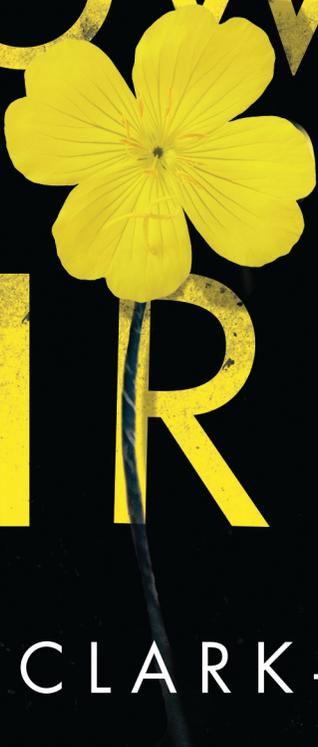


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For Tom, Constance and India



# PART ONE



## CHAPTER ONE

1997

Rosie was aware of nothing apart from her sister's shadow. It spiked, jagged and black, across the stippled, sunburnt grass. She skipped inside its edges, her white leather sandals dipping into the cool before springing out, feeling once again the blister of sunlight.

She hopped in and out of Laurel's shadow like a sprite, seeing only the ground as she danced, watching the grass change to asphalt beneath her. They flitted past the unoiled swings where children squeaked, throwing their flying silhouettes onto the grey concrete of the playground, then past the colossal oak tree that shaded the white-and-red awning of the trailer café where a circle of mothers clustered, holding Styrofoam cups of coffee. Then they turned left, in the direction of the old metal rocking horse that creaked back and forth, its seats worn shiny and pale.

Jumping over the cracks in the concrete, Rosie skidded to a halt at the platform alongside the horse. Still gazing down at the ground, she could see her sister's feet below the horse's mouth, her scuffed red trainers, one on top of the other, the laces split short and untied. Above the trainers, attached to legs astride the horse, she could see the flowery

buckled shoes of a toddler, her podgy toes bunched up beneath a strap, her ankles fat like coddled cream.

Rosie lifted her head. Her eyeline reached that of the blank-faced horse. Metal rolls of hair curled down the mane to where the toddler's fingers clung tightly to the strands of frayed rope that served as reins.

'Where's your mother?' Laurel asked the little girl.

Rosie moved her gaze to her sister. The leaves of the oak tree swayed quietly above them; a breeze kissed their foreheads damp with sweat.

'Do you like sweeties?' Laurel said. 'I've got some if you like.'

Rosie felt the top of her lip prickle. She said nothing, though. Just waited.

The toddler shifted on the seat at the front of the horse. She wore a yellow T-shirt with a daisy on it. Light blue shorts. She had a clip in her hair, pink and shimmery. Rosie raised her hand to touch it. It was beautiful. Like the toddler's golden hair.

The little girl turned her head to where her mother stood, coffee cup in hand. Her mouth opened in a soft little 'oh'.

'Sssshhh . . .' whispered Laurel and the toddler hesitated. 'Do you know where the fairies live?' she asked. 'They live in a little dell, just down there.' And she flung her hand out, pointing over the playground fence, to where the grass dipped down and the land stretched out beyond where they could see. 'Just there. They live in tiny houses. Under buttercups and snowdrops. It's beautiful,' she said.

Rosie watched as the toddler's gaze followed the line of her sister's hand. As her eyelashes widened at the beautiful

and incomprehensible names her sister gave the fairies: *Titania; Cobweb; Mustardseed.*

Rosie began to dance and spring again, in and out of the shadow of her sister as it moved once more across the playground. She whispered the names to herself: *Lily* and *Bluebell* and, her favourite, *Rosebud.*

They skipped over the rough ground, the grey of the paving stones, through the gate and back onto the sun-stained grass, its coarse, unmowed tufts grazing their calves, flattening dock leaves as they passed. And then down the slope they went, down into the cool and the shade of the line of oak trees that stood guard, wise and silent, running the whole length of the old canal path.

That was where they went.

Down to the grass-filled gully as the trees whispered above them, watching them and waiting.

For what was yet to come.

## CHAPTER TWO

It is on Hazel Archer's twenty-fifth birthday that the second girl goes missing.

The child is only five years old, with hair like Snow-White's and a rosebud mouth all puckered and soft in a never-ending pout. She was last seen as the light fell away from the land and the Devon coastline became a swathe of rough, black shadows. Night has drawn in quickly around the hotel, which perches high on a promontory over the English Channel, dark folds of rock stretching down to where the sea pounds on the wintry shore, gravelly waters pulling in and out like monstrous pistons.

Hazel is at her dressing table in the hotel room when the alarm is sounded. Jonny hums to himself, shaving at the bathroom mirror. Evie is next door in her own room, undoubtedly plugged into her headphones, eyes half-closed, long painted fingernails tapping along to the tinny beats in her ears.

The rapping on the bedroom doors begins along the corridor. At first, Hazel assumes it is room service, delivering aperitifs before the New Year celebrations start in earnest. But the knocking is too quick and moves on too swiftly for that. There is no cheerful clank of a bottle on glass, no surprised laughter or thank yous. Instead, there is a swift and sudden change of mood. A sea mist seems to

swirl frantically down the corridors, chasing ahead, while searchlights beam on each and every room.

Jonny opens the door. A towel is around his waist, soap still clinging to his cheeks, his cropped, dark hair damp from the steam in the bathroom. Mr Lamb, the manager of Balcombe Court, stands outside in the corridor. Across the way, another staff member is knocking on doors opposite. Inside their bedroom, all is soft-furnished and -hued: a four-poster bed, winged velveteen-covered armchairs, mahogany bow-legged tables. Outside, it is a different country: the air is fraught with panic.

‘Is everything all right?’ Jonny enquires.

Mr Lamb is short and compact. He bounces uneasily on the balls of his feet, his breathing pinched and held tight. ‘A little girl’s gone missing,’ he says. ‘Her name’s Georgie. Over an hour ago – nearly two.’ He skewers Jonny with a stare before shifting his gaze beyond the line of his shoulder, over to where Hazel sits. ‘Have you seen her, either of you?’

Jonny turns back to Hazel and they look at each other. After the merest second, they shake their heads almost in unison, mouths drawn closed, perceptibly nonplussed.

‘No,’ Jonny says. ‘We’ve been in here for an hour, I’d say. Wouldn’t you, Hazel? I haven’t seen any little girl.’ He frowns. ‘Maybe at lunch? I think I saw her in the dining room earlier. She’s the small dark-haired one, with the baby brother?’

Hazel’s eyes are wide, her skin shiny with moisturiser. Her hands are gathered in her lap. ‘Where was she last seen?’ she asks.

