

THE FORGOTTEN SISTER

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Caroline Bond



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To Chris, because it's about time he got a mention!

THE BEGINNING

A newborn baby is a vulnerable thing: soft-skulled, thin-skinned, best watched over, for fear of damage.

But this little girl is alone.

She sleeps peacefully on the floor, in front of the fire, covered by a slightly grubby shawl. The shawl rises and falls gently in time with her breathing. There's a thud in the room above, something dropped and cursed over. Footsteps pattern the ceiling. Her eyes flutter open, revealing glossy black pupils that can see very little, only a blur of light and dark. Shadows pass over her like birds across an open sky.

She's awake now.

In the tiny, coral whorls of her ears the sounds upstairs are muffled, soft-edged as if she's still in a world of water. Her arms and her legs wave, but she no longer floats; dry land is so much harder to navigate. Her feet get caught in the fine mesh of the shawl. She kicks and manages to free them, but she cannot move, she cannot roll over, cannot even turn her head. She is where she is; in a safe place or in harm's way? She cannot know.

All she can do is feel.

She feels the rub of the babygrow against her skin and the pinch of the wound on her belly. She feels the soft nap of the blanket beneath her head and the heat of the fire. And she feels the loss, the absence, the sudden, violent removal from the warm flesh that once folded her in.

And so she cries.

Her small, shocked lungs expand as she forces out one startling cry, then another; high, hard, angry yelps that fill the room, pierce the walls and ricochet up the stairs. They proclaim her presence, her needs, her wants, her demands.

Perhaps she is not so helpless after all.

But no one comes.

She stops. Her eyelids squeeze shut. She waits, learning anticipation or disappointment. Then she takes three short, desperate gulps, drawing in the unfamiliar air.

She tries again, louder this time, more desperate.

Comfort comes out of nowhere.

Fingertips brush her cheek. Soothing, tentative, but real enough to break the spiral. She listens to their message. The touch tells her that she is safe and not alone.

It is enough.

Prologue

THE HOUSE phone was ringing, which was unusual. Grace ignored it. She carried on stacking the dishwasher. The people she knew – the people she loved – rang her mobile. It would be a sales call. They had a cheek. Friday nights should be sacrosanct. The answerphone kicked in, mercifully cutting off the noise. She set the dishwasher running.

Through the kitchen window she could see Tom ambling round the garden, hands in his pockets, head bowed, inspecting his precious lawn. He looked at ease, relaxed – happy even. Grace felt her own shoulders loosen in response. It was still a lovely evening. They should make the most of it. She fetched a bottle of wine and some glasses and slipped on her flip-flops, intending to join her husband. They could sit out, enjoy the warmth, maybe talk things through again, see if they couldn't come up with a different tack; their current approach plainly wasn't working. Or perhaps not – perhaps *not* talking about Cassie was what they needed.

Grace heard the answerphone stop and reset.

She pushed open the back door and was about to step out into the fading light when the phone began ringing again. It sounded louder, more insistent. A chill rippled through her. She shouldn't

have ignored it the first time around. It was tempting fate to ignore a ringing phone. She crashed the wine and the glasses down onto the counter and hurried across the kitchen, stumbled and lost a flip-flop. She kicked off the other in frustration. The soles of her feet slapped across the unforgiving hardwood floor. It suddenly felt very important that she reach the phone before the caller gave up. She snatched at the receiver, nearly dropping it in her haste. 'Hello.'

'Mrs Haines?'

She could tell, instantly, that it wasn't a call centre. 'Yes?' Her breathing echoed back at her through the handset.

'Ah, good. I was having problems leaving a message. I think there's something wrong with your answerphone.' Grace wasn't interested. The woman carried on. 'Could you confirm your home address and date of birth for me, please?'

'Sorry, but what's this about?' Her question came out more sharply than she'd intended, worry taking precedence over politeness.

'If you could just confirm your address and date of birth, please, then I'll be able to explain.'

Grace relented and gave her personal details. Balanced on the edge of panic, she looked round their hall, taking in its reassuring ordinariness. Tom appeared at the kitchen door.

The voice came back on the line. 'Thank you. I'm sorry to inform you that your daughter's been brought into A&E at the General Infirmary.'

Grace took a shallow breath. She'd imagined this phone call often enough over the years, endless nightmarish permutations of dreadful accidents and life-changing injuries, conjured up out of the overwhelming instinct to protect her children. But the reality was different. The reality was worse.

'Mrs Haines? Did you hear me?'

Grace managed to respond calmly. 'Yes. Sorry. What's happened? Is she all right?' Of course she wasn't – she was in hospital. 'I mean,

how badly hurt is she?’ Tom raised his hand to his face, obscuring his expression.

