

NO

ONE STOLEN BABY

GOOD

TWO DESPERATE STRANGERS

DEED

ONE NIGHT OF TERROR

CASS GREEN

USA Today bestselling author

Cass Green

**No Good Deed: The gripping
new psychological thriller
from the bestselling author
of In a Cottage in a Wood**

Аннотация

One stolen baby. Two desperate strangers. One night of terror. The USA Today and Sunday Times top ten bestselling author returns with a dark and twisty psychological thriller. She saved your life. When Nina almost dies during a disastrous blind date, her life is saved by a waitress called Angel. But later that evening, Nina is surprised by a knock on the door. It's Angel – and she's pointing a gun at her. Now she'll make you pay. Minutes later, Angel's younger brother Lucas turns up, covered in blood shielding a stolen newborn baby in his arms. Nina is about to endure the longest night of her life – a night that will be filled with terror and lead her to take risks she would never have believed herself capable of...

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Dedication

Readers: I'm so grateful to each and every one of you.

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1

Nina

The sun still blasts through the restaurant windows at seven pm, showcasing dust on the red plastic table cloths and monochrome movie stars on the walls. Even Sophia Loren is looking the worse for wear as she smiles down on my table-for-two, her picture yellowing and wrinkled in the unforgiving light. Two large ceiling fans churn the soupy air, bringing no relief.

The initial, barbecue-novelty of this heatwave has long passed and most of the passers-by now share the same shiny, bad-tempered patina. There's a fraught, irritable energy in the heavy air. Earlier, on the bus into town, a young woman had unleashed a barrage of swearing at an old man she accused of hogging all the space on their double seat. Physical contact with strangers is even less welcome than it ever was.

I pluck at my neckline to let in some air; sweat is gathering under the seams of my bra. Because I've been living in vest tops, baggy old shorts and flip-flops after work lately, I feel imprisoned by this outfit. I don't even like this dress that much, nor the sandals that supposedly go with it, which seem to be made mainly from barbed wire and sandpaper.

I bought the shoes and the dress from a shop I normally avoid because it's so expensive, deciding I needed to be bolder, braver,

in my wardrobe choices.

Making any kind of decisions the day after your husband of fifteen years moves out of the family home and in with his new, younger partner, isn't, it transpires, the brightest idea.

I picture her; reasonable, smiling Laura with her huge, moist eyes and her, 'I really hope we can become friends, Nina.'

Friends.

Ian posted a picture on Facebook today; the two of them looking tanned and happy outside a pub. Laura's face was turned to him like a heliotrope seeking sunshine. He seems to have dropped ten years in that picture and it stung, I can tell you. If that wasn't bad enough, Carmen, my supposed best friend, had liked the post. It was as though she'd forgotten all that stuff about being 'better off without him'. Forgotten about my broken heart.

So, I'd bashed out a furious private message to her. She'd claimed it was 'difficult' because we all 'went back a long way' and a load of other rubbish that finally made me snap. I'm pretending not to see the missed calls and four texts she has sent since then.

It's fair to say that it has been a shitty day.

I usually love this time of year. The thought of six weeks away from the comprehensive where I work as an English teacher should be something to relish. All those weeks without lesson planning, marking and having to mop up hormonal teenage angst. Lots of time to hang out at home. The extended summer holiday usually includes some lesson planning and a couple of meetings,

but for now it stretches ahead of me. That is the problem, in a nutshell.

Last night, my twelve-year-old son, Sam, went off to stay with Ian and Laura before travelling with them to visit Laura's parents, who live in Provence. I've seen the pictures of where they're going. It's all turquoise shutters and tumbling wisteria. Idyllic. There's even a small pool. But the icing on the cake is the resident dog, a shaggy-haired golden retriever. Sam has always wanted a dog but Ian's allergy to pets meant it was a no-go. I can't help enjoying the thought of Ian spending the whole holiday sneezing. Maybe I'll get the biggest, hairiest dog I can find while they're away. That'll show him.

I pretended to be excited for Sam, however hard it was to mould my mouth and face into the required shapes for a response. I want him to have a lovely time. Of *course* I do, but the idea of rattling around the house on my own, picturing them all together as they amble down sun-sparkled lanes surrounded by lavender fields, causes a panicky emptiness to swell inside my chest.

Must snap out of this. I take a swig of my tepid white wine and blink hard. I wish I had thought to bring something to read, or at least my iPad. I'd been watching something on Netflix in the bath, and I left it on the side. Ian disapproved of this and now I do it as often as possible in a pathetic act of rebellion.

I look around the restaurant.

There aren't many other customers. Whether it's because it is still early, or there is no air conditioning here, it is hard to say. A

couple with two small children stoically attempt to eat with one hand each, while simultaneously pushing rising offspring back into highchairs, wiping mouths and occasionally tapping at their phone screens with the other. I remember those days all too well, but how quickly they go. People told me this but I didn't really believe it then.

I still think a Starbucks might have been a better choice for this blind date, or whatever it is. When he suggested this unprepossessing family Italian restaurant, Gioli's, it had thrown me a bit. Feels like more of a commitment; harder to make a getaway anyway, should the need arise. But Carmen is always telling me to be bolder, to 'get back out there again,' and so I agreed. The man I'm meeting, Carl, is an acquaintance of Stella at work, who assured me he was a) clean b) not mad c) quite good looking, in that order. The order of importance might have been different twenty years ago.

My attention is drawn now to the back of the restaurant, where the manager, a rotund moustachioed man, is having an intense conversation with a waitress who appears to have just arrived. She is tying an apron around her narrow waist, and looking sourly over his comb-over'd head. Taller than him by several inches, she is willow-thin, with jet-black hair only a few midnight degrees up from natural judging by the Celtic paleness of her skin. Her hair is tied up in a tumbling ponytail. Her large features and smokily made-up eyes remind me a little of Amy Winehouse.

As the manager turns away, grim-faced, I shoot her a tentative

smile of sympathy. The young woman lifts her fingers and makes a shooting gesture at her own head, which makes me laugh out loud.

The restaurant door flies open then and a man enters with much bustle and energy, carrying one of those foldable bikes. He manoeuvres it past a table, catching a chair that almost clatters over. I hear a murmured grumble.

He's tall, balding, slim. Not bad looking. Carl, I'm sure of it. I offer a smile but he regards me with a furrowed brow. Like I haven't quite matched up to expectations. Something deflates inside me.

'Are you Nina?' His voice is a little curt. He still isn't smiling. 'Yes,' I reply, feeling my own friendly expression sliding off my face. He bobs his head in greeting and begins fussing with the folded bike, trying to wedge it next to the table up against the wall. This all seems to take an age and he looks increasingly annoyed.

I'm starting to squirm a little in my seat by the time he finally does look up. He manages a brief smile, warming his eyes for a moment like a light flicking on and then off again.

'Sorry,' he says. 'You must think I'm rude. I'm Carl.' He holds out his hand and I'm aware that mine is a little damp in his oddly dry one.

'That's dedication,' I say with a grin, 'cycling in this heat. I almost melt in a puddle just walking anywhere!'

The frown's back. Maybe I've said the wrong thing, or the

thought of me sweating is repulsive to him. He picks up the menu and says, rather abruptly, 'So. Are we eating?'

No, we bloody aren't, I think, not if you're going to be like this. But he's calling Amy Winehouse over and within seconds he has ordered a chicken salad and a Diet Coke.

My eyes dart to my glass of white wine and I take a large, defiant sip.

'Anything for you?' the waitress asks quietly, her voice deep and soft. She has a bumpy rash of spots around her chin smeared in concealer. She looks like she needs to eat more fruit and vegetables. A plastic name badge says 'Angel' on the breast of her white shirt.

What a pretty, unusual name.

Carl is tapping the Fitbit on his wrist and staring into its face greedily. Heaven knows when he finds time to go walking, what with all that cycling.

This isn't going to work. But I'm too well brought up to simply get up and leave. On any other day, I'd have probably made a plan for Carmen to ring with a fake emergency. That was out, obviously. I'm just going to have to deal with this on my own. I'm not staying much longer, that's for sure.

'Just some olives, thanks,' I say. 'And a tap water. With ice.'

Carl looks at me curiously.

'Ate earlier,' I lie. I'll finish my disappointing glass of wine, eat the olives and then pretend I've had a text calling me away. Decision made, I feel myself relax slightly.

As the waitress writes down our order, I spot what look like fingerprint bruises circling her delicate wrist, but it's just a glimpse. She moves and a trio of cheap metal bangles cover the spot with a tinkling sound.

'So, Nina,' says Carl, pulling my attention back, 'you aren't a cyclist then?'

'No,' I say, 'well, not unless you count using an exercise bike once, before guiltily stuffing it in the garage.'

He regards me blankly.

'You're keen then?' I say, a bit weakly.

Oh yes. He is.

He proceeds to talk at length about the cycling club that saved him from a serious bout of depression. He tells me how many 'Ks' he does every weekend and about his plans to enter some race or other in the summer. I tune out and finish my wine miserably, while surreptitiously dragging my handbag onto my lap in readiness to receive the fake text.

He doesn't even stop talking when the food arrives. I drain the glass of water then robotically pop olives into my mouth, waiting for the best moment to pretend my phone is vibrating.

'You should try it,' he's saying now. 'Literally saved my life.'

'Yep. You said.'

He stares at me then, an odd expression on his face. His cheeks redden a little.

The next thing he says is in a lower tone and I don't catch it at first.

'I'm sorry?' I say, sliding the last olive into my mouth.

He clears his throat.

'I'm not very good at this sort of thing,' he says, sotto voce, 'but do you want to come back? For sex?'

I stare at him for a couple of seconds, unable to believe what I just heard. His cheeks are now flaming. A mental picture of him attempting to peel off Lycra shorts in a seductive manner comes into my mind and a surge of hysterical laughter rises in my throat. I inhale sharply and the olive shoots backwards, covering my windpipe. I try to cough it away but my throat just spasms uselessly, silently, failing to budge it. The olive is a solid mass at the back of my throat. There's a split second of disbelief before I accept that I'm choking. My pulse thunders in my head and there's a whooshing in my ears.

I can't breathe ... I can't breathe.

'I don't think it was that funny,' says Carl, his face sour now. He doesn't understand that I'm dying, I'm actually dying *right here*, in this shitty restaurant.

Slapping my hands against the table, I stagger to my feet, panic blooming in hot waves as my body strains for air. I try thumping my own chest but nothing changes, nothing shifts. The olive feels vast in my throat as my lungs strain and pull uselessly and my face is wet with tears.

Carl's mouth opens and closes, fish-like, his shocked eyes wide.

Why isn't he helping me? *Why isn't anyone helping me?*

My vision begins to smear, the floor shifting under me. My mind blooms bright with Sam's face and I strive even harder to make the air come. But it's no good.

I'm going to die.

And then arms encircle my body from behind. It feels unbearable to be touched and my panic ratchets higher and higher again. Then a hard fist under my diaphragm jerks upwards – *again – again – again* – and the olive shoots out of my mouth onto the table, where it sits, glistening with spit.

Air rushes into my lungs. I start to sob uncontrollable tears of relief. I can't stop them.

