

# **MY MOTHER'S SECRET**

Sanjida Kay is a writer and broadcaster. She lives in Bristol with her daughter and husband. She's written two previous thrillers, *Bone* by *Bone* and *The Stolen Child*.

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**Sanjida Kay**



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*To my mother,  
Rosemary O'Connell*

*'If I were to marry you, you would kill me.'*

*Reader, I married him.*

*Jane Eyre* by Charlotte Brontë

## PROLOGUE

‘Did you know my name means God?’  
She shook her head and the movement made her forehead throb, her vision blurring into ultramarine and plum. She winced.

‘So I’m kind of a superhero.’

‘Like Spider-Man?’ she asked, smiling in spite of the pain.

‘Yeah. What do you think my superpower could be?’

The child knelt on the floor beside the camp bed and stared into her eyes. His own were large and dark as treacle. He was so close, she could see how long and thick his eyelashes were, and smell the cream Arjun must have put in his hair to try and stop it standing on end. The boy was going to be a heartbreaker when he grew up.

‘Can you fly?’

‘All superheroes can fly,’ he said scornfully.

A little light spilled into the room from round the edge of the door, which was ajar; it was just enough to see the boy. There were no windows and Arjun had turned off the lamp when he left. She rolled gingerly onto her back and closed her eyes. The darkness was soothing.

‘Maybe you could be invisible.’

‘That’s not very exciting,’ he said.

‘Is this where you sleep?’

‘Sometimes,’ said the boy. ‘If Daddy’s working late and there’s no one to look after me. My mummy’s dead,’ he added, matter-of-factly.

‘I’m sorry, Dev,’ she said, taking his small hand in hers.

‘That’s okay. She’ll come back. Maybe as a horse. She loved horses.’

He was only six, she thought. How could he hope to understand death?

‘Perhaps your superpower could be to talk to horses?’ she said.

‘Lizzie?’

‘Yes?’

‘Are you going to die, like Mummy did?’

‘No, Dev, I’ve just got a really bad headache. I had a funny turn in the shop, so your daddy said I could lie down for a little bit. I’ll be better soon.’

For a couple of minutes the child said nothing, and she was aware of how loud his breathing was, and the strange smell of the room: of damp in the walls and dust, curry powder and laundry liquid. She gradually realized that something was happening on the other side of the door; there were raised voices and then a bang, as if a fist had pounded against something: a shelf maybe, or a table. The child jumped and his breathing sped up. He gave a little whimper.

‘He’s been here before,’ he said. ‘I saw him.’

‘Who has?’ she asked.

‘The bad man,’ he whispered.

She forced herself to sit up, swing her legs round. She pressed her hand against her forehead; her skull felt as if it was being crushed in a vice. The child had disappeared into the darkness. She stood and swayed; the floor lurched like the deck of a ship; nausea threatened to overwhelm her. She squinted towards the door and saw Dev standing, peering through the chink, his hair haloed by the light.

Whoever was on the other side was shouting and there was a loud crash and the sound of hundreds of cans falling, of glass shattering. She forced herself to walk over to Dev. The yelling and swearing grew louder. She gripped the boy’s thin shoulders and tried to pull him away from the door. He resisted. She looked around,



but there was no other way out of this room. Arjun was asking whoever was with him to leave; he said he would call the police. She tried again to get Dev away, but he grabbed hold of a shelf and she thought it might topple, or he would cry out and give them away. Instead she hugged him closer to her; she could feel the beat of his racing heart, the tremor in his body.

Through the crack in the door, she could see a man. He was large, well over six foot tall, and broad. He was dressed in black. He had a tattoo, like a blurred tear on one side of his face, and his head was shaved. He was shouting at Arjun, destroying his shop, overturning shelves and smashing bottles. Each time something crashed on the floor or was hurled against the walls, she and the child flinched. And then he stopped. He looked towards them. She shrank back, still gripping the boy.

