

*LISA LUEDDECKE*



**the  
moss**

uclanpublishing

*The Moss* is a uclanpublishing book

First published in Great Britain in 2024 by  
uclanpublishing  
University of Central Lancashire  
Preston, PR1 2HE, UK

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Cover photograph copyright © Chris Ke, 2024  
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978-1-91674729-6

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

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Set in 10/16pt Kingfisher.

Designed, edited and typeset by  
Eleanor Bowskill, Teddy Khanna and Rachel Robinson.

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

Printed and bound in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, Elcograf S.p.A.

*For Atlas.*

*And for everyone doing their best.*





# prologue

**WE BROKE THE RULES** just once, and we paid for it.

The bog has always been there, lurking behind the house, and we have never been allowed to go near it. Eve, nearly two years older than I am at twelve, lets it hold her curiosity more than I do. She lets the stories about it play in her head over and over again, of missing people and shapes in the mist.

Our dad tells us little, but I think he only knows little.

The fence that runs along it is meant for us, he said. To keep us out. To keep us safe. The reasons are many: risk of drowning, getting stuck in the mire and dying of dehydration. I'm not entirely certain what that is, but I know enough to keep from tempting anything that ends in death.

But Eve isn't like me. Eve loves danger, and danger loves Eve.

The contents of the dollhouse in my bedroom are splayed out across the floor like guts. We have agreed to do some renovations: change out the wallpaper – contact paper stolen from our mother in the kitchen – and rearrange the furniture. The sunlight streams in through the large window, casting criss-cross patterns on the floor around us. I'm dusting off the tiny bureaus and the miniature grandfather clock (spring cleaning, Eve called it), when a sudden and unceremonious *thud* makes us both jump.

We stare at the window, where the glass just *thunked* in a way that settles into the pit of my stomach.

“What was that?” I whisper to Eve, my mind racing with images of ghosts and ghouls.

She stands, slowly, dropping the contact paper and moving towards the window. “A bird,” she says softly, a moment later.

I cross the room quickly, staring down to the grass below, where a tiny form flops about, trying to climb back into the air. But something in me thinks it never will.

“Do we leave it?” I ask, feeling a sob fill up my chest. I don’t like dead things. Not even the motionless ladybugs that sometimes gather on the windowsills, or the dust bunnies that Mom says aren’t alive but gather under my bed like little, fluffy corpses.

“Of course not,” Eve says, and she turns for the door. I take another look at the bird, still flopping around, then going still, then flopping again. Its movements are getting smaller, less frequent.

I run from the room behind her.

The sunlight outside is wild and sharp, glinting off the spring morning dew that hasn’t yet been burnt away. The ground is harsh against my bare feet, but I think little of it as we cluster around the fallen bird. The brownish feathers remind me of birds I’ve seen at my mom’s feeder outside the kitchen window.

“It’s a lark. And he’s going to die,” Eve says bluntly.

Tears well up in my eyes. I wipe them away sloppily with the back of my hand. “How do you know that?”

“Because he’s dying now,” she says, scooping it up in her hands. “I think its neck might be broken, or mostly broken.” The bird tries to flop in her hands, but gives up, lying still save for its chest rising and falling furiously.

“What do we do with it?” I ask, its little form blurred by tears.  
“Bury it?”

But Eve turns away from me then, towards the fence – and the bog. I follow her gaze and go still, the tears drying up as something cold takes their place.

“We should give it to the Moss,” she says softly, breathlessly. And something in the way she says it makes it sound like a gift. Like an offering.

“We aren’t supposed to go near it,” I remind her, although Mom is napping, and I know our dad isn’t here.

“This is different,” she tells me, and she moves towards the fence. I linger a moment longer, debating. Our father has told us at least once a day, sometimes more, to leave the bog alone. To stay on this side of the fence. To let it be. And we always have.

*Don’t go into the bog.*

But maybe Eve is right. Maybe this is different, and maybe the bird lived in the bog and should return there to die. That doesn’t seem to be what Eve is thinking, but it makes enough sense to me that I let my steps trail behind her and slip across the fence in my bare feet.

