

S O P H I E  
H A N N A H

Haven't They  
Grown

  
HODDER &  
STOUGHTON

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# 1

*20 April 2019*

Here we are, in the wrong place: Wyddial Lane. It's a private road, as the sign unsobly proclaims in letters larger than those spelling out its name, in a village called Hemingford Abbots. I switch off the engine, stretch my back to release the ache from two hours of driving, and wait for Ben to notice that there's no football ground in sight.

He's buried in his phone. I can't help thinking of it like that – as if he's stuck inside the machine in his hand, unable to get out. Quite happy about it, too. Zannah's the same. Most teenagers are, as far as I can tell: they spend all day and half the night in lock-eyed communion with an addictive device. No amount of my children telling me it's 'the way life is these days, so stop being so old and just chill' will ever persuade me to think it's okay. It's not. It's frightening and depressing.

Sometimes it's also useful, to a parent who doesn't want to be scrutinised. It's likely to be a while before Ben notices the intense quiet – almost total silence, apart from the occasional bird-chirp or gust of wind rustling the branches of the trees that line Wyddial Lane on both sides – and realises that there are no teenage boys in football strips traipsing past our car or anywhere nearby. He's completely immersed: head down, lips moving as he types with his thumbs. I've probably got two minutes at least.

Plenty of time. You can take in a lot in a hundred and twenty seconds, and that's all I came here to do: have a good look. Many times over the past twelve years, I've wondered about Flora's new house. Technically it ceased to be 'new' at least a decade ago, though that's still how I think of it. I checked last year to see if the 'Street View not available in this location' message still came up, and it did. Maybe that's got something to do with it being a private road. I can't think what else it would be. Until today, I assumed that Wyddial Lane was very remote, but it isn't. Despite the peaceful rural vibe, it's only two minutes from a main road.

I've no idea what kind of house I'd buy if, suddenly, money were no object, and I've always been curious to see what Flora and Lewis chose – certainly not curious enough to devote half a day to the four-hour round trip, especially when I might be spotted on my spying mission and I'd have no way to explain my presence, but interested enough to recognise a perfect opportunity when one presented itself. As soon as the list of impending football fixtures arrived and I saw 'St Ives, Cambridgeshire', I knew what I was going to do. It felt like a reward for all those Saturdays spent driving Ben around, all the hours I've stood shivering by the sides of muddy fields far from home while he played. Finally a perk had been handed to me and I resolved on the spot to take full advantage of it.

Today, if by any chance Flora or Lewis catches sight of me here, my excuse will be so close to the truth that it might as well be the truth: I'm driving my son to his Regional League match nearby and I took a wrong turn. Ben, sitting beside me in his red and white football gear, would be all the proof I'd need. Only the 'wrong turn' part of the story would be false.

For a better view, I've parked across the road from number 16, not directly outside it. To the left of the thick wooden gates,

there's a square sign, grey stone, attached to the high brick wall that protects all but the very top of the house from prying eyes like mine. The sign says, 'Newnham House'.

I shake my head. Unbelievable, that they chose to call it that. And those gates, a foot higher at their uppermost point than the top of the wall . . . Most of the houses here have high walls surrounding them. Being on a private road doesn't offer these people enough privacy, apparently.

Of course the home of The New Flora and Lewis Braid looks like this. I should have been able to predict it all: the ugly, sprawling modern mansion, the private road, the gates kidding themselves that they don't appear superior and unfriendly because they've got curly flourishes at the top that look marginally more welcoming than the seven feet of dense wood immediately beneath them.

There's a silver box with buttons below the 'Newnham House' sign – an intercom. I'd need to press those buttons if I wanted to gain access, which I definitely don't.

Is this what too much money does to people? Or is it only what too much money does to Lewis Braid? There's no way this house is Flora's choice – not the Flora I knew. And Lewis had a knack for getting his way whenever they disagreed.

'Where are we? This isn't the ground.' My son has finally noticed his surroundings.

'I know.'

'Then why've we stopped? I thought you knew where we're going?'

'I do.'

'The warm-up starts in, like, fifteen minutes.'

'And it'll only take us ten to drive there. Lucky, eh?' I smile brightly, switching on the engine.

Ben turns back to his phone with a sigh. He is considerate enough not to say, 'I wish Dad was driving me.' According to

our family folklore, Dominic is a good driver who plans well and allows enough time, and I am the opposite. This week was Dom's turn to do football duty. He couldn't believe his luck when I said I fancied an outing and offered to go instead. I doubt he remembers that Flora and Lewis moved to very near St Ives soon after we last saw them. Even if he does, he wouldn't suspect I had a secret agenda. Dominic would never take a ten-minute detour in order to see the current home of someone he hadn't seen for twelve years – therefore, in his mind, neither would I.

'Fuck off!' Ben says to his phone.

'Ben. What have we—'

'Sorry.' He makes that sound like a swear word too. 'Do you have a list of everything Dad's ever done wrong?'

