

**THE
HUSH
SARA
FOSTER**

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For Marian

And in loving memory of Dorothy and Jill

*When, lo, as they reached the mountain-side,
A wondrous portal opened wide,
As if a cavern was suddenly hollowed;
And the Piper advanced, and the children followed,
And when all were in to the very last,
The door in the mountain-side shut fast.*

Robert Browning,
The Pied Piper of Hamelin: A Child's Story

PART I

FIRST STAGE

[CLASSIFIED DOC]

SENT THROUGH PRIVATE SERVER,
FROM MI5 TO THE PRIME MINISTER'S OFFICE AT
10 DOWNING STREET

URGENT

The YouTube site hosted by PreacherGirl has been permanently taken down.

Total views: 4,065,341.

Police taskforce Delta will continue to look for the person behind the 'PreacherGirl' pseudonym.

As agreed, all media enquiries will be dealt with by the Press Secretary's office.

Out of the twelve girls originally mentioned as missing, three have been located at home.

Out of the twenty-six girls mentioned in the comments by site viewers, eleven have been located at home.

This leaves a total of twenty-four girls, names appended, whose whereabouts are still unknown.

Possible link to Project 9.

We need to talk.

Friday, 6.30 am

A distant siren merges into the staccato shriek of an alarm clock, and Lainey's dream slips away. She comes to in her own bed, her body heavy on the sagging mattress, the weight of the blanket pressing her down. Rolling over, she gives the alarm clock a whack, hoping it hasn't woken her mother. From his basket nearby, Fergus lets out a low grunt. Beside the bed, there's fluttering and rustling.

She sits up and rubs her eyes. Her room is still dark, full of shadowy cubist shapes. Although the autumn temps have dropped already, she hasn't turned on her radiator yet, and the morning air is chilly. It's raining outside, and the rush of water is a million murmuring voices, cajoling, soothing, warning, impatient. *Get moving, they say. Get this done.*

Lainey hesitates, thinking of her plans this morning. There's an icy lump in her belly. And she hasn't accounted for rain.

She tiptoes to the bathroom, alert for any other sound. All is quiet. She sits on the toilet with her head in her hands, staring at the scrappy fabric of her knickers caught at her knees. If she stays here and prays hard enough, something might change. Except she doesn't believe in miracles.

Finally, she gets up to wash her face and brush her teeth. Her hands shake as she gulps water from the tap and she sighs. If this is going to work, she needs to stay calm.

Back in her room, she moves stealthily, gathering what she needs. She gives Fergus a few treats then unclips her watch, attaching it to his front right paw. Fergus looks mournfully at it, then his trusting brown eyes turn towards hers.

‘Sorry, buddy,’ she tells him, stroking the spaniel’s ears and kissing the soft swath of fur between his eyes. ‘I need you to cover for me. I won’t be long.’ She still feels paranoid doing this, but now the watches are compulsory, day and night, and she can’t risk being tracked for the next hour or so.

Before leaving, she pulls the pillowcase off a large container by her bedside. Three fluffy-feathered baby starlings begin to chirp, tiny beaks bursting open like bright-yellow petals. She’s only had them for fourteen days, but they’ve changed so much already from the half-feathered scruffs she’d rescued from a nest, shielding them from the sight of their dead mother, who’d lain at the base of the sycamore tree, decapitated by a passing predator. It had been fortunate Lainey had seen the hollow and checked it, but then she is always looking out for animals in need.

She grabs the tub of mealworms and pre-soaked dry cat food, pulls off the cellophane, then dips tweezers into the gunk before offering tiny portions to each waiting mouth. The last two weeks of her holidays had been taken up by their feeding demands: every half an hour at first, then gradually extending the time between meals and encouraging them to start eating independently. They can manage for a few hours now, but still prefer being hand-fed.

After a few rounds of this they settle. ‘I’ll be back soon,’ she reassures them, and replaces the cover. ‘Take care of them, Fergus.’

Fergus whines softly and rests his chin on his front paws, head leaning leftwards, avoiding the watch.

