

Alicia used to imagine living inside a perfect raindrop. Her father would hold her up to the window and she'd watch them in the dusk, trapping white-gold lamplight in a shimmering kaleidoscope. They streamed down, merging, gathering pace towards the edge of the pane. Each was a tiny globe of possibility trembling on the glass in front of her when she raised her fingers to press against them from the safe, dry inside.

Her tears and the autumn rain distort the moorland night into a morass of water, wobbling around her like a hall of mirrors. Nothing seems firm, not the Tarmac under the wheels, or the sheep that glare towards her out of the darkness, not even her body or mind. Part of her seems detached, watching while she drives as fast as the spray on the dark road will allow, watching while she tries to catch her breath and stop crying, but fails.

An isolated structure looms ahead – the pub that tops the moor close to home. Her headlamps catch its name: the Cat and Fiddle. She wonders how she's managed to travel so far west. Mirror, signal, manoeuvre, said her driving instructor, but Alicia has neither checked nor signalled during her headlong plunge out of Yorkshire. Nor has she looked back.

A few cars and motorbikes are parked behind the pub and Alicia, numb with exhaustion, pulls in alongside them. In the neighbouring field blank-eyed sheep form a glowering, unwanted audience. She switches off the engine. Rain drums random music on the roof. The drops slide down the windows, glinting in the dim light from the pub, which feels a hundred

miles away. Alicia raises a hand to the windscreen – her fingers strong and slender, nails cropped short, as a pianist's must be – and presses on the raindrops from inside.

She sees what she's looking for in the shadows near the pub's outbuildings: an incongruous hosepipe, redundant in this damp, moortop desolation. Her mobile phone churns out a Tchaikovsky melody that she's begun to loathe. Her detached self says she should silence it: either answer or turn it off, never to be switched on again. The rest of her has thrown open the car door and is running through the rain towards the hose, which beckons to her, a coiled smile that promises salvation.

# I

## BUXTON IN THE PEAK DISTRICT

The green notice marks the Roman road's final approach from moor to town: Buxton, a grey stone fan spreading across the Derbyshire hills, which undulate like the phrases of an English folk song. Buxton is one of the highest towns in England, proud of its water, proud of its once-flourishing spa; sometimes it imitates Bath, complete with eighteenth-century crescent (a low-calorie version). Hikers gather at the pubs, knocking mud from their boots outside, comparing notes on the day's adventures around the Peak District's moors and villages. In the well-tended Pavilion Gardens, children feed the ducks and their mothers and grandmothers gather in the tea room to eat Bakewell tart and sip a good, warming brew to keep out the bitter north wind. By the bridge over the stream stands the Bradley family's favourite road sign: a red triangle bearing the immortal words DUCKS CROSSING. How, Alicia asks herself, are the ducks supposed to know?

One side of the Bradleys' house begins higher up than the other. It and its semi-detached partner stand well back from the road, which curls up a hill in Buxton's Park area, protected by a spruce hedge and a row of sycamores that, as Guy was quick to point out when they first saw it, is just far enough away not to threaten the foundations. Tall rather than wide, the house is Victorian, made of the goldish-grey local stone that gives so much of Buxton its reassuring solidity, as if it had grown organically out of the hillside