The woman said, ‘I don’t have that information, I’m afraid. I’m just the booking clerk. I’ve been given your contact details and asked to request that you come in.’ There was a pause. The remote soundtrack of other people’s traumas reached down the line and insinuated itself into their home: a child crying, a raised voice, the muted but urgent peal of a siren. ‘Mrs Haines? Are you able to attend?’ There was a touch of impatience in the clerk’s voice now.

‘Of course. Yes. We’ll be there as soon as we can.’

‘Thank you.’ The line went dead.

Grace carefully replaced the receiver, delaying, for a moment, the imperative to deal with what the woman had said. She looked at Tom.

‘Cassie?’ he said, although he didn’t really need to ask – he already knew.

Chapter 1

FOUR MONTHS EARLIER

RYAN HAD asked Cassie to wait for him after her shift finished. Her parents had asked her to come straight home.

She'd said 'yes' to him and lied to them.

She sat on the wall that separated the hotel from the park, enjoying the last rays of sunshine. This late in the evening it was quiet, only a few solitary dog walkers around. They criss-crossed in and out of the shadows in a complicated pattern of amicable avoidance. It was entertaining to watch – from a safe distance. They were far enough away for Cassie not to feel anxious. No chance of an over-exuberant puppy jumping up at her or some bad-tempered yapper appearing out of nowhere, teeth bared. Cassie didn't like dogs – any dog – big or small, cute or ugly. She didn't see the point of them and, more honestly, they scared her, with their unpredictable affection and equally erratic aggression.

The sun felt good on her face. She closed her eyes and let the warmth seep through her skin. As she basked, her mind turned to Ryan. She wondered, idly, which of the shelters they'd use, probably the one at the top that looked out across the city. Not that they paid

much attention to the view. It was a long walk, but the hack up there was worth it, because the top shelter had one distinct benefit: it was private.

Cassie shifted her position, happy for the time being to wait. It was nice to sit outside; the quiet was soothing, after the noise and hassle of evening service. Cassie hated being a waitress, at the beck and call of fussy diners. But as much as she disliked the work, she enjoyed the money. The job also had the benefit of getting her out of the house and away from the non-stop prying of her parents. Last-minute lunch services and additional evening shifts – there was always a credible cover story, should she need one.

There was still no sign of Ryan.

Cassie swivelled round to catch the last of the sun on the other side of her face; as she did so, the kitchen door banged open. Her heart rate quickened, but it wasn't Ryan. It was Freddie, one of the waiters; nice-looking, nice-smelling, nice manners, with a very nice gym-bunny body to go with it. Cassie watched him open a can and take a long drink, celebrating the end of his shift. The can glinted as he raised it to his lips, providing her with her own, private Diet Coke Break. Ryan couldn't stand Freddie. He hated his posh voice and his cockiness. Cassie knew that it irritated Ryan that she found Freddie funny, which somehow made her laugh just a little bit louder and longer than was strictly necessary whenever he cracked a joke. It was all part of the new reality that Cassie found herself operating in. She'd thought the physical changes that had happened at high school were the biggie – the periods, the boobs, the mad mood swings that made her want to murder her mum one minute, then climb onto her knee the next – but she'd been wrong. It was learning what to do with her body that was the revelation. And that had really taken off since she'd started working at the hotel and had met Ryan.

Ryan Samuel Newsome, dark, wiry, sometimes crude, often moody, inked – and wanting more – not a brainbox, not a great

talker, or listener for that matter; basically not her type at all. And yet...

With Ryan, Cassie was discovering that the pathetic hook-ups that used to happen at school were a pale imitation of the real thing. With him, there was the pull and the push of fierce sexual attraction. It was a physical thing, not explained by logic. Addictive, exciting and at times almost scary.

The pull was fascinating.

Cassie was very conscious of the power she had over Ryan. She saw how his eyes tracked her in and out of the kitchen: her and no one else, not even Sophie, who was prettier and far slimmer than her. Cassie liked to watch his reactions when she spoke to the other staff, especially Freddie. She loved how she could distract him by the simple act of wearing a black bra underneath her white work shirt – add in a slow stretch, and it was almost cruel. She could feel Ryan's hunger pulsing through him when he was near her. It was a massive turn-on. In fact, Cassie wondered – sitting there quite happily, on her own, on her wall, in the sun – whether she didn't actually enjoy the pull more than what came after; whether the chase wasn't better than being caught. Either way, it was changing the way she felt about herself and everyone else.

