

17
CHURCH
ROW

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ALSO BY JAMES CAROL

The Killing Game
Kiss Me, Kill Me

~~WRITING AS JAMES CAROL~~

The Jefferson Winter Novels

Broken Dolls
Watch Me
Prey
The Quiet Man

The Jefferson Winter Chronicles

Presumed Guilty
Hush Little Baby
Open Your Eyes

JAMES CAROL

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ZAFFRE

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*This one's for my brother, Mike.
Keep on rocking on Little Bruv!*

Father attempted to murder me once.

A bold statement, I know, but one based on fact. When he swung that axe there was no question of it being an accident. He was aware of his actions – and the consequences of those actions. No court in the land could fail to convict him on the available evidence. The story itself is tiresome. I have gone over the events so many times the finer threads are starting to lose their integrity and unravel. That said, it is important you understand, so we will talk more of this later. Before we go any further, though, we should get some things straight.

Firstly, the operative word in my initial statement is 'attempted'. Had his attack on me succeeded I would not be here talking to you today. Because let us make no mistake, I am very much alive. Secondly, I am not looking for pity. Mawkish feelings are irrelevant.

I have not taken the decision to kill Father lightly. Believe me when I tell you that this is something that I have agonised over. However, after weighing all the available evidence, the only conclusion I can draw is that this is the only way forward.

Father must die for what he has done.

Chapter 1

The heavy steel gate retracted slowly, revealing the house in all its glory. It was brand new and looked as though it had been beamed in from the future. The angles were sharp, every pane of glass was gleaming, and the white walls reflected the sunlight like a Spanish villa. There was something beautiful about the stark simplicity of the building, something quietly comforting. The question Nikki was asking herself was whether she could imagine the three of them living here? ‘Maybe’ was as much as she was willing to concede for now. The gate finished opening and Ethan pressed the accelerator, bringing the Tesla’s motor back to life. He drove into the courtyard and stopped in front of the garage. A convertible BMW was already parked here, the top down even though it was only March.

‘You’re very quiet over there. I don’t think you’ve said a word the whole way.’ Ethan was smiling at her from the driving seat, trying to keep the mood light. It was a good smile, one the cameras loved. She wasn’t fooled. You didn’t spend a decade with another person without learning to read them. This mattered to him. She had known that when he first showed her the details on his laptop. They had looked at houses before, but this one had got him fired up in a way the others hadn’t. How much he’d

been fired up became apparent the next day. Up until then they had looked at houses in a vague, speculative way; with this one he had taken the next step and arranged a viewing.

When she didn't reply, he added, 'Look, Nik, I know this isn't the sort of house you'd usually go for, but all I ask is that you keep an open mind.'

'I *am* keeping an open mind. In fact, I was just thinking that I kind of like it. I like the location too.'

Ethan caught her eye again, surprised. 'You're not just saying that?'

Nikki shook her head. 'I'm not. You know one of the things I hate about our current house is that it's like living in a goldfish bowl. Bedford Street is too busy. There are just too many people around. This street is the complete opposite of that.'

And that was the truth. Church Row was a quiet Kensington cul-de-sac that seemed to sit apart from the hustle and bustle of the rest of the city. The pavements were narrow, the road just about wide enough for two cars to pass. Tall brick walls bordered the properties, high trees blocked the view of the houses, and every gate had a camera pointing at it. Number Seventeen sat at the far end of the street. The wall surrounding it was a couple of feet higher than the neighbouring properties and the driveway was hidden behind a heavy black steel gate. Like all cities, London had its secret places. That was what this felt like. A secret place. Driving along Church Row, Nikki could imagine feeling safe living here. That was another tick for the plus column. She could also imagine Bella being safe here, too, which was an even bigger plus.

Ethan turned his smile on Bella, who was sitting quietly in the back. She was staring at the house, keeping her thoughts to herself. Everyone said that Bella looked like her, but all Nikki could see was Ethan. Father and daughter shared the same perfectly proportioned nose, the same bright smile, the same shimmering, contradictory blue eyes, a blue that made Nikki think simultaneously of icicles and tropical seas. They both had thick black hair – Bella’s was shoulder-length, while Ethan’s was cut short. Bella had her father well and truly wrapped around her little finger. Sometimes Nikki would look at the two of them conspiring together and experience a pang of irrational jealousy. In those secret moments, she found it hard to believe this was the same child she had carried in her belly for nine months.

‘What about you Bella Boo?’ Ethan said. ‘What do you think?’

Bella reached for her tablet and started tapping the screen. *‘It’s okay.’*

The voice coming out of the tablet sounded like a six-year-old, but without any of the emotions you would usually associate with a child – no excitement, no laughter, no attitude, nothing. The voice reminded Nikki of the old telephone speaking clock. The information you’d asked for was being delivered, but in a cold, robotic manner.