'What? No, of course not.'

'So it's not normal, then? Most people in relationships don't do it?'

'A written list? Definitely not.'

'Lauren's got a list on her phone of everything I've done wrong since we've been a thing.'

Lauren, a model-level-beautiful girl who is excessively polite to me and eats nothing apart from noodles according to both my children, describes herself as Ben's girlfriend. He objects to this terminology and insists that they are merely 'a thing'.

'But you've never done anything wrong to Lauren, have you? Or have you?' They've only been together – if that's the right way to put it – for three weeks.

'I put two "x"s in my last message instead of three. That's the latest thing.'

'Did you do it deliberately?'

'No. I didn't even know I'd done it. Didn't think about it.'

I indicate to turn onto the main road, wishing I had a choice and could stay a bit longer on Wyddial Lane. Why? I did what

I wanted to do, saw what there was to see from the outside. That ought to feel like enough.

‘Who the fu— Who *counts kisses* in a message?’ Ben says.

‘Girls do. Some girls, anyway. Lauren’s obviously one of them.’

‘First the problem was me not doing it – she’d always put a line of “x”s at the bottom of her messages and I never would, and she thought that meant I don’t care about her – so I started putting them in, and now she’s counting how many, and thinking it *means* something if I do one less than in the last message. That’s crazy, right?’

‘Ask Zannah if she counts how many kisses Murad puts in each message.’ Murad, to my knowledge, has only once done something wrong in the year and a half that he and Zannah have been whatever-they-call-it, and he turned up looking tearful the following morning, clutching a dozen red roses. Zannah was delighted, both by the roses and by the news of the sleepless night he’d suffered after ‘criticising me when I’d done fuck all wrong. Mum, I literally don’t care what you think about me swearing right now. Sometimes I *need* to swear, or I’d throw myself off a bridge.’

I would be very surprised if my daughter did not keep on top of the kisses-per-message statistics.

Ben groans. ‘And now, because I didn’t instantly reply and say “Oh, sorry, sorry”, and send a long line of “x”s, she’s going to accuse me of blanking her.’

‘So why not reply and send more kisses?’

‘No! Why should I?’

‘You’re right. You shouldn’t.’ Poor boy. He’s fourteen, for God’s sake – too young to be engaged in fraught relationship negotiations.

‘I’ve done nothing wrong. Ask Zannah, Mum. Lauren’s a high-maintenance, needy—’

‘Ben!’

‘Person. I was going to say “person”.’

‘Yeah. Course you were.’ I’m glad his instinct is to stand up for himself, and that he’s not planning to cry all night and take roses round to Lauren’s house tomorrow morning.

Ten minutes later we’re parked in the right place. Ben climbs out of the car. ‘You coming to watch?’ he asks, tossing his phone onto the passenger seat. I usually do. I’m not remotely interested in football, but I love to see Ben doing something healthy and worthwhile, something other than being the slave of an electronic device.

‘In a bit,’ I say. ‘First I want to find a supermarket and get something for dinner tonight.’

I watch him run off. Soon he and other red-and-white-clad boys are pushing each other around happily – trying to trip each other up, grabbing each other’s rucksacks.

On the passenger seat, Ben’s phone starts to ring. ‘Zannah’ flashes up on the screen. I pick it up. ‘Hi, darling. Everything okay?’ Zannah isn’t normally awake before noon on a Saturday.

‘Where’s Ben?’ The clipped precision of her words doesn’t bode well.

‘Football.’

‘Really? According to Snap Maps, he was on a street called Widdle Lane or something ten minutes ago. What the hell was he doing there?’

‘Wyddial Lane. Yeah, that’s nearby. Now we’re at football.’

‘Right. When you next see him, can you please ask him to deal with his high-maintenance nightmare of a girlfriend? Thanks. She’s just called me and *woken me up* to tell me that Ben blanked her in the middle of an important conversation, and can I ask him to message her? Their pathetic relationship is not my problem, Mum, and I’m not getting dragged into it.’

‘I—’



‘Thanks, Mum. See you later. I’m going back to sleep. Ugh, it’s *nine thirty* – grim.’

She’s gone. ‘Girlfriend’, she said. So using that word in a teenage context is not entirely disallowed. I add this important clue to my ongoing study of teenage behaviour, glad that my investigative interest in every aspect of my children’s lives is not reciprocated. Zannah and Ben aren’t remotely concerned about the details of my day-to-day life. Neither of them asked me why I drove to Wyddial Lane before going to the St Ives football ground; neither of them ever will.

There’s something comforting about living with two people who never think about or question your behaviour. I tried to explain this to Dominic once, when he complained that the kids never ask how our days have been. ‘They’re teenagers,’ I said. ‘Anything happening outside of the teenage arena, they couldn’t care less. Be thankful – remember the time Ben found cigarettes and a lighter in your jacket pocket, and you told him you gave up ages ago, and they must have been there for at least ten years? You didn’t mind then that he didn’t pounce on that and say, “But wait, you only bought that jacket last month.”’