The sun left her face and edged further down her body. The door opened and Ryan finally emerged.

Time for the push.

There was the briefest nod of acknowledgement between Freddie and Ryan, then Freddie tossed his can in the bin and walked off, watched by Ryan, who stood perfectly still, as if unable to move until Freddie was out of his orbit. Cassie was just about to shout 'Hi', when she suddenly, inexplicably, decided against it. Instead she swung her legs over the wall and dropped down the other side, where she crouched, out of sight, uncertain why she was hiding from him.

From her secret vantage point she had a clear view of Ryan's confusion. He looked round, thrown by her not being where she should be. He glanced at his phone. Nope. No text. He scanned the car park, searching for her, obviously thinking that she'd stood him up. Perverse as it was, she stayed hidden, enjoying his uncertainty. He paced away, then turned and walked back, and in that moment she caught sight of the look of raw, furious disappointment on his face. She felt a sudden, sharp, uncomfortable surge of panic. But now she had a problem. She could hardly pop up from behind the wall, like a jack-in-a box; she'd look like a complete idiot. She was trapped. There was no option but for her to shuffle along behind the wall, through the scrubby fringe of grass and the weeds, keeping her eyes peeled for dog crap, doing an awkward kind of bear-crawl, until she finally made it to the gap in the bricks. Once there, she crouched, waiting for the right moment to appear... She could pretend she'd just been for a walk in the park. When Ryan turned away for a second, she stood up.

When he turned back round and caught sight of her, the darkness in his eyes cleared and he smiled.

They were breathless by the time they made it to the top of the park and the sky was turning pink. Cassie knew she couldn't stay long, but she also knew she couldn't say that to him, not yet. Ryan headed for the shelter and she followed him. They'd used up all their topics of conversation on the way up through the trees, so they sat side-by-side looking at the shadows, without talking. The park was virtually empty now, the dog walkers all gone, except for a lone woman in Lycra, who was jogging laps of the bottom path with her Westie skittering along by her side. From a distance they were little more than a splash of neon-pink and a dab of dirty white, tracing circuits in the fading light. The silence that stretched between Cassie and Ryan was taut with expectation.

It was Cassie who made the first move. She owed him that much. She put her hand on his thigh. They both looked at it. She waited, enjoying the tension beneath her fingertips. Then, without a word, she slid her hand down his leg towards his knee, enjoying the feel of his muscles flexing in response to her touch. Ryan's breath quickened. Then, aching slowly, she trailed her fingers along the inside of his thigh, back up towards his crotch. Ryan put his hand over hers and guided it higher.

There was no need for conversation for the next hour as the purple sky turned black.

Chapter 2

TOM LET himself into the house and threw his keys in the bowl. He was on domestic duties for the evening, Grace was away in Reading with work. The house was quiet, which was a change, but a welcome one. Cassie was out, working a midweek shift at the hotel, with their permission, which meant it would be a nice, chilled-out evening, without the drama that his eldest child had a tendency to generate of late. The fact that Ryan would be hanging about at the hotel, ogling Cassie while she worked, was, however, quite a high price to be pay for an evening of peace. Tom was bemused as to why his bright, articulate, opinionated daughter was so enthralled by a lump of such exceptionally average masculinity. The couple of times Ryan had called round to pick up Cassie, Tom had been so underwhelmed he'd thought she was joking – that she might be parading Ryan in front of him as a warning rather than as an actual boyfriend – but apparently not. The lad seemed to have some sort of hold over her, though Christ knew what. Sex, probably. Damn it, she was only seventeen, and she was his daughter. It was too soon. Tom hated the thought of it. In truth, he hated the very existence of Ryan, and the thousands of others like him, lying in wait for both his daughters.

Tom could feel himself tensing up. No, not tonight. Cassie was coming straight home after her shift, she'd promised; she'd have no time to be getting up to anything. He was going to take Grace's advice and let it be. She was sure Cassie's infatuation with Ryan would run its natural course. He hoped his wife was right.

He hung up his jacket and eased his feet out of his shoes, divesting himself of a tedious day at work, and of his anxiety about Cassie. Tonight he was determined to focus on his youngest daughter. Poor, easy-going, 'never a drama – never mind a crisis' Erin, who risked being forgotten, by virtue of being so low-maintenance. He assumed Erin was in her bedroom, doing her homework, as she so often was. He headed upstairs, hoping that he'd be able to lure her away from her books for a few hours, get her down to talk to him, maybe even help him prepare the meal, but when he reached the landing he paused. Her door was ajar, but her desk was empty. He was just about to shout 'Hi' when he caught sight of the soles of her bare feet at the end of her bed. He peeped into her room. She was lying on her side, completely still, her cheek resting on the open pages of one of her school books, fast asleep. Tom backed away from her room, leaving her to nap.

