

1

‘What are you up to?’

The words startle him. But then Malcolm Benson finds the mental echo of the chuckle he failed to contain. He turns from his place at the sink, the amusement still written on his face.

Harriet is at the table, mug of tea cradled in her small hands. It’s her favourite mug – the one with Snoopy on it. He made certain to give her that one on this special morning. She has her eyebrows arched in that endearing way of hers. One of the features that first attracted him to her thirty years ago.

He flicks soap foam from his Marigolds, then touches a finger to the side of his nose.

‘Wouldn’t you like to know?’ he says.

Her suspicions confirmed, Harriet lowers her mug to the raffia coaster.

‘You’re planning something.’

‘I’m always planning,’ he says. ‘You know that. Planning and plotting.’

Her eyes shine at him. ‘What is it?’

‘You’ll have to wait.’ He faces the sink again. Dips his gloved hands into the suds. He knows she will be staring at the back of his head, trying to read his mind.

‘It’s not my birthday for another month,’ she says casually.

He remains silent.

‘Is that it? Something to do with my birthday?’

He looks at her over his shoulder. In her fifties, and yet still full of such child-like innocence and wonderment.

‘It *is* a present. But not for your birthday. It couldn’t wait that long.’

'Malcolm, you're teasing me now. Tell me. Please!'

He had been hoping to draw things out a little longer, but it wouldn't be fair on her. Besides, he's as excited as she is to bring it into the open. He has kept it to himself for far too long.

'All right,' he says. 'Wait there.'

He peels off his gloves and removes his apron. As he heads towards the kitchen door, he sees how Harriet claps her hands in anticipation.

He smiles as he walks all the way up to the tiny box room that is his study, and all the way back down again. This is a huge moment for both of them. The culmination of an immense amount of effort and patience.

He pauses before re-entering the kitchen. 'Close your eyes. No sneaky-peekies.'

'Okay,' she answers. 'I'm not looking. Promise.'

He walks through the door, his gift held out before him. Harriet has her hands tightly clasped over her eyes. There is a discernible tremor in her fingers.

'Right,' he says. 'You can look now.'

She parts her fingers. Slides them slowly down her cheeks. Her face registers puzzlement and then disbelief at the sight of the large, leather-bound book.

'It's . . . it's the album.'

He nods. He knows she's about to blub, and already a tear is forming in his own eye.

She lifts her gaze to lock with his. 'You haven't?'

'I have.'

'You've found one?'

He smiles.

'Oh my Lord,' she says. 'Oh my Lord. Show me, show me, show me!'

She leans across to drag one of the chairs around so that it's right next to hers. Malcolm sits down and places the album on the table between them.

'Are you ready for this?' he asks.

'Malcolm, you know how much I've wanted it. Open the book.'

He locates the silk tab inserted into the centre of the album. Opens the book at that position.

The reflected glow from the page lights up Harriet's face. Her hand jumps to her mouth. Tears spring from her eyes and run down the back of her hand.

'I hope those are tears of joy,' Malcolm says.

It's all she can do to nod her head as she continues to marvel at the contents of this treasure chest. This is better than any birthday.

She reaches out and turns the page. Emits a gasp. Malcolm studies her as she gets caught up in the dream. Watches her cry and smile and laugh as she turns page after page. He wishes he could do this for her every day.

The questions start to come then. Harriet wants as much information as she can get, down to the last detail. Malcolm is sometimes stretched to answer, but he does his best.

When Harriet reaches the last page, she goes back to the first. Gently touches a finger to the photograph affixed there. Malcolm knew she would love that one best of all.

And then a cloud of doubt seems to cross her features.

'This isn't just more teasing, is it, Malcolm? I mean, this is definite?'

'Oh, yes. You can see how busy I've been. Look at the photographs. It's all set.'

'All set? When? Soon?'

Malcolm strokes his chin. 'Well, that's the difficult part. These things take time. It's a question of logistics, you see.'

Her face drops. 'Oh.'

'So I thought . . . I thought *tonight*. Would that be soon enough for you?'

Huge eyes now. Eyes brimming with ecstatic incredulity.

'Malcolm!' She throws her arms around him, pulls him into her warmth. 'Malcolm, you are an amazing man. I love you.'

She releases him finally. 'It won't be dangerous, will it? I mean, you're sure you can do it?'

He takes her hands in his. 'It won't be easy. I'm not as young as I used to be. But yes, I can do it.'

She hugs him again. Returns her gaze to the album. And then something occurs to her, and she glances up at the ceiling.

'Can we tell her? Can we tell Daisy?'

'I don't see why not, do you?'