I don’t have any bad habits that I’m concealing from the children. I’ve only ever had one near-miss on a par with Dominic’s cigarettes-and-lighter scare, and that was when Zannah was four and still interested enough in people outside her immediate peer group to notice strange things her mother did. She walked into the kitchen and found me with a pair of scissors in one hand and a photograph in the other. I must have looked upset and guilty, because she asked me if I was okay. ‘Of course, darling,’ I said in a bright voice.

How could I have explained to a four-year-old what I was doing – or to anyone? Dominic was working in the lounge, which was next to the kitchen in our old house. He’d have been horrified. I remember holding my breath, praying that

my unnaturally high-pitched ‘Of course’ hadn’t aroused his suspicions. Four-year-old Zannah looked doubtful, but she didn’t ask any more questions.

The photograph she’d caught me holding was of the Braid family: Lewis and Flora and their three children – Thomas, Emily and Georgina. A happy family portrait, taken in the back garden. Flora had included it with their Christmas card. She always sent a photo, just as she always signed the card ‘Lewis, Flora . . .’ His name had to come first because it was traditional, and the Braids cared about things like that. Dominic and I discussed it once. He said, ‘There’s no way Lewis has ever said to Flora, “Make sure to put my name first”. He’d totally leave the Christmas card sending to her, wouldn’t he? I can’t see him giving it a single second’s thought.’

‘True,’ I said. ‘But he also would never have ended up married to the kind of woman who wouldn’t automatically put his name first on all correspondence.’

So often over the past twelve years, I’ve wanted to tell Dominic what I did to that photograph and ask him which he thinks is worse: that, or what Flora did to me.

If I did, he’d probably laugh and say, ‘You’re mad, Beth,’ in an affectionate way. He’d say the same – that I must be insane – about what I’m going to do next, which isn’t what I’ve just told Ben.

I’m not going to the supermarket to buy tonight’s dinner.

I’m going back to Wyddial Lane.



I’m amazed by how much more I notice now that I’m alone and there’s no pressure from an imminent football match to distract me: the black metal postbox attached to a gatepost, with ‘16’ on it in white, the burglar alarm, the row of what

might be tiny security cameras or some kind of motion sensors lining the top of the house just under the guttering, like a string of paranoid fairy lights.

As I drove back here, the grey sky gave way to a hazy blue and the sun appeared. Now it's properly warm for the first time this year. Even with the window down, it's already too hot in the car. I don't want to put on the air conditioning – that would involve starting up the engine, and the last thing I need is for Flora to look out and wonder about the stationary car with its engine running.

That's funny: I'm assuming that, if anyone's home, it's going to be Flora. Twelve years ago, when I still knew the Braids, Lewis's job on Saturdays was to ferry Thomas and Emily around by car to their various hobby-duties: swimming lessons, drama club, tennis coaching. Five-year-old Thomas and three-year-old Emily had an absurd number of unmissable appointments. Lewis drove them to and fro while Flora caught up on the housework. He often used to say, 'When I sell my company for a trillion dollars, we'll have a fleet of chauffeurs and I'll be able to spend weekends watching telly with my feet up.' In those days, he was always making jokes about how he would one day be rich. If we went to a crowded bar or café where we had to raise our voices to be heard, Lewis would announce, 'When I'm rich I'll have four chefs living in the annexe of my mansion – Indian, Italian, French and English – so that I don't have to put up with other people's noise in order to get great food.' Flora would tut at his imaginary extravagance and say, 'Lew-is,' in the same voice she used to subdue her small children when they were making a spectacle of themselves in public.

As it turned out, Lewis didn't need to worry about selling his company in order to get rich. His hoarder-miser grandfather died and left him several million pounds that nobody in the Braid family had known the old man had. Lewis and Flora

moved from a three-bedroom basement flat to 16 Wyddial Lane, which looks as if it must have at least eight bedrooms, and now perhaps Lewis has all those chefs and chauffeurs he used to joke about acquiring. Maybe he and Flora and their kids are all inside the house now, staring at their iPhones.

What age would Georgina be? Twelve, so not quite a teenager. We didn't let Zannah have a phone until she was thirteen, but her teenager behaviour had definitely started by then. She was eleven the first time she raised her eyebrows and asked me why I imagined in my wildest dreams that she might want to go into town with someone wearing a carpet. (I was dressed in a beautiful woollen poncho at the time.)

I feel ashamed when I think about Georgina Braid, so I concentrate on the house instead. I got it wrong before – I glanced at it and decided it was modern, but, on closer inspection, it looks as if only the sides of it are newly built. The middle third of the building sticks out in front of the grand wings to the left and right, which are flat-fronted and have been added much more recently in what Zannah would call a 'glow-up'. The dark-red pantiled roof of the newest sections starts higher up than the roof of the middle part, which has two dormer windows set into it. Presumably this was once an average-sized cottage. Only just visible above the closed wooden gates is a lychgate-style roofed porch, with the same red tiles. Apart from the two roofs – house and porch – the entire frontage is gleaming white. It looks as if it might have been painted yesterday. The overall effect is of a sleek, contemporary white-cube-style house that has swallowed a lumpy old cottage and been unable to digest it.

