

don't close your eyes

HOLLY SEDDON



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For my friends.

CHAPTER ONE

Present day

ROBIN

Robin drags in the stuffy air with thin breaths, puffs it out quickly. Dust dances in the foot of a sunbeam. Robin tries not to imagine those tiny specks filling her lungs, weighing her down.

Outside, the Manchester pavement is grey and wet but the air has a freshness, a flirtation with spring. Robin won't feel this. She won't let the damp tingle her skin. It won't slowly sink into the cotton of her faded black T-shirt.

A bus rushes past the window, spraying the front of her house and its nearest neighbours with a burst of puddle water temporarily turned into surf. But Robin doesn't see this. She only hears the gush and the disappointment of the woman whose jeans got 'fucking soaked'.

Robin did not go out yesterday and she will not leave her house today. Bar fire or flood, she'll still be inside tomorrow. Just as she has been inside for these last years. Until a few weeks ago, everything in Robin's world had been fine and safe. A cosy shell. She spends her days clocking up the recommended ten thousand steps a day on her pedometer, watching television, lifting a metal graveyard of weights and aimlessly searching the internet.

Robin is careful and controlled. She only answers her door by prior appointment. Online groceries arriving outside of designated slots get lumped back to the depot by irritated drivers. Unexpected

parcels are unclaimed. There is an election soon, but Robin is not interested in discussing politics with earnest enthusiasts in bad suits shuffling on her doorstep.

Someone is knocking on her door right now. They were polite at first but now they're building to a crescendo of frustration. Robin stares forward at the television in grim determination, jaw jutting ahead. The screen is filled with bright colours and mild voices. Television for toddlers. The minutes are filled with stories of triumph in simple tasks, of helping friends or learning a cheerful new skill. There is no baddie, there is no guilt or fear. Everyone is happy.

As the knocks grow a little more frantic, Robin deliberately takes a deep breath. She focuses on her chest filling and expanding, and the slow seeping of air back out between her teeth. Still she stares doggedly at the screen.

SARAH

My child has been torn from me and there's nothing I can do. Four days ago she'd walked off happily holding her uncle's hand and that was the last I'd seen of her golden hair, doe eyes and tiny pink nose. Violet was smiling and oblivious, waving to me while I sat at my own dining table and heard accusation after accusation with no right of reply.

Jim was flanked by his parents. We'd just eaten a 'family lunch' that I'd spent all morning cooking. Instead of letting me clear the plates, as I usually would, Jim had cleared his throat, nodded to his brother to take Violet away, and started reading out his list. Line after line, like bullets.

For a moment afterwards we all sat in stunned silence until Jim looked at his mum and, on seeing her nod of encouragement, said, 'Let's not drag this out. You need to pack your things and get out of here. We've found you somewhere to stay until you get on your feet.'

I was marched upstairs, hands on my back. They watched me while I packed my bags, then Jim and his father escorted me from my home and into a taxi, where I spent fifteen minutes dumbly staring out of the windscreen, too shocked to even cry.

As the blood drained from my skin, I went over and over the list Jim had read out and tried to make sense of it.

1. Jealousy

I thought he was going to say more. But he'd said the word 'jealousy' alone, quietly and firmly, without taking his eyes off the piece of paper in his hands.

At that point I still thought the whole thing might be some kind of joke. His mother and father at the dinner table, his normally pally younger brother in another room with Violet.

But no punchline came. Instead he just carried on reading his list. His parents sat there with their hands in their laps, curled in on themselves while their son made terrible claims about me. About me and our almost-four-year-old.

Jim thinks I was jealous of his affection for Violet. Jealous of their bond, which was apparent from the earliest days. Jealous that he would come in from work and say 'where's my girl?' and mean her. Our little baby. And even though I had nourished her all day, run ragged trying to do everything in the house single-handed while my koala baby stuck to me, covered my ears and bitten my lips when she'd screamed, as soon as she saw Jim come through the door at 6.15 p.m., up her little arms would shoot and she'd make monkey-like straining noises as she tried to reach him.