The golden-green grass is damp, my feet squelching as we trail down towards the Moss at a slow but steady pace. Approaching it like we aren’t afraid of it, but of course we are. Eve is in front of me, holding the bird aloft like she’s carrying a birthday cake into a room at a surprise party. The breeze throws her brown hair around like some wild girl out of the fairy tales our mom sometimes reads to us, and it makes me slow down a step. Put slightly more distance between us.

It’s hard to tell where the field ends and the bog begins, but

somehow we both know, and we both stop. Pools of water fall beside areas of solid ground, slender bog trees sticking out like long fingers from the ground.

I've never been this close before. That spark of rebellion that brought me here fans into something stronger, something that relishes in the closeness. That delights in being somewhere I know I shouldn't be. Finally.

"Here you go," Eve whispers, kneeling down by one of the murky pools. "This is for you." I don't know who *you* is meant to be, but she drops the dying bird into the pool of water and it goes very, terribly, still.

I can't look away for a long and dreadful minute, and stare at the now lifeless bird floating in the brown water. Can't stop thinking about how only moments ago, it was flying through the air like other birds, its whole life ahead of it, and now it's here, dead, in a bog, and that's just it.

The sobs return; Eve puts a comforting hand on my shoulder.

"Here. Help me," she says, and she walks a few steps away to where a large cluster of bog laurel grows, the small flowers starkly cheery against the backdrop of death.

We pull and pluck until we both have handfuls, then return to the small pool where she placed the bird.

But the bird is gone.

Eve stares at the pool. I stare at Eve, my heart thundering.

"Did it sink?" I ask shakily, but Eve doesn't answer. She just keeps staring, her face unreadable, before her gaze slowly wanders up. I follow it, blinking through the new tears – and if my heart was beating fast before, now it stops.

Through the mist that is suddenly everywhere out in the bog,



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a shape stands eerily still, watching us. A white deer, with antlers so tall they disappear into the fog, moss and vines dripping from them like an ancient tree. It doesn't move, and I could almost believe it's a painting or a statue – but then a waft of mist drifts in front of it, and when it clears again, the deer is gone.

Eve is frozen in place, staring at the spot where the deer just stood, her knuckles white where they grip the flowers. Then we both drop the bog laurel and run back to the house, our clothes sodden and our legs muddy by the time we reach it.

We never speak of the bird or the deer again.



**I AM A THOUSAND** feet above Maine, and there is a dead girl sitting beside me.

The trick is not to look directly at her. If I do, she's gone before I've finished turning my head. Vanishing like a star in the dawn. But if I don't look at her, she reappears, haunting the edges of my vision. A white gown, dark hair that's matted and mangled, her mouth open in horror. A silent scream.

*Breathe.* This is not my first ghost, but it is the closest I've come to one, and the cold air tumbling off her feels like the wind on a winter's day. I grip the arm rest as we descend lower and lower over the cloudy state. My state. My home, once upon a time. I have always loved it here, with its wild woods and gnarled coastlines and mist that lies thick with secrets. But for the past 368 days, my home has been far away, on the sun-kissed beaches of California.

"A place of healing," my father had said when he sold me on the idea, immediately after my sister disappeared.

I do not love California, but my aunt does, enough to make it her home for the past fifteen years, and she loved me enough to let me spend a year in her guest room. The change was jarring, even shocking, though I did grow fond of the boardwalks and palm trees, and the sense of *life* and *future* that lights up everything

out there. If California is the future, then Maine is the ancient, cob-webbed past. Myth and murk to mint and modern.

And that suits me just fine. I've grown used to my houses having a few ghosts, and my forests a few secrets. Although my sister and I were the only ones who could see the ghosts, and I always felt like we were the secrets.

But the girl sitting next to me now is something else. She isn't like the splintered shadows or threadbare figures that dart across the room in the dead of night. Nor is she like the eyes I sometimes swear I feel watching me when I step outside our house and draw near to the bog that stretches away behind the house for dozens of miles.