In the bedroom he dug out a pair of shorts and one of his comfy old T-shirts, a Grace 'favourite', the Chicago Bulls one with the peeling logo. As he pulled it over his head he started thinking about what to cook and whether he wanted a beer or a glass of wine. He had every intention of going downstairs once he'd changed, but instead, on a whim, he found himself heading up to Cassie's room, taking care to avoid the creaky stairs.

Cassie's 'den' was on the third floor. It extended from the front to the back of the house, a luxury of space and light. It was one of the reasons they'd bought the house ten years ago, plenty of square footage for their family to grow up in – happily. Tom didn't venture up to Cassie's room very often these days, mindful as he was of respecting her growing need for privacy and separation, but he was

familiar with every stick of cursed-over flat-pack furniture in it. The Ikea vibe was strong, lots of funky Scandi storage solutions, grey paint and the obligatory swinging light bulbs, but in amongst the assertion of modernity and borrowed identity there were crumbs from the past: the row of children's books on the shelves, the dusty teddy on the top of the wardrobe, the plastic hippo on the bedside table.

Tom sat on the bed, feeling nostalgic for the old house, the old routines and the smaller spaces that used to exist between himself and his children.

Cassie's tablet was on the floor beside the bed, charging. Tom picked it up, intending nothing more than to look at the cover, a vermilion-and-black spider's web design, which on closer inspection revealed itself to be a dreamcatcher. It must be new. Her last one had had cartoon rabbits on it. He had bought it for her, thinking she'd appreciate the cheesy humour. She'd obviously grown tired of it. He opened the cover, intending nothing more than to see whether her tablet was fully charged – wasting electricity, a teenage-girl Olympic event. It was. He lightly touched the screen, intending to glance at Cassie's choice of apps. The screen immediately asked him for her pass code. Without thought, he tapped in 1 – 2 – 0 – 4, her birthday, and was surprised when the screen opened; some things in her life hadn't changed. He briefly scanned her pages, hunting for clues to this new, emerging incarnation of his daughter, but the apps told him little, other than that she was as mired in the same social-media web as every other teenager, which – curiously – reassured him.

He shifted his position on the bed and barely touched the Internet icon, intending simply to check that Cassie hadn't been spending all her allowance on make-up. She hadn't, though there were plenty of searches for exorbitantly expensive eyebrow pencils. She'd also googled a shop that repaired hair-straighteners and, reassuringly, found at least a little bit of time to do some homework, if the search on American Civil Rights was anything to go by. But there was

one other search that definitely wasn't 1960s US politics-related – family-planning clinics in their local area.

Tom closed the cover and dumped the tablet back on the floor, scalded by the insight into his daughter's life that he'd had no intention of discovering.

Erin woke, having not thought she'd been asleep, to the absolute certainty that there was someone in the house.

She lay still, her heart thudding, neither flight nor fight winning. Had she locked the back door behind her when she came in? She couldn't remember. Had some lad in a hoodie with a habit slipped through the side gate into the garden, peered through the windows and seen enough to make it worth his while? There was definitely someone upstairs. She could hear them moving around in her parents' bedroom, searching for valuables, not caring how much noise they made, thinking the house was empty. Erin didn't move, too frightened that they would hear her. The 'awkward' second drawer in her parents' chest of drawers squeaked as it was yanked open.

Then her dad swore, softly.

It wasn't a drug-dependent burglar about to attack her and leave her sprawled in a pool of blood, like a character in a TV drama. It was her dad. Of course it was. Erin unclenched and waited for her heart rate to steady. She was an idiot. She lay with her face stuck to her book, the horrid gluey taste of adrenaline coating her tongue, feeling stupid. Her dad came out onto the landing and she waited for him to barge in and make one of his chronically unfunny jokes, but instead of coming into her room, he went upstairs. She heard his footsteps cross the floor overhead, then silence. And then more silence.

Erin unpeeled her face from her book, pushed herself upright and listened to her dad, doing absolutely nothing, in her sister's bedroom.



An hour later, Tom dished up dinner. They ate in the kitchen. Erin did her best to keep her father occupied with anecdotes about the new maths teacher with the personal hygiene problem. After they'd eaten – a huge bowlful of spag bol, with lots of cheese on top – and cleared up the kitchen, she made an effort and followed her dad into the lounge. He didn't seem to want to be on his own. The only 'compromise TV' they could find was a natural history programme, but after five minutes of watching thousands of tiny, newly hatched turtles playing 'chicken' – and losing – across a six-lane highway in Hawaii, Erin couldn't stand it any more. She excused herself and went back upstairs to have another go at her art homework. The minute she left the room she heard her dad switch over to the History Channel for some sepia Second World War footage of mass death and destruction. That was bound to cheer him up.