Lainey surveys the room for a moment, checking all is okay, then hoists her bag over her shoulder. Time is ticking. She creeps down the dimly lit stairs, wincing at every creak. If she

can just get outside, then her mother mightn't even realise she's gone.

At the bottom of the stairs, she unlatches the door. It opens to a gloom-struck scene: dark, dismal, wet. Beyond the low gate, ten paces away, a truck drives past the terraced houses, wheels spinning and whooshing in the puddles. Lainey turns and slowly, cautiously, closes the door behind her. There's the faintest of clicks. Seconds later, she is beyond the safe confines of home, head bowed, sprinting towards town.

*

6.55 am

Emma listens to Lainey's slight footsteps; hears the soft shutting of the door. She jumps out of bed and hurries to the window, watching the silhouette of her daughter disappearing into the gloaming beyond the street lamps. *Where the hell is she going? It's not even seven, for Christ's sake.*

But there's no time to speculate. She grabs the thermometer by the bedside and holds it close to her forehead until it beeps, indicating the wireless transfer of data to the hospital. Next she takes a swab from a packet in her top drawer and pops it into her mouth, sucking on it for a few seconds, trying to ignore its gritty dryness against her tongue. She removes it and sees the colour is blue. Neutral. Next, she runs her watch over the tiny barcode at its base, until another beep tells her this data has also been delivered. After ten seconds, her watch lights up with one small word on the screen: *Negative.*

In other words: no virus detected. Time for work.

The day looms before her, its endless demands exhausting her before she's even moved. There's a ten-hour shift on the ward to contend with, and she's promised to meet Cathy for lunch. Cathy will be full of crises and concern, but Emma doesn't blame her, because all anyone can think about is the growing catastrophe at the hospital. At some point during the past few

months, the days had turned into minefields. Every hour at work is uncharted territory that must be tiptoed through, hyper-alert, preparing for the next inevitable explosion. And once a day is conquered, it doesn't drift away from Emma like it used to. It turns to stone and settles inside her. There's a cairn in the pit of her belly.

No doubt, as hospital management, Cathy is getting it in the neck from the powers that be. Of course everyone wants answers. And because Emma is in the trenches, down on the wards, Cathy often questions her for small details, grilling her for anything they might have missed. 'I don't know,' Emma has insisted, over and over, trying not to picture the row of tight little faces in the morgue, those tiny stubborn mouths that had refused to open, to breathe. 'I don't understand what's happening. I'm frightened too.'

This time last year, a stillbirth had been an event. Rare and tragic. Usually, with answers delivered via an autopsy. Then rumours began five months ago – disturbing reports from hospitals in the north of England about births going wrong – but they were nothing compared to the shock of delivering a little girl, plump and perfect, who came easily into the world but refused to take a breath. Emma won't ever forget the stunned silence. The steady panting of the mother turning to howls of confusion; the father staggering and vomiting on the floor. The hasty efforts at resuscitation. The swift removal of the child for assessment. The parents' never-ending, agonising questions, which no one could answer.

Emma had gone home that evening, taken a long, hot bath, and prayed to every god she could think of that she would never experience a day like that again. It hadn't worked. Instead, her days have become a lottery, the live births interspersed with the Intrapartum X babies – or the 'doll babies', as the media calls them – the ones who twist and wiggle in the womb, showing no signs of anything amiss; who are perfectly alive during delivery, their steady heartbeats tracked as they descend into the birth

canal, but who, once born, refuse to take a breath or open their eyes. No matter how much resuscitation they're given. No matter how much the adults implore them.

Within a few nightmarish months, almost every hospital across the country had experienced such an event. At first it was one in every ten births, then one in eight. Now the ratio is creeping closer to one in five. Caesarians don't help. It doesn't matter how rapidly a neonate is plucked from the womb – if it's an Intrapartum X baby it will go limp the moment it's touched. The babies demonstrate no signs of pain, and no will to stay in the world. They are pristine human specimens.

They just won't breathe.

