

Prologue

The gears stick as the car is changed into third. From the back seat she can hear the crunching with each gear shift. Outside the dusky sky darkens with each passing moment. She looks in the footwell of the seat next to her, where there is a bag full of water bottles.

‘Have one of those if you want,’ the driver says, their eyes connecting in the rear-view mirror.

‘Just up here, thanks,’ the girl says, opening a bottle and drinking thirstily.

The car keeps going, past the road her home is on. She taps on the window. ‘You can just drop me here. I can walk this last bit.’

The car keeps moving. The girl realises the driver has no intention of stopping. She tugs at the handle

but the back door is locked, the mechanism snapped off. She slams her palm against the window, smacking repeatedly, hoping someone, anyone will walk past and hear.

The car speeds up and the girl starts to feel strange, a bitter taste in the back of her throat. She feels the cold water splash against her thighs as she drops the bottle, her grip too weak to hold on. She lolls in her seat, unable to stay upright. She slumps to the side, the feebleness in her hand spreading to the rest of her body. She knows she is in trouble. She struggles to stay awake, aware that once her eyes are closed, they may never open again. As her lids draw together she tries to speak, but all she hears is an unintelligible gargle.

‘You’re coming with me,’ the driver says.

Chapter One

Now

The bed next to me is empty when I wake, my eyes still puffy from crying myself to sleep while listening to the radio for comfort. Chris never came upstairs to bed. At his work event last night I drank too much and locked myself in the toilet. Social situations make me anxious and as understanding as he is, I always push him past his limit. I had promised to behave myself this time, but as usual my nerves got the better of me and I embarrassed him again, something I seem to do more and more these days. My head is throbbing, I know I haven't slept well, the echo of my dreams still lingering. They're

indiscernible, but I have the uneasy feeling that comes after a nightmare.

I wander downstairs in my pyjamas and find Chris asleep on the sofa where I left him last night, an overturned wineglass on the rug and the TV on. I reach down and feel for wetness but there is nothing. At least he finished the wine before he dropped the glass. I pull the throw on the back of the sofa over him. I wonder how long he will keep up the silent treatment this time. It's nothing less than I deserve.

'What time is it?' he mutters.

'It's still early – it's seven – the kids aren't even awake yet. Why don't you go and get in bed for a couple of hours?' I suggest, trying not to sound upset.

'I wanted to go out on the bike this morning.'

'Oh. I thought we were having a lazy weekend.'

'I've changed my mind.'

'If you're annoyed at me, will you just bloody say it? I can't stand this tension between us.' The tears start again.

'Come here.'

I get on the sofa next to him and he pulls me into an embrace. Kissing my tears away, then kissing me on the lips. He gets like this the morning after he's been drinking. His hands start to wander and I know he isn't angry with me anymore.

‘Not here.’

‘Come on, you already said the kids were still asleep.’

‘They could wake up at any moment.’

‘We’ll hear them; you know they find it impossible to stay quiet.’ He kisses me again and I sink into the sofa – feeling him against me like this is always nice. I am half in the moment and half listening out for any movement in the house, not wanting to traumatised our children by having them walk in on us in flagrante on the couch.

As Chris kisses down my body the words from the television start to permeate my thoughts. It’s a news report about a missing girl last seen at a bus stop in a sleepy seaside town on the south coast . . . no clues as to what happened to her. I push against Chris to get him to move but he just keeps kissing me.

‘What is it?’ he says as he realises I’m not just offering friendly resistance.

‘The news, I need to hear it.’

‘Are you joking?’ He gets up and sits back with a petulant sigh.

I grab the remote and rewind the report. Images of a small town in Devon, quaint and picturesque. Just what you would imagine on a postcard from the south of England, lots of pebbles and red cliffs and hanging baskets full of pansies. The reporter

standing at the bus stop is telling the story of a young girl, Mandy Green, who went missing just a few days earlier. The police believe it's a possible kidnapping. The story ends with a sweeping view of the coastline, all the candy-coloured hotels along the shore. I stand.

'I have to go,' I say, knowing he will ask me questions. I don't want to answer them right now; I don't know how to. The news report is so familiar, it's almost the same as one I saw many years ago, of the girl who went missing and was never seen again. Same town. I feel sick at the thought of history repeating itself in any way. I thought I had put a stop to all of that when I left.

'Go where?'

'Devon.'

'What are you talking about?'

'I know that place, Sidmouth, it's where I grew up.'

'There? That's not what I expected. I thought you didn't want to talk about your home because it was rough. That place looks like something out of a posh period drama.'