Mr Lamb shakes his head impatiently, keen to be off looking for the girl. ‘She’s five years old,’ he says, as if that is an answer. ‘Her mother is distraught. If you see her ...’

Jonny nods again.

‘Of course,’ Hazel replies. ‘Let us know if we can help.’

‘We can join in a search,’ Jonny adds.

‘Yes, yes,’ Mr Lamb answers. He lifts his eyes to the ceiling, as if praying to the gods. ‘There’s a storm coming, you see. If she’s outside ...’

Hazel glances out of the mullioned window. The sky is pitch black beyond the glass. Balcombe Court is isolated, balanced as if on the air atop the sea. If Georgie is lost out there, she could fall down over the headland. She could be badly injured.

‘You could ask Evie,’ Hazel suggests. ‘Jonny’s daughter is in the room next door,’ she explains. ‘Jonny, go with Mr Lamb to check.’

‘Hang on, let me get some clothes,’ he says, retreating to the bathroom. He emerges a few seconds later, tousled in jeans and T-shirt, and he and Mr Lamb hurry along the corridor. Hazel stands as she hears a short rap on a door, the sound of Evie’s voice as she opens it, the murmurings explaining why they are there. Hazel moves to the window and looks out to where the yellow lights of the hotel seep onto the snowy ground.

She scrutinises her reflection in the dark glass. From downstairs, the aroma of roast meat, caramelised vegetables and garlic, of fruit punch and red wine, creeps into the room and she feels a similar sense of nausea as she had done once as a child, lying upstairs with a fever while her mother fried onions down below. She leans her forehead against a diamond of cold, damp glass framed by lead and history.

‘Happy birthday, Hazel,’ she whispers. ‘Happy birthday, precious girl.’

## CHAPTER THREE

The cries of Georgie Greenstreet's mother are tearing through the hotel like violent jags of rainwater.

Hazel is clothed now, her red dress on, her high-heeled shoes ready by the door. Jonny is in his suit and they stand facing each other, their faces strained.

'They'll cancel the dinner, I expect,' he says.

Hazel presses her lips together, a bite of irritation stabbing within her at his acceptance of the status quo. They have been stuck in this room for an hour since the manager's visit, despite Hazel trying to persuade Jonny to go downstairs and see what's going on, what's happening with the other guests. But he has been firm, telling her they should wait for further instructions from Mr Lamb.

'They don't need us bothering them now,' he says. 'They've got enough on their plates.'

Hazel tries to ignore the feeling she has been having lately – only in the last few weeks, since they have been planning this trip, in fact, and cajoling Evie to come with them – that Jonny's concern with not bothering other people is a trait which, later down the line in their relationship, will cause Hazel to resent him, to lash out in frustration, pound a figurative wall with her fists, that he is so laid-back.

At the same time, she looks at him standing there in his crisp white shirt and his dove-grey tie and feels wrapped

in a strength that shields her from everything in the past, and what might happen in the future. Even when he is dressed, she can imagine the weight of him, the feel of his muscular arms around her. Is this what marriage is like? she wonders. A constant balancing act between infatuation and impatience. Not that they are actually married yet, but it seems probable, and Jonny has never caused her to worry that it won't be the case. He is an ally, she knows this. He has taken on burdens with her that no other man would shoulder. Even with Evie, his daughter from his previous marriage – even then – he has introduced Hazel with such eagerness, such pride to have her in his life.

But despite all of this, surely he must see the danger of the situation? With the girl missing? She turns back to the mirror, searching her perfectly made-up face, trying to imagine what others will think when they see it. How she will be judged. Her heart roils inside her chest, caught between the childish sense that what is happening is unjust, and fearful anticipation of what is yet to come. Whatever Jonny says, they should be downstairs, figuring out what to do, finding out what the hotel management are planning.

‘Will they call the police?’ Hazel asks him, her eyes febrile and bright.

‘Coastguard first, I would think,’ he answers, hands in his pockets, leaning back against the door. ‘If Lamb’s right, and the weather’s turning bad, they’ll want to search the beach before it kicks in. Storms are epic around here. You wouldn’t want to be anywhere near the sea in one.’ Jonny stops talking and takes a breath as if a thought has just occurred to him. Again, Hazel feels that bite of irritation, that feeling of being ten steps ahead. He comes over to her

and cradles her face between his palms. ‘Oh, sweetheart, are you worried? About the police coming?’

With an effort, Hazel swallows her frustration. Her hands tremble as she places them on his shoulders. ‘Of course I am. What do you think?’ She closes her eyes briefly. ‘A five year old going missing. It’s . . .’ She shakes her head, unable to finish.

‘It’s going to be fine,’ Jonny says. ‘I promise. You’ve got nothing to worry about. I’m here, aren’t I?’

Hazel leans her head against his chest, breathing in the scent of him, feeling that solid frame, strong as oak, which props her up. It’s only when she straightens that she sees, with the force of a whiplash, electric-blue swirls chasing rapidly across the walls. Then she realises that her fears have materialised, and her head begins to spin along with the lights that circle the room from outside.

Turning together to the window, they see the harsh, unremitting lights burning from the two police cars that have drawn quietly up in the snow.

## CHAPTER FOUR

The jaunty Christmas trees by the hotel entrance twinkle persistently under the barrage of freezing water that has begun to fall like nails from the sky. Detective Constable Lorna Hillier pulls up as close to the front door as she can, her car skidding slightly as she brakes.

She has a checklist running through her brain at high speed. Close off entrances and exits; check CCTV (if any); confirm timings of guests; search all hidey-holes; PNC checks on everyone in the hotel for sex-register entries; liaise with the coastguard regarding search parameters; consider the necessity of a child rescue alert. Words like *murder* and *kidnap* leap around her head. Her eyes flit from wall to window, ears pricked as the weather changes shape outside.

‘Could do without this storm,’ she says to Mr Lamb, who greets her in the hotel lobby. They stand in front of the fireplace, their shadows dancing around the mahogany panelling. Behind them seven-foot-tall Christmas tree dominates the area in front of the desk, where an eavesdropping receptionist leans forward. ‘It’s going to make the search near-on impossible.’ Hillier glances at the ceiling. ‘Are the parents upstairs?’

‘Yes – with the baby. They’re not in a good way.’

‘That’s understandable,’ Hillier replies. ‘How many guests are staying here?’ she says, assessing the two

corridors leading off from reception. There will be other exits, she thinks, other nooks and crannies where a child could hide or be hidden. ‘How many staff?’

‘I’ll get you a full list from the register,’ the hotel manager answers, shifting in his tweed suit, rising up onto his toes. He is barely an inch taller than Hillier and this is bothering him, she observes. ‘Would you like to see the parents now?’

