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she  
left*



*what  
she  
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R O S I E   F I O R E

  
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Allen & Unwin  
c/o Atlantic Books  
Ormond House  
26–27 Boswell Street  
London WC1N 3JZ

Phone: 020 7269 1610  
Fax: 020 7430 0916  
Email: [UK@allenandunwin.com](mailto:UK@allenandunwin.com)  
Web: [www.allenandunwin.com/uk](http://www.allenandunwin.com/uk)

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*For my sons.*



# PROLOGUE

Helen brushed her hair and smoothed it away from her face, then used a hair tie to secure it. She combed the length of the ponytail until it lay smooth and shiny over her shoulder, split the hair into sections and plaited it neatly. She checked her reflection: light eye make-up and a becoming, pale pink lip-gloss. She went into the bedroom, where she had laid her dress out on the bed, a cotton maxi-dress, covered in big blue flowers. She slipped it over her head and slid her feet into flat white pumps. A spritz of her citrusy perfume and she was ready to go.

She went down to the kitchen. She'd cleaned up after breakfast, before she'd taken the girls to school. To an outsider, the kitchen would have appeared spotless, but Helen picked up a cloth and wiped quickly at a tiny smear on the otherwise pristine worktop. The washing machine hummed quietly, but other than that, the house was silent.

In the living room, her handbag, a large, soft leather one which matched the blue of the flowers of her dress, sat on the coffee table. She'd packed it carefully, as usual, but she checked through its contents one more time. Looking out of the window, she saw their next-door neighbour, Mrs Goode, leaving her house, Sainsbury's Bags for Life in hand.

Helen glanced around the living room, then took a quick tour round the downstairs to check that all the doors and windows were securely fastened before picking up her handbag and stepping out of her own front door. As she locked it, she called a cheery greeting to Mrs Goode, who was standing in her driveway, clearly waiting for a lift. Mrs Goode waved back, and Helen, dropping her key into her bag, headed off up the road on foot.

As was her habit, she set off at a brisk, focused pace. She imagined Mrs Goode watching her. She didn't look back. She walked quickly to the end of their quiet road, turned the corner, and disappeared.



# PART ONE



# CHAPTER ONE

## *Lara*

Every middle-class London school has a Helen. Perhaps the Helen at your school has shining blonde hair or twinkling dark eyes. Perhaps she's called Sarah, or Rebecca or Shariza. The principle is the same. Our Helen had a clear, bell-like voice, and you had to speak to her for a little while before you picked up the slight twang and upward inflection that told of her Australian origins. She had a smooth, chestnut-brown ponytail, clear, pale skin and wide blue eyes. You would often see the ponytail swinging as she ran briskly through the park, half an hour before pick-up time. But more often than not, you'd see it swinging as she laughed among a bustling group of parents in the playground. She'd be there before school, after school, at every school event, at the school gate collecting for the summer fete that she'd organized. She'd be at the open day, merrily guiding a group of prospective parents from classroom

to classroom. She'd wink kindly at the harried mothers rushing in late, as her own demure girls, their smooth ponytails equally perfectly brushed, waited by her side. She produced perfect cakes for the cake sale, perfect costumes for the class assembly and perfect financial records after the astonishingly successful Christmas fayre. She was perfect.

And then she vanished.

It turned out that I was the first person at school to know she'd gone missing. Ella Barker did an interview with the *Daily Mail* and said she was the first 'because Helen was always at the school gates, so I noticed immediately when she wasn't there'. But that wasn't true. Ella was long gone when we realized, and so were all the other Year Three mothers. Ella didn't care if what she said wasn't true. The *Mail* sent a stylist and took a picture of her in her neat front garden, and said how much her house was worth, so she was thrilled.

Ella was gone, and the playground was all but deserted when I ran in, rattling the pushchair ahead of me, sweaty and out of breath. It's a long story, but not a very interesting one – any parent who has a toddler and a child at school knows it well. The toddler runs around like a lunatic, then spends some hours screaming blue murder, resisting their nap. Then they finally fall asleep fifteen minutes before school pick-up time. You end up stuffing them clumsily into the pushchair and running to school with a dozy, wailing, hot and miserable child. And, of course, you're late, and your eight-year-old is the last child left at the classroom door, next to the tight-lipped teacher who has several hours of planning ahead of her, delayed because of your poor time-keeping.

Except, on that muggy day in late May, Frances wasn't alone. Miranda was there too, her socks still spotlessly white and neatly pulled up and her hair tidy. Mrs Sinclair had a sharp crease

between her eyebrows. She expected me to be late – it happened at least twice a week. But Helen was never late.

‘Did you see Helen on your way in?’ she asked as I hung Frances’ rucksack on the handles of the pushchair and handed my daughter a brioche as an after-school snack. ‘She’s very late, it’s most unlike her. Perhaps there were problems with parking.’

‘The road’s clear outside,’ I said. ‘And anyway, I think Helen walks. Did she leave a message with the office? Maybe Miranda was supposed to go on a play date with someone and forgot.’

Miranda regarded me with all the contempt an eight-year-old girl can summon.

