

## Excerpt – ‘Children at the Gate’

### ‘Hounds of the Hunter’ ( pages 55-57)

Damian is at the gate again, waiting. Sarah bites down hard on her lip and turns her head away so she doesn’t have to look at him.

‘You’re late,’ he says. ‘I told you last time. I don’t like hanging about.’

Sarah doesn’t say anything. There’s no point. When they reach the bridge, he grabs her arm and twists it up behind her back. ‘That’s to warn you,’ he says, panting. ‘Don’t keep me waiting tomorrow.’

Sarah makes a little soundless gasp. It’s enough, though.

Damian relaxes and lets go of her. ‘All right. Now you know.’ He pulls her further under the bridge.

No-one can see them there. It’s all tangled shadows and empty beer bottles and on the far side, the river itself, a dark thread almost choked with reeds and blackberries.

Sarah grits her teeth. She knows what Damian’s going to do and she hates it but she lets him. She has to. The blackberries are in flower, just one or two, little white flowers like stars. Sarah shuts her eyes and the flowers are there inside her mind, she is holding a spray of them in her hand, their little tender stamens are tipped with gold. For a moment it’s like the things Damian is doing aren’t happening to her. They’re happening to someone else, some other girl who probably likes it. Sarah feels sorry for her. She looks a real loser, the girl with Damian. She’s stupid too. Otherwise she wouldn’t just lie there. . . she’d do something, she’d . . . Sarah shakes her head and opens her eyes.

Suddenly she starts. It’s like waking up. Damian is speaking to her. His voice is different. It’s so low, it’s almost a whisper.

He puts a hand out and touches the curve of her cheek. ‘You’ve got nice eyes,’ he says. ‘Sort of like a fawn. I . . .’ He stops. He looks surprised. Then, almost immediately, his mask is back. His voice deepens. ‘I was telling me mate Simmo about you. He wants to come with us tomorrow. He reckons I owe him one and so . . .’

‘No. No.’ Sarah shrinks back. Her eyes, her fawn’s eyes are so wide she can feel the skin stretching, stretching . . . ‘No. Please. Please don’t make me. I . . .’

Damian straightens up. He swaggers a bit. ‘Well,’ he says. ‘Well, I haven’t decided yet. Told him I’d let him know.’

Sarah can’t look at him. Her hands are trembling. She pulls down her skirt and then, to hide her face, bends over and carefully reties one of her shoes.

Damian picks up his school-bag and shoulders it. ‘Gotta go.’ Without a backward glance, he’s up the bank and running along the path to the bus stop.

Sarah hears him begin to whistle. She leans back against the concrete pylon. She feels suddenly too tired to move. She puts her head down on her drawn up knees and closes her eyes. Her hair falls forward over her face. She feels safe behind it. She thinks about the fawn Damian saw in her eyes. She’s standing watching it, a little tender thing, stepping delicately toward her through the bleached grass. It pauses a moment, irresolute, its nostrils quivering. It is so innocent. But the hounds are out. She can hear them in the distance. They are baying for its blood. Sarah shudders. The fawn doesn’t know. It curls itself up in the grass and goes to sleep.

Sarah wants to save the fawn. And Damian. Damian wants to save it too. Sarah can see it in his face. His mouth is trembling. But his hands, his hands, they twist together and all at once the softness goes out of his face. He is helpless too.

‘Victims,’ whispers Sarah. Her mouth is dry. She wets her lips with her tongue. ‘We are victims. Hunter and hunted. All victims.’

The baying of the hounds is louder than ever. They have almost reached the fawn. Sarah can’t bear to watch. She opens her eyes.

The shadows under the bridge have darkened. She can no longer see the fawn or the hounds. Sighing, she reaches for her bag. It’s time to go home.