Someone, barely inches away from her, on the other side of the door, spoke. His voice was thin, reedy, almost refined. The man with the tattoo was listening to him. His chest was heaving, but he'd stopped tipping over the shelves. The other man continued to speak in a low and soothing tone. It was going to be okay, she thought, they would leave.

'Now, Mr Kumar, I don't like my people to be unhappy, but equally we cannot let this slide, can we?' he said.

She should phone the police, she thought, she ought to take this chance before anything worse happened. She let go of the boy. Her mobile had been in her rucksack, but she didn't know where Arjun had put it. She hoped he'd brought it in here and he hadn't left it out there. She went back to the camp bed in the corner and ran her hands over the floor. She felt grit and dust beneath her fingertips, but she couldn't see or feel her bag.

The man with the soft voice was still speaking to Arjun, but she was too far away to make out the words. She crouched on the camp bed and felt the strap of her rucksack. It had fallen down the

back and was wedged between the metal frame and the wall. She pulled it up and rummaged inside for her phone, but she couldn't find it. She glanced over her shoulder and saw the outline of the child. He was too close to the door. Frantically she searched again, and then tipped the contents onto Dev's Spider-Man duvet. It was there, she'd got it! She switched the phone to mute, so the men wouldn't hear the click of the keys, and started to dial.

There was a sickening thud, like the sound of a cricket bat hitting a watermelon, and Arjun screamed. The boy gave a cry. She ran to him, her fingers slipping from her phone. But she was too late.

The man on the other side of the door had heard him. Or maybe he had known the boy was there the entire time. She saw his arm – he was wearing an expensive navy suit and a white shirt with gold cufflinks – shoot through the gap in the door. He seized the child by the hair and pulled him into the newsagent's. And in that brief moment, as the door swung open and shut, she glimpsed the expression on his face, and she saw the knife.

## EMMA

It's as if we've stepped into a Constable painting, a bucolic vision of England. There's a single oak ahead of us in the heart of the valley; the grass is lime-green and the steep sides of the Cotswold escarpment are covered in dense woodland. Even though it's May, the sky is shale-grey; there's a brooding mass of clouds on the horizon.

'We could have parked right there! Why did you make us walk all this way?' Ava whines.

'Because you'll appreciate it even more,' says Jack.

Stella snorts. 'Yeah, like anyone but you is going to "appreciate" a mouldering old church.'

'It's so creepy. I don't like it,' Ava says.

I have to admit, the lowering sky and the dark green of the trees surrounding us make me feel a bit hemmed in.

'I've been bitten!' she shrieks and jumps about, slapping at her ankles.

'I did see a horsefly back there,' I say.

'It's probably nothing. Just a scratch,' says Jack.

'Let me have a look.' I turn Ava's slim calf in my hands.

Sure enough, there's a large red lump starting to form above her ankle bone.

'Don't worry, I've got some ointment,' I say, sliding my backpack off my shoulders.

Stella rolls her eyes.

‘Of course,’ says Jack, ‘your mum is prepared for anything. Break a leg, and she’ll wrap you in her space-blanket while we wait for mountain rescue on speed-dial.’

‘You’re kidding, right?’ says Stella. ‘A *space*-blanket.’

‘I do have a space-blanket, as it happens. You never know when you might need one . . .’ I rub antihistamine into Ava’s leg and she stops whimpering. ‘It’s so light, it would be stupid not to bring it.’

‘I told you,’ says Jack.

‘Oh my God, you are insane.’

‘We could use it to fly to the moon,’ says Ava.

‘Jesus, Mum, the Taliban carry those things to stop the US spying on them with thermal cameras,’ says Stella.

‘Multi-purpose,’ murmurs my husband.

I finish putting away my first-aid kit. Ahead of us are a tiny stream and the remains of an old bridge.

‘Look! The people who once owned this place probably swept down here in their coach and horses, right over that bridge and up to the big house,’ I say brightly.

‘Like, that’s even interesting,’ says Stella.