‘Just okay?’ Ethan said.

Bella responded with a shrug that could have meant anything. ‘Shall we?’

Ethan jumped from the car without waiting for an answer, as eager as a kid on Christmas morning. Nikki got out in time

to see him bounce up to the back door and open it with a dramatic flourish. Bella stepped out, frowning at him like she just wanted him to go away, but not quite able to hide her smile. Before Nikki could say anything, Ethan had taken hold of their hands and was leading them towards the front door. All they could do was follow in his wake, pulled along on the wave of his excitement.

The first thing Nikki noticed when they got there was that there was no handle. It was one of those details that cried out to be noticed. Certain things you took for granted: the sun would rise in the east each morning and doors had handles. The second thing she noticed was that there were none of the other things you might expect to see either: no doorbell, no letter box, no house number. It was just a blank expanse of black-painted wood, as though the door had come straight from the factory and had yet to have any of the extras fitted. She stopped in front of it. Ethan's puzzled look mirrored her own.

'So what do we do?' she said. 'Knock?'

Before Ethan could respond, the door swung silently open and a voice said, 'It's a pleasure to meet you, Mr and Mrs Rhodes. Please come in.'

Nikki peered through the open doorway but couldn't see anyone. Ethan was peering too, his puzzled expression turning to one of bemusement.

'I guess we do what the lady says,' he said as he walked inside.

Nikki hesitated for a second, then took Bella's hand and followed. No sooner had she stepped into the foyer when she

heard a faint noise behind her. She glanced back in time to see the door slowly closing behind them.

‘Ms Fisher is waiting for you in the kitchen. She said you should follow the smell of coffee.’

The voice was warm and mellifluous and seemed to be coming from right beside them. Except there was no one there. Ethan was grinning now, clearly tickled by this. Nikki didn’t share the emotion. She didn’t like surprises. They played havoc with her anxiety.

‘Perhaps I should introduce myself,’ the voice continued. ‘My name is Alice and I am here for your comfort and convenience.’

‘Here for our comfort and convenience,’ Ethan echoed. ‘You know, guys, I think I like the sound of that.’

The smell of coffee got stronger as they moved into the spacious reception area. Like the outside of the building, the walls were painted white. A touch of colour was provided by the strategically placed rubber plants and a large wall screen displaying a colourful Picasso that was heavy on the oranges and reds. The area was brightly lit by dozens of small halogens embedded in the ceiling. The reception area narrowed into a corridor that went on for ten metres or so before opening into a large open kitchen that was dominated by a granite-topped work island. Everything in here was sleek and elegant and smelled brand new.

Catriona Fisher was sitting on a stool at the work island. She stood when she saw them and walked over to do the introductions. The way she moved it was as though she had complete

conviction that the universe was going to step aside to accommodate her. She was in her fifties and four or five inches shorter than Nikki, so somewhere around five foot three. Her hairstyle was her most striking feature, a sleek raven-black bob that was shot through with a vibrant turquoise streak. The black baggy shirt and black cargo pants contrasted with all the surrounding white. Bella was jerking Nikki's hand and holding up her tablet. *Edna Mode* was written on the screen, causing Nikki to bite back a laugh. Edna Mode was a character from *The Incredibles*, a fast-talking fashion guru who designed superhero costumes. The film was one of Bella's current favourites. Looking at Catriona, Nikki had to admit that Bella had a point. There was more than a passing resemblance. In attitude as well as appearance.

'So who wants coffee?' Catriona asked.

'I'm fine,' Nikki said.

'I'm fine too,' Ethan echoed.

'What about you, young lady?' Catriona asked, aiming the question at Bella. 'Mind you, I suppose you're a bit too young.'

Bella moved closer to Nikki and took a tight hold of her leg.

'Last chance. But you should know that Alice makes a spectacular cup of coffee.' Catriona gave them less than a second to answer, then called out. 'Alice, another coffee, please. And make this one a little cooler and not so sweet as last time.'

'Of course, Ms Fisher.'

The coffee machine was hissing and gurgling on the work surface that stretched along the far wall. By the time Catriona

got there, her drink was ready, hot steam swirling up from the cup. She picked it up and took a sip. 'Perfect. You know, there are so many things that excite me about this house, but Alice is right up there at the top of the list. What do you think of her, by the way? Pretty amazing, huh?'

'I guess so,' Nikki replied, although the truth was that she wasn't particularly impressed. Granted, Alice had opened the front door for them and made coffee, but as far as Nikki could see, Alice was just Alexa dressed up with a different name.