‘I didn’t forget,’ she said coldly. ‘And anyway, my dad was supposed to pick us up today. He’s supposed to come to my ballet class to see us perform, and now I’m going to be late.’

Mrs Sinclair looked at her, surprised. ‘Your dad? Your dad never picks you up.’

‘I know,’ said Miranda. ‘But he was supposed to do it today.’

At that moment, Marguerite’s class teacher walked up, holding Marguerite’s hand. Marguerite is six and in Year One, rounder and softer than Miranda, shy, but just as immaculately turned out. She had clearly been crying and her soft cheeks were puffy and wet. The teachers exchanged a glance and a quick word.

‘She wants to be with her sister,’ said the Year One teacher. ‘Can I leave her with you, and I’ll go to the office and see if they can’t get hold of Helen or her husband?’

‘I have Helen’s number on my mobile,’ I said quickly. Jonah, my two-year-old, had stopped wailing but was grizzling and twisting against the straps in the pushchair. I should just have taken Frances and left, but I wanted to help, if only to show Mrs Sinclair I wasn’t a total dead loss as a parent. I pulled my phone from my pocket and dialled. Helen’s phone went immediately to

voicemail, so I left a message with my number. The two teachers and four children looked at me expectantly.

‘Voicemail,’ I said unnecessarily. ‘Maybe she’s stuck on the Tube or something. Or her battery’s flat. Or she’s lost her phone.’

None of these were likely. Helen’s efficiency, forward planning and organization were legendary. Even I could hear how lame it sounded.

‘I could take the girls home with me,’ I heard myself saying.

Frances and Miranda weren’t especially good friends. Helen had had Frances over for a play date, but only because she always conscientiously invited every little girl at least once during the course of each year. I’d meant to return the favour but never had. I’d been intimidated by the prospect of having those spotless little girls in my chaotic house, and I’d have had to clean for a week if Helen were coming to collect them and stay for a cup of tea. But now it was a case of needs must. I couldn’t leave them at school.

‘We can’t release them to you without their guardian’s authorization. I’ll keep them in my classroom,’ said Mrs Sinclair. ‘Perhaps, Miss Jones, you could go to the office and get the family contact details? You might be able to get hold of the dad, if he’s the one who’s supposed to be picking them up.’

Miss Jones, a plump, self-satisfied woman, nodded. ‘I’ll go and call from the office.’

I would have left then, but as soon as Miss Jones walked away, Marguerite began to cry. My Frances went into full mummy mode and bustled over, taking Marguerite by the hand and leading her to the book corner in the Year Three classroom. Frances settled on a cushion and drew Marguerite on to her lap. She pulled a book out of the stack and began reading in a high, babyish voice, which she clearly thought was the way one spoke to six-year-olds. Miranda stood by coolly and watched as Frances cared for her sister. Jonah let out a roar of frustration. He’d tried to wriggle

downwards out of his pushchair straps and had got himself stuck. I unstrapped him and straightened the straps, but when I tried to do them up again, he arched his back and let out a wail of pure fury. He shoved my hands away and climbed out, toddling over to Frances and Marguerite.

‘I can’t begin to think where she might be,’ said Mrs Sinclair.

‘Has something bad happened?’ Miranda asked flatly.

‘Of course not,’ Mrs Sinclair and I said in unison.

‘Miranda, love,’ I said as sweetly as I could, ‘are you sure your dad was supposed to pick you up today? Has there been some kind of a mix-up?’

Miranda looked at me coolly. ‘Of course there’s no mix-up. Dad wanted to come and see my dance show.’

‘But wouldn’t Helen—’ I began, but Miranda cut me off.

‘She’s doing a course today. She said she would come along later,’ she said.

That made sense and explained why Helen’s phone was off.

‘Do you know what sort of course? Or where?’ Mrs Sinclair asked, but Miranda shook her head.

‘It’s just one of those things,’ I said. ‘I’m sure Helen or Sam will be along any minute.’

Miranda stared at me like I was some sort of idiot.

‘I’ll make some calls,’ I said. ‘Maybe she told one of the other mums where she was going.’

I ran through all the local families in my mind and decided to call Linda. She always asks a lot of questions and generally seems to know everything about everyone. She listened to my garbled account of what had happened. ‘She didn’t say anything this morning at drop-off,’ she said, ‘but I’ll start a phone chain to see if anyone has heard from her.’

I felt better knowing someone as practical as Linda had taken charge. I glanced over to the children. Marguerite had stopped

crying and was sitting happily on Frances' lap, sucking her two middle fingers as Frances read to her from a book of ancient Greek legends. It struck me that Marguerite was quite babyish for a child nearly in Year Two. But perhaps it wasn't fair to judge her in that rather stressful situation. Miranda stayed where she was, close by Mrs Sinclair's side, looking up into our faces. She's one of those wide-eyed, quiet children who listens intently to whatever adults say. 'Little bat ears,' Helen would often say when Miranda was nearby and we were chatting. 'Be careful what you say. She misses nothing.'