In the beginning, Emma spent long hours awake at night going over each birth, searching for an answer to this nightmare. She'd read the latest research, obsessed about numerous theories and quizzed weary obstetricians and frazzled nurses. The only result was a week off work with sleeping tablets, and after that she'd taught herself not to dwell on her more disturbing thoughts. Now, as she heads to the kitchen to make a drink, she forces her thoughts away from work for a few minutes, her mind turning to Lainey's sudden flit. Her heart contracts. When was the last time she checked in with her daughter?

When Lainey was small, they'd talked about everything. Craig had left before Lainey could even walk, and in a family of two, all focus was on each other. Emma was the sun, and Lainey the flower in bud, leaning and unfolding towards her mother's light. But, as Lainey had blossomed, the shadow between them had grown too. Lately, they'd been little more than tenants sharing the same house, thanks to Emma's erratic shift pattern. Between the all-encompassing nightmares at the hospital and Lainey's unpredictable social life, it is hard enough to find themselves in the same place, never mind with enough energy to talk. And Lainey doesn't confide much in Emma anymore, which makes Emma want to weep, even though she knows it's to be expected. 'We knew we'd have to let them go one day,' Cathy had said

on a recent night out, raising her glass of wine as if toasting their losses at a living wake. 'It's just happened so bloody fast.'

But, no matter how sympathetic her friends are, Emma still hasn't completely got the hang of stepping back. Otherwise, she'd dismiss this horrible urge to run after Lainey to check she's all right. And she wouldn't have shrugged off all her better judgements about prying, and walked upstairs into Lainey's room to find Fergus fast asleep, wearing Lainey's watch.

*

7.10 am

On Frederick Street, a shadowy figure emerges from a driveway and joins Lainey, their footsteps instantly in time with one another.

'I hope I don't look as knackered as you do,' Sereena says. 'Did you even brush your hair?'

Lainey laughs. 'You look pretty average, I'm sorry to say. Did you get out okay?'

'No sweat.' Sereena combs her fingers through her damp hair. 'Mum's snoring like a walrus in there.'

'What did you do with your watch?'

'Moodle's wearing it as a collar. She isn't happy, but I think she'll settle down. I hope she does anyway, otherwise the government spies will think I'm a loony turning circles in my bedroom.'

Lainey pictures Sereena's obese tabby prowling around with her new choker. She smiles, then remembers the reason they're here. 'Do you think we're being too paranoid – about the watches, I mean?'

Sereena shrugs. 'After what happened to Ellis and PreacherGirl, I think it'd be weird if we weren't paranoid. Why else is it illegal to remove them for more than five minutes?' She trails off, and Lainey knows she'll be stewing about the new rules. The watches have only been compulsory for the last

twelve weeks; before that people could at least sleep without them. But these new waterproof versions are supposed to serve a whole host of functions: ID, credit payments and making a continual record of health data. All under the auspices of keeping them safe, but Sereena's convinced it's really about surveillance and tracking. She'd suggested using their pets as decoys a few weeks ago, and Lainey had heard it was being copied all over school.

She thinks over Sereena's words. 'Have you found out anything more ... about Ellis?' she asks nervously.

'Nothing.' Sereena bites her lip, and the space between them is filled with unspoken worries. Ellis Scott was the same age as them, and Sereena had got to know her on a camp a couple of years ago. Lainey had been jealous of their friendship at first, but that hadn't lasted long, because Ellis was so easy to warm to. Tall and willowy with long, dark hair, she was always sharing jelly sweets and talked incessantly about being a fashion designer. Her hobby was scouring charity shops and buying mismatched pieces of clothing that she'd turn into art pieces, cutting them up and splicing them back together, sewing on beads, buttons and tassels. After she'd finished she would give them away to her friends.

To start with, only Sereena had known that Ellis had walked into a chemist and bought a pregnancy test, expecting them just to take her ID. Instead, she'd had to take the test inside the shop – with a security guard called to stand outside the toilet door. The pharmacist had insisted on seeing the sodden stick and recording the results. Soon after, Ellis had disappeared, along with her family, and no one had seen them since.