Hillier glances at him, noting his glum expression. ‘Yes, and then I’ll want to talk to the guests. Perhaps you can gather them in the lounge? And . . . the chef?’ She looks at her small spiral-bound notebook. ‘In your call, you said he saw Georgie at around three p.m.?’

‘She came to see the kittens,’ Mr Lamb says. ‘We found them in a box down on the beach earlier. Someone obviously wanted to dump them. Marek – the sous-chef – brought them here. He put them in the pantry, just out the back of the kitchen.’ Mr Lamb nods in the direction of the wall behind Hillier. ‘Marek says that Georgie came in earlier, wanting to see them, and he showed her and they gave them some milk together. Then she went away.’ He exhales mournfully.

‘Went where?’

Mr Lamb hesitates. ‘I don’t know – we don’t know,’ he says at last.

‘How long has Marek . . . Surname?’

‘Kaczka.’

‘How long has he worked at Balcombe Court?’

‘Eighteen months. He’s a good lad. And why would he say he’d seen her if he’d . . . ?’ Lamb’s sentence peters out.

Hillier says nothing, making another note on her pad. She looks up as the constable first on the scene, Tom Ellis,

comes into the hotel from outside, shaking droplets of water from his jacket.

‘Nothing,’ he says in answer to her unspoken question. ‘The boys are searching everywhere. Checking all the guest rooms, the places you told us about.’ He jerks his chin at the hotel manager.

‘OK’, Hillier says, raising her voice above the steady gun-fire sound of the rain drumming on the windows. ‘Mr Lamb, think carefully, please. Are there any other places you know of that Georgie might have crawled into? If she was exploring, could she have found a secret hiding place? The hotel’s so old, surely it has crawl spaces that might be attractive to a five year old?’

‘I’ve racked my brains,’ he says, his voice edging towards contained hysteria. ‘I’ve told you everywhere I can think of. The coal hole, I told you about. The outbuildings.’ He shakes his head, eyebrows pulled down deep together. ‘I’m sorry. I can’t think of anywhere else.’

Hillier nods and squares her shoulders. ‘Right then,’ she says. ‘Let’s go and see Mr and Mrs Greenstreet.’ She turns to leave, pulling Ellis to one side. ‘In the meantime, run checks on all the staff’s and guests’ timings. Especially the sous-chef, Marek Kaczka. He’s the last person to have spoken to Georgie. And then I want to see all the hotel guests for a chat.’

## CHAPTER FIVE

The rain continues its arrhythmic drumming as the police search the hotel. They bring the bitter wind inside with them, which mingles impudently with the warmth of the reception and the smell of pine needles. The piano ballad playing softly through the speakers is drowned out by their damp hustling. It is as if the legs of Balcombe Court have been shoved out from beneath it and now it lies flat on its back, struggling to right itself in the eye of the storm.

Max Saunders watches the police from his observation point in an alcove a little way down the hall from the reception desk. He sits there with a whisky and ginger and a copy of *The Times*, studying the activity over the rims of his glasses.

He looks on as the hotel staff usher the police through, under the medieval stone archways of the reception hall, into the lounge where velvet curtains hide the ice clouds outside, poised and waiting, thick and furred and cold.

Balcombe Court.

First a Saxon hall then a nest of the Bubonic plague, later a coaching inn then jewel of the English Riviera. And soon-to-be location of *The Buccaneer's Daughter*. What was it his agent had called it? Historical fiction with a twist. Everything has to have a bloody twist these days, Max thinks, folding his paper and getting to his feet. Why, in

God's name, can't he just write a good old-fashioned story and be thanked for it?

He heads in the opposite direction from the police, into the billiards room where low lights do nothing to assuage the force of the Devon dark. He wraps his arms around himself, feeling the shape of his mobile phone in his shirt pocket. He should call home, speak to Alison. Wish them all a Happy New Year. It feels wrong though somehow, with the child missing. He looks at his watch. She's been gone for three hours now. He feels sick at the thought of it.

He paces around the billiards table, his glass dangling in his hand. Where are you, Georgie? Max thinks. Are you still alive, or are you floating somewhere in the deep cold waters of the Devon coastline, reaching down to the ghosts of pirates who lie on the bottom of the sea?

He's seen the little girl only a couple of times. She's a spritely thing, always jumping around, never still. She has a younger brother, a chubby blond baby who always seems to be sucking on a piece of soggy toast. But Georgie is dark-haired with eyes like black almonds and a mouth like a red bow tied on top of a present. Her parents are nice enough, with the ubiquitous purple shadows under their eyes of those with very young children. They've got that anxious quality about them, Max has observed. Forever second-guessing which ornament Georgie might crash into or which tablecloth the baby might make a grab for. Parenthood seems to Max to be a constant attempt to corral the wind. He and Alison had been through it with Polly and Grace, but now the girls are teenagers and as condescending as alms-giving courtiers (them) to peasants (he and Alison).

He shivers although the room isn't cold and moves to the window for some reason, searching beyond his reflection into the cold of the night. He holds his hands up, fingers touching the glass, tracing the rain as it gushes down in an endless stream. He feels the warmth of his breath, the sound of his exhaling ominously calm. It is as if time has stopped for a millisecond. There is a fraction of silence in the midst of the rattling on the glass. It seems as though the downpour might have eased, that the weather has exhausted itself, turned in and gone back home. Then the sky is ripped from corner to corner, with a blistering light and a tearing sound.

Now he understands.

The ice comes slowly at first. Deliberate, with pointed teeth. It strikes the ground like spears. Max's breathing catches as he watches it fall indiscriminately, shattering through the dark like crystal shards. He presses his fingers against the glass as if he's reaching for outside, feeling for the cliff top where the coastguards search with their sweeping beams. He shuts his eyes briefly, flashes of his own daughters' faces shooting through his mind, realising how desperate the situation is. Because if that little girl isn't found soon, she will be dead.

Trapped under frozen rain in the ice storm.

## CHAPTER SIX

There is a faint bellow of foghorns on the wind. Then the sound of ships tussling with the waves, doing battle with the ice falling from the sky in sheets. The noise engenders a terrible sense of claustrophobia in Hazel and pinpricks of fear pinch at her as she and Jonny make their way down the staircase to the hotel lounge.

Outside, a world of white that has transfigured the garden. Ice debris covers everything in sight. A water barrel resembles the bottom half of a snowman, and intricate webs of snow and remnants of hail are strung together like diamond necklaces between the bare branches of the apple trees.

