

## ***The Whisper Man***

by

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At the time, I was stood looking at a newly assembled bookcase, marvelling at my industry. DIY had never been a strong point of mine, but I knew this was something Rebecca would have wanted me to do, and I imagined her pressed up behind me now, with the side of her face against my back and her arms around my chest. Smiling to herself. 'You see? You can do this.' And while it was only a small taste of success, even that was an unusual feeling recently, and I liked it.

Except, of course, I was still alone.

I began filling the shelves.

Because that was another of the things Rebecca would have done, and even though this new house was about Jake and me moving on, I still wanted to honour that. 'You always put out the books,' she told me once. 'It's like buttering a cat's paws.' She had never been happier than when reading. There had been so many warm, contented evenings, with the two of us curled up at different ends of the settee, me writing as best I could on my laptop, her lost in novel after novel. Over the years, we had accumulated hundreds of books, and I set to work unpacking them now, sliding each one carefully into place.

And then it came to my own. The shelves beside my computer desk were reserved for copies of my four novels, along with the various foreign translations. It felt ostentatious to have them on display, but Rebecca had been proud of me and had always insisted on it. So this was another gesture to her – as was the empty space I left on the shelves, ready for the ones that hadn't been written yet, but would be.

I glanced warily at the computer. Beyond turning it on to check the new WiFi worked, I hadn't really done much with it this last week. I hadn't written a thing for a year. That was another thing that was going to change. New start, new –

*Creak.*

A noise from above me, the sound of a single footstep. I looked up. It was Jake's room directly overhead, but I'd left him in the front room playing while I did the assembling and unpacking.

I moved to the doorway and looked up the stairs. There was nobody on the landing. In fact, the whole house suddenly felt still and quiet, as though there was no movement at all. The silence rang in my ears.

'Jake?' I shouted upstairs.

Silence.

'Jake?'

'Daddy?'

I almost jumped. His voice had come from the front room, directly beside me. Keeping one eye on the landing, I took a step towards the front room and peered in. My son was crouched on the floor with his back to me, drawing something.

'Are you all right?' I said.

'Yes. Why?'

'I was just checking.'

I stepped back, then stared up at the landing again for a few seconds. It was still quiet up there, but the space had a strange sense of potential to it now, once again as though there was somebody standing just out of sight. Which was ridiculous, of course, because nobody could have come in through the front door without me knowing. Houses creaked. It took a while to get used to their noises, that was all.

But even so.

I walked upstairs slowly and cautiously, stepping quietly, with my left hand raised, ready to deflect anything that leapt out at me from that side. I reached the top – and of course, the landing was empty. When I stepped into Jake’s room, that was empty too. A wedge of afternoon sunlight was coming through the window, and I could see tiny curls of dust hanging in the air, undisturbed.

Just an old house creaking.

I went downstairs more confidently, feeling silly but also more relieved than I’d have liked to admit. At the bottom, I had to edge past the piles of post on the last two steps. There had been a lot so far: the usual documents that inevitably come with moving into a new house, along with innumerable local takeaway flyers and other junk mail. But there had also been three proper letters, addressed to someone called Dominic Barnett. All three were printed with either *Private* or *Addressee Only*.

I remembered that the previous owner, Mrs Shearing, had rented the house out for years, and on a whim, I ripped one of the letters open now. Inside, I found an itemized account from a debt collection company. My heart sank. Whoever Dominic Barnett was, he owed the company just over a thousand pounds in arrears on a mobile phone contract. I opened the others, and they were the same: notices for unpaid debts. I scanned the details, frowning to myself. The amounts weren’t large, but the tone of the letters was threatening. I told myself it wasn’t an insurmountable problem – that a few phone calls would sort it out – but this move was meant to be a new start for Jake and me. I hadn’t expected it to deliver a fresh set of obstacles for me to overcome.

‘Daddy?’

Jake had appeared in the front-room doorway beside me. He was holding his Packet of Special Things in one hand and a piece of paper in the other.

‘Is it all right if I play upstairs?’

I thought of the *creak* I’d heard, and for a second I wanted to say no. But again, that was absurd. There was nobody up there, and it was his bedroom; he had every right to play in it. At the same time, we hadn’t seen much of each other that day, and it felt isolating for him to disappear upstairs now.

‘I guess,’ I said. ‘Can I see your drawing first?’

He hesitated. ‘Why?’

‘Because I’m interested. Because I’d like to.’

*Because I’m trying here, Jake.*

‘It’s private.’

Which was fair enough, and a part of me wanted to respect that, but I didn’t like the idea of him keeping secrets from me. The Packet was one thing, but it felt like if he wouldn’t even show me his pictures now, then the distance between us must be increasing.

‘Jake –’ I started to say.

‘Oh, fine.’

He thrust the sheet out at me. Now that it was being offered, I was reluctant to take it.

But I did.

Jake had never been good at drawing straightforward, realistic scenes before, preferring his convoluted, unfolding battles instead, but he’d attempted one here. The picture was rough, but it was obviously an approximation of our house from the outside, reminiscent of the original photograph that had caught his attention online. He had captured the odd look of the place well. The curved, childlike lines stretched the house into a strange shape, elongating the windows, and making it look more like a face than ever. The front door appeared to be moaning.

But it was the upstairs that drew my attention. In the right-hand window, he’d drawn me, standing by myself in my bedroom. On the left, there he was in his own room, the window large enough here to include his whole body. There was a smile on his face, and the jeans and T-shirt he

was wearing right now were shaded with crayon.

And beside him, he'd drawn another person in his bedroom. A little girl, her black hair splayed almost angrily out to one side. Her dress was coloured in with patches of blue, leaving the rest white.

Little scrapes of red on one of her knees.

A corkscrew smile on her face.