I wasn't jealous of her. If anything, I was jealous of him. I wanted her love all to myself but I didn't begrudge their bond, I loved to watch it. Love in action. A hard-working, loving man, our comfortable home, our beautiful little baby.

All lined up in a row, like dominoes.

CHAPTER TWO

1989

ROBIN

Robin drags the toes of her patent shoes along the wall. Just because she's small doesn't mean she should be dressed like a stupid little doll. Sarah's the one who likes to look shiny and neat. Sarah's the one who turns herself this way and that in the mirror and admires her golden hair like Rapunzel. Their mum and dad would love it if Robin acted more like Sarah. The thought of it fills Robin's mouth with sour spit.

'Robin!'

'What?'

'Don't spit on the floor. What's wrong with you?'

Robin scowls up at her mother. 'I had a bad taste,' she says and, without thinking, carries on scuffing her shoes along the wall.

'Robin! What the hell are you doing?'

Whoops.

'Nothing.'

'Those are brand new, you naughty girl.'

Her mother stands with her hands on her hips, legs apart. With the sun behind her, her silhouette is sharp but really her mum is quite soft.

'They're too shiny,' Robin says, but she knows she's already lost the argument.

Sarah stands to the side of her mother, affecting the same look of concerned dismay. Even though they've spent the whole day at

school, Sarah's hair is still in perfect plaits. Her gingham summer dress is clean and she doesn't have an ominous line of black muck under her nails. Robin's own dark brown hair had burst out of its band before the first playtime. There's so much of it, the curls in a constant state of flux, that no hair bobble stands a chance. In a few years' time, Robin will have cut it off in sharp clumps with the kitchen scissors, but not yet.

Robin and Sarah are still lumped together as one: the twins. But in reality they could scarcely be more different. Blonde and brunette; tall and tiny; rigid and rowdy.

When they were very little, their mother Angela – Angie – had done the usual twin thing. Matching bonnets, dresses and shoes. But Sarah had been so much *longer* and acted so much *older* – almost from day one – that the coordinated clothes only highlighted how different they looked. There were even times – as had gone down in Marshall family folklore – that perfect strangers had argued that the girls could not possibly be twins.

'I should know,' her mum would say with a pantomime sigh. 'I had to squeeze them both out.'

'My little runt,' Robin's dad, Jack, calls her as she sits by his side on the sofa, swinging her feet that are yet to reach the ground. Or when she spends long Sundays contentedly passing him bits of wood, nails or glue in the garage while he fixes something that her mum would prefer to just replace. 'I'm not made of money, Ang,' he says. 'Ain't that the truth,' she replies with another of her sighs for show.

Robin and her sister have just started walking home from their first day of the new school term. Their heads sag on their shoulders, lunch boxes rattling with sandwich crusts. Their talking fades into yawns and complaints. The first day back is always tiring after six weeks of playing and watching TV. They won't usually be collected by their mum – they're big girls now, turning nine next month – but

this is a first day back 'treat'. Robin has already been told off twice, so she can't wait to be left to trudge her own way back tomorrow, albeit with her sister acting as nominated adult. Amazing the difference that sixteen minutes can make. 'I'm the oldest,' Sarah says all the time while Robin rolls her eyes. *It would be different if I was taller.*

Robin frowns. Up ahead, there's a shiny black BMW parked partially on the pavement, its hazard lights blinking on and off. The mums who have younger kids in buggies are huffing loudly as they exaggerate how hard it is to negotiate this intrusion to their paths. The driver's door springs open and a woman glides out. She has bouncy, shiny hair and wears an expensive-looking coat. 'I'm so sorry,' she says in the general direction of other mothers. 'I didn't know where to park.'

As the women ignore her, the shiny, bouncy BMW mum sees someone and waves excitedly. It's the new boy from Robin and Sarah's class. He runs up to her, his backpack bobbing up and down. His hair must have gel on because it doesn't move. He climbs into the front seat, the car eases off the pavement and whooshes away almost silently. Robin is unimpressed.