There's a hot hand on the bare flesh of my arm and I'm looking into the face of the waitress, who says, 'You're OK, you're OK.'

It takes me a few moments to find my voice and then I manage to croak, 'Thank you, thank you so much.' It's the strangest feeling but, in that brief moment, I love this waitress a tiny bit.

I wish I could stop crying but I can't. Carl stands awkwardly in front of me, arms dangling by his sides, and the other diners stare as one.

Thank God, I'm finally out of that place and on the way home.

I pretend to root in my handbag to avoid the curious eyes of the cab driver framed in the rear-view mirror. I know I look a state, with eye make-up migrating down my cheeks and skin all blotchy from crying.

Every time I think about how it felt, my eyes well up again. The precise texture and taste of the terror keeps coming back

to me in waves. It was all-encompassing; a drenching horror I'd only ever experienced in my worst nightmares.

I have never come close to dying before, not really. I was in a car accident when I was a teenager, when a boyfriend misjudged a bend and wrote off his car. But all I got was a bit of whiplash.

This was the most frightening thing I have ever experienced, worse than the most intense bits of childbirth when I thought nothing could be as bad. Or the time when I lost Sam at the Natural History Museum for twenty whole minutes until there was an announcement calling for me. I'd thought then that it was the most intense terror I'd ever experienced, but it was nothing like the feeling that I was about to die.

For a moment, standing in that crummy restaurant, I really thought my life was over. I'll never forget that hot panic and the desperate fight for air, not for the rest of my suddenly-precious life. Oh, here we go again. I swipe my nose with a piece of kitchen towel I find in my handbag. So humiliating too. For this intimate thing to happen, being reduced to my basest self, with all those strangers.

Carl ... well, I hadn't been wrong about him. After a lukewarm, 'Alright now?' he had lingered awkwardly as I sat down again and attempted to get myself together.

Perhaps he felt slighted. His bald offer of sex having, after all, almost killed me. Hopefully he'll sharpen up his chat-up lines before his next date, unless I've frightened him off for life.

This, almost, is enough to make me smile inwardly.

The life-saving waitress had been monosyllabic, as if what she'd done was no big deal. Afterwards, she just asked me if I wanted a cab and, gratefully, I'd accepted, hoping there wouldn't be a long wait. We'd quickly split the bill; Carl throwing down more than enough in his hurry to get away. After he had gone, I had sat there, deflated and wrung out, gazing out at the street and wishing I'd never come out tonight.

When the cabbie arrived, I asked him to wait a minute and hurried to the far end of the restaurant where the waitress was talking to another, older woman who had just arrived. They both regarded me curiously as I approached.

'I'm sorry. Excuse me,' I said. 'I just want to thank you again. You saved my life!'

The waitress hadn't replied. Flustered, I hurried on. 'I wish I could repay you in some way. Look, let me give you something. An extra tip.'

I found myself thrusting a twenty-pound note at her. The waitress looked up sharply, a little suspicious, almost as though she was being tricked in some way.

She took it with only a small nod of thanks.

Just before I left, vowing to never come back to this restaurant, I reached out and touched her thin, pale wrist.

'Your name is apt,' I said. 'I can never thank you enough.'

I sniff now and the taxi driver eyes me again.

Please don't make conversation.

I hadn't been able to face the bus. My car is in the garage and,

even though it feels extravagant to get a taxi all the way out of town to mine, I just want to be home so I can close the door on this terrible evening.

More than anything, I want to grab hold of Sam and squeeze him for all he's worth. But that's not going to be possible.

What a disastrous day. I can't wait for it to be over.

2 Angel

Angel's phone buzzes like an angry insect against her thigh. Over and over again. Text after text. They just keep coming, each one a variation on the same pattern.

Im sorry babe. Can we talk l8r?
i luv u. u know that right???????

Pls?

Get bck here Ffs.

U R actually fcking with me now.

I luv u???

It's embarrassing.

Even though she has always communicated with him in the same language, it isn't a novelty any more. Pathetic, that he can't write properly, or use punctuation. He's not fourteen. He's a thirty-year-old manager of a pub.

It used to be a strange kind of draw, that he hadn't had the same sort of schooling as her – had any kind of schooling, probably. Once she teased him about his lack of education and he hadn't liked it one bit.

She rubs her wrist and winces, thinking about earlier.

She didn't know why she always did it. Picked fights. She simply couldn't help it sometimes. Had always been that way.

When she was small and The Bastard was in one of those volcanic moods, when you could see the fury building up heat inside him, she hadn't made herself smaller and quieter, like her brother had. No, she had made herself even more of an irritant, added more friction to the situation, even though she knew what would follow.

They'd had a perfectly decent evening, by any normal person's standards. But maybe that was the issue.

Time was, they'd party until six am then sleep into the afternoon, only waking to eat, fuck and smoke. Lately though, Leon had been saying stuff like 'Maybe we should stay in and have a quiet night' or complaining about being tired all the time, or too broke to go out.

Last night they'd spent the whole evening watching telly with ready meals on their laps. Angel could feel something bitter fermenting inside her. She'd barely spoken all evening and Leon had kept asking her if she was alright. Eventually, getting no real response, he'd gone into a sulk and slunk off to bed early. Angel had finished another bottle of wine, alone, barely taking in what she was watching on the television.

This morning she had woken with a feeling of clarity, despite her clanging head.

She'd looked around at the bedroom, and suddenly hated the smelly sheets and lack of proper curtains. The overflowing ashtray next to the bed and the sticky glasses and mugs crowding the bedside table. It had turned the dial on her hangover, making it more technicolour and nauseating.

Angel had watched Leon slide out of bed and pat his naked belly in a self-satisfied way. She'd hated him then. So, she'd picked a fight – hard to even remember what it was about, but it didn't really matter because it had quickly escalated. She'd thrown some stuff and tried to scratch his face. He'd twisted her arm behind her back and called her a mad bitch. He'd looked like he wanted to cry as he said it. Idiot. Then he had stormed off to work.

She feels strangely cleansed now. It's over. He can go ahead and burn her stuff if he wants to. She's got what she needs right now in her rucksack.

Before she had left though, some strange impulse had driven her to do one last thing.

Leon was vain about his looks. He spent a lot of money on shirts, lining them up in the wardrobe by colour, so they ranged from white through the pinks and purples to blues and patterned varieties at the other end. Before she left the flat for good, she found herself with a pair of scissors in her hand.

Snip, snip, snip.

It felt good.

For a little while, anyway.

Angel pushes the memory away.

She'll get to the end of this shift, pick up her pay for the week and then Ron, with his manure breath and his clammy little roving hands, can go fuck himself. He won't even know until Saturday, because she has a day off tomorrow. And then she'll

get on a bus and go away for a bit.

Scotland, she thinks, picturing the landscape of watery green mountains and lacy mist. The air is cleaner there. It will sort of scour her on the inside. She can start again, and leave all her mistakes behind her. A fresh start.

Lucas comes into her mind then; a cloud across her positive thoughts. She'd like to see him properly before she leaves. Make things right.

She never really meant what she'd said to him. There was no need for him to cut her off like this. She's been trying to catch up with him for weeks and he never responds to her texts, WhatsApps or calls.

Well, if he's going to be like that, she doesn't have time for it.

This, rather than anything else, is what drags at her now. He doesn't really need her any more. When they were small they'd clung to each other like the inhabitants of a sinking lifeboat but maybe those days have gone.

That's a good thing.

It is.

Angel idly watches the choking woman fussing about getting her stuff together, flashing small grateful smiles her way. She's glad she could help. Learned how to do the Heimlich Manoeuvre years ago, when she'd thought about being a nurse. Never had to do it before though. The woman looks beleaguered, and almost blurry at the edges, like she is trying not to take up any room in the world. She's actually really pretty, with those big brown

eyes and curly auburn hair. Bit frumpy, maybe. She definitely has potential, but it's her expression that's off-putting. Mouth turned down. Sad eyes. It's depressing, looking at her.

Angel doesn't want to end up like that.

It's definitely time to make some changes.

3

Nina

People say two things about where I live: ‘What a great house’ and, ‘How do you stand living next to *that*?’ Not necessarily in that order.

I live at the far end of a country road that runs parallel to a stretch of dual carriageway on the outskirts of the city of Redholt. The road has an unusual name, Four Hays, which often confuses people because it sounds like a house, not a street name. There are only two properties – mine and my immediate neighbour’s, which has been empty and for sale since my elderly neighbour died six months ago. The main road makes it feel less isolated, but we still don’t let Sam walk home alone.

When we first moved in, I thought I might never get used to the constant traffic, which throbs and pulses all day and all night. Now, I barely register the sound of the cars and lorries that thunder past twenty-four hours a day.

Proximity to the road was one of the reasons we could afford to buy this in the first place, one of a pair of red-brick semi-detached cottages, originally designed for railway workers. The railway line running towards the back of the property is now defunct, only a small portion remaining at the bottom of the steep bank that borders our back garden.

Inside the house I gratefully kick off the offensive shoes and peel off the dress, pulling on a shapeless vest top and a loose skirt. I examine the sore, red patches on my heels glumly and for a moment contemplate what it would have been like if I had taken Carl up on his offer. It hadn't felt like much of a compliment, considering he hadn't shown the slightest sign of being attracted to me before this outburst. Maybe he thought I looked desperate.

Grimacing at the prospect of revealing my overweight forty-five-year-old body to a fitness evangelist like him, I go into the kitchen, hesitating only a moment before opening the fridge and eyeing the bottle of white wine in there.

When Sam is around and I'm ferrying him to swimming, judo and Scouts, I barely touch a drop of alcohol on weeknights. But on these evenings when I'm alone in the house, it's too easy to numb myself with a glass of something. I'll stop next week. Designate week-nights as alcohol-free nights. Maybe I'll even invest in a Fitbit like Carl and try not to be a boring git about it.

I take the wine and my laptop outside to the patio chairs and make myself comfortable there.

The evening sun is kinder now, the brutal intensity of the day finally having burned itself out. I breathe in the sweet air, scented with the jasmine creeper that Ian had diligently trained up a trellis on the back wall. The low droning mumble of bees in the plant is soothing.

Then I turn on my laptop.

It's impossible to resist. In seconds, I'm back on Laura's

Facebook page, looking at the smiling couple. I almost relish the pain it brings. This is what masochism is, I'm sure, but I can't stop myself from scrolling through Laura-related posts. I seem to be making a habit of this self-destructive behaviour.

It feels like they have everything to look forward to.

Ian has told me that she wants kids.

The other day, I somehow found myself mournfully looking through Sam's old baby clothes in the attic. Pathetic, really.

I'm not friends with Laura on Facebook – even I'm not that much of a mug – but she hasn't made much effort to keep her profile private. She is an enthusiastic selfie-taker, and her timeline is packed with images of her and various friends gurning into the lens against a variety of backdrops. She's ten years younger than me and Ian, whose birth dates are only a few months apart, and has some sort of job in marketing for a sports clothing chain.

I scroll to a picture of Laura and Ian at a skating rink with a group of other people who are clearly Laura's friends. Ian looks a bit sheepish. Skating, for heaven's sake ...