There's a second building, long and low, standing between the house and the high wall, separating the two. Most likely it's a double or triple garage. If there's this much space at the front, there must be three times as much at the back, at least. I picture

a long, striped lawn, alternating shades of lush green, and a smooth stone patio area, complete with top-of-the-range outdoor chairs and sofas: dark brown with plump cream cushions.

I wipe beads of sweat from my forehead. One open window isn't enough. How has it got so hot, suddenly? I open my door slightly, to let more air in.

Could I . . .

No. Absolutely not. I can't ring the bell and smile and say, 'Hi, Flora. I was passing, and I thought I'd pop round on the off-chance.' Not after twelve years.

Is that why I came here, really? Not only to see the house but because I'm secretly hoping to rewrite the story?

*The Braids and the Leeson's were best friends. Twelve years ago, they did not have any sort of argument, nor did they exchange harsh words. The last time they saw each other, everybody smiled and laughed and kissed and hugged goodbye. They talked about getting together again very soon – maybe next week, maybe taking the kids to the summer fair on Parker's Piece. As they enthusiastically agreed to ring each other to arrange this outing, Flora Braid and Beth Leeson both knew that there would be no phone call in either direction, and no trip to the fair. Dominic Leeson and Lewis Braid did not know this, because no one had told them that the two families would never meet or speak again.*

On the face of it, it makes no sense. Only Flora and I understand what happened – and I'll never know whether our understandings of it are the same. I've tried to explain to Dominic what happened from my point of view, and I suppose Flora must have told Lewis something, though perhaps not the truth . . .

This is ridiculous. I should be watching Ben play football, or finding a supermarket. I really do need to get something for dinner. Who cares where the Braids live now? I've seen everything

there is to see – cream curtains at the upstairs windows, fat, square red-brick gateposts topped with large balls of grey stone, perfectly smooth and round, clashing horribly with the red brick.

I should go.

I'm about to start the car when I notice one coming up behind me: a Range Rover driving extra slowly. Wyddial Lane is a twenty-mile-an-hour zone, and this car's going at no more than ten. I'm watching it, willing it to speed up, when I notice a movement from another direction.

It's Flora's gates – they're opening.

The silver-grey Range Rover slows still further as it approaches the Braids' house. It inches forward, now almost level with my car. That's where it's heading: through the wooden gates, into the grounds of number 16. Of course: there's no way Lewis and Flora would have gates that you have to get out and open; they'd have some kind of remote-control set-up.

I see glossy dark brown hair through the Range Rover's half-open window. It could well be Flora. It's bound to be.

*Shit.* Why did I think I could get away with this? She's going to see me.

*No, she won't. No one looks at a random parked car. She'll drive in through the gates and then they'll close again, and she won't think about what's beyond her property.*

I turn my face away, making sure to lean close to my open window in case there's anything to hear.

There's nothing for a few seconds. Then a crunch of tyres on gravel, and the sound of the Range Rover's engine cutting out. A car door opens. Feet land on gravel and a woman's voice, halfway through a sentence as it emerges into the open air, drifts across to me: '... said I'm ready now. You can start. Yes. Start.'

It's Flora. Unmistakeably. She doesn't sound happy. She sounds ... I don't know how to describe it. Afraid, resentful, prepared for the worst. Is something horrible about to happen?

*Don't be ridiculous. You heard, what, six words?*

I listen for a response but I hear nothing. Flora's probably on the phone.

*I've never heard her sound like that before.*

I can't not look. I have to risk it. If the worst happens and she spots me and I decide I can't face talking to her, I can just drive away, fast. That'd give her twenty-mile-an-hour-zone neighbours something to talk about. They could lobby to have Wyddial Lane sealed at both ends so that no one who doesn't live here can enter in future.

The gates of Newnham House are still wide open. And there's Flora: twelve years older, but it's definitely her. Her hair hasn't changed a bit: same dark brown with no hint of grey, same style. She's wearing white lace-up pumps, a pale grey hoody and jeans.

'Home,' she says, holding her phone half an inch away from her ear. 'I'm at home.'

I tried to push it away but it's back again: the strong sense that what I'm seeing isn't an ordinary conversation. There's something wrong.

A short silence follows. Then she says, 'Hey, Chimp.' She stops, raises her voice slightly and says, 'Hey, Chimpyyy!'

Strange. The words don't match the expression on her face at all. She looks upset and worried, not in relaxed greeting mode.

Is she talking to a new person now? Did the person she told she was ready put a child on the phone? It must be a child, surely. Who else would allow themselves to be called Chimp? Her change of tone, too, from normal to deliberate, slower, louder . . .