SARAH

There is a new boy in our class. He's as good-looking as Jordan Knight from NKOTB and as quiet as a mouse. He has blond hair and dark eyes, cheekbones like a model from an Athena poster. Our new teacher, an elegant old lady with long silver hair called Mrs Howard, who Robin says is a witch, made him stand at the front of the class and introduce himself. His ears went pink and he opened his mouth but nothing came out. Eventually Mrs Howard pursed her lips and said, 'This is Callum Granger, he's new to the school. I hope you'll make him very welcome.'

I wrote 'Callum' in my exercise book and drew a heart around it so I'd remember his name. As if I'd forget.

At lunchtime, I saw him sitting on the friendship bench by himself. His knees were clamped tight together and he was reading a book, *The Ghost of Thomas Kempe*, while he ate an apple. The boys skirmished around nearby, kicking and stamping on a tennis ball, but every time they got near to Callum, he'd just tuck his knees out of the way and continue reading.

'Hi,' I'd said, smiling in as welcoming a way as I could manage. 'I'm Sarah.'

'Hi,' he'd said. 'I'm Callum.' I thought for a moment that he might extend his hand for me to shake.

'Do you know this is the friendship bench?' I asked.

His ears had gone pink again but he said he didn't realise.

'It's where you sit if you're feeling lonely and want to play with someone,' I explained. I always find it a thrill to explain the rules and rituals of our school. I've been here since I was four and I know all of them.

I offered to show Callum around. He looked at his book, closed it carefully around a bookmark and followed me as I showed him

the field where we have games, the leaking swimming pool that isn't used any more, the caretaker's shed that's haunted and – to make him laugh – the outdoor girls' toilets. He went pink again.

He told me that he'd moved to our village, Birch End, for his dad's new job. His dad is something important at a cola company in Reading, but Callum probably can't get any free pop because his dad doesn't like to be asked for things. He sounds very strict.

It's home-time now and Mum has already had to tell Robin off. She'd been scraping her new shoes along the wall and I'd chosen not to tell on her but then she'd started spitting for no reason and Mum had to tell her off. I don't know why she does these things because she always gets caught. It's like she wants to get in trouble. I don't know why anyone would want to get in trouble. Everything's so much nicer when you're good. I try to be a good girl, *always*.

Dad calls me his little swot. Mum calls me her golden girl.

Mum likes to pretend that she's really fed up of Dad and he likes to clown around and call Mum things like 'her indoors' or make jokes about nagging, but I think they still like each other. They'll curl around each other on the sofa when we watch *Stars in Their Eyes* or *Roseanne*, Mum's blonde hair fanning over his chest, his hand resting loosely on her leg. When we're in the car, they talk nonstop like they've not seen each other for weeks, and Robin and I give up trying to interrupt them to ask for more Opal Fruits. We play 'eye spy' or 'yellow car', where whoever sees a yellow car first yells 'yellow car!' and punches the other one on the arm. It always ends in tears but while we're playing it, my sister and I laugh maniacally and press our noses to the glass and it's the most fun in the world. My sister drives me crazy, but if there's one thing she always knows how to do, it's have fun.

CHAPTER THREE

Present day

ROBIN

From Robin's bedroom window on the second floor, she can see into nine separate flats behind her house. If she moves down a floor and balances herself on the window sill in her spare bedroom slash gym, she can see another three flats on either side. Each of the apartments that face her back wall has three windows facing out, filled with lives she doesn't know. Zoetropes stacked on top of each other, showcasing the effortless movement of people as they drift and glide in and out of the windows.

It's mid-morning now, so most of the windows are empty, on hold until the evening. In a top-floor flat, a cleaner pushes a mop around briskly. Her bright top swings around her large body like a circus tent. Her shoulders shake; she's either listening to music or remembering it. In the bottom right-hand flat, the old lady is doing her usual chores. Bright yellow Marigold gloves on, navy tabard protecting her no-nonsense nylon clothes.

In the apartment at the dead centre of the building, a man and woman are both home. Mr Magpie. Robin's special one.

Mr Magpie isn't his real name, of course. He is Henry Watkins and his wife is Karen Watkins. But before Robin knew this, Mr Magpie – named so for the prominent grey streak that sweeps down the side of his otherwise black hair – had already formed an important part of Robin's day.