The girls had been confused and concerned when Ellis didn't pick up their calls, but the panic hadn't hit until a couple of weeks ago, when PreacherGirl dropped her song about fourteen pregnant girls who'd purportedly vanished, accompanied by a scrolling video of their names and photos. Ellis wasn't listed, but the stories were all too familiar, and Sereena had added her

friend's name to the missing in the comments. It had meant betraying Ellis's confidence, but she wasn't sure what else to do.

Since then, Ellis's absence has felt increasingly sinister. To begin with, the whole town was talking about it, but once PreacherGirl's site was taken down, many people felt it was too dangerous to continue whispering conspiracy theories in case their watches were recording all conversations. Nevertheless, a few of Lainey and Sereena's friends are still determined to find Ellis, so far with no success.

Lainey had watched this all unfold with growing horror. Four days ago, she'd broken down and told Sereena she feared she might be pregnant, too.

'So,' Sereena says, interrupting Lainey's thoughts, 'd'you reckon we'll pull this off? I keep wondering if we've missed anything, but it seems pretty easy to me.'

Lainey shrugs. 'Glad you're confident. The rain's making me nervous. Wet footsteps are a giveaway.'

'Rain's good. Gives us more reason to keep our hoods up. Just wipe your feet when you get inside and you'll be fine.' She rubs her arms. 'I wish it wasn't so bloody cold, though. The seasons are stuffed, aren't they: September's practically winter now.'

Lainey eyes the dimly lit street ahead of them. She's shivering too, but she's not sure it's from the cold. 'Thanks for coming.'

'It's no problem – I should be thanking you. Any chance to mess with this screwed-up system and you know I'm there. And depending on what happens, I'll help you decide what to do next.'

Lainey nods, but in truth she can't think beyond the next hour. Sereena doesn't press it. As always, Sereena seems to understand. Ever since their first year at school, when they'd bonded over McVities biscuits, practising their cartwheels and a Japanese cartoon series called *Power Girls*, they'd been fiercely loyal friends. In Year Two, when Tyler Goldsmith began bullying Lainey, Sereena had smacked him in the face and got

suspended. In Year Four, when Sereena got appendicitis, Lainey had sat and read joke books to her in hospital until she had to stop laughing because of the pain.

As they near the small row of shops on Glace Street, their pace slows. ‘Just wait,’ Lainey says, and they watch from a distance for a few minutes, until they see the pharmacist unlock the shop doors. Lainey glances left and right. As they’d hoped, there’s no one around yet. They’d picked this place because of its early opening time and its location: in a secluded spot, out of the way of traffic.

‘Right, then,’ she says. ‘Now or never.’ Her breath grows shallow. She makes a conscious effort to deepen it, thinking of Mrs Allerton, who for years had insisted they meditate in health class, her nostrils flaring like a wild horse’s as she demonstrated the inhale and exhale. Lainey tries it now and ends up snorting nervously instead. Her stride falters.

‘Keep walking,’ Sereena hisses. ‘No backing out. Pull your hood up a bit, and put your scarf over your face.’

‘Don’t be so bossy,’ Lainey objects, but does it anyway. They’re within a few metres of a small row of shops when Sereena whispers, ‘Ready?’

‘Ready.’

Sereena suddenly twists and falls heavily. Lainey doesn’t mind this part, because they’d orchestrated it. But they hadn’t planned for the back of Sereena’s head to meet the glistening pavestones with a crack.

‘Shit!’ Lainey pauses automatically to crouch down and check on her friend.

Sereena puts her hand up to feel the injury. Her face is screwed up in pain, but she hisses, ‘Don’t stop. Quick. Go.’

There’s a beat while Lainey hesitates, but then she’s running into the chemist’s at the end of the row, ignoring the health-check station by the door, crying out, ‘Help, help!’ as the pharmacist rushes around the counter to greet her. The woman is in her late thirties, hair in a high ponytail, thick lashings of

makeup doing nothing to hide the deep circles under her eyes. Her face is full of concern.

‘My friend, she just fainted outside, she’s lying on the pavement,’ Lainey manages, close to hyperventilating. ‘Do you know first aid? Please, help us.’