There’s a sign saying the ruined bridge is unsafe. A round, stone ball lies to one side, as if it has tumbled from the crumbling turrets. It’s now half-obsured by long grass. There’s a cowpat next to it. We head to the right; buttery-coloured Cotswold stones poke through the soil.

I start singing ‘Follow the Yellow Brick Road’.

‘Spare me,’ mutters Jack under his breath, striding ahead of us. He’s smiling, though.

Ava joins in with the chorus, and we keep singing and she forgets to moan as the hill curves steeply upwards.

I don’t have my husband’s strength or resilience in the face of concerted opposition: I would never have managed to drag a fourteen-year-old and an eleven-year-old out of the house when

they'd much rather be Snapchatting (Stella) or practising ballet (Ava). So I'm pleased Jack's cheerily ignored any opposition to his plans, as he normally does, even if it means visiting yet another church. We haven't been to see this one in a while, but sadly there's no cafe nearby that the girls and I can escape to.

I'm out of breath. I really should lose some weight, I think, as I always do when Jack is marching us up some hill. He's as fit as a flea. He goes to a posh gym in town and does kettlebells and something called HIIT in his lunch hour.

At the top, there's a mansion that a family actually lives in, rather than opening it up to the public and allowing the whole world to traipse through the living room to raise money to repair the roof, plus a walled garden with stables and greenhouses that are also off-limits. The church is open but to reach it you have to walk round in a loop and double-back to give the owners a modicum of privacy. I get distracted by a lily pool and stop to take some photos on my phone. It's surprisingly dark: there's a thick hedge behind me, and beech trees overhead. I imagine this must have led to the main driveway for the house at one time. I lean over the fence, the metal cold against my stomach, and try and get a water lily to fill the frame in my camera. When I finally manage to take a halfway decent photo, I look up, ready to show Ava.

She's gone. I can't hear her or Stella and Jack, either. There's the faint smell of horses and leather. It's silent. It appears darker than before. The first spot of rain hits my cheek. I look round, but the narrow path is empty of walkers or my family.

I start jogging and call out, 'Ava? Stella?'

I still can't see them. The path grows narrower, the trees tower over me and it's impossible to see over the hedge. Shrubs encroach. Something snaps across my face, stinging my cheek. I cry out. It's a branch. I feel as if I'm in a tunnel. I run faster. A black shape explodes out of the bushes and I jump back. It's a blackbird, disappearing

into the wood in a flurry of feathers. I can't breathe. There's no sign of them, no sign that anyone else even passed this way.

I start screaming their names, over and over, the names of my family, my loved ones, the people I cannot live without. My heart is beating so hard it's painful.

I must have missed the turn for the church, because now I'm on a wide driveway flanked by those giant beech trees, last year's masts crunching beneath my feet, and the house is behind me, the windows shuttered against tourists. There's still no one else around. No walkers. No one appears at the window. I can't stop shouting; the silence will choke me. I feel as if my chest is in a giant vice that's squeezing my ribs. I run to a fence and look down into the valley. There's a girl on horseback a long way below me. She isn't even aware that I'm up here, shouting for help. The path twists to the left, away from the fields, and disappears into a dark thicket of laurels. Is that where they are? I'm frozen. I don't know where to search next, what to do.

And then Jack is running towards me. He puts one hand on my shoulder and looks straight into my eyes.

'Take it easy. Deep breath. In. We're all here. We're safe. Breathe out.'

I see the girls peeking round a trellis draped with pink tea roses. Their faces are white. They're fine, though, just as Jack said they were.

Once I've stopped hyperventilating, Jack folds me in his arms.

'We were inside the church,' he murmurs in my ear. 'You know I'd never let anything happen to them, don't you?'

I nod, and pull away. Ava comes and flings her arms around my waist.

'Are you all right, Mum? I'm sorry, I shouldn't have left you. I thought you saw . . .'

'It's okay,' I say. 'It's my fault, not yours. I should have kept up.'

Stella scowls at me. 'You screamed the whole bloody place down,' she says and stalks away.