The tension in the air crackles like cellophane. But despite this the lounge clings bravely on to the mellifluous calm of a cosy room on New Year's Eve. Hazel's hand is clamped in Jonny's. If she could shut her ears and ignore the sound of the storm, try and swallow down the fearful bile that burns in her throat, she might be able to pretend that this is all just as they'd planned, Jonny and she: a trip to Devon for her birthday, to the hotel where he'd come as a boy. Bringing Evie with them, hoping that the holiday would draw them closer together, because the fact that Hazel is only eleven years older than Jonny's daughter is an itch everyone acknowledges but no one dares to scratch.

Evie has followed them into the room, fully made up, tottering on heels that only a fourteen year old would wear for an interrogation by the police. Hazel and Jonny sit quietly on a love seat underneath one of the ice-battered windows. Balcombe Court is fully booked for New Year's Eve. Forty guests have gathered, sombre and grave-faced. Before them stands Mr Lamb, hands linked behind his back, swaying to and fro on his feet, waiting for them and the staff to settle like birds onto branches at sundown.

Max has wandered into the lounge from the billiards room. He fingers a packet of cigarettes in his trouser pocket and leans on a wall at the back, his eyes moving from staff member to guest, observing their muted anxiety, their nervous chatter. He is the first to notice DC Hillier when she enters, her notebook tucked away, her eyes bright and keen. She is in her late-forties, he surmises, with curly brown hair scraped back into a tight knot. Energy buzzes from her as she surveys the gathering, gazing at each of them as acutely as Max has done.

'It is our view,' she begins, 'that Georgie Greenstreet is no longer in the hotel.' She waits a second to let that sink in. 'We've searched the building thoroughly but I'm afraid to say she still hasn't been found.' Hillier lifts her head towards the window as a crack of thunder splits the sky above. 'As you can see – and hear – the weather is abominable. I've been told by the coastguard that the search will have to be abandoned until morning.'

A wave of concern breaks through the room at this. A spark flies from the fire and lands on the rug by Hillier's foot. She grinds it into the carpet with her black lace-up shoe, eyes never leaving her audience. 'I know that you are

eager to help in any way you can,' she continues. 'At present, however, there isn't much that can be done until daylight returns and the storm dies down. Right now, all we need is for you to provide myself and PC Ellis with your details and an approximation of your movements this afternoon and evening. Then all we can do is wait.'

'How is Mrs Greenstreet?' an elderly lady asks from a corner of the lounge. 'The poor woman . . .'

A sympathetic murmuring breaks out among the guests and Hazel grips Jonny's hand, her thumb rubbing his in a compulsive pattern.

'She is very grateful for your concern,' Hillier answers. 'And doing OK under the circumstances.'

'Officer,' a man in a colour-blocked rugby shirt cuts in. 'Look, I'm ex-TA. The weather's fierce, sure, but this is a little girl we're talking about. You can't call off the search. If she's out there in this . . .'

Hillier holds up her hands, palms facing out, to stop him talking. She looks calm but Hazel can see a gleam in her eyes. It's an expression she recognises. A drive deep within, with tentacles so fierce and probing that they will reach into dark places, secret places that once were thought well hidden. It makes Hazel catch her breath, this look. At once she feels unutterably exhausted, beaten to the quick. She drops Jonny's hand, feels him glance at her uneasily but cannot meet his eyes. It's all she can do to remain upright and still, and try to keep invisible.

'As I say,' Hillier goes on, 'we do appreciate your concern but we would ask that you do as we advise. We don't want any more people outside, getting lost in this storm. It's treacherous. Please leave the searching to the

professionals. We would also request that no one departs from the hotel at present.'

'What do you mean?' the man in the rugby shirt interrupts again. 'Are you saying we can't leave?'

Hillier smiles at him. 'The weather wouldn't permit it in any event, sir. But I would ask that if you need to check out of the hotel tomorrow, you do so only after you have been questioned and provided us with full contact details.'

Hazel's hand searches again for Jonny's and clutches it tightly.

Hillier looks around the room, taking in their faces one by one. 'Right then,' she says brightly. 'PC Ellis and I will call you in one at a time. Thank you.'

As she spins round and leaves, Max is reminded of a soldier and wonders briefly if Hillier is ex-military. He studies the guests as they sink back into random disquiet. The man in the rugby shirt is gesturing to his wife, a disgusted look on his face. A group of older women sitting together in a huddle seem close to tears. The couple on the window seat are motionless and silent. Their teenage daughter appears bored by the whole occasion, chewing gum and studying her fingernails.

Something about the woman by the window seems familiar although Max can't place what. It niggles at him like a prickle on his skin. There is an almost childlike quality about her, the way she clings to the man beside her. She's pretty but with the kind of delicate, petite appearance that he has never found wholly attractive. She's got a freckled, snub nose and dark brown hair cut like a boy's. But her eyes are those of a Cinecittà heroine and her lips have the warm, pendulous pout of an Ingrid Bergman. She seems sweet, a slight person; the type Alison would immediately pin down as *a girly girl*.

Alison is very much the opposite of a girly girl, with her Scandinavian genes and her strong-boned looks of a milkmaid. She'll be at the farm in Coventry now. He looks at his watch. They'll be sitting down to dinner, Alison raising her eyebrows if she sees his number light up on the screen of her phone. She'd probably show it to Rachael, and her sister would give her a sad look, rub her arm and pour her more wine. His name will be mud there tonight.

He's said sorry a thousand times. Explained that if he doesn't meet his deadline, he won't get his money. And then they'll be late on the school fees and that will incur a penalty. And, no, he can't write at Alison's parents' farmhouse because it will be filled to the rafters with a horde of family members, yelling and arguing at all hours of the day and night, and he unable to hear himself think. Despite the (tax-deductible) expense, he has to come to Balcombe to write here, where *The Buccaneer's Daughter* is set. It was all obvious to him, but unfortunately not to Alison, who sets family above all other concerns, including, it appears, keeping a roof over said family's head.

And so, on the day after Boxing Day, Max packed his case and hoisted his laptop bag over his shoulder and took the three trains required to travel from the terraced house he and Alison live in just outside Birmingham to this remote edge of Devon. Now he sighs, abandoning the pointless rehashing of it all. He feels for his cigarettes again and decides to brave the freezing cold for a smoke.

Hazel barely notices him go; she sees nobody else in the room, so immersed is she in her thoughts. She stares down intently at her thumb circling Jonny's, over and over again.

That look.

That look the policewoman had given her right before she left. It's a look that takes Hazel straight back to the old canal path.

And, at once, it is as if a chasm has opened up beneath her, and all the castles in the air she has built over the years – with Jonny, with her job, her colleagues – are minutes away from being dashed to smithereens. Like the pirate vessels on the rocks down from the headland where the hotel sits, her treasures will be discarded, tossed out, picked over . . . and then the vilification will begin.