'Not rough, just . . . not what it seems.' How do I explain to him, with his perfectly open family and no understanding of what it feels like to be trapped inside someone else's lies?

‘Well, I can’t take any time off right now, but after next Thursday we could all drive down. You could show us around some of your old haunts – I bet the kids would love it.’

‘No. No, I don’t want you to come. I need to go on my own.’

‘Today? It’s Saturday. We were going to take the kids to the cinema later. I don’t see why this can’t wait until Monday, at least.’

‘I’m sorry. I really need to go. You can manage without me for once,’ I say, as though he is being unreasonable to expect me to explain myself.

‘This is ridiculous. You can’t just keep a whole part of yourself cut off from us, we’re your family. Why do you think our teenage daughter only comes to me when she has a problem? Why do you think Lloyd won’t talk to us about what’s going on at school? You’re so closed off, Flick, you need to let us in. We’re your family. It’s supposed to be us against the world and it really doesn’t feel that way.’

‘I know, and I’m sorry. I need to go back though; I need to confront those demons or I will never be able to change. I can’t help the way I am.’

‘Well, you need to try, or you are going to lose those kids.’

‘I wasn’t always like this. Maybe finally going

home will help me work through my issues – like *you* wanted me to.’ I don’t leave him any room to protest. ‘I’ll arrange for an after-school club for Lloyd and go down tonight. It’s the last couple of weeks of term anyway, it’s not like they do any proper classes. Daisy will be all right with him ’til you get home from work.’

‘It’s that important?’

‘I wouldn’t ask you if it wasn’t. Please, Chris, just let me do this. I promise when I get back I’ll tell you everything.’

‘Why now? What’s this about the missing girl? Do you know her?’

I hesitate. ‘No, but when I was at school a girl went missing. I was with her the night she disappeared.’

‘Jesus, why didn’t you tell me?’

‘I find it hard to talk about the past, you know I do,’ I say.

‘Did the police ever find out what happened to her?’

‘No. She vanished without a trace.’

There’s a tiny part of me that hopes that I am wrong, a part of me that hopes there is no connection between the two disappearances. The news report has forced me to remember that summer when everything changed. I try not to think about that time and I have never spoken about it since,

especially not to Chris. It's a secret I have kept locked away. But there is no hiding from it anymore.

I have to go back.

Chapter Two

Then

Jasmine's father pushed her bed so that it faced the feature wall. It was papered with a mural of a tropical beach at sunset. She would have preferred something a little simpler, more grown up, but didn't want to say anything because her parents were so pleased. Jasmine's mother Lisa helped her make the bed with brilliant white bedding and the Kantha quilt that she had coveted for years. It had been given to the Burgess family by the women from a village in Bangladesh they had visited a few years ago, and Lisa had given it to her daughter to mark her sixteenth birthday. It depicted vibrant parrots on a deep

green background, with yellow stitching running all the way through the quilt.

‘Doesn’t this look perfect in here? I hope you look after it, Jazz. This is a one of a kind,’ Lisa said.

‘If you don’t trust me with it then keep it,’ Jasmine said, gripping the edge of the quilt, ready to hold on in case her mother changed her mind and decided to put it back in the cupboard.

‘Of course I trust you,’ Lisa said.

‘Is that everything then?’ Frank asked, tilting his head and looking at the curtain pole over the window, checking it was straight.

‘Yes. Everything is brilliant, now let me get settled please,’ Jasmine said impatiently, desperate for some time alone in her new room.

Her dad came over to ruffle her hair as though she were a child, and she shrugged him off instinctively.

‘Fine. Call if you need us,’ Lisa said as she reluctantly left the room.

Her parents went down the hall to finish their own unpacking.

The house was bigger than their old one, where Jasmine’s room had been a third the size of this one, and they’d had a courtyard rather than a garden. Jasmine had the feeling she was betraying

her old self by living on this road, where the snobby kids lived, so she was determined not to become like them.

Jasmine's bedroom window looked out over the overgrown garden, to where a small, painted brick, chalet-type guest house was tucked into the corner. Frank and Lisa planned to rent it out to fund their trips abroad.

She went down to the kitchen and grabbed a banana from the fruit bowl. They hadn't had a chance to do a proper shop yet. As Jasmine made her way back to her room, she heard a knock on the front door. She looked in the mirror. She wasn't properly dressed or showered, and her hair looked a little bedraggled, but no one else was coming down to answer.