It's obvious, now, where the path to the church was. I wipe a sheen of cold sweat from my forehead and hold Jack's hand tightly. I swallow uncomfortably and take a sip of water from the bottle I've brought with me.

The tiny church is cool, almost cold. I sit on a pew to try and pull myself together, while Jack strides about, pointing out features to Ava. I think she was humouring him, but now she's actually interested.

'It dates back to the twelfth century, but there was a pagan site here even before then. The whole church is in the shape of a cross. Take a look at the turret.'

'Oh! It's a hexagon,' she says, peering up into the rafters.

Someone has put vases full of roses next to the nave and their sweet, spicy scent fills the air. I try and keep my anxiety under control, but occasionally, particularly when I'm in unfamiliar places, it bubbles to the surface. I'd like to appear strong and unflappable for the girls, and sometimes I manage. The stained-glass windows are exquisite: Christ stands in a sea of white lilies, the bloodless marks where the nails were driven into his feet are tear-shaped.

'You always ruin everything,' hisses Stella. 'We're not little kids any more. You don't have to freak out when you can't see us for thirty fucking seconds.'

'Stella!' says Jack, pausing from his monologue. 'I don't want to hear you speak to your mum like that.'

Stella storms out of the church. I jump as the door cracks against the thousand-year-old stone frame. Jack follows her. Ava comes and curls into my side and I put my arm round her and tuck her soft blonde-haired head beneath my chin. Thank goodness for one sunny child who hasn't yet hit puberty.

## STELLA

I'm standing by a stone angel when Dad comes out of the church. He has that look – his Dr Seuss expression. He really wants to bollock me, but he can't. He has to access his inner psychologist and work out how to 'connect' with a stropky teenager, so I'll feel 'heard', but will be put in my place. Dad is quietly spoken, but that can actually be quite frightening. The angrier he gets, the softer his voice goes, until he snaps. It's only happened twice and it was terrifying. Both times it was about Mum. He's so uber-protective of her.

'Look,' I say, 'have you seen this headstone?'

Sometimes distraction can work, especially if you act like you're interested in all this historical shit. The headstone is an angel, a weird one, though. She's a young girl, really realistic, and she's got a stone star on her forehead. She's looking at the ground and pointing at the sky. The angel's about the same height as me. Perhaps it's the grave of a girl who died when she was my age. That makes me feel a bit strange, so I don't look at the inscription. She's covered in orange-and-white lichen. It's kind of cool, I guess, although the last place I want to be on a Sunday afternoon is a Norman bloody churchyard with my dad.

Dad puts his hands in his pockets and rocks backwards and forwards on his toes. He makes his face go all sympathetic.

'Go easy on your mum, sweetheart. She only acts like that because she cares about you.'



‘She’s just nuts,’ I say.

He sighs, and looks up at the sky. It’s gone an even darker grey. Why isn’t there a cafe here? It’s going to tip down, and I want a hot chocolate.

‘She gets anxious at times, you know that. It’s how she is.’

‘Yeah,’ I say. ‘The accident.’ Like I haven’t heard it all before.

‘It’s not only that,’ he says sharply.

‘No?’ I say.

Out of the corner of my eye, I see Ava coming towards us. I start counting: one, two, three, four . . . Mum bursts out of the church. It’s probably a record. She won’t let Ava out of her sight for a second now. The next couple of days are going to be a nightmare.

‘Well, what then?’ I ask. I want him to hurry up before Ava gets here.

‘I don’t know,’ he says. I look at him sharply. Dad never says he doesn’t know anything. He takes a breath. ‘Something else. She won’t talk about it.’

Mum wanders over to a headstone with carved flowers round it and acts likes she finds it fascinating.

‘Then how do you know?’ I say.

Ava leaps towards Dad and he catches her and spins her round, as if she weighs nothing instead of being a big lump of a girl, and she does that ballet-thing I detest, where she kicks her legs out and points her toes, like she’s in *Sleeping bloody Beauty* and Dad is the handsome prince and she’s in some pink frilly fucking tutu, instead of jeggings and Togz. She isn’t really a lump. She’s got those skinny-muscly dancers’ legs. He puts her down and they hold hands. Dad doesn’t hold my hand any more. Not that I want him to.