Her homework was a reinterpretation of Munch's *The Scream* and it wasn't going very well. The background colours were warring with the figure in the foreground and the perspective was off. Erin felt that with every mark she made, she was making it worse. As she worked, the picture grew darker and muddier, but she persevered, hoping that if she just kept going, somehow it would come together. She struggled on without interruption for over an hour, with the exception of a couple of texts from her mum, who was going through a chronic phase of emoji overuse. There was nothing from Cassie; there rarely was these days. And, thankfully, there were no more excursions upstairs by her dad.

Cassie got back later than normal. Erin had already been lying sleepless in her bed for nearly an hour by the time she heard her sister try and sneak into the house unnoticed. She failed. The lock was on a spring mechanism and, as always, it made a loud rattling noise as the door shut. Simultaneously, the sound of the TV cut out.

Erin lay in the dark and waited. She heard footsteps. Cassie made it across the hall, but not up the stairs.

‘You said you’d be back by quarter past ten.’ Tom’s voice, full of suppressed irritation, was very clear. Erin waited for her sister’s response.

‘It was busy.’ Cassie’s voice was equally clear. But it wasn’t the words themselves that were the problem, it was the tone.

‘Cassie, you have to stick to what we agreed.’

Erin pushed herself up in bed and listened.

‘It’s only half an hour, what’s the problem?’ Cassie’s casual, but deliberate defiance echoed around the hallway.

‘It’s closer to an hour; it’s gone eleven p.m. Anyway, it’s not the time that’s the problem – it’s doing what you said you’d do. Or at least texting, if you’re going to be late.’

‘Oh God, Dad. Can’t you give it a rest!’ Cassie’s footsteps made it onto the stairs.

Tom’s voice went up a notch. ‘Cassie! Please don’t walk away from me when I’m talking to you.’

‘I’m tired. I’m going to bed,’ she replied. No hint of apology or compromise.

Tom’s next question was the one guaranteed to light the blue touchpaper. ‘Were you with Ryan?’

There was a long, long pause.

Cassie’s response, when it finally came, was loud, firm and final. ‘No.’

Erin heard her come up the last few stairs, cross the landing, go into the bathroom and close the door. The minutes ticked by. The loo flushed, the tap ran, she came back out. The landing light clicked off, plunging the house into darkness. Cassie thudded up the stairs to her den and shut herself in.

Conversation over.

Erin sat hunched up in bed, breath held, still waiting for her dad’s response.

But there was nothing – just the unmistakeable and unnerving sensation of him standing, silently, at the foot of the stairs in the dark.

Chapter 3

CASSIE NEARLY backed out of it. She put it off for more than a week, picked the Tuesday to definitely go, then conveniently couldn't, because 'something important' cropped up. The Thursday was a bust as well, but on the following Monday she caught the bus into town after college, on her own, with every intention of going through with it.

The place was nothing special. It was a modern, two-storey building that could have been an office, but for the sign outside offering podiatry – whatever the hell that was – a dental clinic, a baby clinic and Cassie's destination, the sexual-health and family-planning clinic. Even from way across the other side of the road, the sign made Cassie flush and feel hot. She watched people coming and going for at least ten minutes before screwing up enough courage to cross over and hurry through the automatic doors. Even then she could have backed out of it – was actively considering it – but the woman at the reception desk chose that precise moment to look up, smile and say, really loudly, 'Can I help you, love?' It was purely Cassie's inability to come up with a deflecting response that saw her being directed up to the first-floor waiting room, the one on the left, not the one on the right, *unless she wanted her corns seeing to*. Even

then, Cassie could have not sat down and not waited for her turn. But she did.

The whole exercise had become a sort of test, a self-imposed challenge. It wasn't about Ryan, not really. It was about her growing up, making her own decisions. She hadn't told him what she was doing. He would have got the wrong idea; well, not wrong exactly, but he would have got excited, very excited, and the invisible red lines that she'd so carefully drawn around her body would have been wiped out in an instant. Cassie wasn't sure she was ready for that, not yet. She liked the tension at the edge of what he wanted and what she would allow. She liked that the power was in her hands. But she also knew she was going to relinquish it, eventually, probably sooner rather than later, and when she did so, she wanted to be prepared.

Her parents should be proud of her for being so responsible, but she seriously doubted they would be.

