

How far would you go to protect your child?



don't say
a
word

A . L . B I R D

A. L. Bird

Don't Say a Word: A gripping psychological thriller from the author of The Good Mother

Аннотация

'A fast-paced, gripping thriller.' B A Paris, bestselling author of Behind Closed Doors and The Breakdown'Intense and brilliantly uncomfortable reading' Lisa Hall, bestselling author of Between You and Me A happy child. Every parent knows the world can be scary. Lawyer Jen Sutton knows it better than most. And she'll go to any length to protect her son from what – and who – lies outside their front door. A loving mother. Some might say she's being overprotective. But isn't it a mother's duty to protect her child from harm? A family built on a lie. Jen has kept her secrets safe. Until the postcard arrives, signed by the one person she hoped would never catch up with her... and her new case begins to feel a little too close to home. One thing is clear: Jen has been found. Now, she faces a choice. Run, and lose everything? Or fight – and risk her son discovering the truth. Don't Say a Word is the electrifying new psychological thriller from A.L. Bird – perfect for fans of C.L. Taylor and Sue Fortin. 'An absolutely jaw dropper and a must read for all.' – Karen Whittard, Netgalley reviewer 'Readers hear claim that, "This book will leaving

you guessing until the end.” I am glad to say that, for once, the claim is true.’ – M Scott, Netgalley reviewer‘Kept me up all night.’ – Kathleen Johnson, Netgalley reviewer‘The psychological tension ramps up to a plot twist that took me completely by surprise.’ – Avonna Kershey, Netgalley reviewer‘Wow! A well deserved 5 stars, one of the best psychological fiction books of this year so far!’ – Julia Beales, Netgalley reviewer‘One you get towards the end you better hope you’re not needed for anything because you will find yourself glued until the last word.’ – Tara Sheehan, Netgalley reviewer‘Impossible to put down.’ – Linda Strong, Netgalley reviewer‘A pacy, action-packed, brilliantly plotted psychological thriller with one hell of a showdown. I absolutely loved it!’ – Diane Jeffrey, author of *Those Who Lie*

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A happy child.

Every parent knows the world can be scary. Lawyer Jen Sutton knows it better than most. And she'll go to any length to protect her son from what – and who – lies outside their front door.

A loving mother.

Some might say she's being over-protective. But isn't it a mother's duty to protect her child from harm?

A family built on a lie.

Jen has kept her secrets safe. Until the postcard arrives, signed by the one person she hoped would never catch up with her... and her new case begins to feel a little too close to home.

One thing is clear: *Jen has been found.*

Now, she faces a choice. Run, and lose everything? Or fight – and risk her son discovering the truth.

Don't Say a Word is the electrifying new psychological thriller from AL Bird, perfect for fans of CL Taylor and Sue Fortin.

Don't Say a Word

A. L. Bird



ONE PLACE. MANY STORIES

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Copyright

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save people's lives.

Prologue

The doorbell rings. Josh runs towards it.

'No, wait, sweetie, remember!' I shout after him.

'It's fine, Mum, it'll just be the postman!'

'No, Josh, let me!'

I run up behind him. But he's already taking off the chain, opening the door. Please let it be the postman.

Yes, it is. False alarm. I see the retreating uniform of a blue shirt and baseball cap. Stop, beating heart. Not every morning is a drama. I kiss Josh on the forehead.

'OK, Josh, it was the postman. But next time it might not be, all right? So let me open the door.'

I lead us back to the kitchen to resume breakfast-making activities, musing at how, even in a situation like this one, ten-year-olds can find so engrossing – no bills to pay, I guess.

But then I realize Josh isn't following. I turn round.

His face is white.

'You've got a postcard,' he says. 'From Chloe Brown.'

The peanut butter jar drops from my hand.

'Josh, let me see.'

He hands me the postcard, wide-eyed.

Yes, there's the name. Chloe Brown. Printed clearly, so there's no mistaking it. The message just says: 'See you soon.'