* * *

Daisy hears them coming upstairs, so she puts down her pencil and sits up straight. She knows how much they like it when she sits to attention.

She has been writing a story about a mouse. She has never been good at writing stories, and doesn't know much about mice, so it has been quite a challenge. She hopes they like what she has done. Later, she will do some more fractions, and then some reading. She has a very busy day ahead.

The door eventually opens, and as the adults enter she stiffens her posture even more.

She notices how much they are smiling this morning. In fact, this is probably the happiest she has ever seen them. She wonders what that might mean.

'Hello, Daisy,' says Malcolm.

'Hello, Daddy,' she replies.

Malcolm and Harriet sit opposite her at the small worktable. They are still smiling.

'We've got some news for you,' says Malcolm. 'Something we're very excited about.'

Daisy doesn't reply. She's not sure how she is meant to answer. She sits and waits patiently.

'Don't you want to know what it is?' asks Harriet.

Daisy nods, although she's not sure she does want to know.

Harriet looks at Malcolm and nods for him to break the news. Malcolm leans forward across the table. Gets so close that Daisy can see the blackheads on his nose.

'You're going to get . . .' he breaks off, leaving a huge gap of expectation, then – 'a little sister!'

Harriet flutters in her chair. Gives a little clap of delight.

Daisy, though, is still not sure how to react. She expects they want her to be as euphoric as they are, but somehow she cannot find it within her. Seeing their eyes on her, she opens her mouth, but no words emerge.

‘What do you think about that?’ says Malcolm. ‘Isn’t it wonderful? Just think of all the things you can share together.’

‘You can show her your toys,’ Harriet says. ‘And you can read to her, and explain how everything works. Best of all, you won’t be on your own anymore. You’ll never be lonely again. How fantastic is that?’

Not wanting to cause an upset, Daisy frantically searches her mind for something meaningful to utter.

‘What’s her name?’ she blurts out.

Malcolm looks at Harriet. Harriet looks at Malcolm. ‘Good question,’ they say to each other.

‘Her name’s Poppy,’ says Harriet. ‘A flower name, like yours. And she’s blonde like you, too. And only six years old. She’s adorable, and I’m sure you’re going to love her.’ She turns to Malcolm again. ‘Isn’t she, Daddy?’

They get lost in each other’s eyes again, giving Daisy a chance to formulate her next query.

‘When? When is she coming?’

‘Another excellent question,’ says Malcolm. ‘Hang on to your hat, Daisy – it’s pretty fast! How does tonight sound to you?’

Something lurches inside Daisy, and she has to fight not to show it. ‘Tonight?’

She realises too late that there is a tone of negativity in her voice. She sees how Malcolm’s lips quiver slightly as they struggle to hold on to their smile.

‘Yes, Daisy. Tonight. That’s all right with you, isn’t it?’

‘Yes, Daddy,’ she answers quickly. ‘I mean . . . I was just wondering where she’s going to sleep.’

Malcolm looks across at the bed. He frowns, as though the problem had not occurred to him until now.

'Well, I'm afraid you'll have to share that bed for a short while. We'll sort something out.'

'Details, details,' says Harriet. 'We don't worry about things like that in this house. It'll all be fine. It'll be more than fine. It will be the best thing ever!'

It seems to Daisy that Harriet could explode with joy. She could suddenly burst apart at the seams and splash onto the walls and ceiling.

She closes off the thought. Stares down at her story in an effort to distract herself.

'So,' says Malcolm. 'That's our amazing news. I knew you'd be pleased, Daisy.'

Daisy doesn't know the word 'sarcasm', but the tenor of Malcolm's voice tells her she is not reacting the way he wants her to.

'Don't worry,' she tells them. 'I'm a big girl. I'll look after Poppy.'

It's the most positive she can be, and the most truthful. It seems to do the trick.

'Well, we'll leave you to do your schoolwork now,' says Harriet. 'I'll pop up later to see how you're getting on.' She wags a finger. 'Don't expect me to be much help today, though. I don't know whether I'm coming or going, I really don't.'

They leave her then, almost floating out of the room on the cloud they have created. She watches them go. Waits for the door to close. For the familiar noise that always comes next. The grating sound that seems to reverberate in the centre of her chest.

The sound of the bolts being drawn.

She is alone again. She spends so much of her time alone. Because of that, a part of her really does think that it will be wonderful to have another child here.

But she wouldn't wish that fate on anyone.

She looks around her bedroom. Sometimes she wonders how long it would take a visitor to work out the true purpose of this room were it not for the external locks. They would see the bed in the alcove across from the doorway. To the left of the door they would see the shelving

unit containing books, toys and a flat-screen television. Next to that, the chest of drawers, on top of which sits a doll's house and more toys. In the middle of the room, the foldaway table and stackable plastic chairs.