The pharmacist looks beyond Lainey and sees Sereena on the ground. As she runs across, Lainey makes as if to follow, then stops. She scans the shop, checking it’s empty, then hurries across to the counter, pulling her hood and scarf up around her face, head down to evade the cyclops eyes of any security cameras. She lifts the counter hatch and slips through to the serving side, scanning the rows of cold-and-flu medication and allergy relief, until she sees, on the bottom shelf, a group of pink-and-white boxes. She grabs one of those, and then goes to another section and takes a little white box of tablets. She knows where to find them thanks to their scoping efforts over the last few days, and so it only takes seconds.

‘What are you doing?’

The voice is tiny, a mouse-squeak. Lainey freezes, then turns.

Sitting on the floor, in the corner beneath the counter, is a small girl. Her back against the wall, a Disney-princess colouring book on her lap and a yellow pencil in her hand. Her dark hair is glossy, held back by a hairband with a blue-and-red pattern that Lainey recognises as St Stephen’s Primary School colours, with bright-yellow ribbons at the ends of her plaits, and she wears the familiar blue-and-red uniform that Lainey had once worn herself. She stares up with dark, curious eyes.

‘My friend needs these,’ Lainey says, showing her the small white packet of tablets. ‘She’s fainted.’

The girl doesn’t reply, but her gaze travels to the box in Lainey’s other hand. Lainey shoves it into her pocket. She would stay and beg the girl to keep her mouth shut, but there’s no time and she sprints for the front door. The whole thing has taken less than a minute and the pharmacist is still leaning over Sereena, who is at least conscious and talking.

As Lainey approaches, the pharmacist frowns at her. Lainey holds up the little packet of glucose tablets. ‘Can I give her these? She’s got diabetes. I think her blood sugar might be too low.’ This is the simplest cover story they’d thought of, but Lainey has never been a good liar, and she fears she’s blushing.

The pharmacist frowns. ‘You can’t just take those. You’ll need to pay for them, you know.’

‘I ...’ Lainey stalls, briefly thinking of the watches at home. The pharmacist’s attention flickers over Lainey’s wrists, and Lainey’s glad she can’t see that underneath their coats their arms are bare.

‘There’s no money in my account. Do you take cash?’ she asks, already knowing the answer.

‘I can’t,’ the pharmacist says, frowning. ‘You know that. You can only pay for medicines with a card or your watch – it’s been like that for weeks.’

Sereena sits up, rubbing her head. ‘It’s okay, I just got faint for a second. Home isn’t far and I’ve got stuff there ...’

The pharmacist is concerned. ‘Are you sure? I’d give you some myself if it were up to me, but I can’t ... the new rules ... I’d be breaking the law. I could be put in jail,’ she reminds them, as though she can’t quite believe it, her expression asking them to understand.

‘Don’t worry,’ Lainey says. ‘Thanks anyway.’ She hands the tablets to the pharmacist, then helps Sereena to her feet. ‘Can you walk?’ she asks, putting her arm around her friend. ‘Let’s get you home.’

As soon as they’re out of earshot, Lainey pulls Sereena closer. ‘Is your head okay?’ she asks in an urgent whisper. ‘It made a horrible crack when you fell.’

Sereena half laughs, half grimaces. ‘It’ll be fine. Stings a bit – I think I’ve grazed it. I need to work on my dramatic falls. Still, at least it made the whole thing seem authentic. So, did it go to plan?’

Lainey groans. ‘Almost. There was a bloody kid behind the counter.’

‘What? Like, serving?’

‘No, she was only little, five or six. She was sitting on the floor colouring in.’

‘Shit, that must be her kid,’ Sereena hisses, then shrugs. ‘Oh well, too late now. But did you get it?’

Lainey touches the pink-and-white box in her pocket, her heart beginning to race. ‘Yes,’ she says, ‘I did.’