I turn over to the picture. It's a small boy, on a bike. My stomach twists. I flip back to the name again. And that's when

I see. There's a stamp, but no postmark. Where the postmark should be, it's written: 'By hand.'

'Mum, I don't think it was really the postman. I think it was ...' He trails off.

We both know who it was. And that Josh isn't safe.

Chapter 1

TWO WEEKS EARLIER

This is me. I should probably stop telling myself this now. But those old habits, they're tricky to shake, right?

Brush brush brush. This is me. Brush brush brush. Jen Sutton. Maybe I should focus on my teeth a bit more, less on the life reminders. Perhaps that would stop the hygienist telling me off – 'You must brush near the gum, Ms Sutton. See how easily I can make your teeth bleed.' If she knew how much trouble it had taken to register for that surgery, the time I had to wait, the rigmarole ... Well, perhaps she wouldn't be so gleeful when the blood oozes out. Just give me and Josh a sticker and get on with it.

'Mum!' There's a yell from outside the bathroom. 'Where's my swimming stuff?'

Oh shit. Of course. Tuesday. Swimming.

Spit the toothpaste into the sink and jam my toothbrush into the jar next to Josh's. Another win for the plaque.

'I'll just get it, sweetie!'

Quickly spritz on some scent. Then: swimming stuff, swimming stuff ... I could berate Josh, tell him he should have reminded me, that he's old enough now to sort it out for himself.

But no. I'm not being that mother. Josh will feel secure and loved and nurtured always. And him being ten now, all it means is, ten years since ... Well obviously. Then.

The woman I try not to think about.

Deep breath. It's OK. She can't get us here.

'Mum! Are you coming?'

OK. Focus on the now. I think I washed the swim kit. Pretty sure I washed it.

'Mum, you have got it, haven't you? We're going to be late. I've got to see Chris about the trains before the bell.'

'It's OK, I'll give you a lift.' Maybe he can explain what he means about trains when we're in the car. Probably something else I've got to make. Sorry – help him make.

I take the opportunity to ruffle his hair as I come level with him – it looks so adorably curly this morning. Josh rolls his eyes at me and ducks slightly. 'You always give me a lift. I don't know why you pretend I might cycle there one day – on my own, shock horror!'

The search for the swimming trunks and towel (and oh, crap – goggles!) stops momentarily. Since when were ten-year-olds so wise? Does he see right through me? That every day there is some kind of excuse why I have to run him to school, not let him walk or ride the fifteen minutes with his friends?

But he doesn't know why. It's fine. That's key. If he thinks I'm mad or overprotective or scatty, I'm OK with that. Normal boring-mum annoyance. Nothing more. And I love the routine.

Every second spent with my son, at home, in the car. Why would I give that up? Even if spending time with him were the only factor.

I poke my head into Josh's room, hoping (dreading) I might see a still-festering swim kit curled up on the floor.

Nope.

'Mum, if I'm not there he'll give the trains to someone else! Come on!'

Ah, sounds like I don't need to make the trains then. Good.

'It's all right, Josh. Don't panic.'

Living room/kitchen – sorry, studio area. No sign of towels or trunks.

Oh, hold on – there. What's that on the radiator behind the sofa?

Trunks. Half off the radiator. Half dry. And therefore half wet. Damn it.

'Right, here we go, Josh; there are your trunks. Let's find the rest.'

'But they're wet!'

'And so will you be when you get into the pool. Try not to worry. Three, two, one – goggles search!'

And we run round the flat waving our arms above our heads shouting, 'Goggles, goggles, goggles!' I've taught him that the best way to look for something that's hiding in plain sight is just to shout as loud as you can. It's sure to lure it out. Plus we have fun.

It works. A giggling Josh returns with goggles. I find a bag and a slightly damp towel hanging off the bike in the hall. Not perfect, but it will do.

