



**'DARK,  
TWISTY AND  
ADDICTIVE'**  
LISA JEWELL

Be careful who you trust  
with your family...

# PICTURE of INNOCENCE

T J STIMSON

# TJ Stimson

## Picture of Innocence

### Аннотация

THE MUST-READ PSYCHOLOGICAL SUSPENSE OF 2019... Perfect for fans of LULLABY, LET ME LIE and THE CRY. My name is Lydia. I'm 12 years old. I'm not an evil person, but I did something bad. My name is Maddie. I'd never hurt my son. But can I be sure if I don't remember? With three children under ten, Maddie is struggling. On the outside, she's a happy young mother, running a charity as well as a household. But inside, she's exhausted. She knows she's lucky to have to have a support network around her. Not just her loving husband, but her family and friends too. But is Maddie putting her trust in the right people? Because when tragedy strikes, she is certain someone has hurt her child – and everyone is a suspect, including Maddie herself... The women in this book are about to discover that looks can be deceiving... because anyone is capable of terrible things. Even the most innocent, even you. THIS IS THE STORY OF EVERY MOTHER'S WORST FEAR. BUT IT'S NOT A STORY YOU KNOW... AND NOTHING IS WHAT IT SEEMS.

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**PICTURE OF INNOCENCE**

**T J Stimson**

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# Dedication

For my nephews,  
George, Harry and Oliver.  
Your Daddy would be so proud of you.  
Charles Michael Francis Stimson  
1974–2015

# Epigraph

Yet each man kills the thing he loves,  
By each let this be heard,  
Some do it with a bitter look,  
Some with a flattering word,  
The coward does it with a kiss,  
The brave man with a sword!

*The Ballad of Reading Gaol*

Oscar Wilde (1854–1900)

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## Now

*I crawl back into bed and stare blindly up into the darkness. I won't sleep; not tonight, not for many nights to come. I doubt I'll ever sleep soundly again.*

*I start to shake. The adrenalin that brought me this far suddenly drains away and I begin to shiver so violently my muscles cramp. I press my fist against my mouth to still the chatter of my teeth. If I had anything left in my stomach, I would be sick again.*

*I've always thought of myself as a fundamentally good person. I'm not perfect, but I've spent a lifetime trying to do the right thing. I rescue spiders from the bath; I stop traffic to let a mother lead her row of ducklings across the road. I literally wouldn't hurt a fly. A month ago, I'd never have believed myself capable of killing a mouse, never mind murdering another human being in cold blood.*

*But human nature has an infinite capacity to surprise.*

*We teach our children to fear dark alleys and strangers, but the real danger is much closer to home. You're more than twice as likely to be murdered by someone you love than by someone you've never met. If you're a child, it's nearer three times. If you want a reason to be scared, look in the mirror.*

*Evil doesn't have two horns and a tail. It's ordinary, just like me.*

*Those jealous husbands who bludgeon their wives to death, the women who smother their babies, the estranged fathers who lock*

*their children in the car and connect the exhaust. Ordinary men and women, all of them.*

*Just like me.*

**Four weeks earlier**

# Chapter 1

## Monday 11.00 p.m.

Maddie opened her eyes. It was dark; she struggled to orient herself as her vision adjusted to the gloom. She was in the nursery: she could just make out the silhouette of Noah's cot. She had no idea how she'd got here. When she groped for the memory, it'd been wiped clean.

Her throat felt raw and hoarse, as if she'd been screaming. She moistened her lips, and tasted blood. Shocked, she touched her mouth, then looked down to see a dark smear on her fingertips. Had she fallen? She and Lucas had been arguing, she remembered that, though she couldn't remember what the row was about. Had she stormed out of the room? Walked into a door?

She closed her eyes again and thought back to the last thing she *could* remember. She and Lucas had been upstairs, in their bedroom; her husband had just come out of the shower, spraying her with water as he towelled his thick, dark hair. Her heart had skipped a beat, as it always did when she saw him naked, even after six years of marriage, the intensity of her craving for him almost frightening her as she'd pulled him hungrily onto the bed.

She suddenly remembered: with perfect timing, the baby monitor on the bedside table had flared into life, an arc of

furious red lights illuminating the bedroom. Not that the alarm had been necessary; Noah's screams had echoed from the adjoining nursery, loud enough to wake everyone in the house, and probably everyone on the street, too.

Lucas had told her to let the baby cry. *That's* why they had been arguing. Lucas had told her to leave Noah. It was just colic, he'd grow out of it – *Come on, Maddie, just leave him ...*

And then her memory simply snapped in half, like a spool of tape at the end of the reel.

She exhaled in frustration. She had no way of knowing if she and Lucas had argued five minutes or five hours ago. The doctor said her memory lapses were normal, the product of exhaustion and the pills she was on. Nothing to worry about, he said. Nothing to do with what had happened before. She had three children, two of them under three: of course she was tired! Of course she forgot things! It'd all sort itself out if she was patient.

But it was happening more and more often: whole blocks of time, lost for good. It'd started around the time she'd found out she was expecting Noah, and had got worse in the nine weeks since his birth. No one watching her would notice there was anything wrong. She didn't collapse or black out. But suddenly, in the middle of doing something, she would find she couldn't remember what had just happened. A few seconds, or a few minutes of her life, gone forever. Her memory stuttered and skipped like a home movie, with blank spaces where pivotal scenes should be.

All she could remember tonight was the baby screaming, Lucas rolling away from her in frustration ...

Noah wasn't screaming now.

Galvanised by fear, she sat up and switched on the nightlight. She'd been holding him in her arms, but they were empty now. He wasn't in his cot, he wasn't on the floor. She couldn't see him. She leaped up from the chair in panic, and then she saw him, crushed against the back of the seat. Somehow, he'd slipped out of her arms and become wedged between her hip and the side of the rocking chair, his vulnerable head pressed against the wooden spindles. Terror flooded her as she crouched on the floor and pulled his limp body onto her lap. His eyes were closed, his face still and pale, except for the vivid red imprint of the chair on his cheek.

She put her ear to his chest, praying for a heartbeat, pleading with a God she didn't believe in. *Please let him be OK. Please let him be OK.*

Abruptly, Noah squirmed in her arms and let out an indignant but healthy cry. Maddie gave a strangled half-sob, half-laugh and snatched him up against her shoulder, her throat clogged with grateful tears.

'Mummy?'

She practically jumped out of her skin. Nine-year-old Emily stood silhouetted in the doorway to the hall, her long nightdress giving her the air of a Victorian ghost.

'Emily! Did Noah wake you?'

Her daughter nodded sleepily. ‘Can’t you make him stop, Mummy? I’m so *tired*.’

Maddie felt thick-tongued and groggy, as if she’d awoken from a drugged sleep. ‘Me, too, darling.’

Emily leaned against the rocking chair, her long, fair hair brushing against her brother’s furious scarlet face. The screaming baby grabbed a fistful in his tiny hand. ‘Can’t you give him some medicine or something?’

‘It doesn’t really help.’ Maddie gently freed her daughter’s hair from Noah’s grasp. ‘Go back to bed, Em. You’ve got school in the morning.’

‘I feel hot.’

She felt her daughter’s forehead. A little warm, but not enough to worry about. ‘Get some sleep, and you’ll be fine.’

‘I can’t sleep. He’s too noisy.’

‘I’m sorry,’ Maddie sighed, standing up and switching Noah to the other shoulder. ‘There’s not much I can do. Why don’t you try putting a pillow over your ears?’

‘Nothing blocks *that* out.’

Maddie closed the door as Emily stomped back down the corridor to her own room, praying the noise didn’t wake two-year-old Jacob too. She paced the small nursery, shushing and rocking the baby, so bone-tired she was almost asleep on her feet. She felt ninety-two, not thirty-two. Her back ached, and her eyes were raw and gritty. Her breasts throbbed with the need to nurse, but when she sat down to try, Noah stubbornly refused to feed.

She got up again and pressed her forehead against the cool glass of the nursery window, looking down into the inky garden as she jiggled Noah up and down in an attempt to soothe him. There was nothing lonelier than being awake when everyone else was asleep.

*Unplanned isn't the same as unwanted*, Lucas had said. But he was wrong. Noah hadn't been a happy accident, not for her.

Oh, she loved him beyond words now he was here, there was no question of that. She'd walk over hot coals for him, of course she would. She was his mother; there was nothing she wouldn't do for any one of her children. But it'd taken everything she'd had to put herself back together after Jacob, and she hadn't been sure she'd had it in her to do it again.

Emily had been an easy infant; even though Maddie had, quite literally, been left holding the baby when her daughter's father had been killed five months into the pregnancy, she'd coped better with single motherhood than she'd expected. It'd helped that Emily had apparently read the textbook on how to be the perfect newborn. She fed every four hours. She smiled on cue at six weeks. She put on exactly the right amount of weight and hit all the correct percentiles for her age. Maddie had taken Emily to the animal sanctuary where she worked, and her daughter had cooed beatifically in her pram in the sunshine for hours while Maddie groomed horses and mucked out stables. She'd listened to other mothers at her postnatal classes complaining about mastitis and sleepless nights and wondered what their problem

was.

Her mistake, she'd realised when Jacob was born, had been having her easy baby first. She'd confidently assumed motherhood would be just as straightforward second time around, especially since this time she didn't have to do it all alone.

She couldn't have been more wrong.