Every morning, Robin watches, breath held, until Mr Magpie and the little boy (whose name wasn't available online, so was called Little Chick) comes out of the flats' communal garden, shaking the night rain off the boy's scooter and working their wiggly route down the cobbled alleyway that separated the two rows of yards and gardens.

Saying, 'Good morning, Mr Magpie' is a fundamental part of the day. Once that is out, the day can begin. But until that point, there could be no tea, no toast, no steps, no weights, no comforting kids' TV, no nothing.

There are other essentials too, of course, that slot together to make Robin's day. The steps. The weights. The sorting and careful disregarding of the post. The hiding. And the watching. Always the watching. *When I don't pay attention*, Robin thinks, *people die*. Unlike most of her 'what if' thoughts, this one carries a certain truth.

Robin hadn't intended to see anything untoward in the Magpie house over the last few weeks. She was only watching to keep them safe. Robin hadn't wanted to meddle. The Magpie family had been all that was good in the world. Loving, caring, normal. That was what Little Chick and Mr Magpie deserved. Magpies mate for life. They're supposed to mate for life.

So when Robin saw Mrs Magpie and her friend walking along the alleyway, talking animatedly, hugging, kissing, and then more, she couldn't look away. An impotent anger rooted her to the spot, behind her curtains.

She watches now. The oblivious husband and a ticking time-bomb of a wife, picking fights and pointing her finger.

Downstairs, the post has fluttered to the mat and the letterbox has snapped shut again. Robin is about to go down and collect it up,

organise it – unopened – into the neat piles she’s been building. But just as she steps out onto the thickly carpeted landing, the knocks come. Robin waits. It could be a charity worker with a clipboard, a politician or a cold caller selling thin plastic window frames. Or it could be someone else. The only way to know – short of flinging open the door and allowing all that outside to rush in – is to wait.

Knock knock. Still they land politely, but they don’t stop.

Knock knock knock. More urgent now.

Knock knock knock knock knock. Rapid, sweating effort. Now Robin knows it’s ‘someone else’. The eager caller, the angry caller, the nameless, faceless man at her door. She stays on the landing, and counts the time it takes for him to give up. Thirty-seven seconds. His determination sets her teeth on edge.

SARAH

2. Lies.

I understand why this was on the list. I did tell Jim a lot of lies. From the outset, I omitted. Then omitting turned to spinning, which turned to outright fabrication.

Jim and I had met at work, not long after I'd moved to Godalming in Surrey. My first job in a long time, flushed with drive.

When Jim asked me about brothers and sisters, I said I didn't have any. And my parents were dead. That first lie felt like the right decision for a very long time: *I don't have a family.*

He talked about his family and his gentle hopes and I knew he was the right man. I moved in. And oh my god, I could breathe. I could smile. It was normal and wholesome and good and I'd managed it.

The lies flowed, and then hardened. So many questions came that I hadn't reckoned on. There were gaps to be filled, and they had to be filled on the hoof. Once you tell one lie, you've chosen your path and there's no going back.

I chose Jim. And I chose to be nice, normal Sarah, living in Godalming. And, most importantly, I chose Violet.

Jim and I had to learn how to be together, in our shared home. There were some awkward spots while we adjusted but our girl transcended those. She'd been born early, needed extra care. I loved her instantly.

While the house slept, I had gazed at the little rag-doll baby with the skinniest legs I'd ever seen. My baby. I whispered it over and over like a mantra. 'My baby, my baby, my baby.'

My first night with her felt like a gigantic prank. This incredibly

small, painfully delicate creature was being left with me. No instructions, no-one from the hospital coming to inspect the house, no-one watching my every move.

I watched Violet's miniature veins, pulsing with her heartbeat. A tiny light blinking on and off. The held breath between pulses became more normal and less frightening, until I relaxed and started to believe we were all safe.

I couldn't always stop her crying at first. And in the early months, I often cried with desperation in the small hours when there was no point waking Jim, because what could he do besides watch me being tired?

But we got there; I got there.