Nothing particularly unusual.

But then they might question the absence of bulky wardrobes. They might wonder why, instead of storage, there is a small washbasin in one corner and what looks like a shower curtain in another. And when they peered behind that curtain they would probably be surprised to find that it hides not a shower but a manky old commode.

And, in an effort to shed some natural light on the puzzling features of this gloomy room, they might wish to draw back the window curtains, only to discover the wooden boards screwed in place behind them.

At that point they might finally realise that this is not merely a bedroom, a room in which to sleep. It is a room for *everything*.

It is a prison cell.

Daisy has learnt not to complain to the adults about her situation. To the people she calls Mummy and Daddy, but who are not her real parents.

This is not the place to bring another child, she thinks.

It wasn't the place to bring *this* child.

She is not sure precisely how long she has been here, but she has a rough idea. She was forced to celebrate her tenth birthday recently. And she knows she was seven when she was snatched.

That makes it about three years that she has been trapped inside this room.

2

‘Is this him?’

Detective Sergeant Nathan Cody follows Detective Constable Megan Webley’s pointing finger to its target. Through the grimy windscreen he sees a figure coming towards them along the pavement, hands deep in his pockets, collar up against the cold.

‘Nope. Nothing like him.’

Ed Sheeran is playing on the radio. Cody taps his fingers on the steering wheel to the beat. He looks into the shop window next to the car. It’s full of skimpy lingerie. He wishes he’d parked a bit further back.

‘What about this guy?’ says Webley.

Cody sighs. ‘No. Look, are you going to ask about every bloke who walks past?’

‘If I do, it’ll be your fault.’

‘Why is it my fault?’

‘Your idea, wasn’t it? Plus, you said he’d show up at five o’clock on the dot, and it’s already three minutes past.’

‘He’ll be here. Have patience.’

Webley indicates how much patience she has remaining with an emphatic folding of her arms.

‘I’m cold and I’m tired and I’m hungry. I had no lunch today.’

‘You’re not the only one. Bit of a mad dash to court, wasn’t it?’

‘You were very good, by the way. In court.’

‘You think?’

‘Yeah. That barrister met his match there. I could see the sweat running down from his wig, the arrogant git.’ She gestures towards him, raising her eyebrows. ‘I noticed you wore a new tie for the occasion.’

Smiling, Cody sits up and straightens it. 'Yeah. Like it?'

'No.'

'Oh.'

After a short pause she says, 'Do you ever miss the old days?'

Cody feels a hot flush coming on. He suspects she's about to bring up the time when they were a couple. Back when she had a say in what ties he wore.

'Which old days?'

'When you were undercover. Do you miss that side of it?'

Phew, thinks Cody. 'Yeah, sometimes. This is good too, though.'

'Ever think of transferring back?'

'Why? Fed up of me?'

'No. Just wondering. It used to be such a big part of your life.'

He shakes his head. 'Doubt it. I still like doing the occasional small job, but I don't think I could do it full-time again.'

'Because of what happened?'

Cody thinks carefully before answering. It's a natural enough question. For most people, the experience of four men in clown masks forcibly removing parts of your body and then gruesomely murdering your partner would be enough to persuade you to seek other avenues of work.

'Yeah, but not just for the obvious reasons. To be honest, I thought the move to Major Incidents would only be temporary, but it opened my eyes. I thought I'd miss the buzz of UC work, but I don't. I like our team, and I like the work we do.'

'Wouldn't be the same if I wasn't on it, though, would it?' She smiles, and he sees her dimples appear.

Before he can reply, Webley's phone rings. She glances at the screen. 'Footlong,' she announces, then answers the call.

Cody looks in his rear-view mirror at the unmarked car parked yards behind them. He can make out the face of DC Neil 'Footlong' Ferguson, lit by the glow from his own phone. Alongside him is another DC from the squad, Jason Oxburgh.

Webley listens, then turns to Cody. 'He wants to know how long we're expected to sit here. He wants to know if your CHIS for this op is reliable.'

CHIS is cop-speak for Covert Human Intelligence Source. An informant.

'Tell him my intel is impeccable,' says Cody, 'and that he needs to have a bit more faith.'

Webley passes on the message, then listens for a few more seconds before ending the call.

'What did he say?' Cody asks.

'Nothing.'

'Go on, what did he say?'

'He asked if you're doing your best to keep me warm in here.'

Cody turns away, shaking his head in despair, but he thinks that the heat returning to his cheeks should be more than enough to keep both of them warm.

He's glad of the distraction when he notices a movement through the car window.

'Aye, aye,' he says.