## Chapter 2

### Tuesday 7.20 a.m.

Lucas noticed the red marks on Noah's face as soon as he came into the kitchen. He crouched down beside the baby's bouncer, stroking Noah's cheek with his thumb. 'What happened to you, kiddo?'

Maddie busied herself with Jacob's Weetabix so her husband couldn't see her face, too afraid to admit she'd flaked out last night with their baby in her arms. Thank God Noah was none the worse for wear, apart from the marks, which were already starting to go. 'I think he got himself wedged in a corner of his cot,' she fibbed. 'He must've pushed his face up against the bars.'

'Poor little bugger.'

'It'll fade.'

Lucas dropped a kiss on Noah's head, then straightened up and started emptying the dishwasher. Maddie surreptitiously watched him as she stirred Jacob's cereal. She never tired of seeing her husband do simple domestic tasks like make coffee or empty the bin. Part of it was sheer novelty; her mother, Sarah, had raised her alone after her father's death when she was two, so she wasn't used to seeing a man help out around the house.

She also found it strangely erotic to watch her big bear of a husband wipe down a kitchen counter or neatly fold tea towels.

At six-feet-five, he dwarfed everything he touched; the plates seemed like toys from Emily's tea set in his huge hands. She and Lucas were a marriage of opposites on many levels, not least of them physical. She barely scraped five-feet-two, the top of her head just level with his broad chest. He was dark-haired to her sandy blonde, brown-eyed to her blue. He could have picked her up and tucked her under one massive arm. She couldn't even get him to roll over in bed when he snored.

But despite his mountain-man appearance, Lucas was actually a cerebral, dreamy, indoor sort of man; his weekdays were spent at a drawing board, designing buildings for a small, local architectural firm, and in his downtime at weekends he did crosswords or read obscure Russian novels. For Maddie, on the other hand, there was no 'weekday' or 'weekend'; she ran an animal sanctuary, which was a twenty-four-seven commitment. She didn't have time to worry about what to wear, never mind what to read; most mornings she flung on the same filthy jodhpurs from yesterday and dragged her hair back into an unwashed ponytail. Her hands were callused from years of mucking out stables and lunging ponies, her fingernails broken and dirty. If she put on a skirt, it was a noteworthy event.

No one who met Lucas and her separately would match them as a couple. And yet theirs had been a whirlwind romance, love at first sight. Four months after meeting in the jury room at Lewes Crown Court, they were married. Six years on, in defiance of the friends who'd said she had no idea what she was rushing into,

they were as much in love as ever.

She'd known, of course, that Lucas must have baggage; as her best friend Jayne succinctly put it, no one got to thirty-four without a few fuck-ups along the way. But, recklessly, she hadn't been interested in his past; only in their future, together. Even now, she still knew very little about his life before they'd met. He rarely talked about his childhood or adolescence, for good reason. When he was just thirteen, he'd rescued his four-year-old sister Candace from the house fire that had killed both their parents. Looking back now, Maddie wondered if their shocking bereavements had been part of what drew them together. She understood better than most that to survive tragedy, sometimes you had to close the door on the past.

But her first instincts had been right. He was a good husband, a wonderful father and stepfather. He brought her a cup of tea in bed every morning and rubbed her feet at night when she was tired. And they'd made beautiful children together, she thought fondly, as she put Jacob's breakfast on the high chair in front of him. Both their sons were a perfect blend of the two of them, with ruddy chestnut hair and hazel eyes. Only Emily looked like she didn't belong. She was growing more like her biological father with every passing year.

As she stirred the lumps out of Jacob's cereal, Maddie felt an unexpected rush of tears. She blinked them back, cursing the pregnancy hormones that left her so vulnerable. Emily's father, Benjamin, had been her first boyfriend, a veterinary student

in his final year at the same college as she when they'd met. Quiet and painfully shy, Maddie had always found it hard to make friends, having been raised by a widowed mother too busy with her charitable causes to have time to show Maddie how to have fun. At twenty-one, she'd never even been on a date until Benjamin asked her to join him at a lecture about animal husbandry.

Somehow, Benjamin had got under her skin. Theirs had been a gentle, low-key relationship, a slow burn born of shared interests and companionship. It wasn't love, exactly, but it was warm and reassuring and safe. Eight months after they'd met, she'd lost her virginity to him in an encounter that, like the relationship itself, was unremarkable but quietly satisfying.

The pregnancy a year later had been a complete accident. To her surprise, Benjamin had been thrilled. They'd both graduated college by then, and while she made next to nothing at the sanctuary, he was earning enough as a small animal vet to look after them both. He bought dozens of books on fatherhood and had picked out names – Emily for a girl, Charlie for a boy – before Maddie had been for her first scan. He was so excited about becoming a father, his enthusiasm was contagious.

He'd died in one of those stupid accidents that should never have happened, skidding on wet leaves on a country road one dark November afternoon. No one else was even involved. Maddie herself had been out shopping for baby clothes when it happened. She would never forget turning into their street and

seeing the police car parked outside their flat. She'd known, instantly, that Benjamin was dead.

She hadn't fallen apart, because she'd had the baby to think of. She'd put her head down and concentrated on Emily and the sanctuary, never permitting herself to think about what could have been. She had her daughter, and her horses. For four years, it'd been enough.

And then she'd met Lucas, as unlike Benjamin as it was possible to be. Their relationship had been a *coup de foudre*, stars and fireworks and meteor showers. She fell in love not just with him but with the person she became when she was with him: confident, witty, amusing. When he asked her to marry him, she didn't hesitate. Lucas had saved her, in every way a person could be saved.

Maddie spooned a mouthful of Weetabix into Jacob's mouth and wiped his chin. She'd been so excited at the thought of having his baby, of seeing what the combination of his and her genes would produce. When Jacob was born, three years after they married, she'd expected him to slot into their lives without a ripple, the way Emily had. But from the start, he'd been hungrier and more fretful than his sister. He'd refused to latch on properly and had quickly lost weight. Then she'd developed mastitis. At the midwife's insistence, she'd switched to formula, feeling like a failure, her anxiety and exhaustion unsettling Jacob even further in a vicious circle. And then, just as suddenly, her agitation and nerves had been replaced by an emotional numbness that was far

more troubling.

It was obvious, even to her, that there was a huge difference between not caring about anything and not being *able* to care. But she found herself incapable of doing anything about it. There'd been days when Lucas had left to take Emily to school in the morning, kissing her cheek as she sat on the edge of the bed, only for him to return home from work ten hours later to discover her still sitting there, Emily at a school friend's and Jacob screaming in his cot.

Her mother had recognised her postnatal depression for what it was and done her best to help, encouraging her to get out more, to relax; she'd taken care of the children and sent Maddie to the hairdresser, for a massage, a girls' night out. But months had oozed by, and she hadn't got any better. In the end, her mother had forced her to see the doctor. For a long while, even Dr Calkins hadn't been able to help and there had been frightening talk of inpatient care and electroconvulsive therapy. But finally, *finally*, just as Jacob reached his first birthday, the counselling and the pills had begun to work. Her feelings had gradually returned; mainly negative emotions to begin with, like hate and self-loathing and sadness, prickling sensations returning to a limb that had been numb for a long time. She'd been angry for quite a while, too, but everyone had been so glad to see her feel anything, they hadn't minded. There had been tears, lots of tears, but eventually the good feelings had come back. Things had started to matter again. She started to care.

Through it all, Lucas had been steadfast in his support. Many men would have given up on her, but not Lucas. She liked to think of herself as independent and self-sufficient, but the truth was, she didn't know what she'd have done without him.

His competence with the baby had surprised her. He'd been a hands-on stepfather with Emily from the very beginning, taking her to nursery school and teaching her to tie her own shoelaces. But Emily was a little girl; babies were a different kettle of fish. Lucas was so bookish and academic, Maddie hadn't really expected him to get his hands dirty when Jacob was born. But he'd changed nappies and soothed tears, as if born to it. Even now, he was the one who comforted Jacob when he had toothache, sitting beside his cot and stroking his back for hours until he settled. On the nights Noah was truly inconsolable, it was Lucas who strapped him into the back of his car and drove around for hours until he fell asleep.

He ruffled Jacob's hair now as he crossed the kitchen to put the milk away. His son slammed the palm of his chubby hand against the tray of his high chair, impatient for his breakfast. Maddie jumped and stirred the bowl of Weetabix again as Emily appeared in the kitchen doorway, still wearing her nightdress.

'Why aren't you dressed?' Lucas demanded. 'We have to leave in ten minutes or you'll be late for school.'

Emily ignored him, lolling against her mother's chair and chewing a rat-tail of long blonde hair.

'Lucas asked you a question,' Maddie said sharply.

Imperceptibly, Lucas shook his head. *Not now.* It was an argument they'd had more than once over the years. She was loath to admit it, but the truth was, the joins in their blended family showed, however much she tried to pretend they weren't there. Emily had had her mother to herself for the first three years of her life. Together with her grandmother, Sarah, they'd formed a tight little family unit. And then Maddie had met Lucas and brought first him, and then Jacob and Noah, into their feminine circle. Sarah adored Lucas, she thought he was the best thing that could have happened to her daughter, but Emily had been slow to thaw. Even now, her relationship with him was painfully polite at best. Lucas accepted it for what it was, but Maddie bridled on his behalf every time her daughter snubbed him.

'Go and get dressed,' Maddie said, giving her daughter a chivvying push. 'You'll make everybody late.'

