

*She sleeps. A pale girl in a white room. Machines surround her. Mechanical guardians, they tether the sleeping girl to the land of the living, stopping her from drifting away on an eternal, dark tide.*

*Their steady beeps and the laboured sound of her breathing are the sleeping girl's only lullabies. Before, she loved music. Loved to sing. Loved to play. She found music in everything – the birds, the trees, the sea.*

*A small piano has been placed in one corner of the room. The cover is up but the keys are coated in a fine layer of dust. On top of the piano sits an ivory shell. Its silky pink insides look like the delicate curves of an ear.*

*The machines beep and whirr.*

*The shell trembles.*

*A sharp 'C' suddenly fills the room.*

*Somewhere, another girl falls.*

## **1**

*Monday, April 11th, 2016*

*M1 North*

He noticed the stickers first, surrounding the car's rear window and lining the bumper:

*Honk if you're horny.*

*Don't follow me, I'm lost.*

*When you drive like I do, you'd better believe in God.*

*Horn broken – watch for finger.*

*Real men love Jesus.*

Talk about mixed messages. Although one thing did come through loud and clear: the driver was a dick. Gabe was willing to bet he wore slogan T-shirts and had a picture at work of a monkey with its hands over its head and the caption: *You don't have to be mad to work here but it helps.*

He was surprised the driver could see out of the back at all. On the other hand, at least he was providing reading material for people in traffic jams. Like the one they were currently stuck in. A long line of cars crawling through the M1 road-works; it felt like they had started sometime in the last century and looked set to continue well into the next millennium.

Gabe sighed and tapped his fingers on the wheel, as though this could somehow hurry along the traffic, or summon a time machine. He was almost late. Not quite. Not yet. It was still within the bounds of possibility that he might make it home in time. But he wasn't hopeful. In fact, hope had left him somewhere around Junction 19, along with all the drivers savvy enough to take their chances with their satnav and a country-lane diversion.

What was even more frustrating was that he had managed to leave on time today. He should easily have made it home by six thirty, so he could be there for dinner and Izzy's bedtime, which he had promised – *promised* – Jenny that he would do tonight.

*'Just once a week. That's all I ask. One night when we eat together, you read your daughter a bedtime story and we pretend we're a normal, happy family.'*

That had hurt. She had meant it to.

Of course, he could have pointed out that *he* was the one who had got Izzy ready for school that morning, as Jenny had had to rush out to see a client. *He* was the one who had soothed their daughter and applied Savlon to her chin when their temperamental rescue cat (the one *Jenny* had adopted) had scratched her.

But he didn't. Because they both knew it didn't make up for all the missed times, the moments he hadn't been there. Jenny was not an unreasonable woman. But when it came to family, she had a very definite line. If you crossed it, then it was a long time before she let you step back inside.

It was one of the reasons he loved her: her fierce devotion to their daughter. Gabe's own mum had been more devoted to cheap vodka, and he had never known his dad. Gabe had sworn that he would be different; that he would always be there for his little girl.

And yet, here he was, stuck on the motorway, about to be late. Again. Jenny would not forgive him. Not this time. He didn't want to dwell upon what that meant.

He had tried to call her, but it had gone to voicemail. And now his phone had less than 1 per cent battery, which meant it would die any minute and, typically, today of all days, he had left his charger at home. All he could do was sit, fighting the urge to press his foot on the accelerator and barge the rest of the traffic out of the way, tapping his fingers aggressively on the steering wheel, staring at bloody Sticker Man in front.

A lot of the stickers looked old. Faded and wrinkled. But then, the car itself looked ancient. An old Cortina, or something similar. It was sprayed that colour that was so popular in the seventies: a sort of grubby gold. Mouldy banana. Pollution sunset. Dying sun.

Dirty grey fumes puffed intermittently out of the wonky exhaust. The whole bumper was speckled with rust. He couldn't see a manufacturer's badge. It had probably fallen off, along with half of the number plate. Only the letters 'T' and 'N' and what could be part of a 6 or an 8 remained. He frowned. He was sure that wasn't legal. The damn thing probably wasn't even roadworthy, or insured, or driven by a qualified driver. Best not to get too close.

He was just considering changing lanes when the girl's face appeared in the rear window, perfectly framed by the peeling stickers. She looked to be around five or six. Round-faced, pink-cheeked. Fine blonde hair pulled into two high pigtails.

His first thought was that she should be strapped into a car seat.

His second thought was: *Izzy*.

She stared at him. Her eyes widened. She opened her mouth, revealing a tooth missing right in the front. He remembered wrapping it in a tissue and tucking it under her pillow for the tooth fairy.

She mouthed: 'Daddy!'

Then a hand reached back, grabbed her arm and yanked her down. Out of sight. Gone. Vanished.

He stared at the empty window.

*Izzy.*

Impossible.

His daughter was at home, with her mum. Probably watching the Disney channel while Jenny cooked dinner. She couldn't be in the back of a strange car, going God knows where, not even strapped into a car seat.

The stickers blocked his view of the driver. He could barely see the top of their head above *Honk if you're horny*. Fuck that. He honked anyway. Then he flashed his lights. The car seemed to speed up a little. Ahead of him, the roadworks were ending, the 50mph signs replaced by the national speed limit.