And Jonny. Is he brave enough for this? Can he see it as she can, what's to come? She stays small and tight, curled up like cigarette paper, her heart warm and beating, but damaged. She comes to this place tonight with all of that inside her. But Jonny? He can't understand what it's like. How can he? Can he really know that he will stay, when everything is out in the open, trickling down, carving its mark in the rocks forevermore?

That look.

Down in the gully behind the garden.

By the willow trees above the bank, spouting leaves onto the ground like a lime-green fountain. The far-off laughter of children running in the playground, the sun on their faces, wind in their hair.

That's the look that started it all. The look that meant everything from then on must be hidden. Tucked away in secret.

Her secret.

Her past.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

The guests file one by one into the room where Hillier and Ellis sit behind a stack of paper and two cooling cups of coffee. They sit down. Some are nervous, some brash. Most of them have inexplicable guilt washed over their complexions, a desperate need to convince Hillier that they are not the ones responsible, that they have not taken the child.

Hillier recognises this misplaced reaction from the fifteen years she has spent on the force and the seven years before that serving as a lawyer in the Royal Navy Court Martial. She knows it well: that foreign and dirty beast that comes unwarranted to the entirely innocent because – and this is the bit she has never completely understood – it actually represents the thoughts these people are beyond relieved never to have acted on themselves. Hillier is certain that criminal impulses lurk unbidden in everyone. But it is only the people who act on those impulses that guilt can claim as its victims. The rest of us feel it but shake it off, thankful to God, or whatever it is that guides our moral compass, that we are able to control it.

Thus Hillier is confident that most of the guilty-looking guests who come before her and Ellis have no knowledge of what has happened to Georgie Greenstreet.

Most of them.

There are two, however, who interest her.

The first is the sous-chef, Marek Kaczka. It is now nearly midnight, and the witching hour, compounded by the fact that it is New Year's Eve, means normal response time at Brixham police station is slower than usual with a skeletal overtime budget meaning a skeleton staff. The rest of her colleagues will be tied up dealing with the drunken fights and skirmishes that dominate proceedings this time of year. Instinctively, Hillier feels that Kaczka will have a record, some kind of infraction in his past, but she is not going to be able to trace that tonight. So she bides her time and leaves him to sweat a bit. She interviews him cursorily, suspecting that anything he says will be tainted with untruths in any event.

Her second point of interest is the petite, pretty woman who comes into the room with her partner and can't look Hillier in the eye.

Hazel Archer.

Something in her face is familiar to Hillier. It buzzes at her, exasperatingly out of reach, like a troublesome fly. The woman has an unusual quality about her. Hillier can't tell what it is. Either she is entirely cold, or she has buttoned up her feelings and is in fact completely paralysed by fear. She and her partner, Jonny Newell, claim to have been together all afternoon, either as a couple or with his fourteen-year-old daughter, Evie. They arrived at the hotel yesterday morning and today is Hazel's birthday. They have come here to celebrate that, and the New Year, and they are terribly, awfully worried about Georgie and where she could be.

But something in all that they say rings hollow for Hillier. A glimmer in Hazel Archer's eyes sparks a feeling in her. It's an instinct born of hundreds of nights spent dealing with drunks and tramps and burglars, sifting through them to

find those people who are truly worthy of her attention: the real criminals. Hillier has refused any promotion up the ranks, has deliberately remained as Detective Constable for the majority of her career. And the reason for that decision is because *this* exact moment, that dances around her now, is what thrills her, rare as it is. She can leave management evaluations to her superiors, along with budget concerns and staffing problems. As DC, her chief responsibility is to get to a crime scene first and this is the moment she relishes. That flash in time when a hunter trains her rifle sights on an animal quivering in the bush. When she faces the mask of innocence and knows, right down to the marrow in her bones, that it is a lie. Whether Hazel Archer is guilty of the disappearance of Georgie Greenstreet is yet to be determined. But Hillier can feel that Archer is, without a doubt, guilty of something.

The policewoman sniffs and dismisses her for now, stashing her papers away, her mind still whirring with what she has gleaned from the interviews tonight.

One by one the lights are switched off, first downstairs and then above, as the guests all go to bed with tired eyes open, staring into the dark, wondering about the missing little girl and where she might be.

Ellis puts snow chains on the car and he and Hillier drive off into the Devon countryside. She doesn't look back, as the pale outline of the hotel fades into the ghostly snow-filled night.

She will return first thing in the morning.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

New Year's Day in South London is slow. Coffee and more coffee and a shower turned blistering hot and then freezing cold. Joanna Denton bites her lip, shutting her eyes to the physical sensation, welcoming the pain and discomfort. This is what will make the hangover dissipate. Caffeine and agony.

Last night in the club she'd drunk tequila shot after tequila shot, trying to reach that place in her head where she could forget everything – as 'Auld Lang Syne' so aptly suggests. But the buzz had eluded her as she'd stood on the periphery of the club where her friends were jumping like jacks to House of Pain and she'd thought, *Yeah, that sums it up.*

So she'd left the club. Walked alone on the Embankment in shoes soaked with booze, breathed in the frosty London air and watched the lights of the city burn. As she'd left the river, she'd had the usual thoughts. The fear that her life was meagre in contrast to that of her friends. Where their lives gush with invitations – to parties and dinners; gallery openings; children's birthdays; beach holidays – Joanna merely subsists. Day after day, rousing herself to do battle with better-paid lawyers in nicer offices with, unlike her, a supportive partner at home who listens sympathetically to tales of their day whilst pouring endless amounts of red wine.

Where was the joy for her? she'd asked herself for the millionth time, her feet sore and cold from the walk. For a

brief moment, glancing up at a broken street light, she had felt like crying. Where was the sense that her life had meaning? That it fed something inside her, apart from the anger she had clad in armour for all these years?

She had wiped a hand across her cheeks crossly. What was the point of crying? She can't forget her job. Can't go and do something painless, something mindless, because always the loop returns to the fact that she can't let it go. She can't ever stop thinking about those people who leave so much pain in their wake, so much chaos. Those criminals who, in their selfishness – or their madness – reach inside another human being and rearrange the configuration of their spirit. Change them indelibly so that they are never the same soul as they were before *it* happened.

At last Joanna had arrived at her flat, wanting desperately to sleep but unable to block out thoughts of the stack of paperwork she could envisage waiting on her desk at the office or the memory of what drives her every day.

The image of two-year-old Kirstie Swann.

Her niece.

Brutally murdered in the gully of a long-disused canal. Beaten to death and then left to rot while her killer went home for dinner.