*

7.50 am

Emma will be late if she doesn’t leave now. She’d taken her time getting ready for work, hoping Lainey would reappear, listening for the key in the lock. Disappointed, she stands in front of the mirror by the front door and studies herself solemnly: her clean, crisp blue shirt with white trim and the hospital logo, a lanyard with ID and hospital codes around her neck. The silver watch attached to her breast pocket is an antique compared to the newfangled watch strapped to her wrist. She tries out a smile. ‘I’m so sorry,’ she says to her tired, pale face. ‘I’m so sorry for your loss.’

Does she look genuine? Can she still show compassion when in truth she’s exhausted? When every day she thinks of quitting the job she’s loved for fourteen years. Despite the many practicalities of tending to a labouring mother, she’s never lost sight of the miracle of birth, in whatever form it took. Up until recently, with current world-class medical care, they rarely lost mother or child. If they did, the whole department would mourn. Now, it was a race to get the reports and procedures finished before the next stillbirth. And the United Kingdom is watched fearfully by a world still tormented by years of lockdowns and losses, after all the time it had taken to get back to some semblance of normality beyond the pandemic and food shortages.

It had been seven years since world tensions had risen sharply in the wake of the virus, the entire planet's population suffering from collective post-traumatic stress disorder as chaos bubbled just below the surface, breaking through as authoritarianism, terror attacks, fracking protests, drone strikes, tariffs and sanctions. But finally, there'd been a surge of people power: massive protests worldwide, followed by a global strike three years ago, which had brought new climate-change accords and a renewed sense of determination to safeguard the planet. A few years of grace had followed, shifting only when the babies in England began dying from an unknown cause.

The media had been largely responsible for the initial panic. They broke the news early and with enough hyperbole to create hysteria, speculating wildly and protractedly on every possible cause, from terrorism to a new viral pandemic to the will of God. Despite this, there are still no answers, not even with the finest medical scientists working around the clock. There are a few immediate areas of consensus – that the problem isn't contagion or infection, and seems confined in origin to the UK – but otherwise the pathology of the disease remains unknown. In every conceivable way, this cohort of children is perfect. They should be alive, but instead they've become the newest threat to humanity, shunting terrorism, world unrest, climate change and the problematic new virus vaccines from the headlines, topping even the perilous daily melt of the icebergs in the Arctic and Antarctic. As a result, women must now present their IDs for every pregnancy test purchased, then take the tests on site, the results recorded and the health authorities notified. Antenatal clinics are emptying of patients. In Whitehaven Hospital, they have delivered so many of these babies that Emma often dreams of them, their perfect little faces impenetrable, guardians of a secret the world cannot yet fathom.

If she'd chosen her job just for the babies, she might already have quit in despair, even if it meant slipping towards the breadline. But it's the mothers who keep her returning to the

hospital, day after day. The mothers need her more than ever. They're the ones who give Emma her courage and determination to do what she does right now: collect her bag, straighten her back and walk towards her front door.

*

8.00 am

Lainey crouches behind a low wall, watching her house amid the cramped row of Victorian terraces, as though she's a burglar scoping for entry. An occasional car glides down the street, while her head thrums like the distant beat of helicopter wings. Sereena has gone home to get ready for school, but Lainey needs to wait for her mother to leave, and of course Emma is taking her sweet time this morning. Lainey has a twinge of horror that Emma won't go at all; that she'll be waiting at the kitchen table, arms crossed, to demand that Lainey explain herself. The only thing that's keeping Lainey from full-blown anxiety is that she knows her mother's shift pattern. Emma is conscientious about getting to work on time; she can't afford to lose her job.

Just as Lainey's legs are cramping and her neck is beginning to throb unbearably, Emma appears. Lainey watches her mother turn back to double-lock the front door, then set off down the path. She is, as always, perfectly turned out: blonde hair in a high ponytail, clips keeping back any loose strands. Her uniform is freshly washed and pressed, and her sensible black shoes are shiny.