Catriona smiled, making sure to include both Nikki and Ethan. 'Okay, I've made my decision: you can have the house.'

'Excuse me,' Nikki said. 'We haven't decided if we want it yet.'

'What's to decide? Who wouldn't want to live here?'

Nikki turned to Ethan. 'Why do I feel like I'm being hijacked?'

Ethan put his hands in the air, his surprise a hundred per cent genuine. 'I've got no idea what she's talking about.'

'Here's the thing,' Nikki said to Catriona. 'Last time I looked, the way this works is that we get shown the house, then we go away and talk about it. Then and only then do we come to a decision as to whether or not we want to buy it.'

'And if you were viewing an ordinary house, that's certainly the process you would follow. But this is no *ordinary* house. Give it another ten or twenty years and it may well be, but for now, trust me when I tell you that this house is unique. A total one-off. Also, if this was a normal house viewing you'd be getting shown around by an estate agent who'd be doing everything possible to persuade you to buy it. But you're not being shown

around by an estate agent, you're being interviewed by the architect. Doesn't that strike you as odd?'

It did, but Ethan had told her that was because the house wasn't on the market yet. He'd heard about it through a friend of a friend and thought it sounded perfect. By meeting directly with Catriona he was hoping they could get in with an offer first, if Nikki agreed to it. 'What do you mean, you're interviewing us? So far all you've done is ask us if we like the virtual assistant and whether we want a coffee.'

Catriona laughed. 'Alice is so much more than a virtual assistant. With your standard VA you ask for something and the VA will try to oblige as best it can, usually with varying degrees of success. Alice has been designed to anticipate your needs before you even realise you have them.'

'With all due respect, it sounds as though you're feeding us a line there.'

Catriona shook her head. 'Alice is the next generation in AI. The best way to think about her is that she's every servant you'll ever need.'

'And that sounds like another line.'

'I tell you what, let's have this conversation after you've been living here for a couple of weeks. Actually, make that a couple of days. I guarantee you'll be convinced by then.'

'We still haven't said that we're going to buy the house.'

'You will. Okay come with me, there's something I'd like you to see.' She turned her attention on Bella. 'Actually it's something I think *you'd* like to see.'

Without another word. Catriona put her coffee down on the work island and strode across the kitchen. She paused at the entrance and smiled back at them. ‘Well, what are you waiting for?’

Nikki shared a look with Ethan then took Bella’s hand and followed Catriona into the corridor. As they moved through the house, Catriona kept up a running commentary, delivering her pitch at a hundred words a minute. She led them to a room at the far end of the house. The door slid silently open as she approached it. She stepped through and motioned for them to follow. The room they walked into was about eight metres by eight, with patio doors on the far side that looked out over a small Zen Garden. There were no furnishings and the smell of fresh paint lingered in the air,

‘I think this bedroom would be perfect for your daughter,’ Catriona announced.

Nikki wasn’t so sure. She didn’t like the fact that it was at the far end of the house, away from all the other bedrooms. She would rather have Bella in the room next to theirs – that was the setup at their current house, and it worked just fine. Bella, however, didn’t seem to share her reservations. She had let go of her hand and was walking through the room as if it already belonged to her, heading towards the patio doors. Before she got there, the doors opened and she stepped out into the cold sunshine. Nikki watched her go, a bloom of panic welling up inside her.

‘It looks like the garden’s enclosed,’ Ethan said quietly at her shoulder. ‘There’s no way for her to get out onto the street.’

‘That’s correct,’ Catriona put in. ‘The big advantage with this room is that your daughter can go outside whenever she wants. It’s important for children to get fresh air, right? That was one of my considerations when I was designing this part of the house. I wanted to create a space that integrated both the outer and inner worlds. My thinking was that if you can’t drag them away from their electronic devices, then why not create an environment where the outside world comes to them. All you’ve got to do is ask Alice to open the doors and you’ve got your very own miniature Garden of Eden.’

Nikki walked across to the patio doors, still unconvinced. What she saw when she got there did nothing to change her mind. Bella was crouched down beside the pond, fascinated by the large coloured Koi carp that were turning lazy loops through the water. It wouldn’t take much for her to lose balance and topple in. A strong breeze would probably do it. Catriona Fisher clearly didn’t have children. If she had she wouldn’t have considered putting a pond out here. It might look pretty, but as far as Nikki was concerned it was an accident waiting to happen.

‘It’s all right,’ Ethan said, reading her thoughts again. ‘We can get something to cover it with. Some sort of mesh. We’ll be able to make it safe.’

He walked past her, out into the garden. ‘So what do you think of the room, sweetheart?’

Bella turned and smiled at him and started jabbing frantically at her tablet screen.

