



The  
WAY  
PAST  
WINTER

Chicken  
House

2 Palmer Street, Frome, Somerset BA11 1DS  
[chickenhousebooks.com](http://chickenhousebooks.com)

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Text © Kiran Millwood Hargrave 2018

First published in Great Britain in 2018

Chicken House  
2 Palmer Street  
Frome, Somerset BA11 1DS  
United Kingdom  
[www.chickenhousebooks.com](http://www.chickenhousebooks.com)

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Cover and interior design by Helen Crawford-White

Typeset by Dorchester Typesetting Group Ltd

Printed and bound in Great Britain by CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon CR0 4YY

The paper used in this Chicken House book is made from wood grown in sustainable forests.

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

British Library Cataloguing in Publication data available.

HB ISBN 978-1-911077-93-0

eISBN 978-1-911490-35-7

*For N, & my brother John,  
the brave ones*

Also by Kiran Millwood Hargrave

*The Girl of Ink & Stars*  
*The Island at the End of Everything*



Part 1  
HOME





## Chapter One

### The House in Eldbjørn Forest

**I**t was a winter they would tell tales about. A winter that arrived so sudden and sharp it stuck birds to branches, and caught the rivers in such a frost their spray froze and scattered down like clouded crystals on the stilled water. A winter that came, and never left.

Three years passed, then five. People spoke of curses and offered up prayers and promises. They blamed mages, their neighbours, the jarls who ruled their villages and towns. But blame didn't break the winter, and soon no one could remember warmth except from fire, or green apart from the silvery hue of the fir trees.

Carts were abandoned in favour of sleighs, fine horses lost their worth until they were all traded for mountain ponies or mewling husky pups, or other animals that knew snow. Bears sank into perpetual hibernation, wolves slunk into the shadows of the vast forest. Some folk moved from their frozen land, but most stayed and,



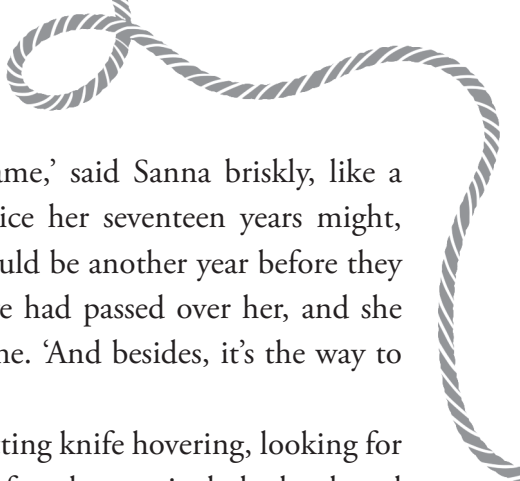
as people do, changed to fit their changed world.

They changed their stories too. Gone were tellings of honey and plenty: tales became warnings, sharp as bee stings. The fire-geese who bore the sun on their backs in summer became ice-swans who nip at exposed fingers and toes, snapping them clean off. The river nymphs became ice maidens who stalk the bottom of frozen lakes, waiting to pull wayward children under. Wistful voices spoke of magical islands where spring waited, of waterfalls of gold streaming into pools of sunlight, but always these places were beyond reach, just past the frozen horizon.

In the winter's fifth year, its grip still tightening on the southern river towns and northern mountain cities, a whole new order of cold wove itself tight as a basket about the families that lived in the remotest parts of the land. And it was in a small house tucked in a narrow pocket of forest rimed with snow thigh-deep, that three sisters and their brother were having a disagreement over a cabbage.

'Please don't boil it again, Sanna,' pleaded Pípa, the youngest. She sat shivering, her hands over her cold ears, lip wobbling as she regarded the shrivelled, hard-leaved vegetable. 'We have had nothing but boiled all week.'

'I'll not be told what to do by a child not even old

A decorative graphic of a thick, braided rope that starts at the top center, loops to the left, and then curves down and to the right, ending near the top right corner of the page.

enough for her given name,’ said Sanna briskly, like a superstitious woman thrice her seventeen years might, for Pípa was seven. It would be another year before they could be sure the evil eye had passed over her, and she was regifted her true name. ‘And besides, it’s the way to get the most good out.’

She stood with her cutting knife hovering, looking for the best incision point for the particularly hard and meagre cabbage.

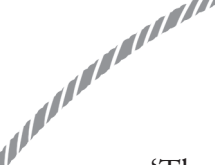
‘There’s dripping,’ said Mila hopefully, trying not to echo the whine of her little sister. ‘We could fry—’

‘And use up firewood to get the dripping hot enough?’ chided Oskar from his spot furthest from the fire. ‘We must boil it. Grow up, Pípa. I’ve had enough of your trembling lip.’

‘Leave her, Oskar,’ said Mila, wrapping her arm around Pípa and frowning at their big brother. He was nothing like he used to be before Papa left: he was becoming a stranger. Now he spoke only to thank their eldest sister Sanna for the food she gave him each morning before he waded into the thigh-high snow to check his traps, or to tell one of his little sisters off.

Mila caught up Pípa’s stiff fingers and blew her hot breath on to them. ‘Come, Píp, let’s not trouble Sanna – she knows her cabbages.’





‘That I do!’ said Sanna, having located the cabbage’s weakest point and bringing the knife down with a satisfying *thwack*. ‘Boiled it is.’

Outside, one of the dogs started to bark. Mila knew it was Dusha – her voice was higher than her brother’s, more whiny and insistent, like Pípa’s. A moment later it was joined by Danya’s whip-crack yowl.