‘Anyhow,’ he says, turning back to me, ‘while you’re both here, there’s something I want to tell you. It’s a secret. Please don’t say anything to your mum.’

Ava immediately jumps up and down with excitement.

‘It’s our fifteenth wedding anniversary in August. I’m going to hold a surprise party to celebrate. It’ll be small – friends and family. Maybe in the garden. We’ll get a marquee.’

He looks pleased with himself. By ‘family’ he means, Grossvater and Oma. No one from Mum’s side.

‘Yessss!’ stage-whispers Ava. ‘Will we have a giant cake? Can we have new dresses?’

‘Yes and yes,’ he says, and raises one eyebrow at me, because he knows there’s no way on God’s green earth I’ll wear some fancy fucking dress.

The heavens literally open at that point. Mum pulls her hood up and comes running over to us, calling, ‘Shall we go somewhere and have a hot chocolate?’

‘Mum, we’re in the middle of fucking nowhere.’

‘A pub then,’ she says cheerily and smiles at me, pretending I haven’t sworn at her. ‘I’ll find one.’

And the thing is, I know she will.

## LIZZIE

‘Do you think we’ll manage them all?’  
The metal frame of their thirty-year-old backpack creaked as Paul adjusted the straps. She ran through their names in her mind: Pavey Ark, Thunacar Knott, Pike of Stickle, Loft Crag, Harrison Stickle – the five Langdale Pikes. If they even managed a couple of these hills, they’d be doing well.

‘You never know. He might fall asleep. Yes, I’m talking about you, Pumpkin,’ said Lizzie, taking Dylan’s podgy hand and smiling up at her son.

He leaned over the top of the backpack, giving a gummy grin, drooling and kicking his legs with excitement.

‘Might be a bit cold for the lad,’ said Paul, looking at the darkening sky.

‘Don’t fuss. He’s wrapped up warm,’ Lizzie said. ‘We’ll see how we get on.’

They’d taken the path directly behind the back of the Sticklebarn pub, where Paul worked part-time at the weekends, past the gold blaze of larches in Raven Crag, and now they were heading along the ridge, with Dungeon Ghyll roaring below them.

‘Bloody hell, he’s quite a weight now, isn’t he?’ said Paul. ‘He must have put on a few pounds since last week. Or is it all the other nonsense you’ve stuffed down behind him?’

‘The “other nonsense” is our lunch and the waterproofs, and I’ve got them in my rucksack. You’re such a lightweight.’

Lizzie inhaled deeply. The air smelt of peat and ice, sheep and moss. It was good to be out of the cottage. It came with Paul's other job as a ranger, and they were bloody lucky to have it, but it was cold. The windows were small, built in the 1600s when glass was costly, and it was gloomy. She took Dylan out in the backpack every day – sometimes they climbed up one of the pikes, or hiked across the Fell to meet Paul – but her son was growing heavy and she couldn't carry him as far any more. And although she loved living here, a stone's throw from the Cumbrian Way, and near enough to her parents and Paul's to get help if they needed it, she was still adjusting. Not that long ago, both of them had been students at Leeds University. Sometimes the quiet and the loneliness of being with a small baby every day got to her. She didn't want to admit it to Paul, but it was one of the reasons why she was looking forward to starting her new job. She was determined to finish her degree, though – but that too was a struggle, trying to write her final dissertation and revise for her exams, every time Dylan napped.

'Busman's holiday for you,' Lizzie said, 'spending your Sunday out here.'

Paul was repairing part of the path at the top of Loft Crag and he was up and down the ridge several times a week.

'Aye, but it's a treat to be out here with my wife,' he said, giving her one of his long, slow smiles.

They still felt self-conscious and delighted about calling each other Husband and Wife.