*The Moss*, as it's commonly known. From an old word for British bog land. Uneven earth and pools of murky water, lanky trees in staccato clusters, swampy vines trailing down into the depths. The largest collection of peat in New England, though my father lets no one go near it, even outside of our family.

*Click. Whirr.* The plane glides closer and closer to the ground. The sun dashes behind gunmetal grey clouds that threaten a late afternoon thunderstorm.

My breath is still tight in my chest, hairs on the back of my neck standing up as every inch of me can feel the presence to my left. The presence that never boarded the plane with me.

I am the only passenger.

It has been a long night and day of travel. The red eye from Los Angeles to Boston. Then an endless wait in the airport because only two flights a day run up to the backwater airport that will save me a five-hour drive into the more unsettled parts of Maine, and I missed the first one. The girl beside me now was not there on

the other flight. She was not there in the airport. She was not there when this small, creaky plane first took off.

Watching me with blackened eyes and tangled hair, earnestly, like time is short and I just don't know it yet.

The landing gear thunks distressingly loudly as the ground comes ever closer. Ahead, the pilots chat to someone in the tower. Just another day for everyone. Business as usual. Unaware of the dead girl in the seat beside me.

"Who are you?" My whisper is small but sharp, hard to hear above the high-pitched hum of the engine. "What do you want?"

My eyes keep darting over to her. To take in every detail I can. To understand who she is. Why she's here. But every time I do, she vanishes. Back again in the next moment, when I avert my eyes.

I cast my gaze towards the window. Only a few hundred feet more to go. Glance partially in her direction again, this time she's leaning towards me, wide eyes trained on me. Only inches from my face. The stench of damp earth and mire invades my senses, and I want to pull away, pressing up against the window of the plane, but I stand firm. This is my flight. My plane. My return home.

"Who are you?" Louder this time, but it is still little more than a grating sensation in my throat.

Looking as close to her as her vanishing habit will let me, I wait. I've seen ghosts before. I've seen *her* before. But not like this. Not so blatant and close and *real*. And certainly not so persistent. The two ghosts with which I am familiar are shy, fragmented things, never whole and real and stark like this one. A glimpse, a scrap, a taunt from a corner that you can just manage to convince yourself was a trick of the light.

In the seconds before the wheels at last kiss the runway, a hollow voice whispers in my ear.

*Stay away.*

Then another voice dances behind it, half-hidden by other noises.

*It's cold, Emma. It's cold, and it's dark. Let me out.*

And the plane is on the ground, and light misting rain gathers on the front window, and the seat beside me is empty.

She's gone, as suddenly and horrifically as she appeared.

Gone.

My breath comes in gasps now, like catching my breath after diving underwater. I run a hand through the air where she sat only seconds ago but feel nothing save for a pocket of cold air. Part of me starts to doubt if she was ever really there at all, but the stench of rot still clings to the edge of my senses. I've stopped letting myself think for too long about why my sister Eve and I were so . . . strange. Why we could see things others couldn't. Obsessing over the *why* felt useless when I could instead focus on the *who*. Who are they? Why do *they* want to be seen?

One of the pilots looks back at me while we taxi to our gate. He sees my heavy breathing, my hand still clutching the arm rest like the safety of the flight depends on it.

"Nervous flyer, eh?" He grins, showing a piece of chewing gum between his teeth.

"Claustrophobic," I half-lie. I've never been afraid of flying. There aren't that many things that scare me, and all of them are back at my father's house.

Calling it a gate feels rich, when really there's just one small terminal building and the plane just sort of parks right outside it.

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The inside of the plane is hardly any bigger than a minivan, so when one of the pilots hauls the door open, I just jump straight down on to the tarmac. My legs sting and ache with the sudden stretch, but I'm grateful to be free. Too much flying and cramped seats and airport gates and not enough fresh Maine air.

"This way."

A moody airline employee, sipping an iced coffee, motions me towards the door of the terminal.

"We'll get your bag in a few minutes."

I move slowly towards the door, enjoying the space to walk, then turn to take one last look at the plane before the door closes behind me.

A girl's face watches me, half-hidden by the reflection of the clouds. Her mouth is open in that dreadful, silent scream.

And then the door closes, and she's gone.