‘Those dogs!’ huffed Sanna. ‘Oskar—’

But Mila was already on her feet, taking her fur-lined boots from beside the fire. ‘I’ll go.’

She threw on her russet cloak and wrapped her fox fur around her brown hair, but before she could unbolt the door someone knocked twice, and then twice more, in a jaunty rhythm that had become familiar to the family over the past months.

‘Wait!’ called Sanna, but Mila grinned mischievously and drew the bolt. She heard her sister swear loudly and clatter the saucepans, searching for the copper one that they sometimes used as a mirror.

A mountain pony was tied to the mounting post in the yard and a boy stood before Mila. He was Sanna’s age and Oskar’s height, with a plump, handsome face, fair where all the Oreksons were dark. He flushed when he saw Mila’s teasing smile.

‘Back again, Geir?’ said Mila. ‘I didn’t know we’d sent



any knives for sharpening this week.'

'Just the one,' said Geir, as Mila heard Sanna skidding into place behind her. Mila looked up at her big sister from under her fox fur and waggled her eyebrows. Sanna had let her hair down and pinched her cheeks into a rosy flush. She'd even bitten her lips in an effort to redden them and she'd broken the skin slightly on the lower one. She pulled Mila out of the way with a pincer grip.

'Hello, Geir.' Sanna's voice was oddly husky, as if she had a cold.

'Hello, Sanna,' squeaked Geir.

Mila snorted and stomped her way back to the kitchen, pulling the door closed behind her to keep the warmth in. They'd grown used to the pathetic exchanges that passed for conversation between their sister and the knife-sharpener from Stavgar.

Oskar looked up from where he was finishing slicing Sanna's cabbage with his hunting knife. Its handle was intricately carved to look like roots twisted across it, and it had a thick blade, better suited to cutting rope and wood than vegetables. 'Geir again?'

'Yep,' said Mila, removing her hat and rolling her eyes.

'Were they kissing?' giggled Pípa.

'Pípa!' scolded Oskar. 'Don't be ridiculous.' He looked sharply at Mila. 'They weren't, were they?' His hand

tightened on the knife.

Mila thought about teasing him, but then her stomach rumbled. She didn't have the energy. 'Of course not. He's just bringing a knife.'

'Another one?'

'Mmm.' She collapsed on the bench beside the fire, watching the steam rising from the water that would soon be the same thin greyish cabbage soup they'd eaten for weeks now.

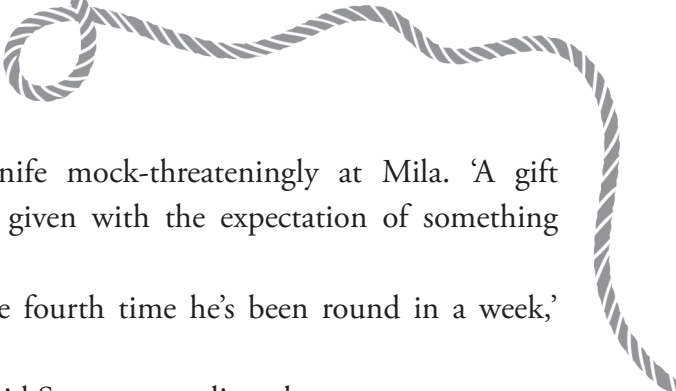
Mila listened to the knife ripping through the cabbage and strained to hear the murmurs of Sanna and Geir's exchange. The lovely bell of Sanna's laugh rang out before the front door closed with a creak and a bang, blowing the kitchen door open and sending cold fingers of wind raking across Mila's cheeks. Sanna floated in, a faraway look on her thin face as she gazed at something in her palm.

'What's that?' asked Pípa.

'Nothing,' said Sanna hurriedly, pinning the something, gleaming, into her cloak. 'A gift.' It was a brooch, intricately worked from elk horn, full of pale swirls that recalled a foaming sea. It was very fine.

'And what did you give in return?' asked Mila, bringing vivid spots of red to her sister's cheeks.

'Nothing,' said Sanna briskly, brandishing the newly



sharpened knife mock-threateningly at Mila. ‘A gift shouldn’t be given with the expectation of something in return.’

‘That’s the fourth time he’s been round in a week,’ said Oskar.

‘Hmm,’ said Sanna, purse-lipped.

‘It’s a long way from Stavgar, he’ll be riding back in the dark.’

‘Hmm.’

‘Perhaps next time you could invite him in for dinner?’


Mila saw a look pass between her older siblings, full of something she didn’t understand.

‘Yes,’ said Sanna. ‘Maybe I will.’ She swallowed, then said in a firm tone that meant the subject was closed, ‘Now, are you done butchering that cabbage?’

The dim day fell into the dark lap of dusk, and the small house filled with the smell of boiled cabbage soup that meant dinner was ready. Sanna was just about to ladle Pípa’s portion into a chipped wooden bowl when Dusha set about barking, followed by her brother.

‘Not Geir again?’ said Oskar, and Sanna shook her head.

‘Probably just spooked. I’ll go and calm them,’ said Mila, in no hurry for her bowl of soup, despite her



hunger. She put on her cloak and hat for the second time, opened the door a crack and stepped into the snow, which glowed a silvery grey in the uncertain light.

‘Coming, Dush-Dush! Coming, Danya!’

Keeping her head bowed against the biting wind, she heaved the door closed behind her and began to trudge through the drifts towards the dog shed with its wooden gate, hands tucked under her armpits to keep them warm. But she had not taken more than three steps before she collided with something.

‘*Javoyt!*’ Mila stumbled back, standing on her cloak, and nearly fell. She regained her balance and looked up. Her heart thudded almost as loud as the wind. Now she knew why the dogs were barking.