‘Cool,’ she said in that blank voice. ‘*Can I look after the fish?*’
‘Of course you can. But you’d need to feed them every day.’

Bella nodded.

‘And you’ll need to learn how to look after them properly. This type of fish requires a lot of looking after. Assuming, of course, we end up buying the house.’

They both turned to look at Nikki. Their smiles were identical. As was the childlike excitement in their eyes. Looking back later, this was the moment when she knew that they would be moving here.

Chapter 2

Ethan didn't say much on the journey back to St John's Wood. For him, the viewing had been a formality. If he hadn't made his mind up before they arrived at Church Row, then he'd definitely made it up by the time Catriona Fisher had finished showing them around. That glint of boyish enthusiasm in his eye had got brighter with each room they had seen and by the time they reached the basement with its pool and cinema room, he was sold, hook, line and sinker. Things weren't so clear cut for Nikki. One second she'd be thinking they could make it work; the next she would be seeing this as the worst idea ever. Applying pressure wasn't going to help, which was why Ethan had wisely opted to keep his mouth shut.

The second they turned into Bedford Street she felt that old familiar knot of anxiety twisting through her gut. This happened every time, so she should be used to it by now, but she wasn't. It was also something that was supposed to get easier with time. It didn't. She'd get a day like today where everything felt raw again and it would be as though she was back at square one. Ethan slowed when they approached the house, searching for a parking space. As they cruised past the line of parked cars, all Nikki could see was their front door. It took up her whole

focus and for a moment she was reliving the accident and its aftermath in every last detail: the pain, the loss, the guilt, the what-ifs, *everything*. Ethan suddenly pressed down hard on the accelerator, jerking her from her thoughts. He had spotted a space and was damned if anyone else was going to get it. The Tesla was barely audible at the best of times but when the motor cut out this seemed to highlight the silence between them. As Nikki unfastened her seatbelt she noticed that Ethan was making no move to unfasten his.

‘Aren’t you coming in?’

Ethan shook his head. ‘I’ve got a meeting with Cally about the new show.’

Cally was his agent. He was currently in the process of transitioning from Radio Two’s drive-time show to the breakfast slot. He’d actually wound the old show up back in January and it was now reaching the point where he was bored and ready to get back to work. To start with it had been nice having him around more, but Nikki was now counting the days too. The show was launching in April and there had been a *lot* of meetings lately. He hadn’t mentioned this one, though.

‘A meeting with Cally, eh? It’s the first I’ve heard about it.’

Ethan frowned and it was very obviously put on. ‘I thought I mentioned it.’

‘You didn’t. What’s more, you know you didn’t.’ Nikki laughed. ‘You are such a crap liar, Ethan.’

Ethan was laughing too. *Busted*. ‘Okay, you got me. I just wanted to give you some space. You have a lot to think about.’

‘You want that house, don’t you?’

‘Is it that obvious?’

Nikki glanced over her shoulder. ‘What about you, Bella Boo?’

Bella answered with a nod.

‘So it’s two against one.’

‘That’s not how this one works,’ Ethan said. ‘All three of us need to be in agreement, otherwise it’s not going to happen.’

‘So when will you be back?’

‘How about dinner time? That gives you the whole afternoon. I can bring Indian.’

‘Indian works for me.’

Bella tapped the screen of her tablet. *‘Korma please.’*

Ethan smiled over his shoulder at her. ‘That goes without saying.’

‘And I’ll have a chicken bhuna, please.’ Nikki leant over and kissed him. ‘Love you.’

‘Right back at you,’ Ethan said, returning the kiss.

Nikki got out and opened the back door for Bella.

‘Love you, Daddy.’

‘And right back at you too, sweetheart,’ Ethan said, blowing her a kiss.

The exchange was bittersweet. It was one of those moments where Nikki realised how much the three of them had lost. Hearing Bella tell Ethan that she loved him in that cold, emotionless voice was like being stabbed in the heart.

Nikki helped Bella out and together they watched the Tesla pull away from the kerb. They kept watching until it turned out

of Bedford Street, Bella waving one last time as it disappeared from sight, the tablet clutched tight in her hand. That was yet another reminder of what had happened. She never went anywhere without it. Other parents joked about how their kids were addicted to their electronic gadgets, but for Bella this tablet was the lifeline that connected her to the rest of the world. The cover was pink and decorated with hearts and stars, and starting to look a bit bashed up. Nikki wondered how long it would be before she wanted to change it for something more grown-up. The thought provoked a pang of sadness. In a lot of ways Bella was still her little girl, but in too many ways she was older than her six years. Hand in hand, they started walking, Bella on her right side, to shield her from the road.