We're out the door, into the car, on our way. Josh gushes about why getting the spare Lego train that his friend has will be so life-changing. I didn't even know spare Lego was a thing. But then, Josh at ten is so different from me at ten. Thank God. As often as I dare, I flick a glance at him in the rear-view mirror. His face is so beautiful. The cutest little freckle – just one – on his cheek. And how did his eyes get so brown? Like two lovely shiny conkers, when he's happy. Which is most of the time.

I give what I hope is an imperceptible sigh of relief. I've done it for another morning. I've created an environment where the biggest crisis is some damp trunks, and I'm now ferrying him to a safe place where he has friends. With spare Lego. It must be within me, this mothering. Because I sure as hell didn't get a good example. Examples. All those 'mothers'. Just not the one I needed.

Anyway, look – school gates.

'Look, look, there's Chris, and he's got the train!'

'Have a nice day, Joshy!'

'Mum, it's Josh at school, OK – I'm ten, you know!'

But he returns my kiss before he jumps out of the car. I watch him as he runs up to a similarly aged boy, and they stand in serious, private conversation, like a couple of dealers. The goods swap hands. Someone honks a horn behind me. I'm double-

parked again. But let them honk. If they knew, they would understand.

And now, to work. Again, a blessing. Because really, who'd have thought it?

Chapter 2

There's a little car park in the courtyard behind our office. I was so pleased when I found that out. I didn't know, when I came to interview. I had to get the bus. I couldn't stand it. Waiting at the bus stop, I felt so vulnerable. Had I really left Chloe behind? What if one of Mick's men spotted me?

Once the bus arrived, I would head straight for the back so that no one could sit behind me. Then I'd worry it would mean I couldn't get off the bus quickly if someone saw me (proper me). So I'd dart from seat to seat. Bus driver must have thought I was mad. I thought I was mad. That it was all too much. They did tell me, when it all started, 'You might find this a struggle.' Masters of understatement.

So, yeah, it's good there's a car park. Good I was able to negotiate a car (not from work, from the other lot).

I check my make-up in the flip-down mirror. Good. Professional not-quite-lawyer. Haven't achieved eye liner. Don't think I ever have since Josh was born. Really wasn't a priority early on – you reassess. Besides. I think I used a lifetime of it back then. Me at ten – vamping it up in a park with some White Lightning. Josh – well, you know, you saw him. He thinks parks are for feeding ducks and sliding on zip-wires.

Fluff my hair up – rocking the sharp blonde bob, if I do say so myself. Should probably take the sunglasses off the top of it for the office though, cool as they look. The usual earrings, silver more tarnished than sparkling. I should upgrade them. But they were from Mum. They've survived enough attempts at being torn out in anger, over the years. Now, they're staying. Even though I had to go.

Oh, but look! Toothpaste on my jacket. Shit. I spit on my finger and rub at the stain. It gets worse. Bugger. Right, let's hope no one wants to meet with me today – the jacket's coming off. It's not the Eighties, anyway. As much as I like the armour, I don't have to power dress every day: Luton's best legal executive doesn't need shoulder pads. Sorry. Lu'on's best. Drop the t. Do the glottal stop. It means fewer questions. Don't need to do the whole 'We lived in Leeds' routine. Again.

I ditch my jacket. It exposes the fragile cotton threads of the friendship bracelet Josh made for me when he was seven. Blue, white, and red. I've safeguarded it like the most expensive Rolex – and for me, it's as much of a status symbol. If anyone wants to mock it, let them. I grab my bag and jump out of the car.

I run straight into Tim, the firm's newest partner.

'Jen!'

'Sorry, Tim. Sorry. I didn't see you.'

'Ah, I move silently – appear when you least expect it.'

Something about the way he says that gives me a little shiver. I wish I had my jacket with me again.

But the moment goes, because he carries on talking.

‘I wanted to see you, actually, Jen. New case I need you to help me on. If you’ve got capacity?’

‘Great! Yeah, of course.’

‘Excellent. Let’s speak later. It’s almost made for you.’