'What?' says Webley. 'Is it him?'

Cody continues to observe. He sees a woman at the cash machine. She has her purse in her hand, but has left her bag wide open. A young man in a dark tracksuit has begun moving up behind her.

Cody lowers his window. 'Fitzy, get over here!'

The young man jerks to attention. Hands in pockets, he saunters over to the car.

'All right, Mr Cody. How's it going?' He bends to look across at the passenger. 'All right, love.'

Cody has to stop himself from smiling. He knows that Webley will be bristling at being called 'love'.

'What are you up to, Fitzy?'

Fitzy shrugs. 'Nothin.'

'Didn't look like nothing. Looked to me like you took a very sudden interest in that woman at the ATM.'

'Oh, her! No, I was just keeping an eye on her, like, you know what I mean? Doing my bit as a good citizen. I don't think she realises there are

certain types around here who might take advantage of a situation like that. Know what I mean?’

‘Yeah, right, Fitzy. Glad to hear it. I’ll put you in for the Pride of Britain Awards. Off you go, then. Chasing you through the streets is the last thing I want right now.’

Fitzy doesn’t budge. ‘What’s happening here, anyway?’

‘Nothing to concern you,’ says Cody.

Fitzy grins, revealing a gap where one of his front teeth should be. ‘Are you waiting for the coast to clear so you can take your missus in there?’ He points behind him at the lingerie shop. ‘It’s okay, you know. These are modern times. No need to feel embarrassed, know what I mean?’

Webley leans towards Cody’s open window. ‘I’m not his missus. Now do one, before we nick you.’

Fitzy puts his hands up in surrender. ‘All right, love. Just being friendly.’

It’s then that the wheels seem to start turning in Fitzy’s mind. He peers along the street towards the other unmarked car.

‘They’re with you, aren’t they? What’s going on? You gonna raid the frilly knickers place?’

‘Something like that,’ says Cody. ‘Now go and bother someone else, Fitzy. And stay out of trouble.’

Fitzy shrugs, then saunters away. As he goes past Footlong’s car, he gives the occupants a little wave.

Cody closes his window.

‘God,’ says Webley, ‘I could do with a drink after this. Fancy one?’

‘No.’

‘Why not?’

‘It’s February. I don’t drink in February.’

‘You don’t drink any frigging month. I bet you didn’t even have a drink at Christmas.’

‘I’m sure you quaffed enough for the two of us,’ he answers. But she’s right: he didn’t drink at Christmas. He spent Christmas alone, in his flat. While everyone else was carving turkeys and pulling crackers and getting pissed, he was tucking into a microwaved curry and nursing an

ankle sprained in the line of duty. He didn't tell Webley that, of course. He told her that he spent time with his parents and with his ex-fiancée, when in reality neither seemed overly keen to spread the festive cheer in his direction.

'Come on,' Webley urges. 'It'll be fun.'

'Nah, I'm knackered. I just want to put my feet up.'

'Christ, Cody. You sound like my nan, and even she manages to get out to t'ai chi and bingo every week. Are you sure you're not ninety-six beneath that boyish exterior?'

'Another time, Megs. Okay?'

She smiles at him.

'What?' he asks.

'Megs. You used to call me that all the time when we were going out.'

'Sorry.'

'No. It's nice.'

Hot flush time again. Cody is grateful when Webley's phone blares into life once more.

Webley answers the call. Listens. Says, 'Footlong again. Thinks we should knock this on the head. His suggestion is—'

'He's here,' says Cody.

'What?'

Cody points. 'He's going in now.'

He watches as a dark-haired man puts a key into the door of a shop front to open up, then disappears inside. Cody starts to get out of the car.

'We're on!' says Webley into her phone.

The four detectives assemble on the pavement, then head briskly in the direction of the shop.

Cody pushes open the door. Inside, the man he has been waiting for turns to stare at the new arrivals.

'What can I do for you?' the man asks.

Cody listens to the action taking place in the back room. He breathes in the odours.

His mouth waters in anticipation.

‘Fish and chips four times, please. And can you make my batter extra crispy?’

* * *

Cody pulls rank and insists they eat in Footlong’s car. The food is excellent, the company even better, but when the topic of a few beers is raised again, Cody declines. He drives back to his flat alone.

Home is the top floor of a Georgian building on Rodney Street, above a dental practice. The practice is closed now, so Cody has the building to himself. He could have invited his colleagues back here. He could have suggested they buy some alcohol on the way. Could have put on some music.

He did none of those things.

In his kitchen, he puts the kettle on, empties his pockets, and removes his jacket and tie. When he has brewed his tea, he takes a seat at the small breakfast bar.