'Cassie Haines?' a voice bellowed. Cassie leapt up and dropped her bag. She felt like a complete chump as she gathered up her stuff and followed the woman through into the consulting room. The website had promised that all the doctors at the clinic were female, but for a minute Cassie could have sworn that the person sitting at the desk was a man. Cropped hair, a big jaw, no make-up, bad jeans and a bland shirt. A bloke. Cassie stopped, two steps into the room.

'Come in. Please.' The Amazon indicated an empty chair.

Cassie sat down, clutching her bag to her chest.

'Now, how can we help you today?' On closer inspection, it was a woman – just. The he/she doctor waited patiently while Cassie stutteringly explained what she wanted. The following ten minutes were awkward. She stared at a point beyond the doctor's left ear as she answered the questions about her intentions and her decisions. They seemed very keen to establish that Cassie knew the meaning of consent. She reassured them, more than once, that she did. The

doctor was actually quite good. She was straightforward, helpful, un-judgy. She nodded, a lot, as if agreeing that Cassie was making a wise and sensible decision. Before too long they were onto which were the best methods of contraception to avoid pregnancy and which were better for protection against STDs. 'You need to keep yourself healthy as well prevent conception,' she advised. As the doctor talked, Cassie felt the screwed-up sensation in her gut ease.

Then a form was produced. The doctor clicked her pen. 'I just need to ask a few last few questions about your medical history, specifically on your mother's side. It helps us decide which device might be best suited to you. There can be a familial link to certain risk factors with some of the methods.' The pen was poised ready to fill in the box. 'Is there any history of breast cancer in your family?'

Cassie answered, 'No', but as the doctor started to write down her answer she realised she couldn't say that. 'Sorry,' she blurted out, feeling stupid and unsettled, 'I don't know.'

The doctor scored through her original answer and scribbled DN on the form and continued. 'Any history of strokes/ embolisms? That's blood clots?' she clarified.

Again Cassie had to answer, 'I don't know.' Her voice grew fainter. 'Obesity or diabetes?' Another box to be ticked.

'I don't know.' Her response was barely audible.

The doctor, sensing her discomfort, seemed reluctant to ask the next question. 'And the last one: any mental-health issues that you are aware of – depression, schizophrenia, paranoia? Don't worry if you don't know; many of our patients haven't a clue about their family's medical history.'

Cassie didn't answer.

Mercifully, the doctor stopped probing. 'Well, like I said, it's not too much of a problem, but I'm afraid we're obliged to ask. I think we have enough to be getting on with. It might be good, however, if

you could speak to a family member before your next appointment; your mum perhaps – if you feel you can – so that we can have a full record.’ She straightened the papers on her desk and seemed all set to proceed, but Cassie couldn’t cope with any more.

She stood up. She wanted out, and fast.

‘Cassie? Are you all right?’ the doctor asked.

She wasn’t, but she couldn’t tell them why. The concern on the doctor’s face only made it worse. Cassie panicked. ‘I’m sorry, I think I need to think about it some more, before I decide what to do. I’ll come back another day, maybe.’ And without waiting for a response, she walked out of the room.

Head down, cheeks burning, she hurried across the waiting room, down the stairs and out of the building. In her rush to get away from the clinic, she ran across the road without looking. She was rewarded by the blast of a horn, and a very unfriendly gesture from a white-van man, who shouted some obscenity at her through his open window. The shock tipped Cassie further into confusion. She suddenly hated Ryan for landing her in this position, in an area of the city she didn’t know, on her own, being asked questions she couldn’t possibly answer.

The sight of her bus approaching at least gave her a focus. She ran to the stop, got there just in time, paid and headed up to the top deck. Distance, that’s what she needed; distance and some space to breathe and compose herself. Unfortunately, the bus was busy. Cassie swayed to the back, targeting the only double seat that was still free. The bus pulled away as she claimed it. Within seconds the clinic had disappeared from view, but the shame lingered, slick and oily on her skin.

Cassie watched the streets and shops grind by, waiting for the embarrassment to fade; which it did, slowly, only to be replaced by something worse. She felt as if someone had grabbed hold of her and shaken her. She clung onto the handrail, desperate for the juddering

sensation to settle. Until she'd stepped into that bloody clinic, her adoption had been an interesting but inert fact in her biography. She had been adopted as a toddler, so what? It was an irrelevance. An acknowledged part of her history, but something with no bearing on her everyday life. She rarely thought about it. Now she couldn't stop. The doctor had woken up the reality of her adoption and sent it crashing around her brain, knocking over the familiar furniture of her life. She willed it to stop, but it wouldn't. The truth was that she knew nothing about her medical history, because she knew virtually nothing about her life before her parents. She'd accepted their potted version of her past as if it didn't really relate to her. What was wrong with her? Shouldn't she have wanted to know more about her biological mother? It should have mattered. *She* should have mattered.