Joanna's always thinking about her.

Kirstie's killer.

And how she will never be allowed to leave prison while Joanna Denton has anything to do with it.

She dresses quickly, pulling on jeans and flat boots; an old university hoodie over a plain white T-shirt. Her only concession to vanity is to brush her long brown hair and

tie it up in a bun, but then she is out of the door and striding for the Northern line back up towards Borough, where the Bang to Rights office is situated. As it is New Year's Day, everything is shut up and quiet. The café where she normally buys her daily croissant is closed and the Tube is empty, seats stretching beside her filled with nothing more than the ghosts of the usual thousands of commuters.

Joanna reaches the office after she's found an open Pret A Manger at Borough Tube and bought another coffee and an apple. She can't stomach anything more. The tequila from last night still churns inside her, making her feel as though she could throw up at any moment.

She doesn't expect Will to be there, but he is. The door is unlocked and his bike is blocking the tiny corridor of the small space they rent. Joanna and Will met at Manchester University over twenty years ago in their first contract law tutorial. In the Union bar they had become friends, drinking pints of beer and planning their future. They would both leave their childhood homes in the North and come to seek their fortunes in London. Will would work for a City law firm, learning how to merge and acquire, and – as Joanna would point out – survive on minimum sleep while making money for a bunch of men in suits who would barely know his name. She, on the other hand, would train at a high-street firm that specialised in immigration and criminal law, earning approximately a quarter of what Will would be paid.

Joanna would tease him that he would become a sell-out, wasting his life lining the pockets of people who didn't deserve to benefit from his brain cells.

‘And what about you?’ he’d ask, fixing her with a stare. ‘How are you going to change the world, stuck out in Shepherd’s Bush helping a bunch of crims?’

Joanna wouldn’t answer this but sat silently instead, curled up on the ratty leather sofa, a cigarette dangling over the edge of one arm, ash lengthening until it dropped into the ashtray on the floor.

Then, just before they graduated, she had received the telephone call that had changed her plans forever. As intended, she had moved down to London to work.

But Joanna did not become a lawyer.

Throughout the entire trial of the killer of her niece, Joanna had sat holding her sister’s hand, making sure she ate enough; helping her to stand and leave the courtroom when it all got too much. And after that, she had begun working for Bang to Rights.

It was a tiny organisation that lobbied the government on behalf of victims. BTR liaised with Victim Support, it mediated between victims and the police, and it campaigned tirelessly for longer sentences proportionate to the crimes committed. Eventually, Joanna’s old boss had retired and she had taken on the running of the lobbying group herself. In that time, Will had married and, upon the birth of his daughter, resigned from his City law firm and come to work with Joanna. It meant that he took home far less money, but he insisted that he would at least be able to see more of his family and do so with a clear conscience.

Old habits die hard, though, and a workaholic nature is hard to tame.

‘But I’m not here for long,’ he says as he hears Joanna jogging up the stairs to the minuscule office they share. ‘Lucy’s

at her parents' house today with Jemima so I thought I'd put in an hour or two before heading there for lunch.'

'I would have got you a coffee if I'd known,' Joanna replies. 'Thanks, Will. There's so much to do,' she continues, looking round at the piles of paper on every available surface. 'We really need a secretary.'

'Fat chance on our budget. How was last night?'

'Oh, all right. Too much booze.' She grimaces and puts her coffee to her lips. 'There isn't enough caffeine in the world today, frankly.'

'Why didn't you stay in bed then?' Will asks, knowing what the answer will be. 'One day isn't going to hurt.'

Joanna sits down at her desk and reaches across to turn on her computer. 'Yes, it will,' she says. 'Remember Mo Farah, William. Let us always remember Mo.'

Will grins, turning back to his own screen. Joanna had once read that the Olympian Mo Farah always trained on Christmas Day because, he said, other athletes would take it as a holiday, meaning he would be one day ahead of them in training.

'Anyway, I've got that radio show today. Remember? The New Year's debate on justice and sentencing?'

Joanna takes a gulp of coffee before clicking on to the BBC website and then exclaims, sucking in a breath. 'I don't believe it,' she says in a voice like lead. She swings the computer screen around so that Will can see. It's the third headline on the site, after the announcement of the Queen's New Year's Honours list and a bus crash in Wolverhampton. Joanna's eyes scan Will's face as he reads what's before him.

'Fuck,' he says at last.

'Yep,' she answers, rubbing her palms over her face before staring up at the ceiling. 'My thoughts exactly.'

## CHAPTER NINE

‘I think we should leave,’ Hazel says. Their bedroom is glaring white from the fresh snow that covers the ground outside. ‘There’s a poem,’ she says, running her hands over her face. ‘I can’t remember who wrote it, but it’s stuck with me. It says the snow is winter folding her linen. But it’s not, is it, Jonny? It may as well be a pit of writhing snakes. Where we are. Now, I mean.’ She turns round to look at him, propped up in bed, bare-chested, sleep-tousled. ‘We’re stuck here and the snakes are coiling round our ankles. It just seems crazy to stay when they’re going to say it’s me, pin it on me. Say that I’m involved at least. And . . .’ She looks at him, panic shadowing her face. ‘I want to go. Get out of here.’

‘We can’t,’ he answers, his eyes fixed on hers.

The early morning is quiet, the winter sun just above the horizon. The sounds of the hotel are muffled: the occasional clang of cutlery on glass, the aroma of coffee percolating up through the floor. The air has that stillness, an atonal hum of peace, which lengthens languidly before it is overtaken by the clamour of industry and the brio of a day that is gathering momentum.

‘If we leave,’ Jonny says, ‘we look guilty. It’s obvious. We have to stay and see what happens. See if the girl is found.’

Hazel extends her arms to him, splays her palms as if presenting him with the room. ‘But all of this, Jonny – all of

this will be gone. You don't understand. You haven't been there. I have. Once people know . . . all of this – all of my life as I know it now – will be taken away from me.'

Jonny breathes in deeply, pushes back the covers and gets out of bed. He pulls Hazel towards him. Her arms drop down by her sides, limp as a doll's.

'You can't hide forever,' he says into her hair.

'But this,' she says again, pushing him away, 'isn't the way. With a girl missing it's too similar. To before. They'll attack me – attack us. They'll say it was me.'

'But we know it isn't.'

Hazel looks at him. 'It doesn't matter. Once the press come – and they will – they'll be like a pack of dogs.' Her voice begins to rise. 'You don't know what it was like. For my parents. For all of us. They won't let it go.'

'They will.' Jonny's voice is firm. 'They'll have to. There's nothing to link you to this girl, to what's happened here. It's just . . .' He grabs a handful of his hair in frustration. 'I do accept that it's appalling timing. I'm sorry.'