Their house was an elegant white Edwardian that sat at the end of a terrace of identical-looking properties. It was filled with character, charming in a way the Church Row house would never be. They climbed the steps to the front door, the memory of the accident pushing Nikki's apprehension higher with each one. She couldn't remember her anxiety being this bad – certainly not for a while, at any rate. She took her keys out and unlocked the door, her hand shaking a little as she did so. She glanced down at Bella, but she was looking at her tablet, blissfully unaware of her discomfort.

Nikki let them inside, closing the door behind them. She rattled the security chain into place then turned the key to engage the five-lever mortice lock. If she had done this two years ago, then things would have turned out very different. It was a thought that occurred to her every time she walked through

this door. Was this something that would get left behind if they moved house, or was this particular piece of neurosis transferable? Only time would tell, she guessed.

The smell of home-made soup hung hot and heavy in the air, and they followed it along the hallway. Sofia was washing up when they walked into the kitchen. She smiled at them when she heard them enter, then grabbed a tea towel and started drying her hands. Bella ran across and Sofia scooped her into a hug and kissed her.

‘Are you hungry, *Corazoncito*? It’s way past your lunchtime.’ Her Spanish accent was still strong even though she had lived in the UK for more than half of her life.

Bella answered with an enthusiastic nod and Sofia stole another kiss before putting her down and turning to look at Nikki. ‘What about you, *mi cariño*? It’s chicken soup. Your favourite.’

Nikki shook her head. ‘Thanks, but I’m not hungry.’

‘You really should eat something, you know.’

‘It’s okay I’ll have some later.’

Nikki helped Bella out of her coat before removing hers. She draped them over the back of one of the chairs then sat down. By the time Bella had washed her hands and sat down too, there was a bowl of soup and a plate with some bread waiting for her on the table. The portion was too big, but Nikki had given up on that battle. Sofia’s stock answer was that Bella was a growing girl. Anyway, Bella was pretty good at self-regulating. She would stop when she was full.

‘So, *Corazoncito*,’ Sofia said, ‘what was the house like?’

Bella put her spoon down in her bowl and started tapping the screen of her tablet. ‘*Amazing. I have my own fish pond in my room.*’

Sofia’s eyes widened with disbelief. ‘In your room? Surely not.’

Bella shook her head, frowning. Tongue poking out from the corner of her mouth, she started tapping frantically at her tablet. Both Nikki and Sofia resisted the urge to fill the silence. One thing the therapists had agreed on was that it was important that Bella felt as though she was being heard.

‘*There is a garden outside the room. That’s where the pond is. Daddy says I can look after the fish.*’

‘That does sound amazing.’

‘*There are three of them. I’m going to call them Ruby, Sapphire and Emerald.*’

‘Such beautiful names. I can’t wait to see them.’ Sofia sat down in the empty seat next to Nikki and waited for her to meet her eye. ‘And what do you think of the house, *mi cariño*?’

Nikki glanced at Bella and Sofia got the message. She changed the subject smoothly, filling the silence with details of what she had been up to that morning. Sofia had been with them for years. They employed her as a housekeeper, but she was so much more than that. She was in her late fifties with long black hair and a quick, easy smile that made her look ten years younger. She always wore something red because she believed the colour brought good luck. Today it was her shoes. Sofia had

been brought up in a small farming village north of Barcelona, but had found this too claustrophobic. She had escaped as soon as she could, first to Madrid, then to London, where she had met her husband, Philip. He had died five years ago from cancer and she had nursed him through the illness. Even now she still hadn't dealt fully with the grief. She probably never would. As Nikki knew only too well, some losses you never fully recovered from.

Sofia had never had children and treated Bella like the granddaughter she would never have. She loved her to bits, a feeling that was mutual. *Corazoncito* was her pet name for her, which translated as "little heart", which fitted perfectly. Nikki's own parents had died before she met Ethan – her mother from breast cancer and her father a couple of years later from a brain aneurysm. After the accident, Sofia had become a surrogate mother to her, helping put the pieces back together. To say she was worth her weight in gold would be an understatement.

Bella took another mouthful of soup then let the spoon clatter into the bowl, picked up her tablet and announced that she was going to her room. She had hardly eaten any of her soup and the bread hadn't been touched. Usually she ate everything they put in front of her, but sometimes she got like this when she was excited about something. Not that Nikki minded. It was good to see her all fired up and acting like a normal kid. That didn't happen often enough these days. Nikki waited for the door to close before speaking.

'I'm sorry. It looks like nobody's eating your soup.'

Sofia just stared. Her mouth was tight, her eyes tighter. For once there wasn't even the hint of a smile.

'What?' Nikki said.