And it wasn't bad. It wasn't just this desperately tough time of night tears and warm milk. It was often a feat of endurance but all underpinned by a tidal wave of love.

When he said number two on the list, 'the lies', I didn't know what Jim meant. He said the word quietly, like it was a curse word.

I'd raised my eyes to his. 'Lies?' I'd said. 'What lies?'

I should have said 'which lies?' because there were so many. They'd spilled out of me like blood.

CHAPTER FOUR

1990

ROBIN

Robin and her sister are staying at Callum's house tonight for the very first time. Ever since their parents became friends with the Grangers – a chance meeting of the mums in the local hairdresser's a few months ago tumbling into firm friendship – weekends have been turned on their heads. There are no more Saturday dinners on laps in front of the telly for the Marshall family. Saturday afternoons are for baths and hair washes, Saturday evenings are for sitting around a table while the adults talk about boring stuff and make jokes that seem designed – annoyingly – to deliberately exclude Robin, Sarah and Callum.

Hilary – Callum's mum – cooks things she's seen on *Masterchef* with Lloyd Grossman or *Food and Drink* with Michael Barry. There's often a 'coulis' or a 'jus'. Robin misses having Saturday night Chickstix or pizza. Callum's dad spends the evening talking about money – how much he has, how much he expects from his 'bonus', what he's going to spend it on – and Robin's mum does a really irritating loud laugh and then all the next morning she and Robin's dad argue because he won't – can't – buy the stuff that Drew Granger buys.

Normally, the evening ends with a wobbly car ride home, the girls buckling up nervously, the air thick with warm, boozy breath from the front. But the police have been clamping down and using breathalysers more and their dad says it's not worth it because if

he loses his licence, he can't do his job. Robin's suggestions to just stay at home instead of go to the Grangers' were ignored, so instead they're sleeping over.

Although Robin would always rather be in her own house, eating her own food and wearing jeans instead of the dresses she gets wrestled into, there is a frisson of excitement about the night. She and Sarah will be top and tailing in Callum's room – he has a bed even bigger than Robin and Sarah's parents – and they've been promised a film before sleep. Robin's hoping for *Labyrinth* but Sarah will probably stamp her feet for something like *Grease 2* or *Dirty Dancing*, the three of them given a note of permission and a quid to go and rent something from the video section of the petrol station. Maybe an extra note of permission to get Robin's dad some cigarettes too.

Callum is going to sleep on the floor next to them on a fold-out bed, willingly giving up his usual digs for the girls he now spends much of his free time with. Listening to them talk, fascinated by the easy flow of conversation, in-jokes and bickering so abstract to an only child.

SARAH

I've been so excited all week. I love going to the Grangers' house. Everything is new and warm and soft to the touch. They have three toilets. One is downstairs and Hilary calls it 'the cloakroom', which makes us smirk a bit because a cloakroom is where you keep your coats and wellies. Sometimes Robin and I pretend that we're going to wee by the coat-rack at our house.

One of the toilets at the Grangers' is in the main bathroom, which also has a shower and a bath – I'm gagging to have a go in the shower; I've only ever had one at the swimming pool in town and that's like a dribble of spit. And then the last one is in Drew and Hilary's bedroom. It's called an 'en suite' and our mum is desperate for Dad to put one in their room. 'Where am I s'posed to put it?' Dad says, laughing at her. 'In the wardrobe?'

I'm looking forward to spending time with Callum. Robin is always pretty good fun, not that I'd tell her that, but she's a bit less manic and crazy with Callum. And she doesn't show off by kicking me or doing disgusting things when he's there.

At school, Callum circles Robin and me carefully in the same way we move around each other. There's only one class in each year, so we're all in the room together whether we like it or not, but it's an unspoken truth that we'd have the mickey taken if we played with each other. Boys don't play with girls and sisters don't play with sisters. Almost right from the start of school, Robin and I acted like we had an invisible force field around each of us so we couldn't get too close. It's protection, I suppose. Some people think twins are weird and some twins *are* weird. They close ranks, turn away from other people and make up their own languages. We don't do any of those things. Our mum says that when we were small, we used to sleep in the same cot. We'd be put down at opposite ends but,

in the night, we'd wiggle around until we were next to each other. And when we started school, it took us a little while to realise the unspoken rules. So on the first day, we'd sat down together in the classroom that we'd gone into holding hands. I suppose it makes me sad that we're not like that any more. I don't think Robin really wants much to do with me, and I don't really know how to tell her that I enjoy being her sister and I like it when we get on.