Miss Jones came back into the classroom. 'I spoke to Marguerite's dad, she said. 'He was supposed to pick up the girls, but then he was called away unexpectedly to Manchester on a business trip. He sent a message to his wife and asked her to collect them, but clearly she somehow never got it. He's on his way back now, but it's going to take him some hours to get here. Lara, he asks if you could kindly take the girls with you. He has no idea why Helen isn't receiving his messages, but he says he'll keep trying to get hold of her. I left a message on her mobile saying that the girls would be going home with you. Perhaps you might send them both a text message with your address, if they don't have it?'

I nodded and did so, although I was sure Helen had the address of every child in the class in a perfectly annotated spreadsheet somewhere.

'Girls,' I said brightly, 'it looks like Helen's busy somewhere, and your dad's on his way. I've let him know you're coming home to my house.'

Marguerite managed a watery smile, and Miranda didn't say anything. I gathered their things and piled them into the pushchair. Jonah wouldn't get back into it without a fight anyway, so he'd have to walk, or rather be shepherded, home.

It took us twice as long as usual. Jonah was so excited to be free of the pushchair and to have two extra girls to show off to



that he ran amok. Frances and Marguerite dawdled beside me, chatting, and Miranda walked slowly and reluctantly a few paces behind. She didn't say anything for a long time, and then, out of nowhere, she spoke. 'It's our ballet performance for the parents today,' she said. 'I was supposed to be a firefly. I've got a costume and everything. And now I'm going to miss it.'

I know how seriously Miranda takes her dancing – she and Frances were in the same class initially, but Miranda progressed much more quickly and is now in an advanced group. Even as a chubby five-year-old, she used to approach the class with fierce concentration. While the other girls were busy swinging their little pink skirts and giggling together, Miranda was focused on the teacher, pointing her toes and making pretty arms. I felt angry with Sam and Helen for letting her down so badly on this important day. I gave her narrow shoulder a pat. She stiffened slightly, and I took my hand away.

I got the kids back to my house and settled them at the table with cups of squash and a snack. I briefly considered taking Miranda to ballet myself, but her costume was at home, and as I don't drive, there was no way we could get to the ballet school in time, not with me wrangling four children on the bus. Someone had to let them know she wasn't coming though, and I was pretty sure Sam wouldn't think to do it. I managed to find the ballet teacher's number online and went into my bedroom to make the call. She was clipped and rude, as if it were my fault. When I turned round after I had hung up Miranda was standing in the door of my bedroom.

'I just remembered, Helen said she'd be back in time to watch the show,' Miranda said. 'She said she'd meet us at the dance school at four-thirty. It's four-thirty now. So where is she?'

## Sam

I'd only just arrived in Manchester to take a short-notice brief from a brand-new client – a massive, multinational health-food company – when the school rang. I phoned the client as soon as I realized I would have to go back to London and told them there was an emergency with one of my children. That seemed serious enough that they might consent to reschedule. I couldn't say, 'My wife didn't get the message to pick the kids up from school and I don't know where she is.' What would they have thought?

I could only get a first-class seat on the train back to London, which was screamingly expensive, but at least it meant I could sit in relative quiet. I wanted to keep my phone free in case Helen rang, so I used email to cancel all my meetings. It didn't even bear thinking about what Chris, my boss, would say.

I know it sounds heartless when I put it like that – worrying about the cost of train tickets, worrying about what people would think. But at that point I honestly wasn't concerned about her. I was a little annoyed, actually. It just wasn't like her to let me down. I know she'd said she was on a course till after school pick-up time, and I had promised to leave work early and collect the kids, but then Chris told me I needed to go and take that brief. The account was worth a fortune and we'd been trying to get in with that company for ages.

I left a voice message, explaining what had happened. I figured Helen would have her phone on silent and would see my call and then listen to the message on her lunch break. She'd have to leave her course early to pick up the girls, but I knew she wouldn't mind.

I'd anticipated arriving in Manchester for the meeting, then calling Helen to say I'd be staying over. She was used to that – I

often took the opportunity to spend an evening with clients. There are certain deals that only get done when the sun has gone down, the booze has flowed and the client in question feels he's got all the perks he deserves. I always kept a bag at work with a change of shirt and underwear and a toothbrush for days like that. Helen knew how unpredictable my work could be, and she always took the unexpected meetings and changes of plan in her stride. So this complete collapse of our arrangements really threw me.

This was Helen. Calm, capable Helen. Something had happened, that was for sure, and I didn't give much thought to what – a broken-down car, a lost phone. Something minor. I'd swallow my annoyance, because she was always so amazing, and it was actually slightly my fault for changing the plans at the last minute. By eight o'clock that evening, we'd all be sitting around the dinner table, laughing about it. She'd have sorted out whatever the problem was and smoothed things over. She'd even have dropped off a thank-you gift for Lara, the mum who'd taken Miranda and Marguerite home. I'd do my best to grovel to the man in Manchester and set everything up for another day.

Nevertheless, my phone stayed ominously silent for the whole journey. Shortly before the train pulled into Euston, I rang Lara. It was just after six o'clock. She'd heard nothing. Apparently Jilly, who lives in our road, had popped past our house to have a look. There had been no answer when she rang the doorbell. I knew, as I had dialled it intermittently, that Helen's mobile phone remained switched off. I think that was the moment I began to be concerned. Helen had said she'd be at the dance school by 4.30, and it was over an hour and a half past that now. She had a thing about 6 p.m. 'I like to have the girls home by then,' she'd say. 'Wherever we've been, six o'clock is home time – time to get homework done and baths ready.'