I nod. ‘Perfect.’ Of course it’s made for me. Because it’s bound to involve some crappy admin running around, which is what they all think is made for me. Even new hires, like Tim. Perfect. Thanks *so* much ...

He holds the back door open and gestures for me to go inside.

I half-curtsey a ‘thanks’ and duck into the building.

One of my safe havens.

It has been, for the last four years. Thanks to Bill, the head of the firm. He knows, of course. Some of it, anyway. Trustworthy lawyer. They thought it was fine to tell him. Said he wouldn’t tell anyone else. I was against it (of course). I didn’t like that when I looked into his eyes he was seeing two of me. And judging me, probably. Thinking I’d done things that I hadn’t. But. I didn’t have any other choices, did I? If I wanted to do something with the college diploma I’d clawed to achieve. Even if ninety-nine per cent of the time it is the less-than-perfect crummy admin jobs none of the ‘real’ lawyers want to do.

Sheila – Bill and Tim’s PA – waves good morning to me. ‘All right, love?’

I wave back. ‘Good thanks. You want a coffee?’

She gives me a thumbs-up. ‘You’re a star!’

So I move to dump my bag at my desk. But then Tim speaks again. I jump. I didn't realize he was still there.

'Another thing, Jen,' he says. His voice is low. 'Keep this new matter between us, OK? Very confidential. I'll explain why later.' I nod. Of course. I feel a little thrill. Lawyers are always obsessed by confidentiality, so for it to be extra confidential – well, that's got to mean it's exciting. And it's good to be trusted. 'If you need to speak to someone, you can talk to Daniel Farley. I've instructed him.' Tim winks and walks to his office.

I go to my desk, head down. Can anyone see the colour that must be rising in my cheeks? Tim winked – he's new, but does he know about the Daniel incident? He can't do, surely. The firm always instructs Daniel when it needs a barrister, at least since I've been here. The wink wasn't a reference to any incident, it was just ... A wink.

Not that there was an incident. Not really. Just a crush. Which might be mutual. We almost went for a drink. Until I stood him up. But it's the nearest I've had to a date since the man we don't mention.

Chapter 3

Two spoons coffee, no sugar, for Bill. One teabag, dash of sweetener for –

'Jen.'

That voice! I start, and the whole sweetener pack goes in Sheila's tea.

The one downside of working here: Lucy Caxton.

Applying my smile, I turn round.

‘Morning, Lucy.’

‘Getting straight to the important jobs I see,’ she says, gesturing to the cups in front of me. ‘I left you a voice message. Didn’t you see the flashing light?’ She puts down her own cup. Yeah, that figures. She’s allowed time to make tea. One rule for her, another for me. I know that type well.

‘Sorry, Lucy.’ If there’s one thing I’ve learnt, you don’t answer back. You can shout and rail internally. But it doesn’t help anyone to be mouthy. ‘The team needed their caffeine, but I’ll get right on it.’

‘OK, well it’s urgent, so maybe get that kettle boiling.’

It’s literally just about to boil. She can hear it. Unless that’s just the steam mounting in my head? Nope, nope, there’s the click. The pressure’s off. Allegedly.

‘Ah, there we are,’ I say. Forced jollity. Turning the old trick. So they won’t know what’s underneath.

‘Well then, mine’s a tea, white, none. Call me when you get to your desk.’

And she leaves me her cup. Christ, she’s led a sheltered life. If you’ve had all kind of shit – yes, actually, shit – mixed in your drinks over the years (ha, ha, yeah, really funny, now fuck off) then you wouldn’t be Miss Prissy Bitch to someone then expect a standard cuppa. But then that’s her whole fucking problem. No compassion. One of those people – walks past on the other side, says the State should help and then goes into Starbucks for

her frappe-latta-cappa, then complains about being overcharged. Fucking hell.

I need to boil more water.

Come on. New Jen. New Jen doesn't stand in kitchens grasping cups so hard they might crack. She doesn't rail against well-dressed women in authority. She smiles; she makes tea; she gets to her desk. She does not swear. The day does its thing; she does hers. And Josh gets safely collected at the end of it.