Suddenly, she turns away and stretches out her arm, holding her phone as far away from herself as possible. Then, a few seconds later, she brings it back to her ear and wipes her eyes with her other hand.

*Sophie Hannah*

*She started to cry and didn't want Chimp to hear.*

'Peterborough,' she says in a more normal tone of voice. 'Lucky. I'm very lucky.'

Tears have filled my eyes. I can't blink. They'd spill over and then I'd be officially crying, which would be insane. This woman has been no part of my life for twelve years. Why should I care that something about this phone conversation has upset her?

'Yes. Tomorrow,' she says. 'I'll speak to you tomorrow.' I watch as she puts her phone back in her bag. For a few seconds she stands still, looking tired and defeated, relieved that the conversation is over.

She opens the back door of the Range Rover, sticks her head in and says, 'We're he-ere!' The deliberate jolly tone is unconvincing. Then she stands back. Nothing happens.

No surprises there. When the destination they've arrived at is their own home, teenagers don't get out of the car unless nagged extensively. If you're dropping them at a friend's house, it's a different story.

I hear Flora sigh. 'Thomas! Emily!' she says in a sing-song voice. 'Come on, out you get!'

'Why are you speaking to them like they're still toddlers?' I mutter. 'No wonder they're ignoring you.'

Even when her kids were little, Flora's speaking-to-babies-and-children tone annoyed me. Thanks to her, I made sure I always addressed Zannah and Ben as if they were proper people.

Flora stands back as if someone's about to get out of the car. 'That's it!' she says encouragingly.

*Quit it, woman, unless you want them to run off and join a cult. They ought to be able to get out of a car without a pep talk from their mother.*

A small, bright blue rucksack tumbles from the car to the ground. I see a leg emerge, then a boy.

A very young boy.



What the hell?

'Come on, Emily,' says Flora. 'Thomas, pick up your bag.'

A little girl rolls out of the car. She picks up the blue bag and hands it to the boy.

'Oh, well done, Emily,' says Flora. 'That's kind. Say thank you, Thomas.'

This cannot be happening.

I touch the skin of my face with my right hand. Both feel equally cold. All of me feels frozen apart from my heart, which beats in my ears like something trapped in a tunnel.

I lean back in my seat, close my eyes for a few seconds, then open them and look again.

Nothing has changed. The little girl turns and, for a second, looks straight at me.

It's her. That T-shirt with the fluffy sheep on it . . . *Le petit mouton*.

The girl I'm looking at is Emily Braid, except she's not fifteen, as she should be – as she *must* be and is, unless the world has stopped making sense altogether.

This is the Emily Braid I knew twelve years ago, when she was three years old. And Thomas . . . I can't see all of his face, but I can see enough to know that he's still five years old, as he was when I last saw him in 2007.

I have to get out of here. I can't look any more. Everything is wrong.

My fingers fumble for the car keys. I press them hard, then realise I'm pressing the wrong thing. It's the button on the dashboard, not the keys. I'm waiting for the engine to start and it won't because I'm not doing it right, because all I can think about is Thomas and Emily Braid.

Why are they – how *can* they be – still three and five? Why are they no older than they were twelve years ago?

Why haven't they grown?

## 2

Several hours later, walking back through my front door and closing it against the world feels like an achievement.

*I made it. Me and Ben, safely home.* How I was able to concentrate on driving properly, I've no idea. I probably shouldn't have risked it.

I lean against the wall in the hall, shut my eyes and let the sound of Ben telling Dominic about the match wash over me. His voice broke a few months ago, and we're still getting used to this new deeper one. His music teacher described him as a 'bass' the other day, and it gave me a strange, dislocated feeling. My sweet little boy, a bass – the lowest and most booming kind of male voice there is. How did that happen?

How do I tell Dominic, or anyone, what I saw on Wyddial Lane?

I want to be in the lounge, in a comfortable chair with my feet up, so that I can think about what to do. This seems an impossible goal. I can't imagine getting to that chair, even though the lounge is only a few feet away. Nothing makes sense any more, so I might as well stay here in the hall, looking at the clumps of mud from Ben's football boots that I'm going to need to pick up at some point.

Where was Georgina Braid? Why wasn't she in the car with her brother and sister? The last thing I saw before I drove away was Flora aiming her remote-control fob at the car to lock it, and then at the gates of her property, which started to glide

shut. Maybe Georgina was inside the car and hadn't climbed out yet.

*She wouldn't have been able to climb. She's only a few months old. Flora would have lifted her out in her car seat and . . .*

I push the thought away, appalled by it. How can I, an intelligent adult woman, be thinking this? Georgina Braid was a few months old *twelve years ago*. She's twelve now. Thomas is seventeen and Emily fifteen. These are facts, not something to speculate about. There is no other possible outcome, for someone who was five in 2007, apart from to be seventeen now, in 2019.

*Unless they're dead.*

That's not a thought I want in my head either. Thomas, Emily and Georgina Braid are not dead. Why would they be? Two of them can't be, because . . .