He thinks about Webley. There have been a couple of occasions in recent weeks when she has suggested going for a drink. Sometimes he wonders if she has an agenda, but then he worries that he is being arrogant. She’s probably just being friendly.

Besides, there are barriers. Too many things in the way. The job, for one. Cody and Webley have to work together, to rely on each other.

Then there are the partners. Okay, ex-partners. Cody doesn’t think there is much chance of his own ex-fiancée taking him back, but he expects that Webley will hook up with her bloke again. They have been apart only since Christmas. Time yet for a reconciliation.

And then, of course, there is the other matter. The thing he can’t talk about.

Webley touched upon it earlier. The event that caused him to abandon undercover work. She knows how traumatic it was for him. How it led to horrific nightmares, hallucinations and a loss of control.

What she doesn’t know is that they are back in his life.

The clowns.

They have made contact. They have been sending him weird messages. They have even been here, in his flat.

They have been quiet since Christmas, but he knows they'll come again. And when they do, it won't be pretty.

That's the real reason he can't allow Webley, or anyone else for that matter, to get too close.

3

Malcolm checks his watch. Just a few minutes more. Soon it will be four o'clock, and that's when he has decided he will go in.

He thinks that four in the morning is a good time. Most people are in their deepest slumbers then. Nobody hears a thing. And if they do, they just turn over and go straight back to sleep.

Harriet will be awake, though. She will be too excited to sleep. She will be perched at the bedroom window right now, anxiously awaiting his return.

It's a quiet road, this. A leafy cul-de-sac of semi-detached houses near Otterspool Promenade. Not much chance of traffic down here at this time of the morning.

He has parked here before, at various times of the day. Watching the comings and goings. Taking countless photographs and videos. Listening to the chatter of the residents as they amble past his van, oblivious to the man sitting in the rear of it, behind the dark tinted windows.

Yes, he has done his research. Tons of it. You can't rush these things. Not if you want them to go smoothly.

He knows that there are just the three of them in this house. Poppy and her parents, Craig and Maria. At about eight o'clock, Craig will leave the house, get into the Mondeo, and drive to work. Maria and Poppy will exit a few minutes later and drive away in the other car, a red Polo. The house will be empty for most of the day, until Maria returns with Poppy at about four o'clock.

But an empty house is no good to Malcolm. He needs what's inside. He needs Poppy.

He has considered other options. He knows, for example, which primary school Poppy attends. He has sat outside that school on several occasions, looking for openings, for opportunities.

It would be too risky. Maria always arrives on time, before the school bell. And the teachers stand guard with the young ones in the playground, releasing them only when a parent is clearly visible on the other side of the gates.

He has tried following them to the shops, too. Maria never lets her daughter out of her sight. Most of the time they hold hands. It would be impossible to snatch Poppy in those circumstances.

And so this is the only way of doing it. Not without its obvious dangers, of course, but he downplays those for Harriet. She shouldn't have to worry about such things. There is no need to dull the edge of her anticipation.

It's not as if he's awash with choice. Yes, there are plenty of other children who would be much easier to take – he is constantly amazed at how cavalier and inattentive some parents are – but none of them fits the bill. Candidates like Poppy don't crop up very often. It has to be her, and it has to be now.

It's four o'clock.

He gets out of the van, taking with him the black sports bag that was on the passenger seat. He closes the van door as gently as he can, leaving it unlocked. Then he walks down to the house and onto the driveway.

He doesn't pause, doesn't dawdle. The less time spent out here, the better. Instead, he continues straight to the wooden gate that closes off the route to the rear of the property. The gate is closed and bolted, but it's a simple matter for him to scale the fencing and drop down on the other side. He might be in his fifties, but he keeps himself in pretty good shape.

Before pressing on, he slides back the bolt on the gate, to make his escape easier. Then he waits and listens, just to be sure his arrival has gone undetected.

When he is satisfied, he moves into the garden, keeping close to the walls to avoid activating any light sensors.

The house isn't a new build. Late thirties, probably. It has a conservatory, but even that must have been added at least twenty years ago. Which is welcome news for Malcolm.

Malcolm is a plumber by trade. Doesn't do so much of it now – just the occasional boiler repair, or the moving of a radiator. He's a family man now, with commitments.

He has learnt a lot in his time – not just in his own specialism, but others too. He has worked with a number of building firms and double-glazing companies who have called on his services. Along the way he has picked up a fair amount of knowledge about home security. In particular, he knows how to circumvent it.

Malcolm sets his bag on the ground and unzips it. He reaches in and brings out the first of the tools he needs: a short length of metal pipe that fits snugly over the protruding key barrel of the conservatory door.