So I dispatch the tea. I almost bow when I drop off Lucy's (better than pouring it on her, I guess). 'I'll be right with you, as soon as I've listened to that message.'

'What, Jen, you haven't done that yet? Oh, don't bother. I might as well just tell you. Sit here.'

And she pulls her pashmina-covered oversized handbag from the chair by her desk.

I don't have a notebook. I am carrying coffee (for myself and one other). The obvious thing to do is to ask her to give me a minute.

'Lucy, could I possibly ...'

'Jen, what's with you today? You're unfocused. Do I need to talk to Bill?'

No, of course not. Of course she doesn't need to speak to Bill. Of course, I will sit here.

I wish there was a room I could slam upstairs to. Refuse to come down. Until I'm shipped off somewhere else.

But I don't have that luxury.

So I sit.

‘I need two land transfer forms this morning. One ...’

And on we go. Minus pen and paper, I work hard to remember the details. Which I can do. It’s details I’ve always been good on. That’s how I got where I am. And he got – where he is.

Finally, mid-morning, I reach my own desk. The light on my phone still flashes. If that light thinks it’s going to annoy me into listening to Lucy’s recorded voice, it’s very wrong. I sip my cold coffee. Not ideal but I’ll tough it out. Hah! Emails, forms, emails, forms. The day goes on. Roll on Tim’s new case. I can’t be Ms Motivation every day.

Lunch finally comes and I sneak out via the staircase, avoiding Lucy’s desk. I’m nearly done with those forms but my stomach’s needs are greater. And my brain’s. When you need a walk, you need a walk. I used to tell them that, back when I was a teenager. They didn’t get it, or pretended not to, stupid sods. ‘She’s gone AWOL again’, they said. ‘Fuck you,’ I said, when I finally returned. Another black mark. Another step further from adoption.

Outside the air is – well, it’s Luton (Lu’on) isn’t it? So the air is a mix of traffic, plane, and curry fumes. An aircraft roars overhead, a call to prayer summons from a mosque, and the buses honk like the drivers don’t actually want to run over pedestrians.

The great big pink M of the shopping mall is what draws me, though. Infinite choice, self-creation. I don’t buy any of it. Money

is still tight. I don't get anything, over and above the job. You'd think I would, but I don't. I can still look though, right? Have a bit of a break? Try to get Jen back on track?

I browse in the window of Oasis. I'm only twenty-nine. I can still do High Street. Remember Chloe 'doing' the high street all those years ago – brazenly picking up what she fancied then walking out the shop. Without paying. No prosecutions, once the tales of the 'difficult history' got out; she just couldn't go back to that shop. Sometimes she got to keep the clothes, though. Should have been shopping with Mum instead. Hah.

Now, the pinks and lilacs waft in a window fan, part of an elaborate window display designed to make you feel like the most stylish, most feminine of women. I could be that person. Maybe I am that person. Just without those clothes. My eye strays to some kids' clothes in the next-door window. There's a cute beanie hat that would suit Josh completely. It can't be too expensive – I should pop in and get it.

Then I realize I am not the only one looking in the window.

There's a woman. But not just any woman. She has wild curly black hair. Chloe hair.

Instantly I go small. You know – shoulders and upper arms clench in, head goes down. Feet wriggle closer together, but ready to make a run if need be.

Stupid, Jen. It's just a woman, looking in the window of a shop. In a busy lunch hour. Over-ride the instinct. Be New Jen.

So I flick my eyes back to the window reflection.

And the woman is gone.

I'm seeing ghosts. It's just me.

Or fucking hell, poltergeists, the amount of a flying shitstorm there'd be if –

If anything that went on in my paranoid world was real.