*Because you've just seen them? Aged five and three, which we've established is impossible?* I didn't imagine what I saw. That's impossible too.

Ignoring the mud and the discarded football boots, I walk into the lounge and sit down, like someone waiting for something momentous to happen.

There's a clattering of footsteps on the stairs, followed by Zan's voice: 'You need to stop blanking Lauren, like, *right now*.'

'Blanking? What does that mean?'

'You'll never understand, Dad, so don't make me explain.'

'I'm not blanking her,' Ben says. 'I'm just not replying to her.'

'Yeah, and she's been spamming me all morning about it – so please deal with her, so I don't have to.'

The lounge door bangs open, hitting the wall. Zannah walks in wearing a black vest top and turquoise pyjama bottoms with white spots. There's a lilac-coloured towel wrapped around her head and a grainy-textured green substance all over her face. 'Mum, can you make him sort Lauren out?' She squints at me. 'What's up with you? You look weird.'

Great: she's picked today to notice that I'm someone whose behaviour might mean something. She stares at me, waiting for a response. In the hall, Dominic is saying that Gary, Ben's football coach, must regret taking Ben off at half-time, because the other team scored their two goals within seconds of Ben being replaced by an inferior defender. This irritates me in a way it wouldn't normally. Dom wasn't there. How does he know? From my brief exchange with Gary at the end of the game, he didn't strike me as a man racked with regret.

'Dad!' Zannah yells. 'Come and look at Mum. There's something wrong with her.'

The easiest thing would be to say I feel ill. No one would question it. It's hot. I'm not good with heat. It's a joke in our house. Ben and I have pale, Celtic complexions, and constitutions that function better in cooler weather. Dom and Zannah are dark, with olive skin, and love stretching out in the sun for hours at a time.

'Dad, get in here, seriously.'

By the time Dom arrives, I've convinced myself that the most sensible thing is to pretend to be fine in the hope that I soon will be. Maybe by dinner time I'll have convinced myself that I didn't see five-year-old Thomas and three-year-old Emily, that the heat made me hallucinate.

'You okay?' Dominic asks me.

'She's *obviously* not okay.'

'Zan, can you give me and Dad a minute?'

'What? Why? You're not getting divorced, are you? If you are, can I hit all the people I've been not hitting till now? Callie's parents are splitting up, and she's started punching and pushing me – in a jokey way, but, I mean . . . I have bruises! Actually, I'm so done with that girl.'

'We're not splitting up,' I tell her.

'Beth, what's wrong?' Dom asks. 'Should I be worried?'

From the hall, Ben calls out, 'Can you all stop causing drama?'

'Yeah, when we're *dead*,' says Zan. 'Life *is* drama, little bruth.'

'Zannah, please,' says Dom. 'Upstairs.'

'Mum, why can't I stay?'

'Suzannah. We very rarely ask you to—'

'Uh-oh. Dad's full-naming me. It must be serious. All right, I'm going.' Zan flounces out of the room, slamming the door behind her.

I still approve of my advice to myself to say nothing and try to pretend it didn't happen, but I know I can't follow it. The words are swelling inside me, preparing to burst out.

'I went to Hemingford Abbots while Ben was playing football.'

Dom frowns. 'Where's that?'

'Near St Ives, where football was.' I take a deep breath. This isn't the difficult part of the conversation. This bit should be easy. 'It's where the Braids moved when they left Cambridge.'

'Oh, right. Yeah, I remember – before they moved to Florida.'

'What? Who moved to Florida?'

'The Braids did.'

The door opens and Zannah reappears. 'You're never going to get anywhere at this rate. You need me to interpret.' She performs some invented-on-the-spot sign language.

'Were you listening outside the door?' asks Dom.

'Course I was.' She rolls her eyes. 'Who wouldn't?'

'The Braids didn't move to Florida,' I say.

'They did. Something Beach.'

'What makes you think that?'

He looks puzzled. 'I don't know. I just . . . oh, I know. It might have been LinkedIn. I'm barely on it, but I think I got a message inviting me to follow Lewis, or befriend him, or whatever it is people do on LinkedIn. I had a look at his profile and he was CEO of some company in Florida.'

'They might have been in Florida at some point but they

aren't any more,' I tell him. 'While I was parked outside their house in Hemingford Abbots, a car drove in through the gates. Flora got out.'

'I don't know who these people are, but maybe they've split up,' says Zannah. 'He's in Florida, she's here.'

'Zan, please, can you let me talk to Dad alone?' If she hears what happened, she'll either be worried about me or scathingly sarcastic; I want to avoid both.

She looks disappointed, but, for once, doesn't argue. We listen as she stomps back up the two flights of stairs to her bedroom.

'I suppose they might have moved back,' says Dominic.

'To the same house? It's the same address they gave us when they left Cambridge twelve years ago: 16 Wyddial Lane.'

'They could have rented it out while they went to Florida temporarily. Either way, I'm not sure why it matters. To us, I mean.'