A few seconds of effort later, he has removed the barrel. It takes just another minute to insert a screwdriver into the hole and retract the locking bars.

And then he's in.

He's inside somebody else's home. The place where they feel safest.

They have no idea.

4

Poppy comes awake.

She has no idea what time it is. Actually, she doesn't really know how to tell the time. She thinks she should learn soon, because she got a Disney watch for Christmas and she hasn't used it yet. She doesn't think it's time to get up, though. Her parents always get up first, and she can still hear them snoring in the next room.

It's very dark in here. She doesn't like the dark. She worries that night time is when monsters come out. And rats. And burglars. Even on Christmas Eve she was alarmed by the idea of a strange man rooting around in their living room, presents or no presents.

She considers putting the light on. But since she doesn't have a bedside lamp, that would involve getting out of bed, and it's too cold for that. Too scary, as well. And besides, if she did put the light on, she would probably never be able to get back to sleep again.

So she tells herself to close her eyes and think of nice things, just like her mummy told her.

She thinks about her friends at school. She thinks about how much they laughed the other day when one of the boys split his trousers.

She starts to drift . . .

And comes instantly awake again when she hears a noise.

At least she thinks she heard a noise.

She blinks furiously, but can hardly see a thing. Raising her head, she looks down the length of her bed to the outside wall. Her curtains aren't very thick, and so she can just see the outline of the window. But she can also make out a shape silhouetted against one edge of it, and now she's

wondering what it could be. Try as she might, she cannot work out what is blocking the meagre light.

It's nothing, she tells herself. It's always there. If I get out of bed and put the light on, I'll see that it's only furniture or toys.

But the more she stares at the shape, the more she believes that it's moving.

Nothing significant. Just a few millimetres or so. To the left, and then the right. As though . . .

As though it's somebody standing there, trying to keep statue-still but not quite managing it.

Poppy ducks under the covers. Her hands reach down for Huggles, her teddy bear, and she pulls him into her, crushing him against her chest.

You're being silly, she tells herself. There's nobody there. It's just a shape, and it's not moving at all. And if you start calling out for Mummy or Daddy, they'll be really cross with you for waking them up.

But now she can't sleep. Not until she knows for certain. Not until she can prove to herself that there isn't a monster or a burglar in her room.

Get out of bed now, she commands herself. Go to the light switch and put it on and show yourself how silly you're being. Go on!

She throws back the duvet. Sits up. Looks again towards the window. Sees . . .

Nothing.

There is no shape there now. Which would have been a comfort the last time she looked. But not now. Because now she knows the shape has moved. It definitely was there before, and it definitely isn't now. So it's moved. And there's a smell here, too. An alien smell.

She opens her mouth, ready to yell.

The call doesn't reach the air. It is cut off when something is clamped over her mouth and nose. It feels like cloth – cold and damp. And it stinks. The strange smell, but really intense now. She tries again to cry out, but all she can manage is a muffled noise.

She flails her arms. They slap ineffectively at someone – or something – large and powerful behind her. Her legs kick out, but they get tangled up



in the undersheet. And all the while, the smell seeps into her. It enters her brain, and her thoughts quickly become fuzzy. She forgets her reason for panicking, and a curious calm descends.

The blackness and the silence become total.

* * *

When she wakes up again, she knows instantly that she is in the back of a moving vehicle. She can hear the roar of the engine, feel every bump of the road. Her hands and feet are tied up, and the movement tosses her around like a plaything, making her feel sick.

And she cries.

This is beyond her understanding. She cannot reason about this. She knows only that she has been snatched from her bed, her parents, her home. Only fear is in her mind now – an overwhelming dread of the situation she is now in.

She tries to call for her mummy, but her mouth is covered with some kind of sticky tape. Over and over again she tries to yell the single word that should bring comfort and reassurance. It has always worked in the past. When she has fallen and hurt herself, or when she has been frightened, one of her parents has always responded to her bleating.

But not this time. Nobody comes to soothe away her distress.

And as each minute passes, she realises she is moving further and further away from her family. She has no idea how long she has been unconscious. She could be anywhere by now. She might never see her parents again.

And what will happen at the end of her journey? Who has taken her, and what do they want to do with her?

The unanswered questions multiply her anxiety beyond measure. She is cold and she is shaking and she feels she is turning inside out with her crying. She prays for this nightmare to end.

And then the van comes to a halt with a squeak of the wheels. She hears the ratcheting of a handbrake being applied. The engine dies. A door opens and closes. There are footsteps moving away from the vehicle.



The seconds pass. Poppy begins to wonder if she has been abandoned. Left here in this freezing cold van to die.