I give myself a moment. Breathe. Think of Josh. Then I abandon Oasis. Rush to Boots, buy one of their meal deal things, then back to the office. I can eat at my desk with BBC News. Today is obviously a day to be inside. I know it's a safe zone at work. Even Lucy, bitch that she is, doesn't pose any real danger. Fuck it, Luton is a safe zone (if you steer clear of the estates, and those crazy pro/anti burqa rallies).

But I can't help looking over my shoulder as I scurry back to the office. I haven't sensed danger for months. So why now?

Chapter 4

I eat lunch over the BBC website. No, not catching up on *Strictly* or some reality shit nonsense (not shit, Jen – just reality nonsense. Come on, Jen. Think nicely; speak nicely). I'm all about the news. When something like that happens, when I'm spooked. If I'm sure as I'll ever be there's no one hovering behind me, I'll flick onto the *Doncaster Star* site for some news from my old locale. Just in case, you know. In case there's something about me. Or something about her. About Chloe.

But of course there's nothing on the news. On the BBC, it's the usual 'delete as applicable' news story. The pound is weak/strong/middling. Europe is in crisis/celebration/despair. Unemployment

is up/down/static. A life is over/lost/saved. Refugees fleeing from a brutal regime/a natural disaster/economic meltdown are welcome/unwelcome/feared. Or from the local news special, the ladies are getting drunk at the races again. That's the problem with Donnie. Too much glitz and glamour. About as much as Luton.

Nothing doing. I am not the centre of the universe. The websites don't, in fact, contain any headlines pertinent to me, or anything about Chloe. Which is good, right?

I still gag on my tuna sandwiches, though. What was I thinking when I chose these?

See, Jen, this is the real-world impact of your crazy single mum paranoia. Dodgy lunch and fishy breath. Josh is going to love that kiss on the cheek later.

I chuck the sandwich, half-eaten, in the bin, and minimize the websites. Time to be intellectually curious about the work I'm actually meant to do. That's how I got the job. 'She's bright,' Bill was told. Which is basically code for 'She knows fuck all, but she's had a tough time, and she can string a sentence together, so cut her some slack.'

She knows nowt, not 'fuck all.' Cut the swearing, even in your mind, Jen – what you don't think, you won't say; give the game away. Crap, but 'nowt's' wrong too. Too Yorkshire. 'She knows nothing.' Finally.

Except I do. I know stuff. I know more stuff about their fucking legal system, the wrong side of it, than all the ones

who've grown up in suits. The stuff you can't learn from books. So don't put me on fucking conveyancing files ... Christ, what a waste. Yeah, I looked at property law in my diploma but, I'm sorry, it's puddle dull, and anyone with a printer, some coloured pens, and the one brain cell you need to fill out a form can do it. Yes, that means you, Lucy.

For those of us with a bit of life experience – family and criminal law. They're what make sense. They're what matter. If you're working for the defence of course. Or the mothers. Some of them are fucking toerags. But I tell you – nine times out of ten they are not as bad as the fathers.

Unless the crack's got them. Or worse, heroin.

But anyway, it's better than some rich twat who's got sick of one house and wants another one, just down the road.

Not stuck in a flat spitting distance from Marsh Farm estate with no real hope of moving away from the spectre of your son getting caught up in the same type of gang that got us there in the first place. Whether they're boys or men or desexed junkies they're all the same, wherever you go. And they beat their women. No fucking doubt. And no one gives a shit.

So. Yeah. Maybe with Tim's case I can help someone.

I can't fill in this form so angry. I'll do voicemail instead. I stick the Bluetooth headset on and tap some buttons.

Yes, there's Lucy, from earlier: 'Oh, my form, oh it's so urgent – oh, oh, oh.'

Delete.

Another one. Bill. OK. Take that one more seriously. Wants me to come with him to a meeting at 3 p.m. to make a note. My stomach tightens slightly. Then it relaxes – Bill says he knows it's close to school pick-up time, but he promises it will be short. Lovely Bill. I'm lucky to have a boss like him. I sit up straighter in my chair. This is what it's about, Jen. Not Lucy. It's about doing well for Bill, and getting out on time for Josh. So behave.