'The children haven't aged,' I blurt out, aware how ridiculous it sounds.

'*What?*'

'Thomas and Emily. They should be seventeen and fifteen. Right?'

'Sounds about right, yeah.'

'I saw them, Dom. Flora opened the back door of the car and said, "Thomas! Emily! Out you get!" in a stupid sing-song baby voice, and I thought "Who talks to teenagers like that?", and then the children got out of the car and they weren't teenagers. They were little children.'

Dom looks confused. Then he laughs, but tentatively – as if someone might stop him at any moment.

'Beth, that's impossible.'

'Yeah. It is, isn't it? I didn't see Georgina . . .'

'Who?'

'Their youngest.'

His eyes widen. 'Shit – you know, I'd totally forgotten they had a third.'

This doesn't surprise me. Lewis and Dom were never as close as Flora and I were. Dom probably hasn't thought about the Braids much since we last saw them.

He smiles. 'Remember the two-thousand-pound changing room, in Corfu? That's something I'll never forget.'

'I can't believe you didn't tell me they'd moved to Florida.'

'Why would I? I deleted the message and forgot about it. We hadn't seen them for years.'

'Since Thomas was five and Emily was three.' I can't help shivering as I say it, despite the heat. 'Which they can't still be.'

'No, they can't.'

'But, Dom, they *are*. I saw them. I heard Flora call them by their names, I saw their faces. Emily was wearing her "Petit Mouton" T-shirt. You won't remember it, but . . . Thomas's clothes were the same too. It was them – today, but exactly as they were twelve years ago. And other things were wrong, too.'

'Like what?'

I'm grateful that he hasn't laughed in my face, and even more grateful when he sits down next to me and says, 'Tell me from the beginning, the whole story.'



It's several hours later, and I haven't woken up yet, so I guess it wasn't a dream.

Dom, Zannah and I are sitting at our kitchen table. They're eating Italian food from our favourite local restaurant, Pirelli's. I'm trying to persuade myself to take a mouthful of the spinach and ricotta cannelloni Dom bought for me. I haven't felt hungry since this morning. Ben is staying overnight at his friend Aaron's house, and is the only member of the family who doesn't yet

know what I saw, or what I cannot have seen, depending on your point of view. Zannah knows nearly everything, mainly from sneaking silently downstairs and listening at the lounge door.

After wolfing down a prawn and red pepper pizza, she pushes her plate aside, reaches for her notebook and pen and pulls them towards her. 'Okay,' she says. 'Let's list all the possibilities.'

'I had a funny turn because it was hot, and I didn't see what I think I saw.'

'When Dad suggested that before, you said, "I know what I saw".'

'That's true.'

'Mum, you're not making sense.'

'If we're listing all the possibilities, we have to include me being . . . wrong. Deluded. However sure I am that I'm not.'

'All right.' Zannah makes a note. 'That's possibility one.'

Shouldn't we break it down a little further? A) There was no one there, and I hallucinated three people. B) I saw three people get out of a Range Rover, but they weren't Flora, Thomas and Emily Braid. There's probably a C) and a D) but I can't think what they might be.

'What are the other possibilities?' Zannah looks around the table, like a manager in a meeting waiting for her team to make helpful suggestions. 'I can think of one.'

'Go on,' says Dom. I find it hard to believe we're having this conversation.

'Thomas and Emily, the ones you knew, died. Lewis and Flora then had two more kids, a boy and a girl, and gave them the same names, as a way of honouring the memories of Dead Thomas and Emily.'

'Very, very unlikely,' says Dom. 'Though not impossible, I suppose. It'd explain a lot – the clothes, for example. Lots of families keep clothes their oldest kids have outgrown, and then,



if you have more kids . . .' He turns to me. 'If the two children you saw today were also Lewis and Flora's, there could well be a strong facial resemblance to older Thomas and Emily.'

'If Thomas and Emily Number 1 are dead, whatever killed them might have killed Georgina as well,' Zannah points out.

'There should be an easily found record of it online if they're dead,' says Dom.

'No, you're wrong,' I say, realising with a small jolt of shock that I'm supposed to be part of the conversation. This isn't some kind of weird play and I'm not the audience. Dom and Zan are jumping from one thing to another too fast. 'If Thomas and Emily had died, then yes, Flora might have wanted to have more children, but there's no way she'd give them the same names. No one would.'

Dom shakes his head. 'There's always somebody who'd do the bizarre thing you think no one would do.'

'Not Flora. And . . . I'm not sure anyone would do it. Wouldn't you feel like you were trying to replicate your dead children in a sick way?'

'I would, yeah,' says Dom. 'But I'm not them. Lewis Braid's a weirdo. Always was. Flora wasn't, but . . . if she really did lose her children in some terrible accident, and she's traumatised, who knows what she might do?'

Zannah taps her pad with the pen. 'All right, so, option one: Mum had a funny turn and didn't see or hear what she thinks she did. Option two: Mum saw a new, different Thomas and Emily who were named after their dead older siblings. What else?'