'Trust you to be up the duff on your wedding day,' her sister, Julia, had said, mocking her affectionately, but even though it had all happened much faster than they'd planned, and they were constantly worried about money, Lizzie had never been happier.

The tops of the hills were shrouded in mist and there was a dampness in the air, as if it might rain. The grass was interwoven with dead blond stalks, the lower slopes swathed with bracken

the colour of rust and dotted with gorse, sprinkled with brilliant-yellow blossom.

‘How’s the pumpkin?’

Dylan had fallen asleep, one of his fat cheeks resting against the frame, a little bubble of spit balanced between his lips. He looked like a chubby cherub. Lizzie took the opportunity to put his gloves back on – Dylan always pulled them off – and tuck a blanket around him. He was already in an all-in-one with a woolly hat, but he could cool down quickly. Lizzie teased Paul about his caution when it came to hiking with their baby son, but she knew how fast the weather could change out here, and how easy it would be to get lost.

‘Out for the count. Let’s have a cup of tea at the top of the Pike; we can always cut back down Thorn Crag, if we need to,’ she said, and Paul nodded, glancing up at the clouds again.

She loved the way it was like another world up here, bare granite poking through the thin skim of soil. On a clear day you could see ridge after ridge of mountains, and all the way to Scarborough Bay. Paul sat down carefully next to the cairn at the top, so he wouldn’t wake Dylan, and Lizzie poured them tea from her flask and opened a packet of Tunnock’s.

‘Are you worried?’

‘Aye,’ he sighed. ‘But I should be asking you that.’

‘I’ll be all right,’ she said.

‘Tough as old boots, you are,’ he said, smiling at her. ‘I wish you didn’t have to go.’

‘Me too,’ she said. ‘I’ll miss this.’ She nodded at the thick mist, swirling round the summit.

They didn’t have enough to live on – Paul was working two part-time jobs, as a ranger and a bar-keeper for the National Trust, and was volunteering as often as he could, while they waited for a full-time position to come up. There was nothing here that Lizzie

could do, particularly with an unfinished degree; most of the casual work was seasonal, so there wouldn't be anything until the spring when the tourists came back. She was about to start a job in Ikea in Leeds, but it was too far to commute, so it meant she'd be away from home for three days a week, and Paul and his mum would have to look after Dylan between them.

'I'll miss you,' said Paul.

'I'll miss both of you,' she said, kissing him. 'But it's not for long. I'll be home before you know it.'

'What time's the bus?'

'You've a brain like a sieve,' she said. 'I've told you a million times. Thirteen minutes past six. I couldn't get one early enough on Monday morning.'

'Aye, you did tell me, right enough.'

'Let's not spoil today, eh?'

For a few moments the mist cleared, and a small patch of blue sky appeared.

'Not bad for October,' said Lizzie, pulling Paul to his feet.

'Race you to the top of Harrison Stickle,' he said, grinning at his wife.

## EMMA

Katie's in a state when she arrives at work. 'Nate's off sick, and today's the first delivery.' She stands in the doorway, her hands on her ample hips, her frizzy curls escaping from beneath a scarf patterned with sunflowers. Her fluorescent-pink Crocs are covered in Disney princess shoe-charms. 'He's texted to say he has flu,' she spits out, as if Nate's malingering.

Although she looks as if she might explode with rage, I know she's trying not to show that she's nervous. And it is a big deal – we're starting a new contract with the National Trust today. The guys have been baking since 4.30 a.m. yesterday.

'I'll do it,' I say. 'I'm insured to drive the van.'

I wipe my hands on a tea towel and start taking off my apron.

'Really? You're an angel, Emma.'

'It's all loaded, you're set to go,' says Harry, tossing me the keys. 'Want me to . . .?' he nods at the boxes of dough at my station, ready to be weighed and put in bannetons to prove.

'Thanks, lovely,' I say.

Harry is thin as a whippet, but he's got the strongest hands of anyone I know and he's the best baker Katie has. My sourdough will be in good shape.