Then I click on the photo to enlarge it, studying my husband's familiar face.

Ian used to claim that I was 'at least two leagues' above him when we were young. His mates would tease him he had struck lucky. Pretty ironic.

Something seems to have shifted now we are middle-aged. All I can see is the weight that clings to me now; the wrinkles and

the sagging bits. He, on the other hand, has grown into his age. His short grey hair suits him, more than it ever did when he was young and strawberry blond. He's comfortable in his skin, the angular gangliness of youth replaced by a sturdier build.

The gym membership had been one of the changes he made after his mid-life epiphany, or whatever it was. I get to the swimming pool now and then but that's about it. I know I should do more. Would it have made a difference, if I had joined him at the gym? Or had he been unhappy for years? These are the questions that plague me in the middle of the night. Trying to find the piece of thread that came loose and unravelled a whole life.

Was it as obvious as last year, when Ian had a semi-breakdown? Or earlier?

Ian's depression was precipitated by the death of his long-time boss and friend, Adam, whose cancer took only weeks from diagnosis to his death. Ian works for a medical software company that sells packages to the NHS and other healthcare providers and he and Adam had worked together for over ten years. I never got on that well with Adam's wife, who seemed to have stepped out of the pages of a 1950s housewife manual. She was one of those competitive mothers, always banging on about tutors and violin lessons and asking my advice 'as a professional' about whether the expensive school their child attended was basically ruining him for life. We didn't tend to socialize as a foursome much, but Ian took Adam's death very hard. After he had lost weight and not

slept well for several weeks, I suggested he try some counselling.

It had worked, at least in terms of helping him get through his depression. Unfortunately, it also prompted him to decide that his life was too short to – what was it again? – ‘Waste it in a marriage that isn’t working any more.’

I genuinely never saw this coming. When he said it, I actually burst out laughing. It sounded so fake. So staged. Not like the things people really say. Married people. Friends.

Maybe that was the trouble. OK, so we spent a fair bit of time apart, and we didn’t have sex that often any more. But wasn’t that like most marriages, when people had been together half their lives? Well, clearly it was more. I hadn’t realized the cracks were signs of serious stress until the marriage broke in two.

Oh damn it, here I go again. My eyes are leaking all on their own, without any warning that it was about to happen. Was this what Ian was like, privately, in that dark time? Maybe I’m having a breakdown too.

I picture Sam, my quiet, serious boy, lying in his unfamiliar bedroom. He had been quietly fretting in his usual way about the upcoming holiday. Even with the promise of access to a dog, he’d been worried. It had taken some gentle cajoling to get him to talk, then I’d been able to reassure him that the boat wouldn’t sink, and that Laura’s parents wouldn’t force him to eat frogs’ legs. He’s always been a worrier, ever since he was a tiny boy who would stand watchfully at the playground while others climbed like happy monkeys. For a hot, shameful moment, I hope he will

be too upset to go tomorrow and that Ian will bring him home.

This feels like a new low.

My arms prickle now and I look up, aware suddenly I've been out here for some time. The air feels alive with the prospect of rain. The setting sun has disappeared behind a dark band of gathering cloud. For a moment, I contemplate stripping all my clothes off and standing in the coming rain to feel the cool freshness on my skin. It would be wonderful after all the nights I've spent lately, twisting in sweaty sheets.

I could do it if I wanted, too. The house next door has been empty and for sale since my elderly neighbour died. No one would see me. Isn't this the sort of thing I should be relishing now I'm alone? Dancing naked in the rain? Not giving a shit?

But I'm already starting to feel a little cold, so I gather up my things.

I'm stepping through the back door as the first fat drops begin to fall, releasing the sharp smell of ozone, hot brick and parched earth.

Inside, I tip the last of the wine into my glass before curling onto the sofa and turning on Netflix on the telly. There's a trashy American comedy I've become mildly addicted to.

We used to Hoover up all the crime series and Scandinavian dramas but now, alone in the house, stories about murder are less appealing. There are enough shadows in real life.

It feels like this is yet another thing that has been taken from me. Ian is no doubt enjoying 'educating' Laura, whose tastes

had previously, he once let slip, extended only to reality TV and soaps.

Without even knowing I've slept, I'm somehow being pulled awake. Groggy and confused, I squint at the clock on the mantelpiece and see it is two am.

For a moment, I think I'm hearing the sound of thunder. Then I realize someone's hammering on my front door.

4

Lucas

Rain dashes into his eyes and mingles with tears and blood, stinging his cheeks and dripping off his chin. The burden he carries seems to be getting heavier by the minute. Sometimes, though, he imagines there isn't anything there at all and his chest swells with panic. This doesn't make any sense. But he stops and checks anyway, peering awkwardly inside the neck of the coat that's sucking in water like a sponge and making him move twice as slowly as usual.

Reaching a brightly lit mini roundabout he stops, disorientated, and has a moment of confusion about which way to go. Right? No, left. It's left here. He's sure of it.

He hurries on but this place is not designed for pedestrians. He is forced to huddle at the side of the slip road, his stomach swooping as a car blares an angry horn, and then he reaches the narrow grass verge. Lucas stumbles along next to the main road, cars roaring past, so close he could stretch out his fingers and lose an arm.

But he welcomes the terror, the biting cold and the pains in his face and ribs. These sensations are too powerful to allow contemplation to creep in. He almost wants to keep moving forever but the tiredness is getting to him now. For a second he

pictures himself taking two steps to the right and stopping it all, but he knows he can't do it. And it's not just about him, is it?

Not far now. But what will happen when he gets there? Lucas stops for a moment, breathing hard.

This whole thing is a terrible idea.

But it's the only one he has right now so he stumbles onwards.

5

Nina

Sam. It's the only thought in my head as I run from the room, punishment for my earlier, wicked wish.

I wrench open the front door so fast I almost fall over and am too stunned to react when the cold, wet figure pushes past me.

'Sorry, sorry. I need to come in.'

I rummage in my brain but somehow can't locate the necessary words as I take in the bedraggled woman standing there, dripping onto the wooden floor of my hallway.

It's the waitress from earlier. Angel?

She's wearing a thin raincoat over a short turquoise dress made from towelling-like material. Her long pale legs – knees reddened and scuffed looking – disappear into battered grey ankle boots. She's holding a massive leather handbag – the sort that is like a sack with handles at the top – and a bulging rucksack, which she lowers with a grateful little 'Oof' sound.

'Why are you here?' I say. It's the only thing *to* say, I realize.

But Angel is off, stalking down the hallway with long strides. She disappears into the kitchen so fast I almost have to run to catch up.

When I get to the kitchen, I see she has picked up a damp tea towel and is now rubbing her face and hair vigorously with it.

Pausing to give it a smell, she grimaces. This finally switches me from numbness and shock to the correct response – outrage.

‘That’s a tea towel!’ I say. ‘Why are you *here*? What do you want?’

Angel regards me; thick, dark eyebrows raised as though this question is wholly unexpected. She throws the towel onto the table and chafes her arms.

‘You said you wished you could do something to thank me?’ she says. ‘After the whole ...’ she makes an almost comical choking gesture, hand at her throat, eyes boggling.

I can only stare back at her. It seems like the sort of thing Sam did when he was in single digits. I find I’m colouring in shame all over again, despite the bizarreness of this situation.

‘But I didn’t mean ... *this!*’ I manage to squawk. ‘I meant ...’ I fumble for words. ‘I don’t know what I meant. How did you know where I *live*?’

Angel hesitates and I realize.

‘Oh.’ I’d told her the address myself, earlier, when she ordered the taxi.

Angel moves smoothly to the kettle on the side and starts filling it with water as though this is the most natural thing in the world. My head is still muzzy with wine and sleep. The right, obvious way to handle this is just out of reach.

I must take control of the situation. Right now.

‘Look, Angel.’ I try to keep my voice steady. ‘It’s two o’clock in the morning. I don’t know you. You can’t just walk into my

house and start making tea. Do you understand?’

Angel is suddenly very still. Her face is without expression as she looks back at me. But although she isn’t moving, a strange energy seems to crackle around her. I have the uncomfortable thought that she is somehow *coiled*. Waiting. Belatedly, I experience a real sense of unease.

She points a long, pale forefinger at me, its nail bitten. When she speaks again, her voice is low and quiet.

‘I saved your life. You *said so*. You *said* you wished you could thank me.’

‘Yes, but ...’ I manage a short bark of laughter at the absurdity of this logic. ‘I didn’t expect you to turn up at my house in the middle of the night!’

‘I know. But ... *fuck it*.’ Her shoulders round.

My maternal instincts must kick in because I suddenly feel aware of how pathetic she looks. She is shivering all over, soaked from the rain I can hear flinging itself at the windows.

‘Look,’ I say, ‘are you in trouble? Should I call the police?’

‘No,’ she says, eyes widening. ‘Not the police. Please.’ She swallows. ‘I just need help.’

I let out a long, slow breath as I remember the bracelet of bruises I thought I saw earlier. Her arms are now covered by the tattered sleeves of the raincoat, sleeves scrunched over her hands like makeshift gloves. What if Angel is running away from someone who has been hitting her? I wouldn’t be able to forgive myself if I chucked her out into the night and then something

bad happened.

‘OK,’ I say, resignedly. ‘Wait here a minute and let me get you some dry things. Help yourself to tea, as you already ... well, help yourself.’

I hurry out of the room but, in the hallway, I grab my mobile from my handbag under the hall table, and stuff my purse at the back of the drawer in the table. There’s something about her that feels ... off. Not least the way she has come barging into my house like we are old friends. But didn’t she save my life? Don’t I owe her something if she is in trouble?

Ian would be furious. He would have kicked Angel straight out the front door again. But Ian isn’t here, is he? And there’s no Sam at any potential risk. It’s just me. I used to be a kind person, who gave money to homeless people before Ian got into my head with his talk of how I was ‘only helping them to an early grave’. I’m always saying I ought to do some voluntary work now I have all these weekends with hours tumbleweeding through them. This can be a start. I will let this obviously vulnerable young woman get dry, give her some tea and send her on her way. It’s the least I can do after what happened earlier, however strange the circumstances.

When I come back into the kitchen, Angel is sitting at the table.

There’s a coffee cup from earlier there, plus some newspapers. Sam’s school bag, not yet stowed away since the end of term, takes up the chair at the end. Angel stares down at her phone, a

deep groove between her eyebrows that makes her look older. In the café, I thought she was early twenties but now I think maybe she is older, twenty-six or twenty-seven.

I hand her a bath towel and some dry clothes, warm from the airing cupboard. It was hard to decide what to give her, especially in a hurry. But after a quick search through piles of clothes that would never fit, I opted for a soft stretchy dress that's a bit tight on me, one of my hoodies and some thick woollen socks. Angel accepts the pile of clothes with a short nod of thanks.

'I'm so much shorter and fatter than you,' I say. 'But I hope this will do?'

Angel stares down at the clothes for a moment and then begins to undress on the spot, shucking off the dress in one fluid movement. I look away quickly, but can't help noticing that she wears no bra. Her small breasts have large, chocolate-brown nipples that are stark against her pale ribcage. She pulls on the dress, which is more like a baggy top on her long frame, then the hoodie. Removing thin, bony feet from the boots, she hops on one foot at a time as she puts on the socks.