I wracked my brains, trying to remember what Helen had said about the course she was going on. Something about effective social media for small businesses? Had she said where it was? I didn't think so. I tried Helen's phone one more time, to no avail. I began to feel a little anxious then, and started to run. I'd planned to just get on the Tube, but I couldn't bear the idea of being stuck underground, even if it was for only twenty minutes, so I jogged to the taxi rank. Miracle of miracles, there was no queue and within seconds I was in a black cab and we were gliding through Camden on our way north.

Once I was in the taxi, I began to calm down. It had to be a misunderstanding. Maybe the course had gone on late. She did love her courses, I reminded myself. She was always doing them, learning about something new. She'd done several, one about starting a blog, and a few about search engine optimisation and basic computer coding.

Lara's house turned out to be quite near ours – maybe three or four minutes closer to the school. The front fence was unpainted and the little garden was a profusion of wild flowers. I kicked a football out of the way and rang the doorbell. Lara opened the door, a pretty woman with a narrow, freckled face and a tangle of red curls. I vaguely knew who she was and had heard Helen talk about her. She was a single parent, I recalled. She ushered me in and we went through to the back of the house where my girls and her two kids were eating around her big wooden kitchen table. An older woman, I assumed her mum, was sitting at the table, chatting to all the kids. She smiled kindly at me. They'd given the children what we would have called 'tea' when I was little – fish fingers and smiley-face oven chips, which Marguerite was enthusiastically dipping into a massive puddle of ketchup. Miranda was sitting up straight, cutting her fish fingers into neat squares with her knife and fork and eating as she'd been taught. The girls usually ate dinner with us

a little later – proper, adult food served in the dining room. On any other day, this would have been considered quite a treat.

‘Hey, girls!’ I said, and my voice sounded bright and fake, like a children’s television presenter. They both looked up.

‘Daddy,’ said Marguerite, in the babyish voice she uses when she’s tired, and she jumped down from her chair and ran to me. I scooped her up and cuddled her. She curved into my arms, her plump arms and legs still soft. She’s lovely to hold, and I took a moment to hug her and sniff her hair, which smelled of the strawberry shampoo Helen liked to use on the girls. Whenever I hug Miranda, which she will sometimes reluctantly allow, she’s all sharp angles – pointy elbows and narrow, bony limbs. ‘Finish up your food,’ I said, gently putting Marguerite down, ‘and we’ll head home.’

The girls continued eating, and Lara drew me out of the kitchen and into the living room.

‘Any news of Helen?’ she asked.

‘Nothing,’ I said. ‘But I’m sure there’s a reasonable explanation. I’m absolutely certain she’ll be at home when we get there.’ I smiled at her, and she looked at me oddly. I suppose it must have seemed as if I were trying to reassure her. I didn’t know what to say. ‘Come on, girls,’ I called. ‘Let’s get going!’

It took fifteen minutes of faffing to gather the girls’ school bags, jumpers and shoes from the chaos of Lara’s living room. We thanked her and her mum again and left the house to walk home. As we turned the corner out of Lara’s road, a name came to me. Crystal Spectrum. They were the people who ran the internet courses Helen went on. I stopped in my tracks, ran a quick search on my phone and came up with a number for them. It was late, but there was a chance someone was still there.

Eventually a crisp-voiced woman picked up. I gave my name. ‘My wife, Helen, was booked on to a course on social media today—’ I began, but the woman cut me off.

‘Helen Cooper? I know her well. She’s attended a lot of courses here. I’m Diane, the director of Crystal Spectrum. Hang on a minute. . .’ I could hear her typing, accessing records on her computer. ‘Oh,’ she said, and she sounded surprised. ‘Yes, she was booked on the course this morning, but she was a no-show. That’s not like her.’

‘No,’ I said. ‘Are you sure?’

‘Absolutely sure. There’s even a note here that the trainer got our receptionist to ring her. There was no reply.’

‘What time was she due to get there?’

‘We started at eleven,’ Diane said, and then she added hesitantly, ‘I do hope everything’s okay.’

So did I. I thanked her and rang off. So Helen could have gone missing as early as eleven that morning. What could have happened? The girls were looking up at me curiously, so I popped my phone in my pocket and walked us home.

I could see the girls were getting worried, so I tried to look and act cheerful. I chided myself for being a worrier and freaking them out. It was a beautiful, balmy evening, sunny and still, the kind of summer evening where Helen would serve dinner on the patio outside – grilled salmon, new potatoes and a salad with her homemade dressing. I imagined us walking into the house and seeing the patio doors flung wide, with music drifting from the kitchen radio; Helen, wearing her duck-egg blue skirt, feet bare and hair caught up in her trademark ponytail, would turn and smile as she carried the salad bowl outside.

We turned into our road, and I could see Helen’s Prius parked in the driveway, just as it always was. I began to believe my own fantasy. I could practically smell the salmon. Helen might be a little annoyed that the girls had already eaten, but Marguerite at least would be up for a second meal.