Cassie twisted and turned in her seat, struggling with the sudden awareness of her own ignorance. Only one thing was certain: her adoption now had the shadow of her actual, birth mother attached to it.

Chapter 4

GRACE WAS worried that Cassie had been abnormally quiet for the past week. Her usual flow of opinions and self-assertion had dried up. She ate with them, when she didn't have a shift at the hotel, did what they asked – which was a relief – and appeared to be doing some work for college, but she seemed absent, distracted. After every meal she either retreated straight upstairs to her own room or to Erin's, closing doors behind her. It left a void. In the evenings it was almost as if they didn't have children. Tom was relaxed about it, privately enjoying this quieter, less combative version of his daughter. He was pleased that Cassie was home more. Secretly he was hoping that she'd ditched, or been ditched by, Ryan. There had been no sign or mention of him of late. If it was a break-up – fingers crossed – and she was a little down, she'd survive. Ryan had looked eminently replaceable, to Tom. But Grace was concerned.

So when Cassie was running late for work on the Saturday morning, Grace went up to her room, knocked and tentatively offered her a lift. Grace hoped that the time in the car might give them a chance to talk. For a second she thought Cassie was going to turn her down, but then she shrugged and said, 'Okay, yes please.'

Grace crossed the room and sat on the bed as Cassie rushed

around, shoving things into her bag. When she'd got her stuff together, she flumped down on the floor in front of her mirror and started dragging a comb impatiently through her hair. Grace winced as she watched. The rasp of the comb announced the damage that Cassie was doing. Grace risked taking another small step – by offering to help. Again Cassie surprised her by agreeing. Grace took up her position behind her daughter on the floor, picked up the comb and began working it through Cassie's hair, a section at time, carefully, lovingly. Patience paid dividends with hair like theirs. Beneath her hands she could feel energy crackling through her daughter, the thrum of a thousand unspoken emotions, but Grace told herself to ignore the clamour. She concentrated on the task at hand and on the curve of Cassie's skull beneath her fingers, working efficiently and gently.

Her touch seemed to have the desired effect, or perhaps it was the familiar smell of the oil and the comfort of old routines. Whatever it was, the vibe in the room softened and Cassie submitted willingly to her mother's attention – just as she had fourteen years ago, when Cassie was Cassidie, and Grace was yet to become a mother.

A steam-filled bathroom, with condensation trickling down the window.

The dark night outside.

Jane, Cassidie's foster mum, on her knees alongside the bath.

And Cassidie, splashing around happily with her toys, chattering away to herself, despite the presence of a virtual stranger in the tiny, airless bathroom.

The bedtime visit was a crucial step in the carefully choreographed 'getting to know you' ballet of the adoption matching process; a deadly serious dance that was destined to determine the shape of the rest of all their lives. But that night it looked just like a child getting ready for bed, with her *current* mum and her *potential* mum, neither

of who was her *real* mum. It had all been so deceptively normal, so seductive, so hypnotically peaceful.

The bubble of calm shattered when Jane tackled Cassidie's hair.

'I warn you, she doesn't like having it washed,' Jane said, and she wasn't joking. Slippery as an eel, Cassidie twisted and slithered around the bath, as Jane endeavoured to lather her hair. It was an onslaught that swiftly escalated into a full-blown battle. Jane persevered, ignoring the tears and full-volume wailing, scrubbing away with a vigour that made Grace feel tearful herself. To rinse the suds away, Jane dumped three bowls of water straight onto Cassidie's head, to the pitiful strains of 'No, no, no, no!' Then she whipped a towel around Cassidie and scooped her out of the bath. Tough love meted out with no coddling, and no conditioner.

Thankfully, Cassidie seemed to survive the ordeal without too many ill-effects. She calmed down quickly, sniffing away her rage, as Jane tucked her swiftly and efficiently into some faded Winnie-the-Pooh pyjamas; a hand-me-down pair, Grace guessed, from one of the many foster children Jane must have scrubbed clean and put to bed across the years.

'All done and dusted,' Jane announced as she gently shoved Cassidie towards Grace. Jane immediately turned round and started chasing plastic ducks in the draining bath water. 'Off you go! Mummy Grace is going to get you into bed and read you your story tonight.'