'But I don't feel well.'

'What sort of not well?' Maddie asked.

'I feel hot, and I've got a headache,' Emily whined. 'And I'm so *itchy*.'

'Don't scratch,' Lucas and Maddie said simultaneously.

She handed the cereal bowl to Lucas so he could take over feeding Jacob. 'Come here, Emily. Let me see.' She peered down the back of her daughter's nightdress and immediately felt guilty for her brusqueness. 'Chickenpox. That's all we need.'

Lucas looked alarmed. 'Shit. Am I going to catch shingles?'

'Don't panic,' Maddie said. 'You can get chickenpox from

shingles, but not the other way round.’ She tugged Emily’s nightdress back into place and made a quick decision. ‘I’ll see if Jayne can have her today.’

‘Can’t I stay home with you?’ Emily asked.

‘Sweetheart, I wish you could, but we have a new horse arriving today and I have to be there. You could come with me, if you like?’

Emily shook her head. She was terrified of the horses: their sharp hooves, their huge yellowing teeth, the sheer size of them. Maddie blamed herself: when Emily had been two, she’d put her on the back of one of her most tranquil sofa-ponies, Luna, a wide-backed, sweet-natured grey who’d taught a generation of children to ride. But that particular day, something had spooked her and she’d bolted and thrown Emily off. Her daughter hadn’t been hurt, but the episode had given her a lasting fear of horses.

‘Do you think Jayne could keep Emily overnight?’ Lucas asked Maddie.

‘I doubt it. It’s Steve’s birthday and Jayne’s taking him out for dinner to celebrate. Maybe Emily could spend the day with her and go to Mum’s tonight. I really don’t want Noah getting sick, especially when it’s only his second week at daycare. He’s just got used to his new routine, and I don’t want to disrupt it if we can help it. When you drop the boys off this morning, Lucas, tell them to keep an eye out for spots and call me if either of them run a temperature.’

‘I can sleep over at Manga’s?’ Emily said, brightening. ‘Can I

stay there till I'm better?'

'Yes, good idea,' Lucas said hastily, thrusting Jacob's breakfast back into Maddie's hands. 'I can't be getting sick, not with all I've got on at the office.'

He was already halfway out of the door. Maddie suppressed her irritation. Lucas was irrationally phobic about illness. A single sneeze was enough to send him into meltdown. Maybe it had something to do with what had happened to him as a child, an association with doctors and hospitals. A trauma like that had to have left emotional scars. Generally speaking, her husband had emerged from the tragedy remarkably sane and well-balanced, but Candace had fared less happily, even though she'd been so much younger when the fire had happened. Lucas was naturally very protective of her, but there was only so much he could do. Maddie didn't resent their closeness, of course; as an only child, she actually rather envied it, and she adored her eccentric sister-in-law. But Candace had cost her husband many sleepless nights over the years, and there were times Maddie felt that her marriage was rather crowded.

Guiltily, she pushed the thought away. Despite his issues, Lucas had been undeniably supportive when she'd had postnatal depression; she could hardly turn around and complain about his loyalty to his sister now. It was one of the things she loved about her husband: once earned, his support was absolutely steadfast.

But there was only so much any man could take, even one as devoted as Lucas. Maddie had already put him through the

wringer once. She couldn't bring herself to tell him about her strange memory lapses and have him worry he couldn't trust her with the children. She was sure the doctor was right, anyway. They were bound to stop once Noah started sleeping through the night.

## Chapter 3

### Tuesday 10.00 a.m.

As soon as Jayne opened her front door, Emily pulled away from her mother and ran down the hall to the kitchen. Jayne's house had an identical layout to their own, although her garden was bigger because she was on the end of the modern housing estate in East Grinstead where they both lived. The resemblance stopped there, however; whereas Maddie's decorating style could best be described as working-mother-meets-couldn't-care-less, Jayne's home was exuberantly themed. She and her husband Steve had gone on a safari in Lesotho to celebrate their twentieth wedding anniversary the previous year; the living room was now filled with African masks and zebra-print cushions. Both her adult sons had recently left home and Jayne had turned one bedroom into a Moroccan souk and the other into a minimalist Swedish spa. It was an interesting look for a four-bed semi, but if anyone had the personality to pull it off, it was Jayne.

Maddie dumped Emily's pink backpack on the retro fifties kitchen table. 'You're a total star,' she said. 'I literally don't know what I'd have done without you.'

'Forget it. I literally can't think of anything I'd rather do.'

The two women grinned at each other. She and Jayne had met eight years ago at a council meeting about a proposed bypass

that would cut through a beautiful section of their West Sussex green belt. The main speaker against the development had had an irritating habit of adding ‘literally’ to almost every sentence; sitting next to each other, she and Jayne had got the giggles and had eventually been asked to leave the meeting, as if they were naughty schoolgirls. They’d been firm friends ever since.

‘Seriously, though, you’re a lifesaver,’ Maddie said. ‘I owe you one.’

‘Don’t be daft. If it wasn’t Steve’s birthday, I’d have her overnight. I’ve got more than enough time on my hands.’

Maddie gave her a sympathetic smile. Jayne had quit her job as a receptionist at a law firm a couple of years earlier to look after her widowed father and his death four months ago had left her at a bit of a loose end while she searched for a new job.

‘Time for a quick cuppa?’ Jayne asked, putting on the kettle.

Maddie glanced at her phone. ‘Go on, then. I’ve got half an hour before I have to leave.’

‘Do you want me to put on a DVD for you, Emily?’ Jayne asked. ‘Or would you rather play in the garden?’

The little girl looked hopefully at her mother. ‘Can I watch Netflix on my phone?’

‘I suppose, since you’re theoretically sick. But not all day,’ she added helplessly, as Emily grabbed her back-pack and shot off towards the sitting room.

Jayne got out a couple of mugs. ‘You’ll be telling me next Jacob has a Snapchat account,’ she teased.

‘Oh, God, am I an awful parent for getting her a smartphone?’ Maddie exclaimed. ‘I am, aren’t I? Lucas was dead set against it, but I wanted her to be able to reach me if there was an emergency —’

‘Give over. You’re a great parent. I was just teasing.

‘It’s not funny,’ Maddie groaned. ‘I can’t keep up with it all. I’ve only just got to grips with Facebook, and now they’re all on Instagram or Pinterest or God knows what instead.’

‘Listen to you. You sound like your own grandmother. You realise you’re technically a millennial, don’t you?’

‘You know you’re way more on the ball than me.’

Jayne set a mug of tea in front of her. ‘That’s a low bar, love.’

At first glance, theirs was an unlikely friendship. Jayne was nine years Maddie’s senior, an energetic, outgoing woman who’d grown up with four brothers and was the life and soul of the party. She’d married and had children young and had been the kind of mother who threw end-of-term parties for the entire class and was everyone’s favourite chaperone on school trips. Maddie never even went to parent–teacher conferences without Lucas as a protective buffer. But she and Jayne had both grown up in homes where money was tight and dessert a treat you only had on Sundays. They’d learned the value of thrift and hard work.

‘You all right?’ Jayne asked. ‘No offence, love, but you look shattered.’

Maddie sighed. ‘I’m fine. Just tired. Noah’s still not sleeping. I know it’s just colic, but it never seems to end.’

‘I hope that lovely bugger of yours is pulling his weight.’

She shrugged. ‘He has to get up for work in the morning. I’d bring Noah into our room, but there’s no point both of us being up all night. The horses don’t mind if I fall asleep on the job, but if Lucas does, a hotel will end up with no windows or something.’

‘Screw his hotels. You’re more important. It’s easy for things to get you down when you don’t get enough sleep—’

‘It’s OK,’ Maddie interrupted, knowing what her friend was driving at. ‘I’m OK. I’m still taking my pills. Dr Calkins even said I can start tapering down soon. I’m not depressed.’ She summoned a tired smile. ‘Exhausted, but not depressed.’

‘Any more funny turns?’ Jayne asked lightly.

Maddie hesitated. Jayne had been with her the first time she had one of her memory lapses, not long after she’d found out she was expecting Noah. They’d been at the garden centre, looking at lavender bushes for Jayne’s new landscaping project. One minute she’d been crushing a soft purple stalk between her fingers, inhaling its aromatic scent, and the next, she’d been eating cheddar-and-kale quiche at Stone Soup two miles away with absolutely no idea how she’d got there.

Jayne had laughed when she’d told her, said it was typical baby brain, to forget about it. She’d left her car in the multistorey at the shopping centre when she’d been expecting Adam, Jayne said – she’d actually got the bus home before she’d realised!

But then it had happened again, three months later, when Maddie was collecting Emily from school. This time she’d lost

a whole afternoon. It was like someone had simply wiped the slate clean. She could remember turning into the crescent-shaped drive in front of Emily's primary school for afternoon pick-up; she could see Emily standing on the front steps, chattering to her best friend, Tammy, windmilling her arms as she demonstrated some sort of dance step. And then suddenly Maddie was upstairs in the bathroom at home, kneeling next to the tub as Jacob splashed fat hands on the water, giggling. It was dark outside; she'd lost four hours, hours in which she'd driven her children home and fed them and helped out with homework and changed nappies. And she couldn't remember any of it.