I can only wait politely, not knowing where I should place my gaze.

'Thanks,' says Angel and dumps her wet things on the kitchen table. She pulls her hair from the collar of the hoodie and rubs it with the towel. 'Do you have a dryer you can stick those in?'

'Um, no. Sorry, I don't.' I fold my arms in an attempt to appear more assertive but evidently this doesn't work. I'm aware that I'm

doing that *thing* – that Carmen picks me up on so often. Saying sorry for something that doesn't require an apology.

'Hang them up for me then,' says Angel. 'Just to get the worst of the wet out.'

I hesitate. How long is she thinking of staying?

I somehow find myself scooping up the clothes anyway and taking them to the short corridor that runs along the side of the house. We use it as a cloakroom and utility room in one and it is filled with boots and trainers, raincoats and household stuff. I hang up her stuff on a clothes horse and hurry back into the kitchen.

Angel is sitting again, now furiously tapping at her phone screen, face scrunched in concentration.

'Are you telling someone you're here?' I ask. 'Is someone coming to collect you?'

Angel holds up a hand to silence me and I now feel a thrill of anger pulse through me. I'm suddenly very tired. This is all too strange. I just want this young woman out of my house now. There is something decidedly off about her, even if she is running away from someone bad. The feeling of unease creeps back. Maybe this was a mistake.

'Look, Angel,' I say. 'I need to know what you want from me. You're going to have to—'

Angel gives a sort of rev of frustration in her throat and looks up, her eyes now dark and intense.

'Shut the fuck up, will you?' she says. 'I can't hear myself

think.’ She dips her gaze back to her phone.

I buzz with outrage at this. I can almost see sparks.

‘Look, just because you helped me in the restaurant earlier, that does *not* mean you have any right to come to my house! I’m sorry, you’re going to have to go.’ I draw a steadying breath for my next salvo and remove my phone from my back pocket. ‘Or I’m going to have to call the police.’

‘Oh, for fuck’s sake!’ The volume of her sudden shout stuns me like a slap to the face.

Giving me a dark look, she bends down and rummages in her rucksack. Thank God. She’s going to gather her things and leave.

What happens next is such a shock, my brain can’t seem to accept what I am seeing.

Angel is pointing a gun at me.

‘I’m going to need you to give me that fucking phone,’ she says.

6

Nina

Terror is a solid bolus in my throat. I throw the phone across the table and then lift my hands up, slowly, palms up in placation.

‘I don’t understand,’ I manage to squeeze out. ‘What is it you want?’

Angel continues to stare down at the mobile, ignoring me. She places the gun in the pocket on the front of the dress. I spend approximately one second contemplating whether I could wrestle it off her, but swiftly conclude that this would be pointless and ridiculous. This woman is taller than me, younger by at least fifteen years, and – crucially – clearly a bit unhinged.

‘We just want some space,’ says Angel when I had already given up on a reply.

We?

Then her expression softens slightly. ‘Look, you seem like a nice woman,’ she says. ‘I’m not coming here to bring you a load of grief. But you said you wanted to help me and that’s what I need right now. Help. From someone with no connection to us. Do you understand me?’

No, I don’t understand any of this. I can feel my knees knocking together and shivers running up and down my arms. I have to clench my jaw to stop my teeth from chattering with

the shock.

Think.

‘The thing is,’ I say after a moment’s silence, ‘my husband is asleep upstairs. He was very tired after ... working late. He’ll wake up soon.’ Shit. I’m a terrible liar. But I force myself to meet Angel’s gaze evenly. ‘He won’t be happy about this.’

Angel half smiles, almost sympathetically.

‘I know there’s no one else here,’ she says.

‘How?’ Anger rises, hotly, inside. ‘How can you possibly know that?’

Angel gestures towards the kitchen surfaces. ‘One plate, one cup. Ready meals in the recycling bin. I think you have a kid, judging by all the ...’ she waves her hand at the fridge, where various school letters and pieces of art work are pinned with magnets, ‘... but the kid isn’t here. Or the father. Are you divorced?’ She pauses. ‘Was that your new bloke?’ She says this last bit with genuine curiosity, as though we are two women having a chat.

‘None of your business,’ I reply. I pull out the chair and sit down again. ‘And no,’ I add, despite myself. ‘He was ... no one.’

Angel makes a face. ‘Good,’ she says. ‘Because he was a tosser.’

A laugh almost slips out before I remind myself that this strange, probably unstable, young woman invading my house has threatened me with a *gun*. Having one aimed at me in my own kitchen doesn’t feel quite real. Yet it still manages to be horribly

frightening.

‘Look,’ I say, going for calm and trustworthy. ‘What do you want from me? Do you want money? Is that it?’

Angel looks up from her phone, where her thumbs have been a blur of motion, and stares at me. She has extraordinary hazel eyes that are almost golden. Quite cat-like. But it is impossible to read what she’s thinking; her expression is as flat as a pool of still water again. She seems to slip in and out of this state. As though other conversations are buzzing in her head at the same time and she has to tune in to hear me.

‘Yeah,’ she says, ‘I think so. And a car.’

I let out an exasperated sound.

‘My car is in the garage,’ I say. ‘And I’ve got about a tenner in my purse.’

‘Oh fuck, really?’ Angel’s dismay is palpable. ‘That’s a pisser about the car.’

She drags a hand through the bird’s nest of her hair and then an old-fashioned bell ringtone comes from her mobile. She snatches it up and holds it to her ear. Getting to her feet, she says, ‘I’m coming.’

Hope spasms in my chest as I hurry after her down the hallway. Maybe someone is here to pick her up. I can just shove her outside and lock the door.

But before I have time to do anything, Angel is pulling another stranger, a man, through the front door and into my home.

7 Nina

He is slightly built, shorter than Angel, with wet, black curls plastered to his face and dark eyes sunk in shadowed sockets. He's enveloped in a long tweed coat that's reminiscent of the sort me and my friends bought from charity shops in the eighties. He smells of wet dog, with another, staler smell underneath it. The coat seems to hang on his frame oddly, as though he is fat and thin all at the same time. He bulges around the middle, but his thin neck and narrow, white wrists protrude. It's like a tall child wearing a grown-up's clothes.

Angel touches his cheek, tenderly, and he visibly shivers.

'Come on through,' she says in a practical sort of tone. 'You look freezing.' She bolts the door then lifts the keys from the bowl on the hall table before locking the door and pocketing them.

I don't even know where to start with this.

Angel almost drags the man by the sleeve down the hall towards the kitchen. I find myself following, mutely, torn between trying to escape and the dangers of leaving these two strangers here.

In the kitchen, Angel mutters something to the man, who is trembling so violently now that he looks as though he might collapse. He listens with his eyes closed as though receiving

instruction. They stand over by the sink. I hover by the doorway, trying to work out what I can do.

I catch him say, ‘The blood. There was all this blood,’ which makes my stomach clamp like a clamshell, but then Angel shushes him and I don’t catch the rest.

‘Who are you?’ I say finally, in my boldest voice. ‘What do you want?’

The boy – man – I should say, drops his head, avoiding my gaze. Angel turns to me and I almost take a step back at the ferocity in her expression.

‘This is Lucas. He’s my little brother and he needs a bloody minute.’

Little brother.

Lucas looks only a few years younger than Angel, maybe early twenties. His face is much finer-boned than his sister’s, his shoulders hunched and narrow. He’s slightly built but looks like he has a wiry strength. His eyes are what frighten me the most though; they’re wide and staring as though he is watching something playing out in his mind and doesn’t like what he sees.

Lucas murmurs something then and that’s when I become aware of another sound, coming from somewhere about his person. It’s a sort of creaky *puttering* noise; familiar but so out of context I can’t place it. I move a few steps closer, drawn to its source, and that’s when I see what is causing that odd bulge in the coat.

‘Oh Jesus!’ I cry out.

Tufty, reddish hair pokes up from a head the size of a grapefruit.

The baby stretches its neck backwards, revealing a scrunched face. It's so small; surely only a few weeks old; possibly newborn. The little twist of a mouth puckers and forms a square and the unhappy creaks turn into an ear-splitting wail.

All instinct, I cross the room and reach for it, hands outstretched.

'Get back!' Lucas yells and flails his arms and I stumble back. Lucas's eyes are wide and a little unfocused. Is he on something? He lifts his hands up and says, in a strangled voice, 'Just give me space! Don't crowd me. I just need space, that's all!'

'Get away from him,' shouts Angel. 'Can't you see what a state he's in?'

She has the gun in her hand again now and is waving it around wildly, horribly close to the baby's tiny head. Barely breathing, I peel my gaze back to Lucas and the shrieking bundle in his coat.

He wipes his face with a hand that's battered and cut, the knuckles raw. I can see what looks like dried blood on his fingers and the backs of his hands. His nails are rimed black. When he places a filthy hand on the baby's tiny head, I experience an internal mushroom cloud of pure horror.

The blood. The gun. The baby squirming visibly at the opening in his coat. Any combination of these things is wrong.

'Lu babe,' says Angel over the wailing. 'Are you hurt?'

'What's wrong with you?' I shout then. 'Don't you care more

about that baby?

‘The kid looks fine to me,’ says Angel sharply.

‘Oh, you know that, do you?’ I say. ‘Because I don’t think that’s a given right now.’

Angel stares at me and, for a second, she looks unsure.

She gives her brother a slight smile. ‘It is *OK*, isn’t it? Lucas? Can I just ...?’

Lucas is breathing heavily, almost panting, as she approaches him, her movements slow and careful. When she reaches out he whimpers and steps back. But with shushing, comforting sounds she begins to open his coat. The baby is straining hard against the makeshift sling, which appears to be made from a man’s shirt. The sleeves are tied around Lucas’s back, the back of the shirt bagged into an unsatisfactory pouch. One of the baby’s legs, encased in a white sleepsuit, protrudes and dangles awkwardly.

Lucas closes his eyes as Angel reaches behind him and tries to unknit the sleeves. The baby screams on, jolting downwards with every tug of Angel’s arms. It is unbearable to watch. I bite back helpless tears and wrap my arms around myself. I can’t stop shaking.

‘Please,’ I whisper, ‘be *careful*.’

Somehow, I know this baby does not belong to either Angel or Lucas. So where is its mother?

Angel now has the baby, who is puce-faced, drawing knees to chest. She looks like she is carrying a bag of sugar rather than a squirming child and she places it on the table, not exactly roughly,

but with little care. Then she peels off Lucas's coat, speaking in a quiet, fussy tone all the while, before dropping it onto the floor.

I can't stop myself from lunging for the child. But Angel is faster and with a yell she slaps me, hard, around the face. My cheek rings, hot with pain. Tears spring to my eyes and, for a moment, Angel looks almost contrite.

'Look, it doesn't have to be like this,' she says, defiant again. 'I don't want to have to hurt you?' She pauses. 'But I will if I have to. Do you understand me?'

I nod dumbly, holding my cheek.