Grace froze, disabled by inexperience and the overwhelming need to get this right, but Cassidie simply blinked, pushed a strand of dripping hair out of her eyes and put her hand out, accepting the handover without complaint.

Holding Cassidie's small hand nervously, Grace led the still-damp child to the bedroom at the front of the house, swiping a hand-towel on the way. There she lifted Cassidie up onto her bed and started gently drying her toes. Cassidie chuckled and retracted her foot. Grace traced the corner of the towel across the soft sole of

her other foot. Cassidie jerked her leg away, laughing out loud. The simple pleasure of being close to Cassidie's warm, soap-clean body was so powerful that Grace had to take a few deep breaths to steady herself. The years of aching for a child melted and pooled in her heart. This was what she had wanted all along; this was what she'd never stopped pining for, despite all the evidence that God really was *that* cruel. To be a mother. But then she foolishly went and spoilt the mood by asking, 'Do you want Mummy to brush your hair for you?'

Cassidie shook her head and tucked her chin down onto her chest, revealing just how much of a haystack her hair was. Who could blame her for her reluctance, after Jane's military shampooing regime? Afro hair really did not respond well to full-on assault; it needed gentle taming. After a moment's thought, Grace told Cassidie to wait for her. She went downstairs, grabbed her handbag and hurried back into Cassidie's bedroom. She had to dig around for a few seconds inside her new, cavernous, 'all eventualities catered for, now that I have a small child' bag until she found what she was looking for – her comb. Cassidie eyed it suspiciously and edged a little further away, clearly unwilling to let anything with such big teeth anywhere near her. Grace decided that 'show, not tell' was called for. With Cassidie solemnly watching, she reached up and pulled the comb through her own hair, forehead to nape of the neck in slow sweeps. Cassidie bottom-shuffled across the duvet.

Then Grace hunted in her bag once again and tracked down her little tub of hair conditioner. She unscrewed the lid and the smell of coconut filled the room. Cassidie inched closer. Grace smeared some of the oil on her fingertips and ran it through her own hair. By now Cassidie's hot little body was pressed up against her. Grace let her hold the pot and sniff it. 'It's called Hair Pudding,' Grace said. Cassidie grinned and stuck out her tongue, going for a lick. 'No, honey. It's not the kind of pudding you eat. It's for your hair. Look.' She took the towel and tentatively rubbed Cassidie's hair, feeling her

bumpy little skull beneath her fingers, then she took another dab of the conditioner and smeared it onto her palms. Cassidie shuffled around, tucking herself into the V of Grace's legs, and submitted to her touch.

The room settled into a drowsy quiet, as Grace worked through the thicket of Cassidie's hair. As she combed and oiled each section, Cassidie's head grew heavy with sleepiness under her fingertips.

'Mum, I'm gonna be late.' Cassie jerked her head away and Grace's hands fell into her lap.

Despite Grace's hopes, Cassie was unforthcoming on the short journey to the hotel. Grace tried to get a conversation going by keeping the tone light and avoiding any direct questions. She certainly didn't ask about Cassie's relationship with Ryan – its state or stage – though she longed to know. As she drove she breathed steadily and prayed silently that love would somehow miraculously translate into communication. In the absence of any cues from Cassie, Grace chattered on about her own sisters' many boyfriends when they were growing up, mixing in plenty of sensible advice with some funny anecdotes. Cassie barely seemed to listen. The stories certainly failed to raise a smile. Grace was rapidly running out of time – the hotel was only on the High Street – so she risked a direct approach. 'We're just a bit concerned. You've been awfully quiet these past few days, not yourself. Are you worrying about something?'

Cassie brushed off Grace's concerns like crisp crumbs, pointing out that *they kept telling her to concentrate on college more than her friends, so she was. They should be happy.*

In the end Grace was reduced to offering up the never-ending gift of all concerned parents: unconditional love, with a side order of non-judgement. 'I just want you to know that if there's something troubling you, you can always talk to me. You know that, don't

you? And I mean *anything* – even the things that might feel a bit uncomfortable or awkward. I might be able to help.’

Cassie finally looked at her mother properly, and during the pause Grace waited, willing her eldest child to confide in her. But, as the silence stretched out and became uncomfortable, she began to fear a more serious revelation – real heartache or actual recklessness. Cassie put an end to the silence with her usual robust bluntness. ‘Mum, leave it. I’m okay. Please, stop fussing.’

Grace had to give up and back off.

They sat in the traffic on the High Street on the last leg of the journey, without speaking, Grace grieving for the little girl who had trusted her so quickly and so completely, and Cassie feeling choked by the impossibility of dragging the ghost of her birth mother out of the shadows into the brightness of the present.