It wasn't baby brain. This was something different and it scared her. She hadn't done anything odd or out of character during one of her episodes – at least, not yet – but just the thought was frightening. She hadn't wanted to go back to her psychiatrist, Dr Calkins; he was a good man and he'd done his best to help her when she'd had postnatal depression, but he'd also been the one pushing for her to be admitted to a psych ward and suggesting ECT. She knew he'd only had her best interests at heart, but the idea of electric shock therapy had terrified her. She'd worried that if she'd told him she was literally losing her mind, he'd definitely have wanted to admit her, and if she'd refused, she might have ended up sectioned.

Nor did she want to tell Lucas; it would only worry him. And she couldn't talk to her mother, either; Sarah wasn't the kind of woman who did reassurance and sympathy. She solved problems,

found solutions. She'd parented Maddie efficiently when she was a child, ensuring she was clothed and fed and nurtured, but although Maddie had always known she was loved, she'd never felt Sarah *liked* being a mother very much. Even when Sarah played with her, getting out the finger paints or making jam tarts, she'd always had the sense her mother was ticking off a good-parenting box rather than actually enjoying spending time with her.

But the third time she'd had a memory lapse, four weeks after Noah was born, Maddie had been so frightened she'd had to tell someone. Jayne might only be a little older than Maddie, but she made her feel mothered in a way Sarah never had. It was Jayne who'd finally talked her into going back to Dr Calkins, even offering to come with her. With Jayne beside her, she'd told the doctor everything and had been surprised, and immensely reassured, when he'd explained it was nothing more than a side effect of the antidepressants she'd been on since Jacob's birth. Once Noah was a little older, he said, they'd scale back her meds and everything would be fine.

She hoped he was right, but last night had shocked her to the core. She'd never knowingly put the children at risk before. It was only luck Noah had just ended up with a few red marks. What if she didn't simply lose her memory next time? What if she had a proper blackout, when she was driving or carrying the baby? Or what if she did something she couldn't remember, like leaving the gas on or the bathwater running? She could burn the house

down, and never even know it.

‘Well?’ Jayne teased, flicking the kettle back on. ‘Or have you already forgotten the question?’

Maddie was about to tell Jayne what had happened. But then Emily came running back into the kitchen, asking for something to drink, and Jayne noticed some of her chickenpox blisters were weeping and went off to get some calamine lotion, and so in the end, Maddie said nothing at all.

## Lydia

She wriggles uncomfortably in the dark. She badly needs to pee, but if she comes out of the cupboard, Mae will be very angry. Mae told her to stay in there till the lady has gone or she'll be sorry. She knows better than to disobey Mae. Last time, Mae beat her so hard, she knocked out two of her teeth and she couldn't move her arm properly for ages. *Let that be a lesson to you.* Sometimes her shoulder still hurts.

Mae says she's a wicked little cow who'll get what's coming to her. She says one of these days she'll end up hanging from a hook in the shed, like the rabbits, with her gizzard slit. She doesn't know what a gizzard is, but she doesn't want hers slit. It sounds like it would hurt.

She really *really* needs to pee. She squeezes her legs together tight. It's so hot in the cupboard and she's thirsty, too. She doesn't know why she has to hide, but she thinks it's probably because she was so naughty yesterday. Mae had to punish her and now she has big red and purple bruises all over her legs. She didn't mean to be a greedy little brat, but she was so *hungry*. Sometimes Mae forgets to feed her, and so after Mae has gone to bed, she sneaks back downstairs and eats whatever she can find in the kitchen, like she was last night when Mae caught her.

She wishes Davy was still here. Her brother was nearly as big as Mae and Mae didn't get as cross with her when he was around.

But Davy left. He told her he'd come back for her, but he hasn't yet. *Good riddance*, Mae says.

She doesn't think it's good riddance, though. She misses Davy.

She can't hold the pee in any longer and it starts to trickle down her leg. Mae will be angry that she wet herself, but it's better than coming out of the cupboard and having the lady see her. Last time a lady came to the house, Davy had to leave. It was her fault, because the special sweets made her sick. They were blue and came in a little bottle. They didn't taste very nice, but Mae told her to eat them all, *a special treat*, so she did. They made her feel funny. She got all sleepy and Mae let her curl up on the sofa, which is something she never usually does. But then Davy came home early from school and found her and he gave her a glass of warm water with salt in it, which tasted disgusting and made her sick. She doesn't know why that made Davy so happy, but he hugged her and kissed her and made her promise never to eat Mae's sweets again.

The next day, the lady came and asked her lots of questions about Mae (the lady called her 'your mummy' and Mae didn't say, *Don't you bloody call me that, you little bastard, if I'd had my way I'd have got rid of you, you can blame your father, fucking bastard I should have known he wouldn't stick around*). Mae sat on the sofa next to her with her arm round her and pinched her hard when the lady wasn't looking, to remind her to keep smiling and be a good girl. Mae didn't get cross with Davy in front of the lady, she laughed and said Davy had got the wrong end of

the stick, it was a silly accident, she was very careful about where she kept her pills, especially when there were kiddies about, but you know what they're like, you have to have eyes in the back of your head. She didn't understand what Mae meant about the stick, but she hoped it wasn't a big one.

The lady wrote all this down and then she went and Mae stopped smiling and dragged Davy upstairs and she heard Mae shouting and Davy shouted back, and there was lots of banging and yelling and screaming. She didn't see Davy for a few days after that and then one night he sneaked into her bedroom and crouched down by her mattress on the floor to shake her awake. His face was all purple and bruised and one eye was swollen shut. He told her he was going to track down his own dad and he'd get him to speak to the lady and *make* her listen this time. You poor bloody cow, he said. If you was a dog, they'd take you off her, they wouldn't let her treat you like this.

But Davy never came back. Mae said good riddance, just like your father, they're all the same. Mae said it's your fault he left, you wicked evil little bastard. Mae must be right, or else why hadn't he come back for her like he promised?

She hears the door slam now and Mae stomping up the stairs. She scrambles back away from the cupboard door, trying to make herself small in the corner. Even though she didn't come out of the cupboard, she knows she's going to be in trouble anyway because of the pee and because she's a bad lot who's got it coming to her.

The door flies open and she blinks in the sudden light. Mae reaches in and grabs her arm and yanks her out, and she tumbles onto the bare boards, scraping her knee. Mae doesn't give her time to stand up. Her arm feels like it's being pulled out of its socket as she's hauled along the hallway, and she has to bite her lip hard to stop from crying.

Mae stops suddenly and flings her into a heap against the wall. You dirty little bastard! she screams. Four years old and you're still wetting yourself! You little cunt!

She curls into a ball as Mae aims a kick at her, trying to protect herself. She didn't know she was four years old. There are so many things she doesn't know, including her own name. Davy called her peanut and Mae calls her little bastard and dirty bitch and fucking slag, but she doesn't think any of those are her name.

Mae grabs her arm again. She just has time to scramble to her feet as Mae drags her down the stairs. She is shocked when Mae hauls the front door open and yanks her outside. She's hardly ever allowed outside.

There are so many things she wants to look at as Mae pulls her down the street, but she's too busy trying to keep up with her. Then they get on a bus and she bounces up and down in her seat, so excited she forgets to be scared. A bus! Davy used to get a bus to school every day, sometimes she watched him from the window, but she's never been on a bus! She wonders where they are going. Maybe Mae has found Davy at last. Maybe she's not angry with him anymore and they are going to get him and

bring him home.

She is sad when they get off the bus, but Mae grips her hand and marches her down a big street, much bigger than the one where they live. It is filled with shops with big glass windows with plastic people standing in them, wearing the cleanest clothes she has ever seen.

Suddenly Mae halts by a black door with gold writing on it and pushes her through it. There are no plastic people in this shop, just a pretty lady with long yellow hair sitting behind a desk. Opposite her is a lady in a blue hat, and an old man with a shiny bald head. The lady with the blue hat is crying.

You want a kid? Mae says roughly. Here. You can have this one.

## Chapter 4

### Wednesday 7.30 a.m.

Emily looked much better the next morning when Maddie stopped at her mother's house, where Emily had spent the night, to see how she was doing. Her daughter's spots had started to scab, which her mother said was always a good sign with chickenpox, and her temperature was almost back to normal.

'You didn't have to come over,' Sarah said briskly, putting the kettle on to boil. 'I told you last night we're fine. Emily's helping me make some posters for my sale this morning, aren't you, darling?'

Emily nodded. 'We've got glitter pens,' she announced. 'And special stickers.'

'Another fundraiser?' Maddie asked, surprised. 'Didn't you have one just last weekend?'

'That was for Child Rescue. This is the Mercy Foundation.'

Maddie kicked herself for even asking. She'd long since given up trying to keep track of her mother's good causes. Sarah was an indefatigable do-gooder; Maddie had grown up surrounded by boxes filled with cast-offs destined for jumble sales and had learned to sort china and check pockets almost before she could talk. When her mother wasn't volunteering at the local soup kitchen, she was helping out with Meals-on-Wheels. It was

impossible not to admire the energy and commitment she put into her charitable work, but Maddie had always felt slightly resentful. Her teenage Saturdays had been spent sorting jumble or posting flyers through letter boxes, while everyone else at school had been out shopping and having fun. It was no wonder she'd found it so hard to make friends. Even now, Sarah's diary was twice as hectic as Maddie's own. Unless Maddie was in crisis, she had to book lunch with her mother a month in advance. There was always another cause more worthy of her attention.