I put my key in the door, but it refused to budge. Whenever

one of us was at home, we'd only use the Yale lock. We'd only lock the mortice if everyone was out. I took a deep breath and sorted through my keys to find the correct one, unlocked the mortice and then the Yale and the door swung open.

The moment I stepped inside, I knew she wasn't there. The air was dead and silent. There were no dinner smells and no music and the doors out to the patio were locked. There was no Helen to turn and smile, a dish in her hand and her blue skirt swishing round her smooth, tanned legs.

As if someone had forcibly punched me into another time, I was hurled back to that other night, five and a half years ago, when I stepped into an empty house for the first time. I couldn't help myself. My knees just gave way, and I found myself kneeling on the hall carpet in the dark, with my daughters standing beside me. Marguerite came to me and patted my shoulder, but, unexpectedly, it was Miranda who began to cry, in high, quick sobs.

'Daddy, get up!' she said sharply. 'Get up!'

I didn't get up. I fumbled in my pocket and brought out my phone. I dialled 999.

'Which emergency service do you require?' said a tinny voice on the other end. 'Police, ambulance or fire?'

'Police,' I said. 'Police. My wife is missing.' And then I began to cry.

## CHAPTER TWO

### *Sam*

They asked me a lot of questions on the phone. When had I last seen Helen? Was this out of character? Had I rung her friends? I know they have to ask the same questions of everyone, to find out if it's a genuine missing person or simply the kind of chaotic household where people come and go and disappear, but I wanted to scream with frustration. In the end they must have believed me because they said they'd send some officers round.

I knew I had to do something with the girls. They were glued to my side, wide eyed and scared, and it was getting late. Marguerite would usually have been in bed by 7.30 and Miranda by 8.30. I certainly didn't want them around when the police arrived.

'Listen, girls,' I said, as calmly as I could manage, 'it's time for baths and bed.'

'We can't go to bed,' Miranda said. 'How will we sleep?'



‘You need to try. Tomorrow is another day, and you’ve got school. I’ll go and run the bath,’ I said as decisively as I could manage. I broke one of Helen’s unbreakable house rules and put on the television to distract the girls while I got things organized.

While I was filling the bath, it occurred to me to call Mrs Goode. She’s our next-door neighbour, a softly spoken woman in her early seventies. She adores the girls and always chats to them, and she’d often babysat for us in the past. Perhaps she would come and sit with them, if they were still awake when the police arrived? I turned off the taps, and, calling to the girls, stepped out of the front door and crossed the shared driveway to knock on Mrs Goode’s door.

I explained everything as quickly as I could, and she grabbed a cardigan and her handbag and followed me across to our house. She was calm and cheerful, and her presence instantly made me feel better. She bustled the girls upstairs. I stood on the landing and listened to her singing them a silly song, which they’d clearly heard before because Marguerite joined in with the chorus.

I laid out the girls’ pyjamas. While they were in the bath, Mrs Goode met me on the landing.

‘The police will have questions,’ she said. ‘They’ll want to know what she was wearing, what she had with her. You might want to check.’

‘I have no idea what she was wearing,’ I said, desperately. ‘I left early. . . I had to get to the office. . .’

‘A floral dress, the one with the big forget-me-nots on it,’ said Mrs Goode. ‘I saw her go out. About nine-thirty, maybe? The floral dress, and she was carrying a blue handbag. Do you know the one I mean?’

I thought I did. Helen had a lot of handbags, but there was one, a bright royal blue, which she liked to use when she wore the forget-me-not dress. It was big and squashy, more casual

than most of her bags. She usually went for a more rigid, satchel-style bag, better for keeping everything she needed neatly compartmentalized.

‘So, the floral dress, the blue bag. . . did she have anything else with her?’

‘Nothing. She was walking. I assumed she was off to the station. Going into town, probably?’

That sounded right, if she was going to the course. But 9.30 would be early to leave if she was only due there at eleven. Maybe she’d had another appointment, one I hadn’t known about? I wished I could see her schedule, but, unlike me, she didn’t use an electronic diary – she had a black leather Filofax, her constant companion, which I was certain would be in her handbag.

‘I don’t know if she came back, though,’ said Mrs Goode suddenly. ‘She might have come home and changed and gone out again. I went to Sainsbury’s and then had lunch with a friend.’

I could hear the girls talking in quiet voices in the bath. I walked into our bedroom, which, naturally, was immaculate, the duvet smooth, the pillows plumped. I opened the wardrobe, and all Helen’s clothes were neatly hung. I stared at them helplessly. Everything looked as it usually did, but who was to say if something was missing? I couldn’t see the forget-me-not dress, but if she had come home and changed, she’d have put it in her laundry basket, wouldn’t she? I opened the white wicker basket. It was empty, apart from a few jumpers and silk shirts, items she usually hand-washed. As I leaned over the basket, there was a sudden wave of Helen’s scent – the delicate floral perfume she wore, the sweet cocoa-butter aroma of her body lotion and the warm, spicy smell of her skin.

Mrs Goode found me sitting on the edge of the bed, looking into the open laundry basket.