But then more footsteps, coming towards her now. The handle on the rear door of the van is operated. The door swings open, and the dim light of the stars and the moon and the street lamps floods into her tiny prison.

She twists her head to look out of the van. Sees that a figure is looking back at her. A woman. Not her mother. Much older than her mother. But kindly. At least, that's the impression she gets. The woman has the countenance of someone seeing her baby for the first time. A look of . . . love.

Poppy wants to beg her to help. If the tape were removed from her mouth, she would do her best pleading. She would promise the woman anything in return for being taken back home. She would pledge not to do anything bad for the rest of her life, if only she could be delivered safely into the arms of her parents.

The woman smiles. It's a warm smile, a comforting smile. She reaches out a hand and strokes Poppy's hair. The gentle caress is the first signal of reassurance Poppy has received, and she tries to hold on to that feeling.

'So pretty,' the woman whispers. 'So beautiful. I'm so happy.'

Poppy wonders why the woman is happy. Is she like the wolf in the Red Riding Hood story? Is she about to gobble up the meal she has been brought?

But the woman seems far too nice for that. She reminds Poppy of her friend's guinea pig. Small and skittish, with tiny bright eyes and bulging cheeks. Her hand slides across Poppy's hair, down her forehead, over her eyes.

'Hush now,' she says. 'You don't need to be afraid. You're safe here. We'll look after you.'

Her palm is soft and warm. It blocks out all the light now, and Poppy suddenly feels incredibly tired. She starts to believe that perhaps these people don't intend to hurt her after all. Whatever their purpose is, it is not to cause harm.

And then she feels the sharp prick of pain in her arm, and all her fears surface again for a few brief seconds before being sucked under with her drowning consciousness.

5

Maria hates the dark, cold mornings. When the alarm goes off, it always seems too early to get up. She could easily manage another hour in bed. She turns over, closes her eyes, feels the beckoning of her recent dreams.

The bed bounces as Craig clambers out of it. Without warning he turns on his bedside lamp. She moans.

Craig slaps her on the curve of her hip. 'Move it, soldier. Don't you know there's a war on?'

'With respect, Colonel,' she says, 'you can kiss my arse.'

Craig laughs heartily. He sounds far too bright and breezy. It seems unfair to her that he seems so refreshed while she could willingly curl up in a ball and go into hibernation for a month or two.

Perhaps it's a sign of age, she thinks. In a couple of days she will be thirty. *Thirty!* That's ancient. Another complete decade will have been put behind her. That's hardly something to celebrate.

She moans again, but somehow manages to summon up the energy to drag herself out of bed. There's so much to do, and in so little time. It's all right for Craig, she thinks. He only needs to jump in the shower for two minutes, throw on the clothes I've ironed for him, swallow down a bowl of cereal, and head out. I, on the other hand, have to get two females ready – myself and Poppy – and that takes a lot more time.

She pushes her feet into some fluffy slippers. Shuffles across the room and takes her dressing gown from the back of a chair. She hears the shower hiss into life.

Stifling a yawn, she drags herself out onto the chilly landing. Despite the central heating, this house never seems warm enough in the winter.

Her first surprise is a relatively mild one.

Poppy's door is wide open. She never leaves it open so much. Never fully closes it either. She likes it ajar just an inch or two.

Curious, Maria heads towards Poppy's room. It's still dark in there, the curtains drawn. Maria enters and turns on the light at the wall. She fully expects a groan of complaint, but none comes.

'Poppy, darling, it's time t—'

And then Maria sees the bed.

The empty bed. The bed with its duvet on the floor and its undersheet all rumped. The bed with no Poppy in it.

There's a smell here, too. An unfamiliar smell. Like something you might notice in a hospital.

And there is Huggles the teddy bear, lying on the floor in the unnatural pose of an accident victim, its dark eyes turned on Maria as if condemning her for not turning up sooner.

Maria returns to the landing. 'Poppy!' she calls.

No answer. Only Craig's tuneless singing in the bathroom.

Perhaps the spare bedroom. Perhaps Poppy had a bad night and needed a change of scenery to help her sleep.

She flings open the door of the third bedroom. Its contents are undisturbed. Nobody slept here last night.

Back on the landing. Heading down the stairs now. 'Poppy! Poppy!'

The shower goes off. Craig shouts, 'Are you calling me?'

She ignores him. Picks up the pace as she reaches the bottom of the stairs with still no response from her daughter. 'POPPY!'

Into the living room. Maybe she's sleeping on the sofa. She's done that before when ill.

But then why didn't she call me? If she's sick, why wouldn't she come and get me?

Not in the living room either.

'POPPY!'

The kitchen now. But why would she be in the kitchen and not be answering my calls?