She opened the door to see a man much younger than her father standing there with a holdall over his shoulder. He was looking at the ground so all she could really tell about him was that he had very dark blond hair, which was brushed back away from his face. When he peeked out from beneath his eyebrows he seemed surprised to see her and stood up straighter. His eyes slowly wandered over Jasmine and she crossed her arms across her front. She couldn't quite read the look on his face, but it was as though he was re-evaluating something.

‘I’m looking for Frank and Lisa Burgess,’ he said. His tone was unfriendly.

She suddenly wished she was wearing something other than shorts, and crossed one foot in front of the other in an attempt at modesty.

Jasmine turned to the stairwell and shouted, ‘Dad! There’s someone here for you.’

Moments later Frank appeared, peering around the corner at the top of the stairs. His face lit up when he saw their visitor and he rushed down, arm extended to shake the other man’s hand.

‘I’m not too early, am I? I can come back if you’re busy,’ the stranger said with a smile, much warmer than he had been a moment ago. He almost pushed Jasmine out of the way as he moved towards her father.

‘Lisa!’ Frank called up the stairs. ‘Tim’s here.’

Jasmine heard her mother’s excited exclamation and then before she knew it, Lisa was downstairs with her arms around Tim’s neck in a hug. When Lisa pulled away, Jasmine could see immediately that her mother was attracted to him; she looked flustered. As they talked about how unpleasant the blistering heat outside was, Jasmine took the time to look at their visitor. He was tall and, although she wouldn’t call him good looking, he wasn’t ugly; there was something interesting about his face. As he put his

holdall on the floor, his shirt lifted up a little and she could see there was a tattoo across his hip, although she couldn't see what it was. She noted he had an avocado-sized patch of sweat at the small of his back but other than that you wouldn't know he had just been outside in this ungodly heat. His skin was tanned, as though he spent a lot of time outside in the sun, and he had tiny flecks of bright white paint on both his face and his muscular arms.

Lisa seemed to remember her daughter was there and turned to her. 'Jasmine, I want you to meet Tim. Tim's the man decorating the house for us; he did your bedroom.'

'Thanks,' she said, unsure what the proper response was and feeling even more uncomfortable knowing that he had been in her bedroom. That he'd put her new bed together, touched almost every surface.

Her father ushered Tim into the kitchen and her mother followed behind. For a moment she reminded Jasmine of the girls in school who would follow the boys around and hang on their every word. She suppressed the urge to roll her eyes.

Jasmine gleaned from the conversation that Tim was going to be moving into the guest house in the garden, which made her feel uneasy. She also noticed that he seemed to know her mother

better than her father; Lisa had worked with him before in some capacity. None of them addressed Jasmine as they talked, as if she wasn't there. But as soon as her parents looked at each other, or were distracted, Tim threw quick glances towards Jasmine, as though he didn't want her there. When his eyes met hers, she looked away. There was something so intense about him and she didn't know why her parents couldn't see it. They were kind and expected everyone else to be kind as well, always seeming so shocked when they read the papers or heard the news. Her mother wouldn't listen to the radio because it upset her. They were always looking for ways to help other people, and Jasmine could see that Tim was just their latest project. They were determined to try to change the world one person at a time again.

Jasmine slipped out of the kitchen and went back to her room. She decided to shower, partly because she hadn't already that day and partly to cool down. They were in the midst of a heatwave, which always filled her with a certain amount of excitement but also dread. Considering her family spent every summer south of the equator, the heat shouldn't have been an issue. Maybe it wasn't the heat that was getting to her after all, but the presence of a stranger in their house.

When her parents told her they were getting a lodger this wasn't what she had expected. She wondered how long he planned to stay. There was something about him she didn't trust.

Chapter Three

Over the next few days Jasmine settled in to her new home, the smell of fresh paint gradually replaced by the smell of the musky perfume her mother wore and the shampoos and soaps they used. It was starting to smell like home. Jasmine had tinkered with her room, putting up a *Donnie Darko* poster. She hadn't seen the film, but her friend Felicity had given her the poster. She tacked it on the back of the door, where her parents wouldn't see it. They weren't controlling, but Frank and Lisa were such positive people that they really didn't understand Jasmine's fascination with morbid things. Lisa always said if you surrounded yourself with negativity then negative things would happen to you. Jasmine wasn't sure the world worked like that.

Their first home-cooked meal together in the new house was Pabellón Criollo, after living off Chinese food from the takeaway around the corner for the first few days after moving. Lisa made the Venezuelan dish especially for Jasmine, knowing it was her favourite, and the aroma of spicy beef filled the house, invoking childhood memories.