I don't feel that option two is in any way a possibility, but I don't have the energy to protest. *Flora wouldn't do that. No version of her, past, present, future, however freaked out, would do it.*

'Do we want to include a supernatural possibility?' asks Zannah.

‘No,’ Dom and I say together.

‘How about: Mum *did* see Thomas and Emily Braid, the same Thomas and Emily Braid she knew twelve years ago, and they’re now teenagers, but they look like little kids because they’ve got some messed-up genetic disease?’

‘That’s ridiculous,’ I say.

‘There are definitely some conditions that make you age faster, or slower,’ Zan insists. ‘If Lewis and Flora both had some kind of recessive gene that was a really bad fit with the other one’s recessive gene . . . or something like that. See, Mum? A teacher at school actually taught me something – recessive genes. It might explain who Chimpy is, too.’

‘How?’ asks Dom.

‘If Thomas and Emily have both got this genetic thing, chances are Georgina has too. Chimpy might be her nickname. Maybe she needs to live in a home, which would obviously upset Flora, which explains why Mum said she looked and sounded so upset.’

‘No. This is stupid.’ Zannah looks hurt, and I feel guilty for cutting her off. I can’t stand to think about Flora’s children dying or having genetic diseases. I don’t want to imagine every possible grotesque scenario. ‘The two children I saw looked perfectly healthy and normal. There’s no—’ I break off and start again, trying to sound less dogmatic. ‘I don’t believe there’s any medical condition that could make two teenagers look like healthy, normal, much younger versions of themselves.’

‘Agreed. Overwhelmingly unlikely, verging on impossible,’ says Dom. ‘Still, it would explain why they suddenly dumped us as friends. Lewis was obsessed with perfection. He wouldn’t have wanted us around to witness the non-growing phase of his children’s lives.’

‘I’m still putting it on the list as option three,’ says Zannah. ‘Same Thomas and Emily, genetic condition that makes them

look younger. What do Lewis and Flora do? What are their jobs?’

‘They’re both scientists by training,’ Dom tells her. ‘He’s been working in IT for years, inventing systems that do all kinds of fancy things. She did the same kind of stuff. They worked together for years, until they had kids, and then Flora gave up her job and became a full-time mum.’

‘Scientists?’ Zannah chews the lid of her pen thoughtfully. ‘No. Even if a science genius invented a drug that stopped people ageing, they wouldn’t freeze their kids in time at three and five. Those are pain-in-the-arse ages. You might freeze your kids at, like, nine and eleven.’

‘Trust me, if Lewis Braid had invented a way to halt the ageing process, he’d have patented it, publicised it widely and made millions from it,’ says Dom. ‘He wouldn’t keep quiet about it.’

It ought to be possible for me to listen to this jokey back-and-forth and feel comforted. Instead, it’s making me feel lonely. *No one but me saw what I saw.* No one saw how wrong it was. Flora wasn’t okay – she didn’t look it and she didn’t sound it. Nothing about it was right.

‘Mum, you’ve not eaten anything,’ says Zannah.

‘I’m not hungry. You can have it if you want.’

‘Flora’d be what age now?’ Dom asks. ‘Forty-three, like us?’

‘Forty-two,’ I say. ‘She could easily have had two more children.’

Zannah says, ‘What about this possibility: Flora *did* have two more kids after her first three. The youngest two look very similar to young Thomas and Emily, because siblings, and you saw them and freaked out, Mum. That’s why you thought you heard Flora call them Thomas and Emily, but actually she called them by their real names, whatever those are – Hayden, Truelove, whatever.’

‘No. I heard her say, “Thomas, Emily, out you get” before I saw their faces.’

‘Truelove?’ Dom raises his eyebrows.

‘That’s what me and Murad want to call our first baby. Boy or girl.’

‘Truelove Rasheed?’

‘Rasheed-Leeson – I don’t know why you’d think I’m ditching my surname, Dad. Think again.’

‘Truelove? Really?’

‘*Did* the Braids dump you as friends?’ Zannah asks me. ‘Why?’ I look at Dom.

‘What?’ he says.

‘I’m waiting to hear your answer.’

‘I’ve no idea what happened. All I know is, one minute they were our friends and then we never saw them again.’

‘Wait, what?’ says Zan. ‘Dad, a minute ago you said they dumped you.’

‘Well, I assumed . . . Was it us that dumped them?’ he asks me.

‘By “us”, do you mean me? You’d remember if you’d been responsible for ending the friendship, presumably.’ Why am I pushing this? It’s the last thing I want to think or talk about.

I need to get away from this for a while.

‘Have I done or said something wrong?’ Dominic looks at Zannah, then at me. In a different frame of mind, I would find this endearing. Of the four of us, he’s always the most willing to accept that something might be his fault.

‘Dad has no idea why our friendship with the Braids ended,’ I tell Zannah, on my way out of the room.