Maria sees immediately that there's nobody here. Where is she? Where could she possibly be hiding? Why isn't she answering?

Through the kitchen. Into the conservatory with its empty wicker chairs and its unoccupied two-seater sofa and . . .

Its open door.

And now Maria's heart is in her mouth. This scene is so, so wrong. That door is kept locked at night. The key is always taken out of the lock and placed on top of a high cupboard. Poppy couldn't reach that key. She couldn't have opened the door. What the fuck is going on here?

She's through the door then. Out into the murky morning. The bare trees look skeletal and menacing. Even the birds don't seem inclined to sing.

'Poppy! Poppy!'

The only answer is from a neighbour's dog. Maria turns and looks back at the house. Have I missed something? she wonders. Am I overreacting, or is this as bad as it seems? Is this the start of the nightmare it appears to be?

She sees it then. The hole in the door where the lock should be.

'Oh, God! Oh, God!'

She knows. Someone has entered the house. Someone has broken in and they have . . . they have . . .

She goes around the side of the house. Sees that the wooden gate – the gate that always has its bolt drawn at night – is yawning wide open.

'POPPY!'

Her calls are screams now – frantic, panic-stricken yells. Give me a word, she thinks. A single word, or even a cry of pain. Anything will do. Anything that will tell me you are still here with me.

If she's here, I can fix her. But if she isn't . . .

Maria passes through the front garden. Out into the street. She is crying now. She clutches at her hair, not knowing what to do. You can't prepare for this. You can't be ready to deal with a situation in which your child—

She's been taken.

She has. That's what's happened here. My beautiful Poppy has been taken.

A voice from behind her. Craig, running up the driveway. She doesn't know what he's saying. Doesn't acknowledge the stares of neighbours as they appear on their doorsteps, summoned by her desperate calls. All that is irrelevant now. Only one person matters.

And she has gone.

6

The girl called Daisy comes awake when she hears the bolts being drawn back on her bedroom door. She sits up, rubs the sleep from her eyes.

They switch the light on as they come in. Harriet first, beaming with excitement. Behind her is Malcolm. There is a child in his arms.

The child looks dead. A sleeping child would waken with all the jostling, but this one is like a rag doll. Her limbs droop and swing. Her eyes are closed but her mouth is wide open. It's hard to tell if she's breathing.

Daisy wonders if she looked like that herself when she was first brought here. Sometimes she wishes she'd never woken up from that deep unknowing.

'Hello, Daisy,' says Harriet. 'Look what we've got. We told you, didn't we? We always keep our promises.'

Malcolm stoops a little, affording Daisy a better look at the child. She seems so fragile, so lacking in substance.

'Is she asleep?' Daisy asks.

'Yes,' says Harriet. 'A very special kind of sleep. She'll wake up soon, though. We thought you might like to keep an eye on her for us. You can let us know when she wakes up. Would that be all right with you?'

Daisy feels uncertain about this. She has never looked after another child before, especially one who appears as close to death as this. But she knows better than to be negative.

'Okay,' she says.

'Let me put her on your bed,' says Malcolm.

Daisy gets off the bed, stands at the foot of it while she watches the girl being placed gently onto the mattress, her head on the pillow.

Harriet moves in front of her husband and bends to give the new arrival a gentle kiss on the forehead. 'See you soon, Poppy,' she says.

The two adults turn to face Daisy. 'We're trusting you to look after your new sister,' says Harriet. 'You will do that, won't you?'

Daisy nods. 'Yes.'

'Tell us as soon as she's awake, okay?'

Another nod.

'All right, then.' They back out of the room, their eyes very much on Poppy. Harriet gives a little wave towards the bed before she closes the door.

And then the bolts are slid into place once more, and the children are alone.

Daisy stays where she is for a full minute, just staring at the still form of the six-year-old. She looks tiny, but then Daisy probably wasn't much bigger when she was brought here.

She takes a step forward, then another. A sister, she thinks. She looks a bit like me, too. This is probably like looking at a photograph of myself from three years ago.

The thought pricks at her eyes. Three years without her parents, without family, without friends. She has not seen a single beam of sunlight in all that time.

She holds up her arm, looks at how pale her flesh is. Then she leans forward and lays it alongside Poppy's. The difference is staggering. She feels like a ghost in comparison.

There are marks on the girl's wrists: pink indentations where rope has dug into them. Daisy is pierced with another sharp memory of her own marks when she was similarly bound.

Her hand brushes against Poppy's flesh. She recoils at how cold it feels.

Daisy climbs back onto the bed. She pulls the duvet over both of them, then snuggles into Poppy.

'Please don't die,' she whispers. 'Please don't die.'