The dining table in the kitchen still had flecks of paint and pen stains from Jasmine's many school projects and artistic endeavours over the years, spending Sunday afternoons with Lisa painting by numbers or making quilled jewellery. Frank's idea of father-daughter bonding was taking her on fishing weekends in Wales, making her watch as he caught, gutted and cooked fish from the River Dee. As Jasmine had grown, however, she and her parents had spent less and less time doing these things together.

As Jasmine finished off her second plate of Pabellón Criollo, Tim appeared at the doors to the guest house. She had her back to the outside but she noticed the expression on her mother's face change to a smile, and her cheeks flush ever so slightly. Anyone who didn't know her mother like Jasmine did wouldn't think anything of it and it was clear Frank was oblivious as he carried on eating, totally focused on the food. She carefully turned her head to watch as Tim crossed the garden

towards the house, then she turned and looked at her mother who quickly changed her expression when she caught Jasmine's eye. It was too late, though. Jasmine knew that her mother liked him. The uneasiness Jasmine had been feeling since Tim's arrival felt justified in that moment. It was Lisa who had convinced Frank that they needed a lodger, and it was Lisa who had suggested Tim.

'Sorry to bother you while you're having dinner. I just wondered if I could borrow a pan to heat some soup up in. I'll go shopping in the morning and grab one of my own. I didn't think about it earlier.'

'Don't be silly, why don't you have dinner with us? Welcome you into the fold and all that. I've made some spicy South American food.'

'I'm sure he just wants to settle in for now. Don't badger him,' Frank said.

'Nonsense, we have plenty of food. Come and sit, Tim.'

'It smells delicious, Lisa, thank you,' Tim said.

Tim came and sat at the table at Lisa's insistence, and she served him the last of the Pabellón Criollo, which Jasmine resented a little, even though she had already had seconds. Jasmine tried not to stare at him, but there really was something about him that set her teeth on edge. For the most part he continued to ignore her.

She couldn't figure him out, but there was something very off about Tim. Jasmine felt as though he had engineered this, like he wanted to be here in this room with them. Like he was trying to get closer to them, to be part of the family. Jasmine knew her parents tried to think the best of everyone though – they often said that the world would be a better place if everyone just tried to make one person's life better – but she sometimes wished they weren't so trusting. She would keep an eye on Tim. She would have to – no one else was going to.

Chapter Four

Now

I push down on my suitcase, trying to zip it closed. I remember the last time I used it how annoying it was and I make a mental note to throw it away after this journey. I have made this same mental note several times in the past but as soon as I return home I put it away and forget about it.

I can't stop thinking about the missing girl. I need to be there. I fear if I don't go then she will never be found, like the girl who went missing when I was younger.

I hear Chris in the next room putting Lloyd to bed. I know I should do it as I am the one who

is leaving but I just want to get on the road. I think this time apart will be good for us – for me, anyway. I need to be a better wife, a better mother. Maybe going back there will make me realise how far I have come. I can barely remember the person I used to be. It's like I have been running for so long and trying to be different from my own mother that I have completely lost myself. It's hard to be a good example when you barely feel like a person at all.

'I don't understand why you have to leave right now. At least wait 'til morning. We can have a nice breakfast. You can't check in to your hotel until the afternoon anyway,' Chris says.

'I booked the hotel from today so I can check in as soon as I get there.'

'I see. You just can't wait to get out of here, can you?'

'Don't be like that. I wish I could explain it to you, but I can't.'

'This again? You think you're the only person who had a rotten childhood, but you aren't.'

'I'm not saying that, I never said that.'

'Then tell me what the big deal is. Why can't you just wait until Friday when I can come, too?'

'I will tell you, just not now. Please just let me do this on my own.'

'I don't know why I even try sometimes. You

are so immovable. You had better do some serious thinking while you're gone. If this isn't what you want, then cut us loose. I can't do this anymore.'

I try not to think about what it is he is actually saying. I know he's right. I know I can't be like this and expect everyone else to just be OK with it, for everyone to just carry on around me as if it isn't obvious I'm on the brink of falling apart. If he knew the truth about me, he might understand why I need to go back. I might be the best chance that girl has.

I go to Chris, his eyes glistening with emotion. I know I'm hurting him but I can't think about that right now, not with what's at stake. I kiss him and I can feel him exhale with relief, as if all he wanted was for me to tell him I still love him. Of course I do, that has never been in question. Not for me anyway.