Hazel manages a small smile for him. It's all she can do as she realises that Jonny is on a different path from her. He is hoping that this is an aberration, something that will pass in the night like a fever. He doesn't see that nothing will be the same for them ever again. 'Oh God, Jonny,' she says and turns her back on him, looking once more out onto the snow. 'God help us now.'

Max is up too, sitting at the desk in his room, eyes glazed as he faces his laptop. He slept badly last night, staring up at the dark ceiling, thinking about Alison and his girls.

And Georgie.

Is she out there? he kept wondering. Huddled near the rocks, trying to get warm. Or is she being held somewhere against her will? Little Georgie, crying for her mother, not understanding why she's been taken away from her. Eventually he had got up and paced his room. Memories of Polly and Grace as babies, as toddlers, chubby, built like tanks, scattered through his mind. That utter dependence, no concept of fear, of any insecurity. He remembers them waddling around, big-eyed and messy-haired. Their smell of Johnson's baby powder, dried milk, lavender shampoo.

Now it is light and the night before seems like a dream. The New Year has come in less like a lamb than a phantom, a reckoning over a line drawn in the deep snow banked outside. Max can hear the sound of shovels as staff clear a path from the front door down the driveway. They are trying to lead the hotel back to reality, exorcising the spectres that floated above its medieval walls last night.

Balcombe Court is already filled with ghosts. Max has done his research. Headless coachmen; gluttonous gargoyles feasting on the entrails of maidens; lost loves of dead sailors; hung, drawn and quartered pirates. It has them all.

And now it has the spirit of Georgie Greenstreet. A half-spirit as yet, calling to them from wherever she is, alive or dead or somewhere in between. Max rubs his face and takes a long gulp of instant coffee made from the tiny kettle in his room before swigging from a bottle of Gaviscon, trying to quell the constant heartburn he has felt for weeks now. He has to work. He has fifteen hundred words to write today, missing child or not. His deadline looms just the

same as it did yesterday and if he wants to make it back to Alison and his girls by the middle of January, he has to finish this book.

He opens up the document and stares at the last paragraph he typed yesterday lunchtime. He had shut down the computer and then gone to the dining room to stretch his legs and order a sandwich. He had seen Georgie, sitting with her parents attacking a plate of spaghetti bolognese. The dining room was fairly empty. The only others in there were the people he had seen again last night, huddled together on the window seat. The pretty woman he now thinks of as Ingrid Bergman, and her partner and the teenage girl.

Max frowns and then closes his eyes. Where has he seen that woman before? Maybe in London when he was working there a few years ago for a literary magazine? A friend of a friend? He prods his fingers into his forehead, straining to remember, before sighing and giving up. Reminding himself that memory never works to order, he turns his thoughts back to *The Buccaneer's Daughter* and the scene he was struggling with the day before, where Constance Mandeville discovers that she is bound in marriage to Jago D'Aubert despite her love for Santo Perowne.

Max begins typing, his lips moving as he does, writing the scene again from the beginning, changing the location to the top of the cliffs where Santo climbs down to his ship, abandoning Constance after hearing of her betrothal. As he climbs, Constance – in her grief and despair – tosses a flower down after him. She chooses a primrose, the county flower of Devon.

Primrose.

Max's hands hover above the keyboard, his whole body frozen as the memory ricochets back to mind at last.

Minimising his manuscript, he brings up the internet and does a rapid search.

Of Primrose.

And murder.

## CHAPTER TEN

Hillier and her team arrive in a cacophony of slamming car doors and the crunch of boots on snow. She is the first into the hotel, removing her heavy black jacket and gloves as she steps into the fug of the reception hall.

The panelled walls of Balcombe are oppressive today, the lights on the Christmas tree glitter in the gloom, but Hillier doesn't register any of this. She heads straight upstairs to where she will find Georgie Greenstreet's parents, calling to the receptionist to let Mr Lamb know the police have arrived.

The hotel is doing its best to maintain an air of normality. Breakfast has been served as usual and guests are permitted to move around freely, although the severity of the weather restricts what they are able to do outside.

'People are asking to leave.' Mr Lamb appears, looking harried, calling after Hillier, scurrying behind her as she makes her way along one of the upstairs corridors. 'What should I tell them?'

Hillier stops and turns on her heel. 'They can't check out yet,' she replies. 'Let me talk to Jane Greenstreet, fill her in on what's happened overnight. Not that much *has*,' she concedes. 'But there are a couple of people I want to talk to again and I don't want them leaving before I do. So just hold fire, OK?'

He nods and backs away. ‘Do tell Mrs Greenstreet that she is welcome to order anything from the menu. On the house of course.’

A moment later Hillier is knocking on the Greenstreets’ door, opening it slowly as Declan Greenstreet calls for her to enter. His wife is sitting on the four-poster bed, her knees curled up to her chest. The curtains are half-drawn and Hillier can just make out the shape of the couple’s youngest child asleep in his cot.

Seeing the door open, Jane Greenstreet swings her legs off the bed in Hillier’s direction. Her face is wild and tear-stained, her hair coming loose from a raggedy knot at her neck.

‘Have you found her?’ she blurts hoarsely.

‘Sssshhhh,’ Declan says, gesturing to the cot, but Jane doesn’t listen, crossing the room to where Hillier stands.

‘Have you?’

Hillier tilts her head. ‘I’m sorry. The coastguard sent the helicopters up at first light. You can probably hear them. The boats are out too and we’ve got search parties down on the beach. We’re doing everything we can, I promise, Mrs Greenstreet.’

‘It’s been too long. She’ll be cold and hungry and frightened . . .’ Jane’s voice rises, her fingers clawing at her face. ‘I can’t bear it. I can’t think of her like that. I just can’t . . .’

Hillier glances at Declan, who stands pale and immobile, apparently unable to approach his wife and comfort her. ‘You’ve seen a doctor?’ she asks him quietly.

He nods, rousing himself from his trance and moving over to Jane to lead her back to the bed. ‘One of the other guests came up. They’ve given her some pills.’

‘I know it’s hard,’ Hillier says, glancing over at the cot. ‘But you need to look after yourselves and Charlie. Try and rest. We are doing everything we can,’ she repeats firmly. ‘Please trust us. We know what we’re about.’

‘What about one of those child rescue alert things?’ Declan asks in a low voice. ‘Have you done one of those?’