Next new message.

Oh. Wow. Now that's something I didn't expect.

Daniel.

'Hey ... Jen. Um, yeah I was hoping not to get voicemail ... So Tim tells me you're working on this case. Give me a call. I'm around, unless the clerks chuck a bail hearing at me last minute. Would be good to speak. OK, well, hopefully chat later. Bye.'

You wouldn't think this guy earns his money from standing on his feet, wooing judges. Was that a hint of a stutter?

I replay the message. Obviously just to check for stuttering. Not because I want to check his voice again or analyse the tone.

Oh, lovely Daniel. I can picture him now. In fact yes, I can – I pull up his profile shot on his chambers' website.

He's younger then – when he first got called to the bar, I bet. Clean-shaven still, not yet the confident permissive stubble of a man who's made it. No empathy lines round the eyes yet, or mouth. But all the good signs in that smile and frank gaze that they will appear. Brown hair that is just brown – no coppers or goldens or anything fancy like that. Not a posh twat, Daniel.

Lawyerly, yes. Decent, polite, yes. Well spoken, true – doesn't drop the 't' in Luton. But he went to his local comp like the rest of us. He mentions that, on the site. No names, but we get the message: normality. Not some private-school tosser.

But why is he calling? The case, yes, but I haven't even had a briefing from Tim yet.

Could it be personal?

I should call him. Or is that going to be too awkward? Damn it. Bloody Tim not telling me more about the case – or I could fall back on that. Maybe I should wait until I've spoken to Tim?

But it would be good, wouldn't it, after the window scare of lunchtime to hear a safe voice. An almost-friend voice? The voice of someone to whom I came very close to disclosing some of my shit. Too close. I had to rein it back.

I listen to the message again, then hit 'call this sender' before I can rethink it.

'Earl Court Chambers?' says a voice.

Oh. Of course. The clerks, not a direct dial.

'Hi. It's Jen Sutton from Rotham Wyatt. Is Daniel Farley around?'

'Jen, good to hear from you. Dan's been missing you!'

Oh good, so there's clerks' room gossip about us. Over nothing. How nice.

'Ha, yes, well, the feeling's mutual.' Can't explain it's because of the case, I guess, if it's so secret.

'Let me put you through to Dan.'

There's a silence, out of which emerges some Mozarty stuff.

Then a voice.

'Jen, hi!'

'Hi, Daniel.'

Silence.

'So I got your –'

'I left you a –'

Over-keen laughter as we each start then stop sentences simultaneously. I can see that happening for the whole phone call.

'You go,' I tell Daniel. 'You know why you were calling.'

'Sure, fine,' he says. He doesn't sound fine. He sounds strangled, choked. Then he lets a bit of breath out. 'Listen, Jen – I just wanted to say, really looking forward to working with you again. I know there was a bit of ...'

He stumbles. I catch him.

'Stuff?' I say.

'OK, yeah. Stuff. There was a bit of "stuff" last time but don't worry about it, OK. I'm genuinely looking forward to working with you again.'

Me too, I think. But I don't fill the silence, in case there are more words to come.

More silence.

'OK, well anyway,' he continues, 'this case looks like a really intense one. I don't know if you've seen the exhibits file yet. It's –'

'I'm looking forward to working with you, too, Daniel.'

There's another pause. A baby pause.

‘Thanks, Jen.’ His voice is softer now. Less manic. ‘I’m glad.’

‘We’ll speak soon, OK? On the case.’

‘Yes, on the case.’

I want to say: ‘And on more “stuff” too.’ But I don’t.

‘Bye, then,’ I say instead.

‘Bye.’

We hang up.

I take a deep breath and close my eyes. It’s times like this I wish it wasn’t so tricky being me. That I could simply have ended the call by suggesting a drink. It’s not just the childcare angle. It’s the caring for my child. The guard goes down slowly, slowly, slowly. Otherwise how do you know who you can trust?

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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