'I'm just waiting for you to answer my question. So what did you think of the house?'

Chapter 3

Sofia was still staring, waiting for an answer.

‘The house is beautiful,’ Nikki replied carefully. ‘Bella and Ethan love it.’

‘That much is clear. Well, as far as Bella is concerned, at any rate. The way she was talking she had already moved in. The thing is, *mi cariño*, do *you* love it?’

‘I don’t hate it.’

‘That’s not the same, and you know it.’

Nikki let go of a sigh. ‘I love this house. When we first looked at it I knew this was the place where we were going to bring up our babies.’

‘Love or loved? Because the thing about love is that it can die as easily as it can grow. Maybe even easier.’

Nikki said nothing.

‘Face it, you haven’t been happy here since Grace died.’

Hearing Grace’s name took her right back to the accident. It was the start of the summer holidays, a beautiful day, the temperature pushing towards thirty degrees. The girls had turned four that June and were playing with a tennis ball in the hall, rolling it back and forward along the length of floor to each other. Nikki had gone to the kitchen to make them their afternoon snack. She was only a dozen feet away, close enough to

hear them chattering away. Like a lot of twins they had even developed their own language – cryptophasia was the technical term. Had she been able to understand them, then she might have known that they were too hot, and that their solution was to open the front door to let some air in, even though they had been told time and time again not to open it.

The second she heard the van skidding to a halt outside the house she knew that something bad had happened. The sound was much too loud, as though it was actually in the house. The juice jug she was holding had fallen to the floor, smashing into pieces, and she had sprinted out of the kitchen. There was no sign of the girls in the hall and the front door was wide open. She found Bella standing on the kerb staring open-mouthed at the white delivery van. Grace was lying in front of it, her body twisted into an awkward, broken shape. The green tennis ball had rolled to stop a short distance from her.

The doctors and surgeons did their best, but they couldn't save Grace. Her head injuries were so severe that even if she had regained consciousness she would have been a vegetable for the rest of her life. The following week was a living hell, just watching Grace lying in a bed surrounded by machines, wishing for a miracle while all the time knowing there was nothing anyone could do. Explaining to Bella that her twin sister was going to die was the hardest thing Nikki had ever done. She still had no idea how she managed to get through it. She and Ethan had explained the situation as best they could, opting for as much honesty as they thought she could handle. There were lots of tears and head shaking, and her little face was filled with

confusion, but since she had stopped talking it was difficult to know what she was actually thinking. When Grace finally passed away, Nikki had just wanted to disappear.

Grace had died a couple of weeks after her fourth birthday. She was buried in the churchyard at Sandridge, the small Hertfordshire village where Nikki had grown up. The plot was next to her parents', in the shade of an ash tree. It was a beautiful spot that caught the mid-afternoon sun. Nikki visited the grave at least once a month to change the flowers and tidy it up. The sight of the white headstone always got to her, but what got her even more were the words inscribed into the marble.

*Here lies Grace Rhodes
Gone to dance with the angels*

*

'Let me ask you something,' Sofia was saying. 'Do you think you could learn to love this house?'

Nikki shook her head. 'I don't know. Maybe.'

'Which is a start. Okay, so do you think you can turn it into a home for the three of you?'

Nikki nodded. 'I think so.'

Sofia went quiet and waited for Nikki to meet her eye again. 'Can you imagine ever being happy in this house again? Truly happy? And be honest, *mi cariño*. For you, not for me.'

Nikki hesitated then shook her head.

'So you need to move.'

'But not necessarily to this house.'

‘That is true, but do you know what I think? I think that you could find a way to talk yourself out of moving to any house.’

‘Maybe you’re right.’

‘Houses don’t just hold on to the ghosts of the dead,’ Sofia said sombrely. ‘They hold on to the souls of the living too. Until you let go, Grace will remain trapped here.’

‘But I don’t want to let go,’ Nikki said quietly.

A tear rolled down her cheek, but before she could do anything about it, Sofia had wiped it away with her thumb and taken hold of her hand. Her skin was warm and rough, her touch comforting.

‘God took Grace, and believe me when I tell you that I ask him every day how He could do such a thing.’ Sofia paused and waited for Nikki to look at her again. ‘However, He let you keep Bella, and I believe he did that to give you the strength to go on. You need to move on, *mi cariño*. For Bella, and for you, and for Ethan. And for Grace too.’

‘I know. But it’s so hard.’

‘You know, when my Philip passed away I never thought that I would be able to carry on, but somehow I did. We’re all stronger than we think we are, and you’re one of the strongest women I know.’

Nikki shook her head. Sofia was just saying that to make her feel better. She wasn’t strong. Far from it. Most days she felt as though she was teetering on the ledge, just one small step away from disaster.