Hillier shakes her head. ‘Georgie’s disappearance doesn’t meet the criteria for an alert. At least not at the present time,’ she answers. ‘Realistically, someone from outside the hotel would have struggled to get up to Balcombe last night, let alone remove a child in that weather.’ She looks at Declan’s expression. ‘I’m not ruling anything out,’ she says. ‘But a child rescue alert is only used in specific circumstances where the public can help us find a missing child. We haven’t established that Georgie has left the perimeter of the hotel as yet. We need to rule out the beach and the surrounding land which the coastguard is doing right now. The relevant public are the guests here, the staff, not anyone in a wider vicinity. Please trust me,’ she says again. ‘We know what we’re doing.’

Jane Greenstreet pushes her hair out of her face and looks searchingly at her. ‘You promise?’ she asks desperately.

‘I swear,’ Hillier says, before turning and leaving the room.

Upstairs, from her bedroom window, Hazel has watched Hillier and the other policemen and women arrive. She sits winding her arms around herself and shivering. Jonny and Evie have gone down to breakfast but she can’t stomach a thing. Seeing the police has brought back the fear, visceral and hot. She feels panic rise in her, tries to swallow it down but can’t. Her eyes are fixed on the horizon, at the place

where the cliff edge meets the sky, the white of the snow almost indiscernible from the pale grey above. Down there, past the snow-covered heather, is the marled sea, bottle-green and angry. Is that where Georgie is? she thinks.

*Oh, Georgie, come home, she pleads. Come back and then all of this will be over. Where are you, Georgie? Where are you?*

Tears begin to fall from Hazel's eyes and she whirls round, her open suitcase the first item she sees. She hefts it onto the bed, and starts to throw things in. Some hers, some Jonny's, it doesn't matter. If she can just get out of here, she can work this out. She can drive away, back into civilisation where there is noise and the snow has melted and gone and she can think about what to do. She's got everything now, she estimates, and slams the case shut, drags it onto the floor. And then she's opening the door and is out in the corridor. She's boiling, sweating underneath her jumper and jeans, the case running along awkwardly behind her on its wheels. She'll call Jonny later, tell him where she's gone. Some travel inn on the motorway where no one can find her, where no one will know who she is.

The case bumps along the carpet until she reaches the top of the stairs that lead directly to reception. Hazel pauses, breathing hard, straining to hear whether anyone is down there. She has the car keys in her other hand and their car is parked five spaces away from the front door. For some reason, she counted them when they arrived the day before yesterday. It's as if she knew she would have to escape at some point. That nowhere is ever safe for her, that eventually she will have to resume running.

But now she just has to make it to the car and then pray that they've cleared the driveway of snow so that she can get out. They must have, it occurs to her sharply, otherwise how would the police have got up here? Once she's beyond the hotel grounds, she can make it.

Hazel begins to pull the case down behind her as she descends. Why has she brought it? she thinks. So stupid. She doesn't need clothes. She just needs her purse and the car keys. Too late now. She carries on, trying to make as little noise as possible. She rounds the bend on the small landing in the middle of the stairs, and halts as sounds emerge from below. She waits until she sees a guest leave the reception desk. She can hear the receptionist tapping on her computer. Does that matter? Will the girl stop her? Ask where she's going with her case? So idiotic to bring it, she tells herself again. Should she just leave it here on the stairs? Walk down casually without it, and out of the door to freedom?

'Hello there,' a voice says softly in her ear.

Hazel freezes.

'Checking out early, are you?'

Hazel is too terrified to turn around; to see what she imagines – *what she knows* – is a policeman, standing behind her. What will she say? How can she get herself out of this nightmare? She swallows, tears springing once again to her eyes.

'I wouldn't leave if I were you,' the voice continues. 'It wouldn't look good and you know it ...'

'... Rosie.'

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

1997

The baby has stopped crying for the moment. Her face, which for the last hour had been scrunched up and covered in snot, has flattened, exhausted by her yelling. Her little chest still heaves, though, as she hiccups in oxygen, her eyes wide as she stares at Laurel and Rosie.

The girls gather the baby like hens rustling a chick to one side, pushing her into the bushes, squashing themselves into the space only they know, where only they have been before. The movement makes the baby cry again, but Laurel and Rosie wear exhilarated expressions, their hearts big in their chests, thumping from the heat and the repeated realisation that the baby is with them.

It was never said out loud, the game of taking the baby. It was just there one day in that unspoken way they have between the two of them. A charm or a spell that, once it had been cast, was as binding as the bell at break-time or their repeated refusal of broccoli. Skipping in their garden, opening the gate and dancing towards the playground on their toes, Laurel and Rosie had known in their bones that soon a baby would come, a round, chunky baby with a delicious smile and open hands. The baby would want to play with them, that was also

certain. And they would go to their secret place, down into the gully scored through the grass where the canal used to run under the willow tree. There, the earth was dark and dank and the leaves made a bower perfect for hiding in.

The game was usually ‘schools’, or sometimes Laurel wanted to play ‘Saturday Night’, which Rosie didn’t really understand but pretended to. This involved a sequence where Laurel feigned putting on make-up and then got upset with ‘Dad’ (who was Rosie) and stormed off, hips wagging, declaring that she would ‘never be back, not even if the baby is crying until morning’. That was what they’d started to play this afternoon. Except the baby wouldn’t cry. So Laurel had pinched her hard on the arm, just above her elbow. And then the crying wouldn’t stop.

Soon, though, Rosie felt hungry and a bit bored and began to look around for something else to do. Laurel was busy looking in the ‘mirror’ on the tree trunk and applying ‘mascara’. The baby was still sobbing and a smell came from her that reminded Rosie of the school toilets. The sun dipped fractionally and something had changed. It felt as if the energy of the afternoon had been whisked away, along with the excitement, the pleasure of just being there in the dappled light under the trees without any adults.

‘Let’s go home,’ Rosie said.

But Laurel ignored her, murmuring, her hands enacting all manner of things known only to herself.

‘Let’s go home,’ Rosie insisted. ‘I’m bored.’

The baby was sucking its fingers now, soothing herself, her eyes still big and wet. She began rocking back and forth, her legs stuck out in front of her.

‘The baby’s boring,’ Rosie said. ‘I want to go home.’ She stamped her foot, grabbing a low branch and pulling it down to the ground, letting it ping back up with a loud thwacking sound so that the baby stopped moving for a moment and stared upward, her mouth open in surprise.

Laurel turned to Rosie then, her face dark with a sulk. ‘You always spoil everything,’ she said. ‘I want to play.’

‘No,’ Rosie retorted.

Laurel got to her feet, her chin low. ‘I want to play,’ she repeated.

‘I want to go home,’ her sister replied.

And then the baby began to cry again. Rasping, heavy sobs that seemed to scratch the very soul of their special place. She was ruining it for them.

It was a sickening, desperate sound that, in the end, had to be stopped.