‘Any luck?’ she asked. I stared at her blankly. ‘Can you help me get the girls out of the bath? Teeth and so on?’

I nodded and got up. We went through the motions and got the girls into bed. Marguerite didn’t want to sleep in her own room, so I let her snuggle in with Miranda. Miranda would never normally have agreed to this, but she was happy to scoot close to the wall and let her little sister in beside her. I put on the soft nightlight and let the girls choose a bedtime story. Helen had been reading them a chapter of *Anne of Green Gables* each night, but they chose a picture book, an old favourite we’d read to them hundreds of times when they were much smaller. I lay across the bottom of the bed and read to them, keeping my voice soft and low. Marguerite’s eyelids grew heavy and she dozed off quickly, but when I looked up I saw Miranda’s wide, dark eyes, so like her mother’s, watching me closely. I didn’t have anything to offer her. No answers at all.

At that moment the doorbell rang. The police. Mrs Goode, who had been watching quietly from the doorway, said, ‘You go. I can sit with Miranda.’

I squeezed Miranda’s hand and she gripped back tightly. Then I rose and went downstairs to talk to the police.

The officers were so young. I felt like my dad, moaning about how coppers were all still wet behind the ears these days, but in all seriousness, the man looked about twelve. He clearly didn’t need to shave more than twice a week, and the woman was a fresh, round-faced girl who looked like she hadn’t quite grown out of her adolescent softness.

I brought them into the living room and we went through everything I’d already told the officer over the phone. Helen was a very reliable person, she had no history of drug or alcohol abuse, she had no financial problems, no history of mental illness, she wasn’t taking any medication. This was entirely out of character.

They asked to see a photograph of her, and I took down the one we keep on the mantelpiece – Helen and the girls at the bottom of the Eiffel Tower, taken at Christmastime last year. Helen is wearing a green coat, and her cheeks are pink from the cold. She's bending down, her arms around the girls, and they're all laughing at me.

'And these are your daughters?' the female PC asked.

'Yes, Miranda is eight and Marguerite is six.'

'And you were alerted that your wife was missing because she didn't collect them from school?'

'Yes. I was supposed to do it, but I was called out of town. I left her a message. . .'

'But she didn't confirm that she'd received it?'

'No,' I said reluctantly. Both police officers looked disapproving. They clearly thought I was negligent and Helen wasn't much better.

'Has she ever done that before? Failed to collect them?'

'Never,' I said adamantly.

'What do you do for a living, Mr Cooper?'

'I work in advertising. I'm a client relationship manager.'

She didn't ask me anything further, but she wrote down what I'd said.

The male PC looked sceptical. 'And you earn enough doing that that your wife doesn't need to work?'

'We do all right,' I said, aware that I sounded defensive. 'Helen takes care of the girls, and the house. She does some courses. She's very involved at the school. Everyone knows her. She's always organizing things and working for the Parents' Association.'

They asked for a list of family.

'Helen's an only child,' I said, 'and both her parents are dead. I can give you my parents' details – but I've already spoken to them and they haven't heard from her.'

‘So no family at all on her side? No cousins? Grandparents? Aunts or uncles?’

‘An elderly uncle in Vancouver, but that’s it. I’ve never met him – he wasn’t well enough to attend our wedding.’

‘What about friends?’ the female PC asked. ‘You say she was involved at the school.’

‘Yes, she’s very popular. We have spreadsheets of names and addresses. I can mark the people I’d say Helen is closest to.’

‘That would be helpful. What about other friends? Old friends from school or university? Old work colleagues? Anyone spring to mind?’

I wracked my brain. ‘No one springs to mind. I mean, no one that she’s seen recently. We met at work. She joined the company just after she moved to the UK – she’s originally Australian. She left a few years ago, and she hasn’t really stayed in touch with those people, but I’ll give you any names I can think of.’

‘And friends of yours as a couple?’

I jotted down a quick list of our closest friends.

They asked me, as Mrs Goode had predicted, what Helen was wearing and I told them my best guess. They asked if she had any distinguishing marks – scars, tattoos, that sort of thing. I almost smiled at the idea of Helen having a tattoo. ‘She does have a scar though,’ I said. ‘Her left earlobe has a raised ridge on it. When she was a teenager, she accidentally had an earring torn out, dancing at a music festival. It’s quite distinctive.’

The female officer nodded and noted it down. She asked me to describe it, and I saw her draw a small, childish sketch of an ear, with a visible scar running vertically through the lobe.

‘Do you have any good, recent photographs you could let us have?’ asked the male PC. ‘One that doesn’t have your kids in it?’

I remembered then that I had taken a picture of Helen on my phone at a party some weeks before, wearing the floral dress. They

asked me to email it to them. That was the picture they showed on the news and put in the papers – Helen walking towards me, holding two glasses of wine. When she saw I was taking a picture, she wrinkled her nose and smiled at me. Her hair was loose on her shoulders. She looked beautiful.

Then we went over what she would have with her. I could only guess what would be in her bag – her phone, purse and Filofax. Make-up, perhaps? A notebook and pen for her course? I told them that as far as I could see, all her other clothes were there, but it was difficult to tell. Who could give an accurate inventory of all of their partner's clothing? Helen probably could of mine, but as she did the majority of the washing and ironing, that wasn't surprising. All I could say with certainty was that there were no obvious gaps in her wardrobe.