No, that was petty and mean. Sarah was the first port of call for a dozen local charities and a lifeline for many of them. Her mother wasn't given to self-pity, but Maddie knew she hadn't had it easy, losing her parents while still in her late teens and then being widowed when Maddie was just two. Maddie's father, who had been nearly twenty years older than Sarah, had ensured his wife and child were provided for; their bungalow had been paid off and there'd been just enough money that Sarah didn't have to work, as long as she was sensible. She'd chosen to pay it forward by volunteering and fundraising.

At fifty-four, she was still an attractive woman, with a neat figure and the same rich strawberry-blonde hair Maddie and Emily had inherited. She'd have no shortage of eligible suitors, should she choose. But she'd never looked at another man since Maddie's father had died. 'I've already been luckier than most women,' she said, whenever Maddie raised the subject. 'I have you, and the children, and my charity work. That's all I need.'

Maddie finished her cup of tea and stood up. ‘I’ll come back and pick Emily up this afternoon, after work,’ she said. ‘The nursery rang this morning, and said half the children are out with chickenpox, so I’m sure the boys will get it too. I know Lucas will hate it, but there’s not much point keeping Emily in quarantine with you if they’re all going to come down with it anyway.’

‘Oh, please, can’t I stay with Manga?’ Emily exclaimed, using her childhood name for her grandmother, which had evolved when she’d mangled ‘Grandma’ by saying it backwards. ‘I’d much rather be here.’

‘How about you come back and help me with the sale on Saturday afternoon?’ Sarah said. ‘Your spots should be nearly gone by then, and I could really use some help setting up the stalls. It’d just be you and me. The boys can stay with Mummy and Lucas. How does that sound?’

‘Could we go to the Lucky Duck afterwards?’ Emily said eagerly. ‘Can we order burgers? The ones with the special thousand island dressing?’

‘I don’t see why not.’

Emily cheerfully opened a bag of silver foil stars and emptied them onto the kitchen table alongside her poster, good humour restored.

Maddie hugged her daughter goodbye, and put her empty mug in the sink. ‘I’d better get going,’ she said. ‘Izzy’s arranged for a photographer to come and do some PR shots for the *Courier*. I promised I’d help her set up some jumps for the horses.’

‘Hang on,’ Sarah said. ‘I’ll come and see you off. I’ve got to put the recycling out.’

‘I can do that for you.’ ‘No, I’ve got it.’

She slipped her feet into her gardening clogs and followed Maddie out, wheeling the recycling bin to the kerb. Maddie unlocked her twenty-year-old Land Rover, jiggling the key carefully in the sticky lock. It’d already had a hundred and fifty thousand miles on the clock when she’d bought it, eight years ago; one of these days, it was just going to collapse into a heap of rust.

‘Are you OK, darling?’ Sarah asked as she walked back towards her. ‘You look awfully tired.’

‘Not you as well,’ Maddie sighed. ‘I *am* tired, Mum. What do you expect? I have a nine-week-old baby to look after. Noah was up all night again last night. I finally got him to sleep around three, and then Jacob woke at five and climbed into bed with us.’

‘And Lucas slept right through it all, of course.’

Maddie paused, half-in and half-out of the car. ‘What’s that supposed to mean?’

‘Nothing, dear.’

‘No, if you’ve got something to say, Mum, spit it out.’

‘I’ve got nothing against Lucas, darling, you know that. I think he’s been very good for you in lots of ways.’

‘But?’

Sarah hesitated. ‘He has been very good to you,’ she said again. ‘But you’ve been very good to him, too, Maddie.’

Maddie bristled. First, Jayne implied Lucas wasn’t pulling

his weight, and now her mother. They had no idea how hard he worked. He wasn't as hands-on with Noah as he had been with Jacob, admittedly, but he was working hard towards making partner at his firm. And sometimes he could be a bit bossy, a little bit controlling, especially when it came to the children, but that's because she was too soft. He was an incredible father. She refused to hear a word against him.

'He's my *husband*,' she said firmly. 'We're in this together, Mum. We don't keep track of who does what. And to be honest, if we did, I'd be the one in the red, not him.'

'I'm not criticising him, Maddie. I'm just worried about you. You've got a lot on your plate. Three children and the sanctuary to manage, on top of everything else.' She laid a cool hand on Maddie's arm. 'If you don't get enough rest, it's easy for things to become overwhelming.'

Maddie shook her off. 'I'm fine, Mum.'

'Asking for help isn't a sign of weakness—'

'I said I'm *fine*,' she snapped, and then instantly regretted it. 'Sorry. I didn't mean to bite your head off. I just wish everyone would stop *watching* me all the time. Don't worry. I'm taking my pills. I've been checking in with Calkins. I'm just tired, that's all.'

'Remember. I'm here if you need me,' Sarah said.

Maddie buckled her seat belt and backed the Land Rover out of the driveway, glancing briefly in her rear-view mirror as she paused at the junction with the main road. Emily had come out to find her grandmother, and as Maddie saw the two of them

standing together, she was suddenly struck by how very much alike they were.

And the resemblance went beyond the physical; at nine years old, Emily already had the same quiet, self-contained composure as her grandmother. She and Sarah were made of the same unbreakable steel. Even as a baby, Emily had never seemed to need Maddie the way Jacob and Noah did. She'd lie outside for hours in her pram at the sanctuary, placidly playing with her own fingers and toes. When Maddie had been at her lowest ebb after Jacob's birth, Emily had quietly found ways to amuse herself, never complaining or demanding attention. She lived in a world of her own, perfectly content with her own company.

Maddie never had to worry about Emily. It was the boys she found so exhausting, and so hard to manage. There were times, although she would never admit it out loud, when she couldn't help thinking how much easier life would've been if she'd stopped at one child, like her mother.

## Chapter 5

### Wednesday 10.00 a.m.

Later that morning, Maddie leaned on the split-rail fence along the edge of the bottom paddock, watching as Izzy took Finn over a five-bar jump and landed him neatly on the other side. Both horse and rider had seen better days, but they were still poetry in motion.

On the far side of the jump, a photographer with a floppy boy-band fringe snapped away.

‘Did you get what you need?’ Izzy called, as she pulled Finn up.

The photographer fiddled with his lenses. ‘One more time?’

Finn’s chestnut flanks rippled in the sunshine as Izzy took him over the jump again. He was a former show-jumper, one of the most beautiful horses Maddie had ever seen. He’d probably earned a great deal of money for his owner, before the trophies had stopped coming and he’d been sold and then resold and finally dumped by the side of the road by an unscrupulous dealer, abandoned without food, water or shelter. When he’d arrived at the sanctuary, Maddie had been able to count his ribs, and his feet were in such a bad state, he could barely walk.

The photographer snapped away as Maddie fed Finn some Polos. She was grateful when he left.

'Please tell me we don't have to do that again soon,' she grumbled to Izzy, as they led Finn back up to the yard.

'Play nice,' Izzy chided. 'The *Courier's* promised us two pages if they like the photos.'

They certainly needed the publicity. The sanctuary's finances were in a perilous state; when Maddie had first started working here full-time eleven years ago, there had been seven members of staff, plus a couple of pony-mad teenage girls trading riding lessons for sweat equity. Now they were down to just three: Bitsy, the last remaining stable-hand, a gruff, weather-beaten woman who'd worked at the sanctuary since she was sixteen; Isobel Pyne-Lancaster, who spent most of her time circulating the begging bowl around her smart friends; and Maddie herself.

It was a daily battle just to keep their doors open. Maddie couldn't bear to turn any horse or pony away, no matter how short of funds they were. But it cost thousands of pounds a month just to keep the sanctuary running. Some of the money came from riding lessons and the odd gymkhana, but the rest came from donations. Maddie might find it difficult to ask for something for herself, but when it came to her horses, it was a different matter. In that, she supposed, she was just like her mother.

Maddie fell in love with horses the way most women fell in love with men. Ironically, she'd never been a horsey child; Sarah had never had the kind of money that supported ponies and riding lessons and gymkhanas, and even if she had, it wasn't the kind of posh, braying world they mixed in. But when she was eleven, her

mother had dragged her along to a fundraiser at a local stable yard for people who'd been severely injured in riding accidents; not the most auspicious introduction to the equestrian world. She'd been absolutely terrified: of the stamping and whinnying, the huge, iron-clad feet that looked like they could crush her in a heartbeat, of the horses' sheer size.

But then one of the stable girls had given her a carrot and led her over to a vast, orange sofa of horseflesh called Paul. 'Hold your hand flat,' the girl had instructed, as the horse snorted and nuzzled her shoulder. 'He won't bite.'

Paul had bared his great yellow teeth as if laughing at her. Maddie had frozen, too petrified to move, as his huge velvety nose snuffled against her hand. With the delicacy of a dowager selecting a cucumber sandwich, he'd taken the carrot and whinnied with pleasure, butting against her arm as if in thanks.

Maddie had gazed up at him in rapture, her heart swelling with joy. He liked her! *He liked her!*

It had been the start of a love that'd had no equal until Emily was born.

Maddie had spent her teenage years in jodhpurs, with straw in her hair and dirt under her nails, mucking out stables at a nearby horse sanctuary in return for riding lessons. At one point, she'd dreamed of being a jockey. She was the right height and had the necessary slim, wiry build, and over time, she acquired the technical skills, but eventually she'd had to accept she just

didn't have the killer instinct. It took strength and guts to hold on to 1200 pounds of horseflesh thundering along at forty miles an hour. Horses could smell your fear, and she'd never quite mastered hers. Instead, she'd got a degree in animal welfare and started working full-time at the horse sanctuary. Later, after Benjamin's death, she'd used her small inheritance from her father to buy out the owners, two retired vets, when it'd become too much for them to manage.