Angel sighs and says, 'Oh for fuck's sake.' She snatches the baby up. 'Happy now?'

She holds the hot, angry face to her shoulder, as the baby shrieks on. Lucas emits a small moan and wraps his arms around himself, rocking gently.

Somehow, I find my voice again. 'Please, please, Angel,' I say. 'I won't do anything. Just please be careful! Can't you see how little he is?' I'm sure he is a boy.

Angel meets my eyes, her expression toxic with resentment. 'It's all going to be fine if you don't do anything fucking stupid, alright?' She begins to jiggle the baby a little roughly, and then, in what is presumably an attempt at a softer tone, says, 'It's OK, it's OK.'

The very words said by Angel in the restaurant after she saved my life. It seems so long ago.

Who, *what*, have I brought into my home?

The baby isn't showing any signs of quietening.

'Please make it stop?' Lucas's voice is plaintive, his accent more plummy than Angel's flat London vowels. 'I can't stand this fucking noise! It won't stop. It's getting inside me!' He presses his fists against the sides of his head and lets out a moan of despair.

Dread throbs through me. What is wrong with him? Whether it is drug-induced or simply how he is wired is unclear. But it doesn't really matter which. What matters is that baby not being injured in any way. I look at the blood on his hands again. I desperately want to examine the child to see if it's hurt but must tread carefully. Neither of the other two adults present seems to be stable.

'Come on, babe,' soothes Angel. 'It's just pissed off. Babies are always grumpy, aren't they? It'll settle soon, you'll see.' Her tone is gentle, cajoling, and it seems to work because he moves his hands away from his head.

'Now get those wet things off, right?' she says briskly. 'Then we can all calm down.'

Lucas shucks the wet black T-shirt over his head and stands there shivering like a whipped dog. His chest is almost concave, delicate, like a boy's. He has bruises on his ribs. The shape of him reminds me of Sam but the sharp, fearful smell of sweat is adult.

'Where can he get dry clothes?' demands Angel. 'Which room?'

It seems challenging to think of the right answer to this question.

‘What, oh uh . . . upstairs, second door on the left,’ I say, then, ‘Shall I go?’

But Angel shakes her head. ‘No, not you,’ she inclines her head at Lucas. ‘Find all the landlines while you’re at it, yeah?’ As he begins to walk out of the room she calls out again. ‘Hey?’ He turns to look at her.

‘Wash your hands up there,’ she says gently, then gives a small, tight grin. ‘Your pits too. You stink.’ Lucas’s mouth twists and he leaves the room.

The baby screams on, hoarse now with misery. Every nerve end cries out to take over as Angel jiggles it roughly and says, ‘It’s OK,’ over, and over, again in a voice lacking any warmth at all.

8

Angel

Angel has seen her brother at his lowest ebb before, but this is something different. It is beginning to scare her now, the desperate look in his eyes. She hasn't seen him for months and now this?

If he'd only tell her the whole story. She hasn't had all of it, she knows that. It's something about the way his gaze keeps sliding away from hers, like he's frightened to meet her eyes full on.

When he'd rung earlier, Angel had been on her way back to a mate, Liz's, where she'd intended to kip until the next morning. Then, bright and early, she planned to be off into London where she'd blow her money on a ticket to Inverness. She was really going to do it, too, this time. Make a fresh start in the clean sweet air, away from all the crap.

When her brother's name had appeared on her screen she'd had the briefest moment when she contemplated not answering. It would serve him right for his recent lack of contact.

But she couldn't do it. She could never really say no to Lucas.

When she heard the state he was in, she'd known straight away that this was it, a turning point in her life, albeit not the one she had been hoping for. He'd been incoherent with gasping sobs. As Angel tried to get him to calm down and tell her what had

happened, it felt like everything inside her was swirling helplessly down a plughole. Whatever this was, it was very bad indeed.

She'd finally managed to extract the barest details from him and, while they'd sounded terrible enough, they hadn't been everything. There was something missing.

It feels like he doesn't trust her and that is beginning to piss her off. Hasn't she always been the one to protect him? Didn't she promise to do that very thing when they were kids?

Whatever he has done, they can find a way through it. How bad can it really be?

He just needs to calm down. Then they can make a proper plan and get the hell away.

The baby is on the table, next to her, screaming its head off still. The noise road-drills inside Angel's skull. She shoots a look at the squalling creature. Tiny babies are so *weird*, with their jerky little limbs and crumpled pensioner faces. Strong and delicate all the same time. God knows she doesn't want to have to hold it.

Angel's disobedient brain immediately lobs an unwelcome image into her mind, like a shuttlecock over a net.

Her skinny sixteen-year-old legs with blood running down them, and the awful pains slicing across her stomach. The unsympathetic way the people in the hospital had spoken to her, about how she only had herself to blame and that she may have done some 'permanent damage'.

Lucas keeps gazing at the baby, mournfully. It isn't even his.

But Angel knows her brother and has a strong suspicion that he isn't going to agree to leaving it and getting the hell out of here. Why even bring it in the first place? It's *insane*.

She pictures the bus to Scotland, weaving its way between soft green hills. Travelling far, far away from here.

9

Lucas

For the moment, he's still bubble-wrapped against the pain.

Getting away had been a good distraction. Pounding down those endless country roads, across rutted fields and along the side of the dual carriageway in the rain, feeling the bouncing squish of the baby inside the coat, had taken every bit of his resources.

But a juggernaut of guilt is bearing down on him and he won't be able to out-run it for long.

Lucas recognizes this feeling. He wonders whether everything in his life has been a series of wobbly stepping stones from there to here.

'I've found somewhere,' said Angel when he'd rung her, almost incoherent with shock. 'It's not ideal but it's all I can think of for now. A place with no connection to either of us.'

She knew only the bare facts and hadn't pressed for more. But she will. And Lucas can never tell her the truth. He can picture all too well how she would look at him if she knew what he'd done. No, he needs her too much right now. His sister is the only person in the world he could have called. If *she* abandoned him ...

Angel had been almost calm on the phone. But Lucas knows this is how she deals with the really big things. For all her dramas,

she's capable of going to a quiet, still place in a storm. That's what he needs right now.

'Whatever has happened, we'll get through it. Together,' she'd said, then, 'Hey, do you remember Grandad's? Remember what I said?'

How could he forget? It was what he'd been thinking about all the way to this woman's house.

Their safe place.

The sharp animal stink and the prickly, itchy straw in the barn. Lying on their bellies and peering down, pretending no one could find them. Eating Grandad's weird old-school food. Pies and tinned peas. Custard creams and cocoa.

Laughing at his crap jokes, and playing with Boris. Lucas having to be prised away from him every night at bedtime. And even then, the old sheepdog would find its way onto his bed and Grandad would pretend not to know anything about it in the morning. He'd say things like, 'It's the funniest thing, but Boris's bed looks quite untouched. I can't understand it,' and pretend to shake his head, while Lucas vibrated with suppressed giggles and hugged the dog harder.

Angel doesn't know about the photo he keeps in his wallet, soft now with age and handling. Marianne is in it, grinning at Angel, so Grandad must have taken it. His sister is standing on one leg and making a daft face. Lucas leans against Marianne, with one hand on Boris's head.

'It's OK,' Angel had said in a harsh whisper. 'I'll look after you,

Lu. I'll always be the one who looks after you best.'

He looks at himself in the mirror in the small bathroom now, forces himself to meet his own eyes. He almost flinches at what he sees there, the burning shame.

Leaning his head against the cool glass, he tries to slow his breathing down.

He wishes the baby would stop crying.

10

Nina

The water pipes rattle, telling me that Lucas is using the bathroom upstairs. I try to summon the most benign expression I can muster but my face is stiff and mask-like. It feels like an impossible thing, to make this horrible situation better.

The pure disbelief – that this really is happening to *me*, ordinary me – is beginning to pass now. I've finally stopped shaking. But every time I look at the baby I'm overwhelmed by an instinct to grab him and just run for my life.

'Look,' I say gently, 'Angel. I think the baby is too hot under all those layers. Can you please let me hold it and help? I'm not going to do anything stupid.'

Angel regards me warily. 'I wouldn't.' She lifts her chin. 'You have to know that the kid isn't important to me. It's Lucas I'm bothered about, alright?'

'Yes, yes.' I know I'm nodding a bit too vigorously. 'I get that ... please? Can I? I might be able to settle him.'

Angel pulls in a long suck of breath and then thrusts the baby towards me like an unwanted parcel. I cringe at her lack of gentleness and quickly take hold of him. The baby hesitates, contemplating this new location and then, presumably finding it still isn't the desired one, continues to wail.

‘It’s OK, little chap,’ I croon gently, looking around.

I need somewhere soft to put him down.

When we had the large kitchen renovated, we made the decision to hang onto a battered old mustard-coloured sofa we’d had since first getting together. It sits at one end of the room and is covered in a fleece blanket. I cross the kitchen and grab the blanket, fashioning it into a mat with one hand, while I hold the tiny boy over my shoulder with the other.

Then I lay him down gently, murmuring the sort of soft nonsense words I used to say to Sam; a time that feels both near and yet very long ago. The baby pauses and for a moment I think it’s me, I’ve performed the magic of making him calm, then the room is filled with a powerful smell.

‘Oh my God, that’s disgusting,’ says Angel holding her wrist delicately towards her nose, her face scrunched. ‘Has it done a shit?’

The baby is now grumbling, rather than giving full-throated cries. I ignore Angel’s theatrical complaints.

‘You just needed a poo, didn’t you?’ I sing-song, ‘and now you feel better, don’t you?’

The little boy stares up at me. His eyes are a dark blue, which might be on the cusp of turning brown. It gives them a look of being bottomless; alien and other.

How am I going to change him? There haven’t been any nappies in this house for years and years. And what about when the child becomes hungry?

He starts to cry again, his little face scrunched in pure misery as I try to unpeel the suit. I'm terrified of hurting him, of being too rough. All the hours I put in with Sam as a baby seem to be for nothing; I have entirely lost that ease with small babies. There is apparently no muscle memory for this practical role. I feel an irrational but powerful disappointment at this.

'Can you fill the washing up bowl with warm water?' I say to Angel. 'And bring me the kitchen towel roll?'

Wrinkling her nose, she moves around the kitchen and mechanically follows instructions, bringing bowl and paper towels to the table. Then she steps back and lights up a cigarette, standing with her smoking arm resting on her other. I will deal with that later, I think, peeling off the white sleepsuit. It all feels so unfamiliar. I have forgotten about bending tiny limbs in and out of clothes and the fear of causing accidental hurt. I used to do this ten times faster, when it was part of my everyday life.

Angel is now pacing the room, darting glances at her phone screen and occasionally mumbling under her breath.

It's like having a small electrical storm in the kitchen, whirling around me. She positively crackles with a malignant energy that makes me instinctively want to hold the baby as close as I can. Would she hurt him? Maybe. I wouldn't put anything past her right now.

I finally release the small nappy and the smell intensifies. I was right. He's a boy.

Mustard-coloured shit is smeared up to his belly button, which

is still new enough to be swollen with a small scab nestled in the folds. This baby was clearly born very recently. Far too tiny to be away from his mother. Where *is* his mother?