'What about identification? Travel documents?'

'According to our neighbour, she walked to the Tube. She didn't flee the country.' I checked myself. Being sarcastic with the police probably wasn't helpful.

'Your neighbour?'

'Mrs Goode. She's upstairs with the girls right now. She's the one who saw Helen leave the house around nine-thirty this morning.'

Unsurprisingly, they asked to speak to her. 'And while we're chatting to her, perhaps you might have a look for your wife's personal documents? Identification, passport, that sort of thing? Just so we know what she might be carrying with her,' said the male PC.

I went upstairs as quietly as I could. Mrs Goode was sitting in the armchair in the corner of Miranda's room. Marguerite was fast asleep, her hair fanned on the pillow and her cheeks pink. Miranda was lying on her back beside her, arms by her side, staring at the ceiling, eyes wide open.

I motioned to Mrs Goode, and she stood and tiptoed out of the room. Miranda's eyes flew to the doorway and locked with mine. I tried to smile and failed. She turned away and went back to staring at the ceiling.

We returned downstairs. Mrs Goode seated herself opposite the police officers and I went to search through Helen's desk in the conservatory. The filing drawers containing all our bills, correspondence and important documents were locked, but I had a key. I opened the top drawer and went carefully through each section. There were the girls' birth certificates, our driver's licences, our marriage certificate, and our four passports, rubber-banded together. Helen bought matching leather passport holders in different colours to make it quick and easy to identify whose are whose when we travel. Mine's cobalt blue, hers is green, and the girls' are pink and purple. Everything was where I expected it to be.

The male PC came looking for me, and I showed him what I'd found. He nodded. 'Clever idea with the passport holders, that. My wife spends ages sorting through them for the kids every time we travel.'

He didn't look old enough for a wife and kids, but it wasn't the time for small talk.

'So nothing appears to be missing?'

'Not as far as I can tell,' I said, and I opened the lower drawer. Here Helen had all our bills and correspondence neatly filed, each section labelled – bank, insurance, mortgage, utilities.

'Very organized, your wife,' he said.

'Very.'

'She certainly doesn't look like the kind of person who'd just go walkabout, does she?' he said conversationally. There was an awkward moment of silence.

I looked over his shoulder into the kitchen and suddenly

remembered my manners. 'Can I offer you a cup of tea? Coffee? Some water, maybe?'

'I'm fine, thanks,' he said. 'Now tell me, Mr Cooper, where were you today? Out of town, I think you said?'

'Manchester, for a meeting. As soon as I arrived there, I got the call from the school to say Helen hadn't turned up, so I got straight on a train to come back.'

'Were you travelling alone? With a colleague?'

'Alone.'

'Did you talk to anybody? Anyone who could confirm that they saw you in Manchester at that time?'

It took me a moment to work out what he was asking. He wanted to know if I had an alibi.

'I bought a ticket from the ticket office. You can talk to the woman who works there. She might remember me because she sold me a first-class ticket for a train that was just leaving. And I'm sure I'm all over CCTV.'

'What time did you leave for Manchester?'

'Around twelve. I was at my office in Soho before that.'

'Can we check that with your colleagues?'

'Of course.' I kept my voice calm, but I thought back through the day, hoping that someone in the office would remember seeing me and saying goodbye to me and could attach times to their recollections. I couldn't believe I was having this conversation. That morning I had kissed my wife goodbye. Now I was trying to find ways to prove I hadn't murdered her. Wait, *had* I kissed her goodbye? I'd left in a rush. Had she been in the shower? Had I just yelled goodbye as I rushed out of the door? It was entirely possible. If that was the case, had I missed my last chance to kiss her, hold her?

I shook my head. She was missing, that was all. There was no proof something bad had happened to her. I had read somewhere



that 90 per cent of missing people returned home within twenty-four hours. I had to believe she was coming back.

I realized the PC was standing watching me.

‘I know this must be hard,’ he said, ‘but we have to ask all these questions. Do our best to work out what happened.’

Together, we walked back to the living room, where I could hear Mrs Goode talking to the other officer. She was sitting with her back to the door and clearly didn’t hear us come in.

‘. . . lovely couple. . .’ she was saying. ‘Never a cross word, although he does work away a lot. It must be lonely for her.’

‘What kind of hours does he work?’ the woman PC said softly. ‘Evenings? Weekends?’

‘He’s away overnight quite often,’ Mrs Goode began.

‘I thought you were asking her about seeing Helen this morning,’ I burst out. ‘Not pumping her for information about our family.’

‘Mr Cooper. . .’ said the PC, in a conciliatory tone.

‘Instead of assuming I’ve murdered my wife and hidden her in the cellar, wouldn’t it be more useful if you actually got off your arses and got some officers out looking for her? For God’s sake!’ I knew I was yelling. I had to stop. I’d wake the girls.

But Miranda was awake anyway. She’d come down the stairs and was standing in the doorway that led from the hall, watching me yell at two police officers, hearing the word ‘murder’. We all saw her at the same time.