I shiver as I leave the warmth of the ovens. It's 5.30 a.m. and it's not quite light. There's a thin band of cream silhouetting the cranes that hover over the half-built office blocks in the city centre. I head along the river, below an arc of houses that will be

bright as jewels when the sun comes up. I hate driving when it's busy, but at this time of day the roads are nearly empty. I switch the station from Ujima to Radio 2. The van still smells faintly of Nate, of rolling tobacco and that distinctive odour of young man – testosterone and fresh sweat; the passenger seat is littered with Pukka Pie wrappers and takeaway coffee cups. I swerve over to a bin and chuck the lot in.

My heart feels too large for my chest; my pulse is erratic. It's as if there's something in my throat and it catches my breath. It's always like this after a panic attack: it takes me a couple of days to return to my normal self. At least I know what it is and how to deal with it, I think, as I count my breath in and exhale for two, three, four, five – as my therapist taught me – and don't panic even more, believing I'm having a heart attack. 'Don't let it control you,' he'd said.

Now, without Nate's rubbish in the van, I inhale the smell of freshly baked bread, hot and yeasty, and once I've taken a few deep breaths, I sing along to 'Rumour Has It'. I drive back the way I came this morning – Jack keeps suggesting I cycle to work, and I can see why: there's a path most of the way along the Avon and, at this time of the day, it's beautiful; the river is still, and seagulls fall above it, like flecks of confetti. But there's hardly anyone else around and there's no escape off that path, save into the sludge-coloured water. The thought of it, narrow and dark and fenced in, makes me hyperventilate again. I wind the window down and pass the turning to Long Ashton, where we live. I think of Jack and my two girls, still sleeping, tucked up in bed, and I draw comfort in knowing they're safe.

Tyntesfield is a Gothic mansion with a private chapel – another of Jack's favourites – but perhaps because it's so close to our house, we haven't been for a while. I'd forgotten how long the driveway is. It plunges steeply downhill; the rising sun gilds the trees that



flank it, so that the leaves look as if they've been cast in bronze. It's going to be a beautiful day.

The main cafe is in a converted cowshed, and I unload the trays of sourdough loaves, and a selection of Katie's signature cakes: chocolate-orange brownies, marmalade-and-coconut polenta, Amaretto-and-raspberry Bakewell tart and gin-and-tonic sponge. Katie loves her cocktails, so there's always something booze-soaked on the menu.

'Do you mind dropping the rest of it off at the Pavilion?' asks the woman who's helping me.

I wonder why she sounds apologetic, and then I remember. There's another tiny cafe but it's at the far end of the estate, past the house and down by a walled vegetable garden. It's at least a mile or two away.

'No problem,' I say, smiling at her.

'Thanks, love. Do you know your way?'

'I think so,' I say. 'Back the way I came and then follow the estate road round?'

She nods and laughs as my stomach rumbles. 'Make sure they give you a cup of tea and a slice of toast when you get there.'

The road swings behind an ornamental rose garden and the mansion, before cutting through a wood. I notice a couple of cottages tucked away – presumably they were once for the workers but now, no doubt, the National Trust has rented them out as holiday homes at extortionate rates. The back of the Pavilion cafe looks out over fields full of cows, and I remember the ha-ha running in front of the mansion, and how Ava and I would leap backwards and forwards over it, shouting 'Ha-ha! Ha-HA!' until we were laughing properly. It must have been two or three years since we were last here. Even then, Stella would never have deigned to join in.

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I sip my complimentary cup of tea and stand in front of the Pavilion cafe, enjoying the early-morning sunshine. *Kate's*, the bakery where I work, is in a tunnel under the train station and there's no natural light, so on my breaks I sit outside, even if it's raining, and watch people rushing into Temple Meads, their faces furrowed with tension, dragging suitcases behind them. The traffic and the trains are loud, and the cafe at the front of the bakery is always packed. I like being surrounded by people – it feels safe – but sometimes it's good to stop, to pause.