I quickly check him all over for injury, but, thank God, he seems unharmed. As I then carefully wash around the scrawny little legs and the nub of the penis, he releases a thin stream of urine in a perfect arc I just manage to dodge. This makes Angel laugh – a quick, sharp bark of mirth – and I snap her a look before continuing with my task. The little boy is now hiccupping miserably. I try to fashion a nappy out of clean kitchen towel but it's hopeless. All I can do is wrap it around his bottom, awkwardly.

'Does Lucas have any of the baby's things?' I ask, but I already know the answer. He arrived with only that coat as far as I could see. A too-big coat and a too-small baby.

'No,' says Angel, distractedly, looking again at her phone. 'We're just going to have to make the best of it.' I wonder if she is waiting for a message from someone.

A thought suddenly chills me; maybe they have kidnapped this child and are waiting to talk terms with his parents.

I swallow, trying to quell my queasy stomach. What the hell have I become caught up in? The baby grumbles and I stare down at him, feeling all at sea for a moment until I pull myself together. I have to look after him the best I can. I'm all he's got tonight.

That's when I remember my self-indulgent time in the attic the other day. Maybe it was meant to be.

‘Look,’ I say, trying to sound calm but firm. ‘My son’s baby clothes are in the attic. I can find them easily if you’ll let me get them. There might be a bottle there too, which we can at least use to give him a drink of water.’

There’s no ‘might’. I know exactly what’s there because I thought, ‘Why am I keeping *this*?’ before shoving it back into the bag the other night.

Angel narrows her eyes through a stream of smoke. ‘I don’t want you leaving the room. Can’t you do something else?’

I want to scream in frustration, but I must stay calm. I’m conscious of how odd and unpredictable she is.

‘What exactly do you suggest?’ I say after a moment.

‘I don’t know.’ Angel casts her eyes about the kitchen and spies the towel she used to dry herself with. Then she starts opening cupboards and comes back with a handful of tea towels, which she thrusts at me.

‘Do something with these.’

I’m awash with incredulity now. I can’t help my sharp retort.

‘Don’t be so ridiculous!’ I want to grab this feckless creature and shake her by the shoulders. Breathing heavily, I say, ‘If you want this child to stop crying he is going to need to be clean and comfortable. And he’s very possibly dehydrated. Babies can get sick if they are dehydrated.’

She gazes back at me and shrugs, defiant. Doesn’t she even care if he gets sick? Can she really be that callous? I force myself to be calm, to think of something that will actually matter to her.

‘Look,’ I say, trying to quell the shaking in my voice, ‘he’s just going to scream even more if he’s uncomfortable or unwell.’ I pause, letting that sink in. ‘I can quieten him down if you let me get the stuff out of the attic.’

Eyes still narrowed, Angel regards me carefully. Lucas comes back into the room, now wearing a shirt of Ian’s. An old, tatty one. All his good ones were packed up and taken away a few months ago. He hasn’t picked up everything yet – apparently Laura’s flat isn’t big enough for that. He said this with an apologetic air that made me want to scream.

The shirt swamps Lucas, although oddly enough Ian’s jeans almost fit; Lucas is all legs, it seems. His eyes dart around the room, never settling on any of our faces for long. He walks over to the kitchen window and peers out cautiously, before moving towards the back of the room again.

I turn my attention to the baby, who is mewling miserably now, gathering his resources. His skin is hot and dry to the touch as I hold him to my shoulder, the awkward nappy bundled up, cringing at the scratchiness of it against such delicate flesh.

‘Look, for God’s sake,’ I say now. ‘This baby could die without a proper drink of water! At the very least we can do that for the poor little thing!’

Angel and Lucas exchange looks. His eyes seem to communicate something.

‘Alright,’ says Angel. ‘Let’s get the stuff out of your attic. You can get him what he needs, alright?’

‘What he *needs* is his mother,’ I mutter. ‘That’s who he should be with.’

Lucas screws the heels of his hands into his eye sockets.

‘Where *is* his mother, Lucas?’ I say, addressing him directly for the first time. My heart flutters as he pulls his hands away and meets my eyes. His are filled with a kind of hunted despair.

In a hoarse whisper that’s barely there at all, he says, ‘She’s—’

‘Lu!’ barks Angel, cutting him off. ‘Remember what we agreed?’

What was he going to say?

11

Nina

‘You don’t need to know anything.’ Angel directs this at me. ‘It’s better that way, OK?’

I think of the blood crusting Lucas’s hands when he arrived. My mouth floods with saliva and I swallow again, forcing the sickness and panic down. I see then that Angel has put the gun on the table and I think for a mad moment about making a grab for it. But this isn’t some crime drama on telly. I’m a middle-aged English teacher. I’ve only ever fired a gun once before, at Sam’s Scout camp on the rifle range. And I don’t want to see what happens if Angel or Lucas start to panic. I make myself breathe slowly, in and out, in and out, until the nausea subsides.

‘Can we please just get these baby things?’ I say tightly. ‘We can all stay calm if we can get him comfortable.’

Angel probably imagines people like me always know where to find things in their attics.

The truth is that if you had asked me a week ago to find Sam’s baby stuff, we’d have been in trouble. But I found myself up there just after Ian told me about the baby, and almost ripped the place apart trying to find the blue canvas holdall I knew was there somewhere.

I’d spent an hour in tear-soaked reminiscence, smoothing

out the small sleepsuits and dungarees, shuffling my pack of memories. Later, I somehow got through three-quarters of a bottle of wine and almost fell over on the way to bed.

It had been a bit of a low point.

I pat the squirming baby in my arms now and try to make reassuring noises as I gaze up at Angel's long legs above me on the stepladder. I direct her to the bag near the entrance.

She calls for me to mind out of the way, and throws it down.

Back in the kitchen, Lucas is sitting at the table, hands flat against the surface. He is apparently just staring into space, but his right leg jiggles up and down as though keeping time to some crazy beat inside his head. He watches silently as I begin to dress the baby. Thank goodness for this bag of stuff.

The best find is a swim nappy that somehow ended up in the bag. It is a little bit too big, but a definite improvement on the kitchen towel, which has already almost disintegrated from handling and the movement of the baby's kicking legs.

There is a vest with poppers at the bottom that is almost the right size and a small pair of leggings that will do, rolled up. I'm so relieved to see the baby bottle there. At least I can get some water into this little chap now.

One-handed, I fill the kettle to the brim with water. I will have to boil this bottle in a pan, and I'll use the rest of the water as a drink, once it's cooled enough.

The baby is still chuntering miserably throughout this process. I can't tell if he is lethargic. He does feel hot, but despite the rain,

the air still feels thick and warm.

Lucas now sits with his hands buried in his hair, head down. Angel is furiously flicking through something on her phone. She pauses once only to say, 'Fuck,' and then, ignoring Lucas's plea to show him what she is looking at, she keeps on scrolling, shaking her head slowly.

It is still raining outside; I can hear it. I stare back at my reflection in the black window, my face a pale oval and my eyes wide and frightened looking.

The baby bottle rattles loudly against the side of the pan as it boils. Will five minutes be long enough? I never did it this way in the past. I used a machine instead, which has long since gone.

The lack of milk looms large in my mind. What are we going to do about feeding this baby?

The windows are misting up with the water boiling on the stove now; combined with the heat of the night, it feels claustrophobic in here. I hesitate for only a moment before leaning over to open the top of one of the windows, feeling four eyes drilling into me as I do it. What do they think? I'm going to haul my body out of that tiny window and escape?

When I turn back, Angel is frowning, chewing on her thumbnail, apparently deep in thought.

'So,' says Angel. 'We need money. You have to get it for us.'

'I'll happily give you money,' I say, carefully. 'But I already told you. I only have about ten pounds here.'

'Cashpoint,' says Lucas, coming alive suddenly. 'Where's the

nearest one?’

‘There’s one along the dual carriageway,’ I say. ‘A Tesco garage.’

Angel and Lucas exchange a glance, then look back at me. It’s unnerving, like twins communicating silently, despite the difference in age.

‘I’ll give you my PIN number,’ I say. Angel shakes her head vigorously.

‘No,’ she says. ‘They have cameras on ATMs. I don’t want them taking our pictures. You have to go and get it yourself.’

My heartbeat quickens. Surely, they won’t just let me go? But then I’d have to leave the baby here with them. The two thoughts collide unpleasantly.

As if sensing this, Angel says, ‘We’ll keep the baby here.’ She glances at the wriggling child in my arms and says, ‘You know we don’t want it to come to any harm.’

The open-ended way she says this is chilling and I realize I’m holding the baby too tightly. He squirms.

I’m grateful for the distraction of the bottle, still rattling in the pan. The water in the kettle must be cool enough now.

‘I need some help with this,’ I say curtly.

Lucas looks at me for a moment. I force myself to meet his eyes, which are the same golden-toffee colour as his sister’s, thickly fringed with black lashes. I realize, belatedly, that he is quite beautiful, despite the hollowness of his eyes and sallow complexion. Much better looking than his sister, whose features

are similar but have a heaviness to them. It must have been hard for Lucas to be the prettier of the two. Then he turns his face away from me, pointedly. Right, so no help will be forthcoming there then.

With a theatrical sigh that any of my Year Elevens would be proud of, Angel comes over and says, 'What should I do then?' in the tone of one who has been horribly inconvenienced.

The baby starts to wail again and a look of pure distaste passes over her face.

'Wash your hands carefully,' I mutter. 'Then take that bottle out of the water and fill it with water from the kettle. Put it on the windowsill to cool off.'

She follows these instructions well enough. I watch her all the time, as I murmur to the baby. He is rooting at my shoulder now, small mouth pursed, trying to find a breast. Water is not going to be enough. I hope to God the Tesco garage has formula milk.

The craziness of this whole scenario hits me again. I shift the position of the baby boy, so he is lying on my forearm, stomach down. I remember an afternoon when Sam wouldn't stop crying, and the health visitor had arrived to find us both inconsolable. She had shown me this move and it had worked magically when Sam was grumpy with colic.

But it's not working now. The baby screams on. I hurriedly rearrange him back on my shoulder. He's becoming surprisingly heavy, the longer I hold him, especially in this heat.

Finally, the water, the bottle and the teat are cool enough.

I instruct Angel to put it all together. When I hold the bottle to the baby's lips, he sucks greedily with noisy slurps. The hydration calms him for a moment, but it doesn't take long for the realization to come that this isn't what was wanted.

He starts to cry again, a miserable mewl. I look up, anxiously. 'Look, he needs milk. I'll go to the garage and get your money. I won't tell anyone. But please, please be careful with him. He's so little.'

Angel looks at Lucas and then back at me.

'He'll be fine,' she says flatly. 'But that's entirely in your hands.'

When he has drunk as much of the water as he seems prepared to take, I reluctantly hand the baby over to Angel. Then I go to find outdoor shoes and a light jacket, watched by Angel the whole time. I'm trembling as I pocket my wallet and a small torch. I'll need it for the darker bits of the road.

'Right,' says Angel, when I am ready to go. 'You had better think very carefully about contacting anyone while you're out, do you understand me? I mean it. I've told you I don't care about this baby. Do you *understand*?'

