

For Giuseppe

CHAPTER ONE

in which Morgan explains the living daylights
and the children begin to arrive

The children began to arrive soon after Engel came to the house. It was Engel who found the first one, an infant girl, in a basket, with a bundle of neatly folded, freshly washed clothes. The basket had been left on the steps leading up from the kitchen into the garden. Whoever had put it there must have known the way the house worked, because days might have passed before any of the other doors were opened; left anywhere else, the child would probably have died. As it was, no more than an hour or two had gone by but already the creature was blue with cold. Engel picked her up and held her, the small soft body pressed to her bosom, the small wrinkled face in the warm crook of her neck, for she didn't know how long; a living daylight was how she described it to Morgan when she brought the baby up to him in his study. Looking across from his reading with amusement, Morgan explained that the living daylights were always plural and that they were supposed to be the part of the human soul most susceptible to fear. She nodded, fervently, that's exactly right, it just goes on and on. That's exactly how it was, she said, with the child's small heart barely beating and the breath like a short hot knife blade on the skin of Engel's neck. Engel lifted the baby away from her body and held her out to Morgan, who shook his head.

She said they should tell someone perhaps, someone would know what to do with her, but Morgan disagreed. Left to himself he might have been tempted, what use did he have for a child, after all? But he could hear that Engel's heart wasn't in it. Just look at you both, he said. What could be better than this? Don't you know how to deal with her as well as anyone? Let her stay here with us, where she will be clothed and fed, and kept out of this wicked weather. At least for a while. Perhaps, he thought, the child's presence would encourage Engel not to go.

He held her later, when she'd been given milk and changed into fresh clothes from the bundle she'd arrived with; decent hand-sewn clothes, laundered and ironed, made of white cotton. He stroked the soft hair from the fine blue veins of her forehead, the first child he'd ever taken in his arms, and examined his feelings to see if they were altered in any way. He wanted to see if this child would change him; more than anything he wanted that. But what he felt seemed familiar to him; he had felt it before with small animals, kittens, a hamster he'd once been given, the little stagger of a newborn lamb; even with plants, those plants that flowered and had scent, that had touched his heart for a moment before they died. It will take time, he said to himself, only slightly disappointed. Miracles will take time. At least, in the meantime, the child might begin to love him. They called her Moira, which Morgan told Engel meant *fate*. At which information, Engel sniffed.

Engel watched the two of them, that morning, standing in the centre of the kitchen with a bowl of cream in her hand, which she was going to beat and pour on bread pudding for lunch. No waste was allowed in Engel's world; even week-

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old bread had its uses. The cream, the colour of old lace, came from one of the black-and-white cows that Morgan could see from his room at the top of the house, herds of cows grazing beyond the wall that encircled his own land, as far as the city itself, where his sister ran the factory.

Other children arrived soon after that, as though Morgan had earned them by taking the first one in. Some were abandoned, as Moira had been, left on the kitchen step, which was now checked hourly; others, he suspected, were given to Engel at the door, by whom, he didn't know. These were the children who arrived empty-handed. By the end of the third month of Moira's presence in the house, there were six or seven, he wasn't sure exactly, of varying ages. Moira remained the youngest. According to Engel, who seemed to know, she couldn't have been more than a few weeks old when she was left. The oldest among them was a fair-haired boy who walked into the house one day with a cardboard tag—the kind used for parcels—attached to his wrist, on which the name *David* had been written in a childish hand. Taken immediately to Morgan, he stood up like a little soldier before his desk, stared straight ahead, and announced, in a solemn yet singsong voice, that he was five years old and had no mother or father and would behave well if he was treated well. The ages of the others ranged between these two, Moira and David, whom Morgan regarded as the most precious, perhaps because they were the most easily distinguished; Moira, the first and youngest, and David, with his tag, the eldest.