A robin sings surprisingly loudly from behind my shoulder, and black calves jostle at a water trough. I take a last sip of my tea and think about the thick slab of buttered sourdough toast waiting for me back at the bakery. Caleb, our chef, will fry me up some bacon, if I'm lucky. I'm about to leave, when I realize I'm not alone. The two young men prepping for the day are still inside, but there's someone else out here.

I saw a shadow pass across the windows of the orangery, I'm sure of it. I feel the muscles around my shoulder blades lock. I take a couple of steps forward. It's too early for visitors to be allowed in or for anyone to have started work in the gardens – it's barely light. The orangery is cloudy with condensation, the lemon trees inside are indistinct shapes against the glass. Perhaps I imagined it. I realize I'm holding my breath and I let it out in a whoosh. My mouth tastes of tea. I set my china mug down on a bench and walk a little way along the path. It's nothing to be concerned about, I tell myself. I just want to check I'm not seeing things.

*I'm safe, I am safe, it's safe here*, I repeat to myself.

I shrug my shoulders, releasing the tension, and feel the knots in my back grate against one another.

I'm about to go when I see him. He's in the cut-flower garden, walking slowly past the beds, which are ablaze with dahlias. *No one I need to worry about, only a man looking at a peony.* But my guts feel as if they're being ripped out. I struggle to inhale. I know this man, I'm sure of it. He's above average height with square shoulders; he's broad, craggy. I can almost feel his hands against my skin. He half-turns and bends towards a dahlia – it's a ball of spikes, pale pink and sea-green, like a sea urchin – and a shaft of sunlight catches his face and I have to shut my eyes because I think I'm going to fall to my knees.

It's Paul – Paul Bradshaw. I can't be sure – he's several metres away, and now he's hidden by a trellis heavy with clematis – but my body knows. I'm certain it's him. I stand for a moment longer and watch as he walks into the shadows. *It can't be,* I think. The last time I saw him was sixteen, nearly seventeen years ago. He might have changed. He must have changed. I know I have. I'm imagining things; a kind of hallucination brought on by my panic attack, because why on earth would Paul Bradshaw be here, outside a Gothic mansion on the outskirts of Bristol?

Now he's barely discernible in the long shadows cast by the low sun and it takes all my willpower not to run after him. Not to call his name and take his face between my palms and look into his eyes once more . . . I suddenly think of Lizzie Bradshaw too, with her wild, auburn curls blowing in a gust of wind, laughing and waving like the carefree girl she once was. I close my eyes and push away the memory because guilt sears through me, as livid and painful as if it had happened yesterday. When I open my eyes, the man has disappeared. I run back to the van, forgetting to give the guys in the cafe my empty mug, shove the plastic trays back in the van and drive away, as fast as I can on this narrow road, with its sharp bends and pools of light and dark that momentarily blind me.

## LIZZIE

Lizzie took out her textbooks and notes. The bus was almost empty and she could spread out her work on the seat next to her. She was writing a dissertation on *Renewable Energy? The Environmental Impact and Sustainability of Electricity Generated by Nuclear-Power Stations, using the proposed Moorside power plant as a case study*. It was hard trying to finish the course without the support of the other students and her lecturers, but she was determined to get a good mark. She had a provisional place at Lancaster University to do a Masters in Environmental Science. She hoped she could finish her degree and save up enough money to be able to start in a year. And focusing on her coursework took her mind off leaving her new husband and six-month-old baby.

It was dark outside. If she leaned her head against the window, she could just make out the stone walls that followed the line of the road and bisected the fields beyond. Paul had crushed her in his arms before she left, and then she'd picked up Dylan and cuddled him. The baby had been excited, waving his fists and kicking his legs at her.

'Hey, look, his bottom teeth have come through!' she'd said, showing Paul the little white serrated edges.

'Thank God for that – I might get some sleep, if he's stopped teething.'

'Only eighteen more to go,' she'd said. 'Don't let your mum put whiskey on his gums.'