‘Randa. . .’ I said, reaching for her.

‘I’m sorry if we woke you,’ said the woman PC in a honeyed voice. ‘I’m PC Shah and this is my colleague, PC Stevens. We’re here to see what we can do to help find your mummy.’

‘She’s not my mother,’ said Miranda calmly, and the two PCs stared at her in silence.

## Miranda

Marguerite doesn't remember our mother, but I do. Her name was Leonora, and she was born in Italy. She came to England when she was eighteen years old to go to university, and that's where she met our dad. He says he liked her the moment he saw her, but she ignored him for two years. Once, I asked him if he had asked her out, and he said no, he just used to see her walking from class to class, but for ages he was too shy to talk to her.

'But if you never spoke to her, how was she ignoring you? If she didn't know you, how was she supposed to notice you?'

He laughed. 'I guess because I noticed her, I thought she might notice me. But she didn't. She'd just walk around alone or with her friends, and she was tall and slim and beautiful and mysterious.'

But then one day they met at a party and he did ask her out, and then they were together. They were sweethearts. I like it when he tells me the story and he says 'sweethearts', because that sounds old-fashioned and romantic and forever, like in a film.

And then they left university and started to work, and our mother was a musician, with a degree in music, and trying to make money playing her violin for concerts while she studied to be a music teacher, and our dad was a designer, trying to get work in advertising, and they lived in a flat in south London that was tiny, just one room and a bathroom, and they were as poor as church mice. I asked him why church mice were poorer than other mice, and he said because there was nothing to eat in the church but hymn books.

Anyway, then our mother got a job being a music teacher and then they had a little bit more money and then they got married. They saved some money and then they went travelling. Backpacking, it's called, when you put everything in a big bag like

a tortoise's shell on your back and you go to stay in grotty hostels and sleep on the beach. They went to lots of places, and I've seen pictures of them in India and Japan and riding elephants and in South America too. They were always laughing, and Dad had a big beard then and our mother was dark brown from all the sun.

And then they came back to settle down and start nesting. First they were church mice, and then they were birds building a nest, and whenever Dad tells the story, then he says, 'And then along came you,' as if I was just passing by and I moved in with them, but what he means is I was born. My dad still didn't have a very good job. He was still trying to be a designer, so after a few months my mother went back to work as a teacher and Dad stayed home and looked after me. They got a little house in south London where they had lived before, and my mother worked in a school nearby. I was a baby, so I don't remember that part.

And then two years later, Marguerite was born, and my mother stayed home with her for six months and then she went back to work. Dad says she worked hard, teaching in the school and also teaching violin to other children in the evening and weekends to make money. And one day she was teaching at school and she fell down. They thought she had fainted, but she didn't wake up and they called an ambulance. And when the ambulance took her to the hospital they found she had died. Something broke in her brain, a vein or something.

'Did it hurt?' Marguerite always asks.

'I don't think so,' Dad always says. 'I think it was more like a light going out.'

'Do you think she was scared?' I want to ask. 'Do you think before the lights went out she thought about us and what would happen to us?' But I never do ask, because I don't want to know the answer. I don't want to think of her seeing the darkness coming and not being able to stop it.

Anyway, that was a very hard time for our family, and Dad didn't know what to do, so he had to come back to north London and we moved in with Granny and Grandpa. Dad stopped trying to be a designer and got a job doing client services in the advertising agency, which is different, and you have to wear a suit and go for dinner and drinks and do schmoozing, but you get a lot more money. And after he had been doing that for about a year, he met Helen at work. She had come from Australia to live in England, not too long before Daddy met her. 'Down Under,' she said. She didn't say under what.

The first time they went on a date, Marguerite and I came too. We all went for a picnic in the park. Helen was kind and pretty, and when we walked in the park, she and Dad each held one of my hands and said, 'One, two, three, wheee!' and swung me off my feet, and then Marguerite, who was two, said, 'Me! Me!' and they did it for her too. It was nice. Actually, I'm not sure if I remember it, but there's a picture of us all in the park that day, and Dad has told us the story often. He couldn't believe a lady from work could be so nice to his two little children. Anyway, Helen started spending more time with us all, and as Dad likes to say, the rest is history. They fell in love and got married, and then Dad got a big promotion at work and bought this house. That meant that Granny couldn't look after us and pick us up from school because it was too far, and Helen gave up her job to look after us.

It's not a secret at school that Helen isn't actually my mother – the teachers know and everything – but I don't talk about it to my friends. Marguerite calls her Mummy, but I don't like calling her Helen, and she isn't actually my mother, so I don't call her anything. I like it that everyone at school says she's the best mum – the prettiest and best at organizing and cakes and stuff, and I don't say 'She's not my mum' when they say stuff like that. Some of the other children are late, or their school uniform is dirty or

they don't bring their homework on the right day, and that never happens to us. It's not so stressful that way, with Helen making everything okay. I sometimes wonder what my real mother would have been like – would she have done my hair so perfectly for my ballet exam as Helen does, or would she have been one of those messy, late mothers? Would I have minded if she was my mum? I don't know. Life has lots of questions we will never know the answers to.