Finn had been her first rescue horse. He'd obviously been viciously abused as well as shamefully neglected, and when he'd arrived at the sanctuary, he'd had no idea how to respond to affection, backing away in fear when she tried to stroke his nose. He'd circled his stable endlessly, grabbing mouthfuls of hay and spitting them out over the door and biting his own shoulders. She'd had no idea horses could self-harm until then.

It'd taken months of persistent, loving patience to calm him enough to even get a saddle on him. But, in the end, he'd become her greatest success story. She always put her most nervous riders on Finn. He was like a huge armchair. He understood their fear, because of what he'd been through himself.

Izzy led Finn into his box. 'Mads, I need to talk to you,' she said, as she came back outside and bolted the stable door behind her.

'That doesn't sound good,' Maddie said, with a lightness she didn't feel.

'Look, I know you don't want to hear this, but I think we

should consider selling the lower meadow,' Izzy said, as they crossed the yard. 'Our cheque for feed this month bounced again. The south stables are leaking, and if we don't fix the roof soon, it's going to come down. Bitsy hasn't been paid for two months, and I know you haven't taken a penny in almost a year. We have vet bills, hay bills, the rates are due.' She stopped as they reached the small Portakabin that served as the sanctuary's offices. 'We're sinking, Maddie.'

Maddie frowned. 'If we start selling off bits of land to pay bills, we'll end up with nothing left. We'll have another fundraiser. I'll talk to my mother, see if she can help.'

'That might see us through this crisis, but what about the next one?' Izzy said. 'We need to increase our donor base and find new sponsors, so we can get some kind of regular income coming in. Otherwise, we're just putting our fingers in the dyke.'

Maddie knew her friend meant well. Izzy and Bitsy loved every blade of grass, every stone and split-rail fence of the sanctuary as much as she did. Like her, they considered it their second home. They'd been at the sanctuary even longer than she had and she'd known them since she'd first started mucking out stables there as a teenager. It was Izzy who'd suggested a degree in animal welfare when her mother had insisted she go to college, and Bitsy who'd encouraged her to buy the sanctuary when the vets could no longer manage it, promising to stay on at the stables as long as Maddie needed her. Izzy had even given Lucas a couple of riding lessons, before they'd concluded, by mutual assent, that

horses weren't for him. She and Bitsy had organised Maddie's hen weekend on the Isle of Wight with Jayne and Lucas's younger sister, Candace, where they'd all got outrageously drunk. Sixty-two-year-old Bitsy had been arrested for indecent exposure after she'd dropped her trousers and peed behind a postbox; somehow, Candace had sweet-talked the arresting officer, a baby-faced policeman barely out of his teens and a full head shorter than she, into dropping the charges in return for her phone number. Bitsy and Izzy were her family. They knew the sanctuary meant the world to her, as it did to them. Losing even a part of it would break all their hearts.

Izzy would rather cut off her own arm than sell the lower meadow. If she was suggesting it now, they must be in real trouble.

Maddie leafed through the bills on her desk after Izzy had left. *Overdue. Three months in arrears. Immediate payment is required.*

Izzy was right. They couldn't go on like this. Lucas had told her the same thing. And he didn't just want her to sell the lower meadow; he'd actually asked her to consider selling the sanctuary itself.

She understood his reasoning: the sanctuary was a financial black hole that had long since swallowed every bit of her legacy, and more besides. As Izzy said, she hadn't paid herself in more than a year. If she sold the land to a developer, she'd make enough for Lucas to buy into a partnership with his architectural firm

and enable him to take on some of the projects he longed to do which were currently no more than a pipe dream.

But the sanctuary wasn't just a hobby or even a good cause, not to her. Maddie felt hurt that Lucas could even ask her to sell it. The horses were her *family*. She loved Finn second only to Lucas and the children. Of course she didn't want to stamp on Lucas's dreams, but closing the sanctuary to facilitate them was inconceivable. It'd be like selling Noah to a baby trader!

She'd sacrifice a kidney rather than let one single horse go.

## Chapter 6

### Friday 11.30 a.m.

Maddie's hair smelled of vomit, and her jeans of urine. She'd already changed her T-shirt three times before giving up and accepting the noxious stains as the scars of battle. Her nails were caked in pink calamine lotion, and she strongly suspected the suspicious marks on her socks had something to do with Jacob's foul-smelling nappy earlier.

'Of course it's not a bad time,' she lied, opening the front door wider. 'Please, come in.'

Candace thrust a Tupperware box at her as she came in. 'I made scones. They're a bit burnt, but you can kind of scrape that off.'

'Sorry about the mess,' Maddie apologised, clearing a heap of dirty washing off a kitchen chair so Candace could sit down.

'You should see my place,' Candace said cheerfully, lobbing a pair of dirty knickers onto the pile in Maddie's arms. 'Lucas told me Jacob's come down with the pox, too. I thought you might need some moral support.'

Maddie shoved the dirty clothes into the washing machine and jammed the door shut. 'You have no idea. Your brother practically ran screaming from the room when Emily came out in spots. You know what he's like about getting sick. I'm amazed

he hasn't made us fumigate the place.'

Candace picked up a piece of leftover Marmite toast from one of the kid's plates and took a huge bite. 'I was a bit surprised when Lucas's office said he was home today,' she said through a mouthful of crumbs. 'I thought maybe you'd gone down with it too, that's why I came round.'

'That's sweet of you, but I'm fine. I've already had it.' Maddie looked puzzled. 'I don't know who you spoke to at his office, but they've got their wires crossed. Lucas has a meeting in Poole today, and then a late work dinner. He won't be back till tomorrow morning.'

Candace snorted. 'That sounds more like my brother. If you were relying on him for the "in sickness" bit of things, you're out of luck.' She took another bite of toast. 'Are you all right, Mads? You look exhausted.'

'So everyone keeps telling me.'

'Sorry, darling. But you *do* look a bit ropery.'

'That's nothing to how I feel.' Maddie collapsed onto a chair. 'Thank God Noah hasn't gone down with it yet, though it's probably only a matter of time. Jacob's been throwing up all day – this is the third set of laundry I've done today.'

'How's Emily?'

'Fine, apart from the itching. I had to cut her nails right back to stop her scratching.'

'The older you are when you get chickenpox, the worse it is,' Candace shuddered. 'I was only five when I had it, and I was

hardly ill at all, but Lucas was fourteen and he had an awful time. I remember Aunt Dot had to tie mittens on him in the end to stop him scratching himself to pieces.’ She lowered her voice and grinned conspiratorially. ‘Apparently he even had spots on his willy.’

Maddie laughed. She loved Candace; she might be a little tactless at times, but she didn’t have a mean bone in her body. At thirty-one, she was only a year younger than Maddie, but she seemed to have settled into a happy spinster groove, content to play the eccentric maiden aunt to her niece and nephews. It was unfortunate: the same strong, masculine features that made Lucas so ruggedly handsome were significantly less flattering on his sister. She must have been six feet and was built like a rugby prop forward. But beneath it all, she was emotionally fragile. She’d never managed to maintain a serious relationship and Maddie wondered if it was another legacy from the terrible tragedy that had shaped Candace’s childhood: the fear of letting anyone get too close.

Lucas had introduced her to his sister just a couple of weeks after they’d started dating. The three of them had met at a rooftop bar in London overlooking St Paul’s, near where Candace worked as an IT consultant, and Maddie remembered feeling sick with nerves as she’d got into the lift with him, terrified that if Candace didn’t like her, it would be the end of everything. Lucas himself had been uncharacteristically subdued and Maddie had assumed it was because he, too, was anxious she met with his sister’s

approval. It was only later she'd found out he'd been far more worried what she'd think of Candace.

The evening had gone well, although she'd been a little taken aback by quite how much vodka Candace had managed to put away. But it'd been a Friday night and Candace had been celebrating landing an important new client. They'd left her at the bar around ten, waiting for some friends, and Maddie had fallen happily asleep in Lucas's arms, thankful she'd passed the biggest test of their relationship so far.

At 3 a.m. the next morning, Lucas had been awakened by a phone call from the police. Candace had been arrested after drunkenly crashing her Mini Cooper through the plate glass window of a car showroom in Berkeley Square. She'd been more than three and a half times over the legal limit.

She'd lost her licence and her job. It was the start of what was to become an all-too-familiar pattern. Candace would promise the moon and stars, swearing to cut back on her drinking, and for a while she'd succeed, before falling off the wagon in spectacular fashion. Lucas had paid for her to go to rehab several times, until finally, four years ago, Candace had got her life back on track and moved down to Sussex to be near them. Maddie didn't hold her problems against her. She knew better than anyone the demons that were fought in private.

There was a loud wail from upstairs, and Maddie wearily shoved back her chair. 'Sorry, that's Jacob. I'd better go to him before he upsets Emily. She's hypersensitive to noise at the

moment. She hasn't even wanted to watch any television, because she says it's all too loud.'

'She must be ill. Well, I won't keep you, darling.' Candace stood and enveloped Maddie in one of her brother's bearlike hugs. 'Let me know if there's anything I can do. Happy to mind the little buggers if you need a break.'

Noah suddenly started crying too, woken by his brother's yells. Maddie almost burst into tears herself.