Perhaps it's because we're not identical twins, quite the opposite. In fact, if someone looked in at us playing with Callum, they'd think he and I were related. We're both tall and golden-haired; he carries himself upright like a dancer and I try to do that too. Robin is small and dark-haired, she's bone-skinny and her clothes never seem to fit her right so she's always tugging at them and yanking them up or down.

Callum is different at his house. When we're playing in our respective groups in the playground, he's at the quieter end of 'normal' boy behaviour but he seems okay, unburdened. When we're in the woods or a country park or the beach, pooling flasks and picnics, the mums rubbing suncream on whichever skin is nearest, he's fun and playful. He does his funny little shoulder-shaking silent laugh freely. But when we're in his house, Robin says he's like an old woman. He fusses and flaps. If Robin picks something up, he goes red and hovers near her like he'll have to rescue it. She is clumsy, but she's not *that* bad. 'You don't understand,' he says. 'Even if she drops it, it'll be my fault.'

We arrive at the Grangers in our old Rover. The mums do this kind of stagey air kiss now. It started as a joke but now it's a habit. I notice that my dad has to gear himself up for the night. He sort of takes a breath and puffs his chest up as we knock on the door. His other friends aren't like Drew Granger. They're gardeners like Dad or bricklayers or thatchers. They don't really talk they just crack jokes and buy rounds in the local pub. Standing at the bar

with their crusty work trousers on and tapping their cigarettes on chunky ashtrays. With Drew, it's all talking and sort of jokes but not the same, nothing with a punchline. I think we're here more for Mum. She and Hilary are the friends, everyone else fits around that. He'd never say it, but Dad would do anything for Mum, and she seems to like this new life of cordon bleu food and wine that makes her chatty and shared days out. I like it too.

CHAPTER FIVE

Present day ROBIN

Snap. Flutter. Crash.

The post arrives a little earlier than usual but it will be dealt with in the same way. Flyers and junk will be placed in the recycling box, lying dormant until Robin can summon a surge of nocturnal energy and rush it all out to the brown wheelie bin under a protective night sky. The bills will be filed away in trays in the office/spare room still in their envelopes, most recent at the front. Everything is paid by direct debit, but Robin is belt and braces; she likes the feel of a hard copy. Generally that will be all, but sometimes a white envelope will sit among the rest, looking shiny and *other*. It will not be opened. It will not be filed. It will be picked up gingerly and placed on the pile of identical white envelopes, up high on the unused wardrobe where they can do no harm.

Robin is not alarmed by bills. Bills get paid. Robin has money; the pot has diminished but there's enough to last a while longer.

She was – nominally still is – the lead guitarist of a British rock band, Working Wife. A string of top-twenty albums, a handful of singles that caught the imagination of the radio programmers and burst out of their niche, plenty of insertions on compilation albums through the noughties. Somewhere, she might still be hanging on a bedroom wall or two, her guitar slung over her shoulder, her lip curled. Maybe even the picture of her from *FHM*, when she was

featured – in her trademark shorts and vest, sulky in make-up she didn't want to wear – among the gaggle of bare bottoms. The headline: 'WEIRD BUT WOULD'.

What would those once-keen fans think if they could see her now?

Having filed the post – no white envelope today – Robin hovers by her bedroom window at the back of the house; the front is out of bounds. One of her curtains moves ever so slightly in time with her breath. She tries to keep it still with her fingertips but it just spreads against the glass. She does the same to the other curtain so at least everything is equal. She swallows hard and ragged, does it again to keep things even.