‘It’s true,’ Sofia added.

‘What do you think I should do?’

‘That’s not my decision to make.’

Sofia patted her hand then stood and walked back over to the sink to finish the washing up. Nikki watched her for a moment then took out her mobile, laid it on the table, and for a long time just sat there staring at it. Bella’s room was directly above the kitchen and she could hear her moving around up there. Grace was dead and there was nothing they could do to change that; Bella, however, was very much alive. What was best for her? Because whatever they did, whatever decision they made, it had to be the one that worked for Bella. Here, Grace’s ghost was everywhere she looked; the memories of her twin sister were embedded into the DNA of the house. Maybe moving to Church Row would be the new start they so badly needed. And who knew, maybe it would be the first step to finally getting Bella to talk again.

Nikki reached for her mobile before she had the chance to change her mind. Ethan answered on the second ring, as though the phone was already in his hand and he was just waiting for her to ring.

‘Hey there, Nik. Is everything all right?’

‘Everything’s fine. I was just calling to tell you that you can come home. We can buy the house.’

Chapter 4

Today was 12th June. Seven years ago Nikki had been in a birthing pool, high as a kite on Entonox, crushing Ethan's hand, while trying to convince him that Entonox was a London nightclub that she used to go to when she was younger.

The girls had loved birthdays and always had a big party to which they would invite all their friends. For their last one together everyone had dressed up as Disney Princesses and it had been a complete riot. There had been thirty kids in total, all of them dressed in brightly coloured ball gowns and hyped up on sugar and excitement.

They'd offered to arrange a party for Bella the following year, but she hadn't wanted one, opting instead for home-made pizza and a movie with her and Ethan. This had started a new tradition which carried on to the present day. They would always offer to arrange a party, but this was what she said she wanted – although the lost look on her face told a different story. Nikki understood. Having a party without Grace would have broken her heart all over again too. Christmases were difficult as well. It was hard to create happy memories when the old ones just wouldn't let go.

'Are you all right, *mi cariño*?'

'I'm fine.'

‘No, you’re not.’

‘I’m just missing Grace, that’s all.’ The words came out on a sigh. Being able to admit this was progress of sorts. For a long time she couldn’t say Grace’s name out loud without breaking down. Dr Richardson her therapist would have been proud.

‘I thought it might be that. Birthdays are always tough. Shortly after we met, Philip took me to the most expensive restaurant he could afford for my birthday. This was something he did every year after. He always bought me a red rose too and arranged for it to be waiting on the table for me. Before he died he arranged for a red rose to be sent to me on my birthday. I swear I cried for a week when it arrived.’

‘Is that why you always wear something red?’

Sofia nodded, then reached up and touched the red scrunchy she was using to tie her hair back. ‘It makes me feel close to him. Like he’s still with me.’

‘You never mentioned this before. You always told me that it’s your good luck colour.’

Sofia’s smile was tinged with sadness. ‘It is. I had thirty good years with Philip. On that basis I class myself as the luckiest person who ever lived.’

Nikki understood. The antique heart-shaped locket around her own neck had a photo of Grace as a baby in one side and Bella in the other. She wore it everywhere, because it was one more way to keep Grace close. Anyone else looking at the pictures wouldn’t be able to tell the two girls apart, but she always could. Grace was looking directly at the camera as if she was issuing a challenge; Bella was looking suspiciously off

to one side like she was trying to work out what the catch was. Their personalities had been defined from the word go. Grace was born first and had always been more confident; a lot of Bella's confidence had come from following the trail her sister had blazed.

'How's the pizza dough doing?' Nikki asked, changing the subject.

'It'll be ready in five minutes. So what's the latest on the house move?'

Nikki took a sip of her coffee and made a face. Not because the coffee was bad – Sofia made a fantastic cup of coffee – but because the soap opera of their house move was showing no sign of ending any time soon. They should have been in the Church Row house by now. Instead, they were stuck here in limbo with half their possessions in boxes, waiting while a process they seemed to have no control over ran its course.

'The couple buying this house are now telling us that they need another week to finalise the sale of their house. Mind you, they've been telling us that for a month now.'

'There must be something you can do to speed up the process.'

Nikki shook her head slowly. 'We've done everything we can at our end. We're just waiting for them now. It's got to the point where it's beyond frustrating.' This was only half the truth. It was true that she was anxious to get going now the decision to move had been made. At the same time, there was a part of her that wanted to stay in this house forever because this was where Grace was.

‘On a more positive note,’ she added. ‘I’ve been speaking to a school that’s only a ten minute drive from Church Row. They specialise in dealing with children with emotional issues. It sounds perfect for Bella. I really think they can help her.’