'Yes!' I snap, then, 'Look, you know I can only get a limited amount of money from a cash machine, don't you?'

'Three fifty,' says Angel. 'That's the daily limit. That will have to do.'

She pats the baby's back, her eyes cold. Is she too rough? It's hard to tell. I feel like a tuning fork, vibrating with every sign of

possible aggression around this vulnerable infant.

My instincts scream at me that I can't, mustn't, leave. But what choice do I really have?

Angel unlocks the kitchen door and then says my name.

'It's three am now,' she says. 'I think, what, forty-five minutes is plenty long enough, don't you?'

'There might be queues,' I say, a thread of desperation running through my voice. 'It's always busy in there. And it's a good ten-minute walk too.'

Angel regards me, her eyes cold.

'Fifty minutes,' she says. 'If you're not back by then, we're going to have a problem.' She holds the baby away from her, considers his face and says, 'Aren't we?'

Then she pats her pocket and her meaning is clear. I can see the outline of the gun through the fabric.

12

Angel

There is a loaded pause of a few seconds and then she can't hold it in any longer.

'What the *fuck*, Lucas?' she says and her voice is too loud even to her own ears. 'Why the shitting hell did you bring that *baby* here? Are you actually insane?'

He doesn't reply, merely hangs his head and Angel is suffused with a mix of intense frustration, fear, and love that makes her cross the room and hug him fiercely.

She feels him wince and he doesn't reciprocate. A bit stung, she drops her arms and turns away.

'Well, we'll just have to work something out,' she says and there is a tremor in her voice now. She wants to cry and she hates crying, so she swallows the feeling down like a bitter drink.

It's only now that she remembers she hasn't eaten anything apart from some garlic bread on her shift earlier. Her limbs feel weak and watery, her head filled with cotton-wool.

She goes to the fridge and begins gathering items of food, suddenly ravenous.

Lucas moves to the table and sits down, burying his hands in his curls, and closing his eyes. Angel glances at her brother as she puts houmous and cheese onto the table.

She feels a burst of resentment that he hasn't answered any of her messages for ages, then presents her with this hot mess. But when she sees the tremor in his hands as he runs them through his hair her heart contracts.

'You know I love you, whatever, you big drama queen,' she says.

Lucas looks up and is surprised into a weak smile.

'I love you too,' he says and then something about this exchange causes a shift and he suddenly jumps up and begins to pace up and down the length of the kitchen, scratching at his arms. It hurts to watch. It's like he's trying to escape from his own skin or something. He used to do it when they were little and Marianne once made him wear gloves in bed.

'Stop doing that,' says Angel and he stops abruptly.

The baby over on the sofa starts to cry again. God, the sound of it is unbearable.

'I hope she won't be long with the milk and stuff,' she says. 'He's doing my bloody head in.'

Lucas tears his gaze away and sees the radio by the sink. 'Try putting the radio on,' he says. 'See if that helps.'

Angel darts him a startled look at this but says nothing as she moves to the counter. She switches on the radio and pop music burbles out. Angel twists the dial so for a minute it drowns out the sound of the shrieking baby lying on the sofa.

The baby is evidently startled by this and he stops crying. She gradually turns it back to a more comfortable level.

‘Well, aren’t you the expert,’ she says drily.

‘Angel, don’t,’ says Lucas, much more sharply than he intended.

Angel slaps her hand on her thigh. ‘For God’s sake, Lu! Why won’t you tell me what really happened? Don’t you trust me or something?’

Lucas stares at his sister and for a moment she thinks, this is it.

‘Why would I call you if I didn’t trust you?’ he says in a weak voice. ‘Anyway, I have told you everything.’

The siblings stare at each other across the kitchen while in the background Little Mix sing about shouting out to exes.

‘Right,’ says Angel, turning away. ‘Sure you have.’ She wants to slap him. ‘Why don’t you go and lie down or something,’ she adds as she goes to hunt for bread in the cupboards. ‘This could be a long night and you look like shit.’

Lucas hesitates for a moment and then silently leaves the room.

13

Nina

The air is pleasantly warm outside, but shock must be catching up with me. I start to shake, so hard my knees almost give way, and I'm forced to stop, panting lightly, hands resting on my thighs.

I can't believe this is happening. It's all so surreal. Her barging into my home like that. Then him arriving, covered in blood. And that tiny baby ... Oh, the baby.

As the shivering becomes less violent, I start to walk, glancing over at the cars on the bypass, which are present even at this time. I wish I could get into any one of them and be carried far away from this situation.

I could do it. Or at least flag down a car and ask for help. But what if the police go storming in there and the baby gets caught up in it all?

I picture again the blood riming Lucas's nails and think about his reaction when I'd asked about the mother. What has he *done*? And what might he be capable still of doing? That's not even taking Angel into account. She feels utterly unreadable to me.

It's a strange sensation, to be walking away, ostensibly free, but yet trapped all the same. I hurry on, reaching the dark part of the road, and then follow the bobbing light of the torch. The road

feels so long in the dark. Like it is never-ending. I would usually be scared, walking here at night. But I only feel frightened of the dangers currently in my home. What an irony it would be, if I was attacked tonight, of all nights.

When I finally reach the end of the road, I turn left at the roundabout there and start walking along the side of the bypass. Obviously, it isn't designed for pedestrians, so I am forced to walk in a semi-ditch at the side. Cars thunder past now and then, so close I feel the gusting force blowing into me. I've never walked along here before; never had any reason to. My heart leaps every time a car passes. I'm intensely conscious of my breakable body, so close to speeding weapons of steel and rubber.

The long, wet grass whips and clings at my lower legs and my shoes are soon soaked through.

I wonder whether a police car would stop if I was seen walking along such a dangerous road. It might even be an offence. I don't think I'd be able to stop myself from blurting out the whole sorry story, if they did pull over.

I turn my ankle in a hidden dip in the grass and swear. Sweating from both effort and stress, I finally see the welcoming lights of the garage ahead. It seems no distance in a car but it's much further than I realized. I look at my watch and hasten my pace.

Thank goodness, the garage is on this side. Hopefully I can get in and out, quickly.

It's surprisingly busy, for the middle of the night. But this road

is a main artery leading, ultimately, to London, so I guess the traffic never stops.

There are two cars and one van filling up as I emerge onto the forecourt, blinking at the sudden harsh lighting. The normality of it, white light reflecting off wet car roofs, a man yawning widely as he walks briskly from the pumps, a snatch of grime music drifting from an open car window, brings sudden tears to my eyes. I have a fervent longing to go back to my life before tonight. It seemed so complicated, but it was so simple, really. Why did I complain? Things weren't so bad, were they?

I'm suddenly overwhelmed by a hot urge to run into the centre of the forecourt and yell at the top of my lungs, 'I'm a hostage! I need help!'

But even as I picture myself doing it, another image comes to mind: the outline of the gun in Angel's pocket. Even if she wouldn't actively hurt the baby, I picture her panicking and dropping him onto the stone floor, his unfinished skull cracking like an eggshell. This thought makes me shudder and I hurry to the cashpoint first, which is located outside the shop. But my hands shake and I fumble the PIN number. There's a second of total panic that I can't remember it. The thought of going back with no cash makes the world spin for a moment until the four digits float, blessedly, into my mind. I tap them in and opt for three hundred and fifty pounds in cash.

This done, I enter the shop and scan the shelves for baby products. The section is small and there are only nappies for ages

three to six months and toddlers. Even the smallest packet is going to swamp that tiny body. But they will have to do.

When I spy the small selection of ready-prepared formula milks, including two cartons for new-borns, I feel quite weak with relief. A thought floats into my head from nowhere and I pause, then realize how ridiculous it was. For a moment there, I had worried about giving the baby formula when he may be conditioned to his mother's breast. As if that was important, now.

Who is his mother? This question keeps coming to me, over and over again. *What happened to her?* Why did Lucas have blood on his hands?

Have to focus. I place both cartons in my basket, then grab a Snickers bar, suddenly craving a hit of sugar. Maybe it will stop me from shaking. I look around, anxiously, sure I am conspicuous, that eyes are roaming and picking over me, even though I know logically that people are just going about their business, bleary with fatigue and their own problems.

When I join the short queue, I become aware of a commotion. There is only one till, where two girls are arguing with a middle-aged man in a Sikh turban.

The white girl has blonde hair in a ponytail so tight that her thickly mascaraed eyes almost bulge from her face. She is in a skimpy dress, stretched tight over rounded hips and thighs. Her black friend is almost bursting out of jeans and a crop top that finishes above a roll of flesh. Her hair is dyed a brassy ginger with a heavy fringe almost meeting her eyelids.

‘Yeah but what’s your problem?’ says the white girl. ‘There’s no need to give us all this fucking grief, is there?’

‘You get out of here with your filthy mouth,’ says the garage attendant in a raised voice. ‘I’m not selling you cigarettes without ID.’

‘Didn’t we just give you that, towel-head?’ says the black girl and she and her friend dissolve into giggles that make them sound five years younger than they look.

The man behind the counter is shouting now.

‘You give me your fake bloody ID and I give you a trip in a police car! You think you like that, *hn?* Get out of here, you little sluts, before I call the police. And stop doing that!’

‘You sexually harassing us?’ says the white girl, who is now holding up a mobile phone in a silver sparkly case. ‘I need evidence.’

I shift from foot to foot, uneasily. Please don’t call the police. Please let this nightmare end so I can get out of here.

There are three other people in the queue: a young man who is studiously avoiding getting involved by staring into his phone screen, an elderly woman clutching a loaf of bread and some beans, and a suited man about my age, sighing with irritation. The old lady casts her eyes around and tuts at intervals. She throws a few disgruntled looks at the man behind her but this obviously doesn’t satisfy her because she then manages to snag my gaze before I can avoid it.

‘Disgusting way for girls to behave,’ she says. I nod briskly and

look away, out at the forecourt, which now has a queue of cars forming at the pumps.

‘Shut your mouth, you old cow,’ says one of the girls as they barrel past, laughing hysterically.

Several more people now join the queue.

Anxiety throbs in my veins. How long have I been gone? Glancing at my watch, I see it is now 3.35. The thought of the baby’s hunger and distress tears at me. It is literally unbearable to think about. I find I’m tapping my foot against the floor, unable to stay still.

The old woman is at the till now. She is clearly a regular because she is asking after the health of several people whose names I don’t catch as the man rings through her purchases. He still looks ruffled after his altercation with the girls but dutifully answers all her questions, finally managing a small smile.

The woman is about to pay when she says, ‘Oh, give me one of those Instant Lottos, Ajay. Bloody waste of money, but you never know. I quite fancy a little trip to the Bahamas, don’t you?’

Ajay joshes along with her now as he painstakingly selects the scratch card and rings it in. All this seems to take an agonizing amount of time. It takes everything I have not to scream, ‘Come on!’ until my throat aches.

Finally, the old woman is done. As she moves past on her way to the door, she shoots me a curious look. Is it obvious that something is going on with me? Can everyone tell? I feel as if my anxiety is leaking through me like visible steam. Maybe you’d

get burned if you stood too close.