In the Watkins/Magpie house, the adults are lying on the sofa in the back of the room. The little boy is sitting at his miniature table in his room, tongue poking out in concentration as he builds something out of Lego. It's a mishmash of coloured bricks, slabs of roof jutting out. He sits back to admire his work, smiles and gets down carefully to go and paw through a stack of soft toys, pulling out something small that looks like a bunny. He lifts a few of the roof slabs from his Lego building to carefully place the toy inside when something makes him jump and he knocks the building to the floor, his little hands covering his face in defeat.

Robin looks into the main room to see what spooked him, and sees the adults in the kitchen, gesturing wildly and obviously arguing. It looks like Mr Magpie has a phone in his hand and he's shoving its screen at his wife's face, pointing at it as she tries to grab it. The little boy appears and the adults spring apart and affect casual poses so disingenuous Robin feels embarrassed. All couples fight, but there's more to this. The man just needs to open his eyes to the full picture. Robin is determined to help.

A young guy is moving into the ground-floor flat underneath the Magpies. He has a stream of helpers, and he is directing them

as they cart boxes and bags around.

He's kind of handsome, smiley, but his features are loose and baby-like.

There are different types of boxes. Half of them are brand new and have the name of a packaging company on them, the others are bashed-in and all different sizes. Robin wonders if he's moving out of a relationship, if this is his new 'bachelor pad' and he's putting a brave face on everything.

The boxes in Robin's dining room have the name of the removal service she found over the internet. They are all lined up, logos facing out, like a football team having a one-minute silence. One day, she'll be brave enough to open them. To let their grief spill out into the room. But not today.

SARAH

3. Neglect

This one, I knew as soon as Jim said it. It was old. Over three years out of date, but even at the time, I'd known it wouldn't be forgotten. It was the look he'd given me that day. More of a pause, like he was taking a mental picture and filing it away. But he didn't say anything more, he'd had a lot going on at the time and was only starting to surface himself.

I'd fallen asleep while I was looking after Violet. The night before had been rough. She couldn't settle, didn't want to feed, didn't have wind. I'd paced the house, jiggling her with increasing frustration. Jim had gone to bed, marching wearily up the stairs and falling into bed so heavily the mattress had squealed. Violet eventually relented and I grabbed a few hours of fitful rest, her cries echoing around my skull long after she'd stopped. The next day I shuffled around like a zombie while Jim went off to work as usual, the lunch I'd made him tucked under his arm.

I'd laid down on the sofa, daytime TV chatting to us both. The cushion under my head, the warm sun through the window. My little baby with her baggy tights and pretty little dress had been contently kicking her squishy legs next to me, her plump pink hand wrapped around my finger.

My eyes were open. The next second, they were springing back open. I'd been woken up by the cry as she hit the floor.

'But she shouldn't have been able to roll over yet,' I'd spluttered in disbelief to Jim as he rushed in through the door after my hyperventilating phone call.

'That's not the point,' he'd said, and I'd shrunk. 'My poor little girl!'

‘I wasn’t blaming her,’ I’d said to his back as he whisked her off, gently cooing her cries away. He didn’t answer me.

Later that night, Jim nudged me awake in the flickering light of the TV set. Violet lay asleep on his chest, mouth open, eyes scrunched shut. She’d been glued to him ever since he’d rushed back.

‘We should have gone to the hospital to have her checked,’ he’d said. Before I could answer, he’d asked, ‘Do you fall asleep when you’re looking after her a lot?’

I tried to explain. Sleep when baby sleeps, that’s what they say. It should have been okay. I’d put her in the Moses basket from now on, it wouldn’t happen again. He nodded slowly, looked back to the blue light of the screen.

While I shakily packed up my things four days ago, watched by the awkward parade of Jim’s family, I’d asked pointlessly, ‘What did you mean by neglect?’ I just wanted to hear him say it. Because it really seemed like such a small and common thing to fall asleep like that, and I wanted his voice to shrink it back to size for him and for them.

‘When Violet was younger, sometimes you’d stare into space ignoring her, she’d cry for you and it’s like you hadn’t heard. She’d need her nappy changed, she’d be sore and you would fucking – sorry, Mum – fucking ignore her, Sarah. That’s what I mean. I caught you. I caught you once and I told myself it was a one-off but it wasn’t. Because I caught you again.’