'Let me see to Noah,' Candace offered. 'Probably just lost his dummy. You go and sort out Jacob.'

Maddie hesitated.

'Go on,' Candace said. 'I'm not going to drop him or feed him gin.'

Instantly, she felt guilty. Candace had never given her any reason to worry when it came to the children. She might not let her get behind the wheel with them in the car, but Candace had babysat for them numerous times.

'There's a clean dummy on the bookcase by the window,' she said, shrugging off her misgivings. 'Let me know if he needs changing.'

She followed Candace upstairs and went into Jacob's room. The little boy was standing up in his cot, arms outstretched to the stuffed dolphin that had fallen on the floor. Maddie gave it back to him and settled him down, stroking his back until he fell asleep again. She could hear Candace singing to Noah through the thin walls. Led Zeppelin, if she wasn't mistaken.

Her mobile phone suddenly buzzed in her jeans pocket. Quickly, she tiptoed out of the room to take it.

‘I got your email,’ her accountant, Bill O’Connor, said, without preamble. ‘Is now a good time?’

There was no such thing as a good time today, but Maddie headed downstairs to the tiny study she and Lucas shared. ‘What are your thoughts, Bill? I know the figures aren’t great, but we’re behind on the Gift Aid paperwork, so if you take that into account—’

‘This isn’t about that,’ Bill interrupted. ‘You asked me to look at a second mortgage on your house.’

‘It’d just be for a couple of years,’ Maddie said quickly. ‘I’m sure we can get back in the black soon. Izzy’s got some wonderful fundraisers planned, and she’s talking to a couple of big donors, so it’s not like I’m pouring good money after bad, I do have a plan, if we can just get enough to tide us over—’

Her accountant cut across her babble. ‘Putting aside the wisdom of using your personal funds to prop up the business, I have another concern. Whose name is the house in?’

Maddie was taken aback by the question. ‘Lucas and I bought it together. It’s in both our names. Why?’

‘So, both your signatures would be required to take out a second mortgage?’

‘I suppose so, but I’m sure Lucas would agree—’

‘I’m not worried about Lucas agreeing, but you already have a second mortgage, Maddie.’

The front door banged suddenly. Through the window, she watched Candace lever herself into the tiny front seat of her sports car and shoot out of the drive with a spurt of gravel. She was a little surprised her sister-in-law hadn't bothered to say goodbye, but Candace was always a bit unpredictable.

She switched her phone to the other ear. 'Sorry, Bill. What did you just say?'

'A second mortgage was leveraged against your house just over six months ago.'

'That can't be right. You must be confusing it with—'

'I'm not confusing it with anything. I'm looking at the paperwork right now. Eighty thousand pounds, using the house as collateral. I have your signature right here. At least,' he added ominously, 'I assume it's your signature.'

Maddie sat down abruptly. For once, she was speechless.

'Maddie,' Bill said heavily. 'You're my client. I have to consider your interests first. I hate to ask you this, but did Lucas take this loan out without your knowledge?'

'Of course not!'

'So you *did* know?'

She hesitated. Did she? Her memory hadn't been exactly reliable recently. But she found it hard to believe she could have forgotten something this big. Eighty thousand pounds! A loan like that didn't happen overnight. They'd have discussed it, and signed paperwork. Her memory was bad, but it wasn't *that* bad. She couldn't possibly have forgotten everything.

But Lucas would never have taken it without telling her, she was equally certain about that. Five thousand, perhaps; he'd lent Candace quite a bit of money to help get her new IT consultancy off the ground last year and it was possible he might have borrowed a bit more without running it past Maddie first. But eighty thousand pounds? It simply wasn't possible.

Why would he even need that kind of money in the first place?

## Chapter 7

### Saturday 2.00 a.m.

Maddie couldn't sleep. The first night since he was born that Noah hadn't been up with colic and she was awake anyway, tossing and turning in bed, wishing Lucas wasn't away tonight of all nights, so she could simply ask him, face-to-face, about the loan.

She needed to look him in the eye when she asked him why he'd done it. Because there was no getting around the fact that her signature on the mortgage application form had been forged. She'd seen it with her own eyes. It was a competent attempt, but the signature on the paperwork Bill had sent her clearly wasn't hers.

Until now, she'd have said she knew her husband inside out. Maybe not his entire personal history; there was much about his life before they'd met that she didn't know. But they'd survived some testing challenges in the six years they'd been together and she had a pretty good idea of the mettle and character of the man she'd married. That'd been evident from the day they'd met in the jury box at Lewes Crown Court.

They'd been empanelled for the trial of a haulage contractor accused of murder. It hadn't been the glamorous *Law & Order* melodrama she'd secretly hoped for when she'd been called for

jury service, but a rather pedestrian tale of embezzlement, bad luck and bad choices that had ended with a blow to the head from a wrench in a half-built swimming pool.

Maddie, along with the rest of the jury, had initially been inclined to side with the prosecution. The haulage contractor had admitted he'd been on the building site where his auditor's body had been found. He'd acknowledged they'd had a blazing row on the morning of the day of the murder. The wrench had come from his own set of tools and bore his fingerprints. As they started their deliberations, the foreman, a retired doctor, had repeated everything the Crown had laid before them as if it were undisputed fact, and sat back, job done.

It was Lucas who'd made them all think again. 'Where's the forensic evidence?' he'd demanded. 'Where's the motive?'

'Fraud,' the foreman said, folding his arms. 'It's obvious.'

Lucas had looked round the jury table, holding each of their gazes in turn. They were a pretty uninspiring crew, Maddie had to admit, seeing them through his eyes. Five men, seven women, all but two of them white, most on the fringes of what her mother called the 'real' working world: the unemployed, the retired, stay-at-home mums. Lucas had been the exception. She later learned he'd passed up the chance of a major design commission to do his jury service, and he'd taken the responsibility seriously.

'Where's the proof?' Lucas had asked. 'The police investigation found nothing to back up the prosecution's fraud theory. I'm not saying the man's innocent, but it's not enough for

us to think he *probably* killed his auditor. The prosecution has to *prove* it. The question is, have they done that?

Lucas had achieved what the defence had signally failed to do and made them put aside their prejudices and actually consider the case before them. The evidence was all circumstantial, he argued eloquently, and set against it was the accused's previous good character. This was a man who'd never had so much as a parking ticket, a committed churchgoer and family man. To convict him of cold-blooded murder, of picking up that heavy wrench and smashing in the skull of another human being, they had to be sure. Not just fairly sure. Not just on-the-balance-of-probabilities sure. They had to be absolutely sure beyond *any reasonable doubt*.

His reasoning was calm and logical, but he'd exuded a fierce, suppressed energy Maddie found mesmerising. She could almost see the neurons firing in his brain. She hadn't been the only member of the jury to fall a little bit in love with him.

Thanks to Lucas, the haulage contractor had been found not guilty, and less than three months later, an ex-boyfriend of the victim had been picked up in a routine traffic stop and confessed to the crime.

Lucas deserved the same benefit of the doubt as the haulage contractor, Maddie told herself now, tossing onto her back and staring up at the ceiling in the dark, her eyes dry with exhaustion. Thank God Noah was giving her some peace, for once. She didn't have the energy to deal with his crying.

Lucas was the most honest, principled man she'd ever met. She had never once caught him in a lie in all the years they'd been married; not even a little white one. He'd lost commissions because he refused to compromise his principles and use sub-standard materials to cut costs. He'd stood by the head of the local junior school when the man had been falsely accused – in a venomous and anonymous poison-pen letter – of sexually abusing a child, insisting the school board not rush to judgement without proof.

Maddie rolled restlessly onto her side. She was desperate to sleep, but her mind raced frantically, like a rat seeking its way out of a trap. Was it possible there was a darker side to her husband? How did she even know he was in Poole, as he'd said? His own secretary had told Candace he was working from home. You read stories in the papers about people who led secret lives – men with two wives at opposite ends of the country, serial killers who prowled the streets picking off prostitutes before going back home to eat Sunday lunch with their families. Their nearest and dearest always claimed to have had no idea what was really going on. Maybe the signs had been there, but they'd been too blind and too trusting to see them. In the end, how much did you ever really know anyone?

Lucas was forty years old, and she had only been part of his life for six years; of course there were things she didn't know about him, just as there were things about her life that she hadn't shared. Maybe there were aspects of his past he wasn't proud of,

things that had no bearing on the man he'd become. She could only speak to the Lucas Drummond she knew, and she didn't believe that man would ever deliberately deceive her.

But she was beginning to wonder if she knew him as well as she thought. The subtle pressure he was putting on her to sell the sanctuary, for example, so that he could buy into a partnership with his architectural firm. It had started to feel like emotional blackmail. And he'd been wonderfully supportive when she'd been depressed, but during her illness he'd been very firmly in charge, and she couldn't help noticing that's the way it'd stayed, even when she'd got better. He'd decided to take Emily out of her private primary school, for which Sarah paid, and send her to the state school down the road, so that Emily and the boys would have exactly the same education. Maddie didn't know why, but he wasn't terribly fond of Jayne, either, and had quietly vetoed dinners and get-togethers with her husband for so long that she'd stopped even suggesting them. It was almost as if he didn't want her to have any friends, and for the first time, Maddie wondered why.