The man in front is served quickly and, finally, I'm able to place my purchases next to the till, sighing with a mixture of relief and impatience.

'Any petrol for you today?'

'No,' I say. 'Just these things.' There's a clock just behind the man serving and, on seeing it, my heart speeds up again. I have exactly fifteen minutes to get back to meet Angel's deadline. Flustered, I miss the man asking if I would like a carrier bag the first time. He repeats the question and, blushing, I accept, before handing over my debit card.

'Contactless alright for you?'

'Yes.' *God, yes! Just bloody hurry!*

After what seems like half an hour in there, I am out of the door. I turn to cross the forecourt and go back to the main road when someone touches my arm.

'Mrs Bailey?'

With a start, I turn to find myself looking into the fresh, smiling face of a teenage girl. Familiar, but her name is just out of reach.

'It's me,' says the girl, 'Hannah Bannerman? You taught me English last year?'

'Hi Hannah,' I force the words out, painfully. 'Bit late to be out, isn't it?'

My brain is turning over and over. Is bumping into someone a sign that I should tell someone what is happening to me?

Hannah, who is looking at me a little uncertainly now, says, 'We're going on holiday. Catching an early flight to Paris.'

She is now joined by an older woman, who looks like the horsier, wider, version of Hannah in about thirty years' time. The blonde-haired, Barbour-jacketed woman is smiling broadly at me. I picture myself climbing into the back of some huge SUV and being cradled by it all the way to the police station. The decision is taken from my hands.

'Oh, are you the famous Mrs Bailey?' she says in a loud voice. 'I believe we have you to thank for Hannah's A star last year, don't we, Hannah?' Her voice seems to thunder in my ears.

Hannah grins and nods enthusiastically.

'Hannah is at Warwick now,' says her mother, 'and she's having a great time, aren't you, darling?'

'I'm having the *best* time,' says Hannah, drawling the word 'best'.

I'm nodding along and trying to smile but I can't think of a single word in response. What can I say? '*Lovely to see you, only, I have a hostage situation back at my house and a tiny baby might be in danger. Bye then!*' Normal etiquette seems to have entirely abandoned me. Being with two unhinged misfits all night has somehow robbed me of my own manners.

Both of the other women are looking at me oddly now, clearly expecting a response. Casting about inside myself, I finally find something to toss back at them.

'That's wonderful,' I say. 'That's absolutely wonderful to hear.'

And a holiday! In Provence!’ I realize straight away I’ve said the wrong place, but they are too polite to correct me. When a sufficient number of seconds have passed, I say, ‘Well, I’d best ...’ but Hannah is holding onto my arm again, blushing slightly.

‘I just want to say that I couldn’t have done it without you, Miss. You really helped me through ... well, you know.’

I stare back blankly and a strange expression passes over Hannah’s face, a kind of disappointed horror. Then it comes to me and I feel *sick* for forgetting.

Hannah’s dad died at the beginning of Year Thirteen and for a while the talented student had, understandably, lost her focus. I lost my own mum in my teens and so I just got it. I spent a lot of time talking to Hannah after lessons and gently encouraging her not to throw away her opportunities.

‘God, yes, yes, of course. I’m sorry, I—’

From nowhere, tears bead my eyelids. I try to blink them away, but the two people in front of me fracture into a watery blur. The memory of Hannah’s distress, coupled with the heartfelt thanks, are more than my bruised emotions can handle right now.

‘Are you alright?’ says Hannah’s mother. She must now notice the nappies bulging in the thin carrier bag because she bursts out with, ‘You’ve not had ... a *baby*?’

This is it. This is the moment to tell them.

But I can’t do it. I can’t risk harm coming to that innocent child because I’m not brave or strong enough to help him. I’m

all that little boy has right now. I take a small breath in before speaking again.

‘No, dear me, no!’ My attempt to sound chirpy and friendly comes across as shrill and deranged now. ‘But my, er ... my ... friend is staying. In fact, I’d better get back! It’s been so good to see you, Hannah! And you too, Mrs ...’ but it’s no good, the surname has gone again, ‘and you too.’

I hurry across the forecourt before either of them have the chance to detain me any longer, feeling their curious eyes on me as I go. They must be wondering where the hell my car is too.

I know I’ve come across as a total fruitcake, but I have no time to worry about that now. Two damaged, possibly violent people are currently in charge of a tiny, innocent life. At their very best, they are rough and incompetent, even if they aren’t about to inflict any deliberate damage. Heaven knows how they are coping with the screaming, which must surely be getting worse as hunger bites deeper. All the very worst stories about child cruelty on the news tickertape through my mind now; babies with burns, babies with tiny broken limbs, babies in bins ...

I start to run.

My breath is tight in my chest and my skin bathed in sweat in the muggy air as I get to the roundabout and negotiate my way back to Four Hays. Carl bobs into my head and I picture him running alongside me with precise, economic strides. It does not help.

And now my stupid, *stupid* brain is unhelpfully filing another

thought: Ian jogging alongside Sam the first time Sam rode his bike without stabilizers at the bottom of this road. Why think of that now, for God's sake? But I can see it so clearly; the pale pink blossom from the apple tree in our garden blowing in the breeze like confetti, Sam's delighted shrieks of, 'Look at me! Look at me, Daddy!' The shared look of love between Ian and me. The memory has a honeyed, golden glow. It's pleasure and pain all mixed together and I cling to it as I slow down.

My knees ache and I can't get my breath, so I stop and walk; small, panicked sobs punctuating my gasps as I struggle to fill my unfit lungs with air.

It feels like someone has played a terrible joke and made my road, so familiar I notice the tiniest change in vegetation over the seasons, twice as long as usual. But at last I see the lights of my home and force a last surge of energy to get myself to the back door, where I hammer the flat of my hand against the wood, almost doubled-over with exhaustion.

The door flies open and Angel stands there, looking down at me.

'Took your time,' she snaps, eyes flashing with fury.

14

Nina

The first thing I notice when I come inside is that the baby has stopped crying. Is this a good thing or very bad indeed? The radio that lives by the sink is playing some sort of generic pop.

Lucas is not in the kitchen. I see the baby lying on the makeshift mat on the table, fast asleep, arms at right angles by his head. His tiny ribcage is rising and sucking inwards in that speeded-up way of the very young. It unnerved us so much when Ian and I were new parents.

Suddenly wrung out, I place the milk and nappies onto one of the kitchen surfaces. Then I lean my hands against the cool granite and try to catch my breath.

‘Why were you so long?’ Angel’s voice is whingey, behind me. ‘You were fucking ages. We were starting to think ...’

‘I’m sorry, but there was a queue and then ...’ I pause, ‘it just took longer than I expected, that’s all.’ I had been this close to saying I’d run into someone I know, but I’m sure that would be a mistake. I must try and appear calm in the hope that they will follow my lead and not do anything stupid.

‘Well, it felt like forever.’ Angel’s voice is quiet. ‘We had to put the radio on to stop it screaming. Thought you were never coming back.’

This seems to be entirely at odds with the calm scene before me and I shoot a look at her. But her head is down again, eyes plugged into the screen of her phone.

It looks as though Angel has been raiding the fridge in my absence, judging by the mess of bread, cheese, houmous and ham at the other end of the table. A knife has fallen out of the houmous and left a slick smear on the surface.

Angel licks her fingers and stares back at me.

I turn away, realizing I will have to sterilize the bottle all over again to feed the baby. I'd forgotten what a faff it is, feeding infants. But thank God for the milk.

I go to the kettle and switch it on. It's all so long ago, when I could do this stuff in my sleep. More or less did, sometimes.

The radio burbles on in the background. It is a local station; one which Sam likes because one of the morning DJs makes him laugh. I get a sudden, vivid mental picture of my son shovelling in Weetabix and giggling like a maniac at the kind of high jinx I find irritating first thing in the day. This sends a spasm of pain through me and I think, *At least he's not here.* It's some small comfort.

Lucas coughs, from the sitting room, I think, and we both glance in that direction. Angel's expression is soft, but there's something else there too. Fear? It's hard to tell.

'You're very close, aren't you?' I say gently. Angel's gaze snaps back to me, suspicion tightening her face again. 'I mean, you're lucky,' I add quickly. 'Lucky to have that relationship.'

Angel gives a bitter laugh then her face becomes serious again as though mulling these words over more carefully.

I press on. 'Not all siblings are like that, you know. I have nothing in common with my brother at all.'

This is true. Steve is a successful insurance broker who lives in a virtual mansion in Wimbledon. He has a long-term girlfriend called Clare, who always looks as though she has a bad smell under her nose. We only meet at Christmas at Dad's place in Yorkshire, or at family weddings. I don't think about him much in my everyday life.

At first it seems that Angel is not going to reply but then she finally responds.

'Had to be,' she says quietly. 'No one else to look out for us.'

Wondering how far I dare go with this, I lean back against the sink and regard Angel, who has a faraway look.

'What about your mum and dad?' I say, after a moment. I immediately think I've blown it because Angel looks at me with narrowed eyes. Then she sighs deeply and yawns unselfconsciously, revealing surprisingly white teeth.

'You don't want to know,' she says. I can feel the moment slipping away, but I soften my voice and try again.

'Look, Angel, I can tell that you are a good person,' I lie. 'After all, you saved my bloody life earlier!' My forced laugh falls flat in the atmosphere of the room. But I press on. 'You must know this baby needs to be with his mother, or his father. I don't know what has happened and, honestly, I don't even want to know. But why

don't you two get on your way and leave the baby here with me? I can take him to the police and say I found him on my doorstep or something. I won't tell them anything about you or Lucas.'

Even as I'm saying it, I know how lame it sounds.

Angel pulls at her bottom lip and appears to be listening, though. My pulse quickens at the thought of this ending easily; safely. I picture myself telling people about it all after the event; my weird night as a hostage in my own home. What a story it will be.

'It's all too late for that,' says Angel, rubbing at a crumb on the table with her finger, eyes cast down again. Disappointment cuts deep and we both go quiet.

On the radio, the station goes to the hour and the local news comes on. I'm only half listening when the presenter starts to speak.

Then it is as though every inch of my skin has been electrified.

'Police are asking for witnesses,' says the sombre female voice, 'after the vicious murder of a young mother in the Foxbury area of Redholt this evening and the kidnap of her six-week-old baby. The twenty-eight-year-old woman was stabbed multiple times. If you have any information about this please call 0333 563334.' There's a pause and then, *'Now for traffic news ...'*

Angel lunges to switch off the radio and turns to me. I can hardly breathe.

She turns to me and her expression darkens when she registers the horror in mine.

‘Don’t you dare judge him,’ Angel hisses through teeth that are almost clenched. ‘Don’t you fucking dare. You don’t know him. You don’t know anything at all.’

15

Lucas

It's raining again.

Lucas lies on the sofa, listening to the soothing pattering against the windows. The room is dark, save for the pale wedge of light against the wooden floor coming from the hallway.

He can hear the low murmur of conversation between Angel and the woman. He's forgotten her name ... if he ever knew it. He wonders what they are talking about and hopes Angel isn't saying anything stupid.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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