'Come with the kids on Friday, if I'm not back already. Please.'

'Are you sure?'

'Of course. I love you, I hope you know that.'

'Sometimes I wonder.'

I pull away, not willing to play the guilt game anymore. I just need to get on the road. The sooner I leave the sooner I can get the answers I'm looking for. I feel the invisible thread as I am pulled back. My life so far has been in two parts, before and

after, then and now. I think back to that summer. It feels like a lifetime ago, another world entirely. I put my case in the boot of the car. I never do this, I never drive far on my own, I never stay away from home without Chris or the kids. This will be the first time I have spent the night away from Lloyd. He's only seven, I hope he understands, I hope Chris does too, eventually. I have no choice. The life of that missing girl may depend on it.

Chapter Five

As I leave the safety of our little town in The Lake District, close to the border with Scotland, and head south, I feel a familiar dread wash over me. My knuckles whiten as I grip the steering wheel, almost clinging on for my life. I want to turn back, to pretend I didn't hear the news report, to carry on living inside my lies. I don't work, not really. I was young when Daisy was born and Chris thought it was better if I stayed home and looked after her. I've been with Chris my entire adult life; I knew from the moment we met that I would be safe with him. I feel bad again for leaving him with the children, especially when he is at such a crucial point in building his start-up business. Chris is in the process of trying to secure

funding to convert a load of freight containers into affordable carbon-neutral houses, at first in the Lakes and then, if the model works, to a wider market.

Leaving late has its advantages and the roads are mostly clear. There is a little rain but it's not enough to break the humidity and not enough to make me pull over. I hate driving in the rain but it feels appropriate somehow. My thoughts focus on what awaits me in Devon. I realise then that I didn't eat lunch or dinner today, too consumed with organising the family so I could get away and deal with this.

I pull over at a service station – it's properly dark now – as I am so hungry I can barely concentrate. I grab a sandwich and take it to the seating area. The rain gets heavier outside and I pull my coat around me. It's not cold but I feel strange being here by myself. A man sits at my table and smiles at me. There are plenty of empty seats so I don't understand why he's chosen that seat, or why he's looking at me.

'Can I help you?'

'Thought you might be lonely sitting here.'

'Well I'm not.'

I had forgotten about this, not going out much, not being part of the world but staying in my safe little village with my family and all the familiar

faces of neighbours and acquaintances. I forgot that sometimes people – strangers – just come and speak to you. I feel the panic rising in me. I want him to go away but I don't want to upset him as I don't know what he might do. Of course he is probably just lonely, but that doesn't give him the right to bother me. He opens his mouth but I stand and move to another table. I can hear Chris in my ear telling me not to be rude, not to be unfriendly. I finish my sandwich quickly and go and buy some cola to drink on the ride, full sugar to keep me awake.

As I make my way to the car, I look behind me to see the man from the café following me. I put my hand in my bag to find the keys, putting them between my fingers when I do. The service station is strangely quiet and I feel unsafe. The car is close now but somehow I feel like I'm getting further away. Behind me I hear the beep of a car alarm being turned off and the sound of a door opening. As I reach my own car I turn and see the man who was following me pulling out of a spot and driving towards the exit. I get in and lock the doors, feeling stupid. I wish I was at home with Chris and the kids, I wish I didn't have to do this alone. I pull myself together and start the car before pulling back out onto the motorway. I'm on a collision course with the ghosts of my past

and there is nothing I can do to stop it. This road somehow feels like the purgatory between my real life now – the one where I am safe and loved – and the mess I left behind.

I change the radio station regularly as I drive, with little tolerance for anything for a prolonged period of time. I finally reach a local Devonshire radio station and my blood runs cold – I'm getting closer. My head begins to throb. I open the glove box and root around for pills of some kind. I usually keep a packet or two in there. I find a pack with just two left and I knock them back with my Coke, even though I know they won't take the thrumming in my temples away. Nothing will until I am out of this place, until I am on my way home. Inside I already feel like I am never going to get home, that I got lucky the last time I left this place, reluctantly released from its grip into the world with the proviso that I never return. I'm breaking a pact I made with myself sixteen years ago when I first got on that bus out of town. I promised I would never go back. I told the universe that if it just let me get away then I would be a good person, if that was even possible for someone like me.

The road signs become increasingly familiar as I approach my destination. I see houses and streets from my childhood. It's like walking through that

wardrobe and into Narnia – another world entirely, one I am not supposed to be in, one that's not meant for me. It's too late now. There is no turning back.