Matilda leaned against a box on the counter – it contained buttons, she remembered, some of them quite rare and so colourful – and yanked open a cupboard door. Inside was a collection of the vegetables she grew in the garden, which were plentiful at this time of year, and which she stored in bags in one of the sheds during the winter, to try to preserve them for as long as possible. She grabbed a handful of runner beans and courgettes, aware she might lose her balance if she bent over too far. Her lower back was prone to giving up on her with regularity, and her stomach muscles were a distant memory. Mission accomplished, she hugged the vegetables to her chest using her left arm, and leaned forward to open the back door, which was never locked and which also never really closed properly, because its hinges were loose.

A fresh summer breeze brushed her face as she moved out onto the back step, a welcome sensation after what had been an airless, sweaty night.

'Brian! Jennifer! Ruth! Helen! Come and get your breakfast!'

There followed a symphony of squawking, rustling and clucking, and a cockerel and three hens emerged, racing each other to be first to bag their vegetable prize. Matilda threw the food down on the earth by her feet – the goats ate every blade of grass that deigned to make an appearance – and watched them pecking at the vegetables, a smile on her face. Her animals, her *beloved* animals. They were uncomplicated in personality, simple in their needs and ample in their affection.

'Now – Eddie, Clarrie. Where are you?'

Matilda clung to a fence post next to the door – that particular fence was necessary to protect her latest crop of carrots from the animals – and took a tentative step down into the garden, worried that her knee might give way at any moment. Then, she

spotted Eddie. He was walking up from the end of the garden, where he'd been eating the grass on the other side of the fence. But where was Clarrie? She looked left and right, assessing the runner beans as she did so – they were growing well, and the next crop would be ready to be picked in a few days – and the tomatoes on the right, which were climbing with vigour up cane wigwams.

Then, a white furry face emerged from behind the tomato plants.

'Clarrie! There you are. Come over here, I've got some food for you, too. I wouldn't miss you out.'

Clarrie was a five-year-old crossbreed, born to one of Matilda's favourite goats, Jill, who had been a mix of white and brown and a great milker. She'd been an intelligent goat, apparently capable of knowing when Matilda needed company and when she didn't, and Clarrie had inherited this trait from her. She was incredibly independent and didn't seem to like Eddie much (except in mating season), and sometimes, Matilda thought, she seemed more human than goat. Which was ironic, given how much Matilda tried to avoid actual humans.

Matilda turned to her right, and, propping herself up against the wall as she went, walked over to the old outside toilet, which was now a storehouse for animal feed. She opened the door, braced her left arm on her leg and bent down as far as she could go, far enough so that she could scoop grain out of the sack which was resting on the toilet seat.

She stood back up, the scoop in her hand, and shuffled slowly along to the feeding trough she'd made out of several old paint cans. She deposited the grain in there and watched as Eddie and Clarrie cottoned on and ran towards it, their tiny fluffy tails bobbing as they did so.

Once she'd made sure they'd both had enough to eat, she worked the rest of the way through her morning chore list: fill up the water troughs, put food out for the cats, and scoop up any poo on the paths and put it either on the vegetables to act as

fertiliser; or, if she didn't have room for it on the beds, she'd toss the occasional one over the fence. Until recently she had only thrown it into the field at the end of the garden, but now that she struggled with her mobility, she had taken to chucking it over whichever fence was nearest. It was biodegradable, anyway, she reasoned, and neither of her neighbours went into their gardens much, so she was sure they wouldn't notice a poo or two among their hedges and shrubs.

Forty-five back-breaking minutes later, Matilda was satisfied her morning tasks were done. She ached all over and her stomach was telling her it was breakfast time. What might it be today, she wondered, as she hobbled back in the direction of the house. Corned beef? Tuna? Oxtail soup? The world was her oyster, she thought, chuckling to herself at the absurdity of that statement. She hadn't left the county in over seventy years.

When she reached the back door, Matilda grabbed hold of the frame, hauled herself upwards and, with significant effort, raised her right foot high enough to clear the threshold. Once inside, she pushed the door closed behind her and walked slowly and carefully to her cans in the hall. As she did so, a memory came to her of rows of long tables and the clicking of cutlery against cheap porcelain, and she shivered. *No*, she thought; never again. Leaving there was the best thing I ever did.

She'd reached the door that led into the hallway. The walls on each side were lined with tin cans, some of them full but the majority empty, and she was careful not to lean on them too much because they were liable to topple. She wondered, for the fourth time that morning, where she'd left her umbrella. She thought it had been beside her on the floor while she slept, but she hadn't had it since and heaven knew whether she'd ever find it again. She had a few more umbrellas about, however, and they were all as useful to lean on as each other. She'd find one of them eventually.

Matilda was out of breath by the time she made it to the hall. She could feel her heart thrashing away like mad, and the heat

in the house was oppressive. She needed to choose something to eat for breakfast and get out of here, back into the garden where it was cooler. Yes, she thought, I'll just pick one of these ones nearest to me. Dean had brought them a year or two ago now, and they probably needed eating. She examined the stack in front of her. Some of the labels were a bit dusty, but she could still make out what they said. Tomato soup? Hmm, no, she thought, not this morning. Oxtail? No, she didn't feel like that today. Baked beans with sausages? Bingo. Yes, that was proper breakfast food. It was several rows down, though, so a little tricky to access. Matilda lifted up her left arm, reached forwards and grabbed onto a stack of cans to the left, aware she needed support to achieve her goal.

It was a second or two before she realised her mistake. She had pressed too hard on the top can, which was unevenly balanced on the stack below. She watched as, almost in slow motion, a cascade of cans poured down upon her. She was forced back by the blow, falling into the stack of cans behind her, which shifted and then began to tumble.

Then a series of heavy objects fell on her head, and there was darkness.