‘And what does Bella think about moving school? She loves it at St Mark’s.’ When Nikki didn’t say anything, Sofia added, ‘She doesn’t know anything about this, does she?’

‘It’s almost the summer holidays. She might as well stay at St Mark’s until then. That gives me the whole of the summer to prepare her for going to a new school. At the moment she’s got enough to deal with. Once the house move is behind us I’ll start introducing the idea.’

Sofia took another sip of her coffee. ‘That reminds me, have you heard of a Dr Santos?’

Nikki frowned and shook her head. ‘I’ve never heard of him.’

‘It’s a her. She’s an American psychiatrist. Anyway, she’s now working in London. I’m wondering if it might be worth contacting her about Bella.’

Nikki’s first thought was: *great, another shrink*. That said, she wasn’t ready to dismiss the idea out of hand. If there was even an outside chance that this Dr Santos could help then it was an avenue worth exploring. ‘What can you tell me about her?’

‘Not much. I saw a story on the Internet. Seemingly she’s been helping some of those poor children who were involved in the Grenfell Tower fire that are still suffering with PTSD. That’s what made me think of Bella. If she can help *them*, then maybe she can help Bella too.’

Nikki reached for her mobile and typed ‘Santos Grenfell’ into the browser. The story appeared at the top of the list of search results. She clicked on it and skimmed through the article, picking out the salient facts. Dr Santos had moved to the UK six months ago and started a new practice in London. Back in the States she had worked with the survivors of school shootings. Reading between the lines, she seemed to know her stuff. At the end of the article there was a quote from her that resonated: ‘There are no broken children, only children who are waiting to be fixed’.

As Nikki read this again, the tiny bloom of hope inside her chest became a little brighter. They’d been here before, though. More than once. Over the last couple of years they had seen every specialist in the country. None of them had been able to help Bella. The one thing they had all agreed on was that Bella wasn’t talking because of the shock of the accident – ‘give it time’ was the favoured phrase – but almost two years had passed since Grace had died and Bella still hadn’t uttered a single word. How much time were they supposed to give it? Another year? Ten?

There was no physical reason for Bella not talking. It was as though the trauma of the accident had short-circuited something in her head, stealing her voice. The term bandied around by the so-called experts was Hysterical Muteness, but this was just a convenient way for them to say they didn’t have a clue without putting their hands up and admitting as much. Typing ‘Hysterical Muteness’ into Google hadn’t helped. There hadn’t

been much research into the subject, and nobody had anything helpful to say. As far as Nikki could tell, hysterical muteness was a label without any real substance, rather than any sort of legitimate medical diagnosis.

It was the little things she missed most, like when she used to pick Bella up from school and was greeted with a hug and a kiss and a full-on, turbo-blasted account of her day: which teachers were nice, which were mean, who this week's best friend was and who had fallen out of favour. Now all she got was a hug and a kiss, and an emotionless *Hi Mummy* via the tablet.

'You should get in touch with her,' Sofia said when Nikki finished reading. 'There's nothing to lose.'

Which was why she would call her. As for whether Dr Santos could help, well that one remained to be seen. 'I'll contact her when we've got the house move behind us.'

'Good. And who knows, maybe she can help. It would be so nice to hear Bella's beautiful voice again.' Sofia reached across the table and patted her hand. 'The dough should be ready by now. Shall we start doing the pizzas?'

Sofia spent the next five minutes making the pizza bases, rolling out the dough, spreading on the tomato sauce and loading them with cheese. While she did that, Nikki sorted out the toppings, putting everything into little dishes so Bella could do the rest. Once they had everything ready, Nikki walked over to the door and stuck her head through the doorway.

'Bella Boo,' she called out. 'You can come and decorate the pizzas now, sweetheart.'

No response. Not that Bella was going to reply verbally, but usually Nikki would at least hear her moving around.

‘Bella,’ she called again.

Still nothing.

‘Bella!’ She was yelling now, a hundred-and-one disaster scenarios flooding through her brain. The panic started in her stomach and within seconds had infected every part of her. She took a couple of steps into the hallway, going far enough to reassure herself that the front door was closed and the security chain was in place, then hurried up the stairs. Bella wasn’t in her bedroom. She ran over to the bed and ripped the duvet off. Bella wasn’t hiding under it; she wasn’t beneath the bed either.

‘Bella,’ she yelled out as she hurried back onto to the landing, ‘if you’re playing hide-and-seek, you can come out now.’

Nikki forced herself to keep quiet and still, listening hard. All she wanted was a sign that her daughter was okay, a clear indication that she was somewhere in the house. All she got was a silence that condemned her for losing Bella too.