I’d lowered my eyes, zipped up my holdall and left the room. *My god, I’d thought, I really believed that I’d managed it.*

CHAPTER SIX

1990

SARAH

Our dad is a gardener.

‘Landscape gardener and tree surgeon,’ he’s started to say because he had this long talk with Drew Granger who ‘sells big ideas’ for a living. Drew Granger told him that you can call yourself anything you want and people will believe you. That if you say your services are better than anyone else’s, and if you look confident enough, you can charge more. Dad didn’t seem sure but Mum got some new leaflets printed up that made it sound like Dad had been trimming the lawns of mansions with nail scissors all his life and he started to get more work from big houses on the outskirts of the village.

Mum’s never really taken an interest in the actual gardening side of things. Like me, she likes a nice green lawn or a pretty flower, but it’s not something she’s obsessed with. Robin likes gardening. I think it’s because she’s allowed to get muddy and dirty if it’s with Dad in the garden. It’s funny because I would have thought Hilary was the same as me and Mum. She has flowers on her dining table and neat little flowerbeds outside their modern house, but the thought of her so much as kneeling down, let alone *touching* soil, is at odds with everything I’ve seen so far. And yet the last time we went to Wellington Country Park, I noticed that Hilary had dropped back to ask Dad something about soil acidity and hours

later at lunch they were still nattering away about seedlings and polytunnels and the best secateurs for roses.

There was something I struggled to read on Mum's face. Gardening wasn't her passion but Hilary was her friend, and maybe she was jealous that Dad was leaning over the beer-garden table to talk to Hilary, that he seemed so excited that someone besides Robin was finally interested. Mum was sitting next to him, but had to make do with listening to Drew Granger tell her why it was the best time to get an Access credit card and that the economy was booming and she and dad should sell our house and buy something bigger. Mum muttered something and they both looked at Dad and then started laughing. Robin knocked her knife onto the floor near me and when I dropped under the table to pick it up, I thought I saw Mum and Drew's feet untangling.

ROBIN

Robin didn't want to like Callum. He was 'boy Sarah' and her sister was everything that Robin wasn't. The girls clashed a lot, as sisters do. But there was something else with Callum, something she couldn't help but be drawn to. A look in his eye, like he had seen something amusing that he couldn't dare to share. Or like he knew something secret and had zipped his mouth shut. Like maybe, if he really trusted you, he might unzip it.

At school, the kids had their own clusters of friends. Callum was tall and poised, and when he wanted to, he could jump into a football game and dribble, kick, header the ball perfectly well. But, most of the time, he preferred to read or chat about books or television with whoever might be nearby. His ability with the ball and his height meant that the other boys – the loud, fast, brash boys – afforded him space to do both.

When the Marshalls and the Grangers got together outside of school, Sarah would practically perform for Callum's approval. The three kids would climb trees or make up spur-of-the-moment, complex, ever-changing games, but Sarah seemed to care the most. And yet. Robin noticed that Callum's shoulders seemed to shake more at the things she herself said and did. He'd never say anything cheeky or rude to his parents, but if Robin back-chatted her mum or dad, Callum would practically vibrate with excitement, his eyes wide.

This thing had started with Robin's mum and Hilary, but the two families had soon squished together to form a new shape. Despite herself, Robin started to look forward to staying over at the Grangers', watching films or learning card games like Shit Head that they had to play in late-night whispers.

She noticed that the lines were blurring with the adults too. The mums were still the organisers, the confidantes and the ones who

met up the most without the others, but the adults were more of a group. Sometimes, Robin's dad and Hilary would even pair up. Hilary had turned up at the Marshall house once in jeans and a sweatshirt, hair tied up in a scarf so that he could take her to the nursery he bought his seeds and soil from, and help her with her garden. And Drew and Robin's mum started to have their own little smirks and jokes. Robin noticed that her mum had started to repeat things that Drew had said, as if they were the gospel. Or she would begin sentences about money or shopping with: 'Drew says...' Robin didn't like that and expected that her dad wouldn't like it either, but it looked like he hadn't noticed.