*Izzy.* He accelerated. It was a new Range Rover. It went like shit off the proverbial shovel. And yet the battered old rust bucket in front was pulling away from him. He pressed the pedal down harder. Watched the speedometer creep up past seventy, seventy-five, eighty-five. He was gaining, and then the car in front suddenly darted into the middle lane and undertook several cars. Gabe followed, swerving in front of an HGV. The horn's blare almost deafened him. His heart felt like it might just burst right out of his chest, like bloody *Alien*.

The car in front was weaving dangerously in and out of the traffic. Gabe was hemmed in by a Ford Focus on one side and a Toyota in front. Shit. He glanced in his mirror, pulled into the slow lane then darted back in front of the Toyota. At the same time a Jeep pulled in from the fast lane, just missing his bonnet. He slammed on his brakes. The Jeep driver flashed his hazards and gave him the finger.

'Screw *you*, too, you fucking wanker!'

The rust bucket was several cars in front now, still weaving, tail lights disappearing into the distance. He couldn't keep up. It was too dangerous.

Besides, he tried to tell himself, he must be mistaken. *Must be*. It couldn't have been *Izzy*. Impossible. Why on earth would she be in that car? He was tired, stressed. It was dark. It must be some other little girl who looked like *Izzy*. *A lot like Izzy*. A little girl who had the same blonde hair in pigtails, the same gap between her front teeth. *A little girl who called him 'Daddy'*.

A sign flashed up ahead: SERVICES ½ MILE. He could pull in, make a phone call, put his mind at rest. But he was already late; he should keep going. On the other hand, what was a few more minutes? The slip road was sliding past. Keep going? Pull over? Keep going? Pull over? *Izzy*. At the last minute, he yanked the wheel to the left, bumping over the white hazard lines and eliciting more horn beeps. He sped up the slip road and into the services.

Gabe hardly ever stopped at service stations. He found them depressing, full of miserable people who wanted to be somewhere else.

He wasted precious minutes scuttling up and down, past the various food outlets, searching for a payphone, which he eventually found tucked away near the toilets. Just the one. No one used payphones any more. He wasted several more minutes looking for some change before he realized you could use a card. He extracted his debit card from his wallet, stuck it in and called home.

Jenny never answered on the first ring. She was always busy, always doing something with Izzy. Sometimes she said she wished she had eight pairs of hands. He should be there more, he thought. He should help.

'Hello.'

A woman's voice. But not Jenny. Unfamiliar. Had he called the wrong number? He didn't call it very often. Again, it was all mobiles. He checked the number on the payphone. Definitely their landline number.

'Hello?' the voice said again. 'Is that Mr Forman?'

'Yes. This is Mr Forman. Who the hell are you?'

'My name is Detective Inspector Maddock.'

A detective. In his house. Answering his phone.

'Where are you, Mr Forman?'

'The M1. I mean, in the services. On my way back from work.'

He was babbling. Like a guilty person. But then, he *was* guilty, wasn't he? Of a lot of things.

'You need to come home, Mr Forman. Right away.'

'Why? What's going on? *What's happened?*'

A long pause. A swollen, stifling silence. The sort of silence, he thought, that brims with unspoken words. Words that are about to completely fuck up your life.

'It's about your wife . . . and your daughter.'

## 2

*Monday, February 18th, 2019*

*Newton Green Services, M1 Junction 15, 1.30 a.m.*

The thin man drank black coffee, plenty of sugar. He rarely ate anything. Once, maybe twice, he had ordered toast and then left it after a couple of bites. He had the look, Katie thought, of someone closer to death than their years should have taken them. Clothes hung off him like they would a scarecrow with the stuffing removed. Emaciation had carved chasms out of his face, beneath his eyes and

cheekbones. His fingers, when he grasped the coffee cup, were long and delicate, bones so sharp they looked like they might slice straight through the thin covering of skin.

If Katie didn't know better, she would have said he was terminally ill. Cancer. Her nan had gone that way and they shared the same look. But he had a different kind of illness. A sickness of the heart and soul. The best medicine and doctors in the world couldn't cure what afflicted this man. Nothing could.

When he first started visiting the services, once or twice a month, he used to hand out leaflets. Katie had taken one herself. Pictures of a little girl. HAVE YOU SEEN ME? Katie had, of course. Everyone had. The little girl had been all over the news. Her and her mum.

Back then, the thin man had hope. Of a sort. The insane kind of hope that fuels people like a drug. It's all they have. They draw on it like a crack pipe, even when they know that the hope itself has become an addiction. People say hate and bitterness will destroy you. They're wrong. It's hope. Hope will devour you from the inside like a parasite. It will leave you hanging like bait above a shark. But hope won't kill you. It's not that kind.

The thin man had been eaten up by hope. He had nothing left. Nothing but a lot of road miles and coffee club points.

Katie picked up his empty cup, wiped down the table.

'Can I get you another?'

'Table service?'

'Only for regulars.'

'Thanks, but I have to get going.'

'Okay. See you.'

He nodded again. 'Yeah.'

That was the total sum of their conversations. Every conversation. She wasn't sure if he even realized he was speaking to the same person each time he came in. She got the feeling that most people were just background to him.

Katie had heard that this was not the only coffee shop he visited, nor the only service station. Staff moved around, and they talked. So did the police officers who often came in. The rumour was that he spent every day and night driving up and down the motorway, stopping in different service stations, looking for the car that took his little girl. Searching for his lost daughter.

Katie hoped it wasn't true. She hoped that the thin man could eventually find some peace. Not just for his sake. Something about him, his quiet desperation, scraped at a raw nerve. Most of all she hoped that one day, she would come into work, he would be gone, and she'd never have to think about him again.