As far as Lainey knows, her mother doesn't have big dreams: it's enough to go to work, cook a nice meal, drink a glass of wine with a friend, get a decent sleep. She's a good mother. She tries to help but doesn't overstep. She always listens but doesn't ask too many questions. So Lainey doesn't understand why, sometimes, when they sit across from one another, eating meals and making idle conversation, Lainey wants to lean over and shout into her mother's face. She's not sure what she wants to

say, or what she's looking for. A reaction? An acknowledgement that Emma is capable of recognising the tumult of feelings that maraud through Lainey? Or perhaps it's more than that: perhaps she wants a sign that her mother holds some deeper understanding of why all this is happening. That she cares about the bigger picture of their lives, beyond the ritual of work and home, and the exhaustion of each day.

When the street is empty, Lainey races across to the house. Once inside, she runs upstairs and into the bathroom, pulling the box out of her pocket. She puts it on the ledge of the sink for a moment and takes a few steadying breaths, catching sight of herself in the mirror. She sees a red-faced, puffing girl, hair unkempt now that her hood is pulled back. A girl way out of her depth with what she's about to do.

But this can't wait any longer.

Opening the packet, she reads the instructions, then sits down and awkwardly pees on the little stick. Setting it in the sink, she slumps to sit with her back against the door, then curls up in a protective ball, as though the testing stick might suddenly explode. She tries to count to a thousand this time, as slowly as she can, summoning her courage as the numbers get higher. When she reaches two hundred she can't bear it any longer. She jumps up and looks into the sink.

Two little pink lines stare back at her. She moves to the packet, to triple-check what that means.

Pregnant.

Shit. Shit. Shit.

She staggers back, away from this crippling, undeniable knowledge. But she already knew, didn't she? She *knew*. She's felt nauseous for weeks. Her boobs are sore and her sense of smell is hyperactive. She's checked the symptoms online, and perhaps she didn't really need proof, after all. It was the final, faint gasp of hope that had sent her on this morning's errand, and now that's gone.

Shit.

There's a sudden loud knocking at the front door, and it spurs her into action. She shoves the stick back into its box and grabs the whole lot, running through to her room and pushing it under her bed. The chicks burst into chorus, and Fergus jumps up from his slumber, as though trying to pretend he's been alert and guarding them this whole time.

She ruffles his fur and removes the watch as quickly as she can, as the knocking comes again. She straps it back onto her wrist as she races down the stairs and pulls open the door, already certain who she'll find.

Liam grins. 'You *are* there! What're you doing? I thought you must have gone already.' He frowns as he registers her flustered expression. 'You look spooked.' He traces a line down her cheek with his fingertip and leans in like he might try to kiss her.

She ducks away. 'I'm fine. I'll just get my bag.'

Liam hovers in the hallway, messing with his phone, occasionally pushing the flop of his dark fringe away from his face. When she comes back he grins. 'I wish we could skip school and do something more interesting.' He nods suggestively and Lainey tries to smile. If someone had told her last year that Liam Whittaker would one day want to walk to school with her, that he'd imply he'd prefer to *stay home* with her, she would have been secretly thrilled. But it isn't like she'd thought it would be. *He* isn't at all as she'd imagined. He crosses small boundaries that are hard to explain, a petty thief stealing goods too meagre to moan about. Some are physical: the way he plays with her hair as though he's trying to tidy her up, like she's an overgrown hedge that needs pruning. Others are less tangible. The long pause he leaves if he doesn't like her joke or observation, the way he changes the subject so that she feels judged and belittled without being sure why. The ease with which he races ahead when he meets a friend, so she ends up ten paces behind them, unsure if she's welcome in the conversation.

This is the fourth day in a row he's turned up to walk with her. She doesn't get why he's still hanging around, since

she gives him little encouragement. Sereena thinks that's the problem. 'You're a challenge for him now,' she'd announced. 'You'll have to spell it out for him, tell him to get lost, or he'll keep sniffing around, hoping you'll take pity on him and give him what he wants.'

Sereena doesn't need to spell out what that is. Neither of them has any doubt about that.

Lainey thinks of telling him about the disaster hidden beneath her bed. Surely he'd run then. *Probably straight to the authorities*, she thinks with a shudder. And since his dad is a high-ranking government minister, he's likely to be listened to.

'Come on,' she says, pushing past him for the door, pretending not to notice his hand reaching out for her. 'We'll be late.'

Liam shrugs and follows her out.