She sat up again and punched her pillow into shape. Maybe there was a perfectly good reason why Lucas had faked her signature and taken out a loan without telling her, though she couldn't think of a single one. But in the end, it didn't matter *why* he'd done it. It meant she couldn't trust him; she'd always be wondering what was going on behind her back. It'd be like taking back a man who'd cheated on you. Wouldn't you always

be wondering when he was going to do it again?

## Chapter 8

### Saturday 7.30 a.m.

Maddie woke with a start. It'd been almost light when she'd finally fallen asleep, utterly exhausted. She was grateful Noah had slept through the night, but she'd almost have welcomed the distraction. At least it might have stopped her mind spinning.

She reached for her phone on the bedside table and gasped when she saw the time. Seven-thirty! No wonder her breasts felt like they were going to explode. Noah had gone for nearly eight hours without a feed. He must be absolutely exhausted himself to have slept for so long. However awful his colic was for her, it was worse for him, because he had no idea why he was in pain.

She struggled out of bed, grabbing her dressing gown and jabbing her arms into it as she stumbled across the room. Jacob had slept longer than usual, too, probably because of all the Calpol she'd given him yesterday to bring down his temperature. She needed to get the kids all up and moving; Lucas would be home any minute. She wanted to get her head together before she talked to him.

She heard the crunch of tyres on gravel and peered out of the bedroom window. Lucas was already pulling into the driveway. Her stomach churned with nerves. She ached to nurse Noah, but she needed to talk to Lucas more. She had to confront him and

get it over and done with. She cracked the door of the nursery to check on the baby. He didn't stir, so she carefully shut the door again and turned towards the stairs.

Afterwards, she could never say what made her stop and go back. Some sixth sense, perhaps; a mother's intuition. Or maybe she'd known the moment she'd seen her son's arm, but her mind, fighting to protect her for just a few more seconds, had refused to process it.

As soon as she re-opened the door, she knew something was very wrong.

## Lydia

She's never been so happy in her life. She was frightened at first when Mae abandoned her with strangers, because even though she's scared of Mae, at least she knows her, she knows where she is.

But then the lady with the yellow hair came out from behind her desk and talked to the crying lady in the blue hat and the old man with the shiny bald head for a long time, and then the crying lady stopped crying and came over and crouched down beside her and said, my name is Jean and this is my husband Ernie and what's your name? She didn't want the lady to be cross with her because she couldn't remember her own name, so she said Mae, because it was the only name she could think of. And then the not-crying-now lady said, how would you like to come home with me, just till everything gets sorted out? And so she did.

She's been here for weeks and she still can't believe how *big* their house is. There is an entire room with a table and chairs just for eating in and another room with a big green bath for washing yourself. There was a bath at Mae's house, but no one ever used it for washing themselves. Once, one of Mae's special friends stayed with them for a while and he kept his two pet ducks in it. When he left in the middle of the night without saying goodbye, Mae was so angry she wrung their necks with her bare hands.

Jean lets her have a bath every day. She has a bed, too: a real

bed, not just a mattress on the floor, and it has pink sheets on it. She didn't know what the sheets were to begin with. Clothes for a bed! It seemed such a funny idea. The first night she slept on the floor, so as not to get them dirty or wrinkled. But when Jean came in the next morning, she laughed and said it was OK if she messed the sheets up, that's what they were for. Then Jean jumped on the bed *with her shoes on*, laughing until she climbed on the bed herself and jumped up and down, too.

And there is food, so much food! It seems it's always time for one meal or another. Slow down, Jean laughs, as she crams toast into her mouth at breakfast and shoves more in her pockets for later. You'll make yourself sick. She does, too, her belly isn't used to feeling this full. It takes her a few days to realise that the gnawing pangs in her tummy have gone. She still fills her pockets with scraps when she leaves the table, she can't help it, but Jean doesn't seem to mind. You poor love, she says. We'll soon fatten you up.

Jean takes her shopping and buys her new dresses as clean and fresh-smelling as the sheets and her very own shoes that don't pinch or slop around on her small feet. Jean shows her how to wash her hair with shampoo and how to braid it neatly into two plaits, and she never hits her, *not ever*, not even when she has an accident because she's too shy to say she needs to pee and has forgotten how to find the bathroom in this huge house. Jean doesn't even shout. Jean strokes her hair and hugs her and says it doesn't matter, it was an accident, we'll fix it in a jiffy, don't

you worry.

She doesn't ask how long she's going to stay here. She doesn't miss Mae at all, which proves just what a wicked little girl she really is. But she doesn't want to think about Mae. She's in the middle of such a lovely dream and she doesn't ever want to wake up. Sometimes, she hopes she's dead so she won't have to.

But then one day Jean answers the telephone and when she comes off she's crying again. Ernie asks her what's the matter and Jean collapses in his arms, I'm not going to let them take her, she says. What do they know, these social workers, I'm not giving her back to that wicked woman, over my dead body.

But Jean won't be able to stop Mae. No one can ever stop Mae when she's made her mind up about something.

Jean does her best, she writes letters to important people and she begs and pleads, but it's no good. The night before Jean has to take her back, she cooks her favourite macaroni and cheese followed by chocolate ice cream. Jean brushes and plaits her hair and reads her a story and tucks her into her nice clean warm bed with the pink sheets for the last time and her face gets that strange look people have when they're trying really hard not to cry. Jean kisses her cheek, I'll never stop fighting, I'll make them listen, I'll come back and get you, just you wait and see. But she knows deep down it'll never happen. Davy promised he'd come back for her, too, but he never did.

Mae is waiting for them at the shop where she left her, looking so different in a normal mummy dress instead of the low tops and

short skirts she normally wears that she almost doesn't recognise her. Mae bursts into noisy tears and throws her arms around her in a suffocating hug, my baby oh my baby thank goodness you're all right!

She doesn't want to let go of Jean's hand, but Mae is holding on to her so tight she can't breathe, pulling her away. You've been very kind, looking after her while I was under the weather, she says, but I'm right as rain now, few pills, bit of rest, just what the doctor ordered. Mae's fingernails dig into her shoulder, but her mother's bright smile doesn't slip.

She wants to beg Jean not to let her go, she wants to run right out of the shop and keep on running as far away from Mae as she can get. Her heart is beating loudly in her ears and she feels hot and shaky and sick in her tummy. Her little hands clench into fists by her sides. She wants to hit something, she wants to hurt someone as much as she is hurting, and she realises, in a kind of dazed surprise, that this is what *angry* feels like.

She doesn't know why Mae even wants her back. Mae says she's never been no good, nothing but trouble since the day she was born. Should have got rid of you when I had the chance. But maybe Mae has missed her after all, she thinks hopefully. Maybe things are going to be different now.

It's only when Mae is marching her back down the high street, towards the bus stop, the grip on her shoulder so tight she knows she'll have bruises tomorrow, and leans into her and says, you think I wanted you back, you little cow, they was going to take

the house off of me with you and Davy both gone, now you're going to fucking well earn your keep, that she understands Mae hasn't missed her at all, and if she thought it was bad before, it's going to be a hundred times worse now.

## Chapter 9

### Saturday 8.30 a.m.

Fear and loss seeped like moisture from the room's neat beige walls. This was where they brought you when there was nothing more they could do. Maddie stared at a cork board covered with leaflets. *What To Do After Someone Dies. Living With Grief. After Suicide: A Guide For Survivors. Coping With A Terminal Diagnosis. Palliative Care: What You Need to Know.*

She turned away, her stomach churning. So much pain and misery in the world. How had she ever thought she'd be lucky enough to escape?

She felt strangely disconnected from everything, as if she was moving underwater, or trapped behind a thick glass wall. She knew her baby was dead. She could still feel his chilling weight in her arms, and yet she couldn't take it in. The reality was so monstrous, her mind refused to accept it.

She'd known Noah was gone the second she'd seen his arm dangling through the bars of his cot, his body strangely still. If she lived to be a hundred, she would never forget the thousand years it'd taken her to rush to his cot and pull the blanket away from his cheek. His face had been waxy and deathly pale, his lips a deep mottled blue. When she'd touched his cheek, he'd been cold.

She had no memory of rushing to the window and screaming down at Lucas, though she supposed she must have done. Her throat was still raw. She didn't remember scooping her baby out of his cot, either, but she would remember forever the cold, dead weight of him in her arms. She could feel it still. The back of his head, where she had always put a steadying hand, like a ball of stone. Her precious, warm, milky son, now a stiff, cool statue, a porcelain doll. Already she couldn't remember what he looked like alive. When she tried to picture him, all she could see was his face, deadly white but for his indigo lips and the purple blotches on his skin where the blood had settled.

She supposed Lucas had called the ambulance and her mother. She didn't know how long it'd taken for the paramedics to get there. She hadn't wanted to let Noah go, refusing to let anyone take him from her arms. It was Sarah who'd finally persuaded her. Maddie had handed Noah's cold little body to her mother, watching as the paramedics briefly examined him and then wrapped him tenderly back in his blanket. She'd felt the emptiness of her arms and had known instinctively the feeling wasn't ever going to go away.

'Maddie, stop that. You don't take sugar. Maddie! Stop!'

She jumped and glanced up. She was standing at a counter at the side of the room, spooning sugar into an empty coffee mug. It was already a quarter full; she must have added at least six spoonfuls without even knowing what she was doing.

'I'm sorry,' she said, dropping the spoon so that it clattered

onto the counter. 'I don't know what I was thinking.'

She sat on the tan leather sofa, pinning her hands under her thighs to stop herself from plucking at her clothes. It didn't matter what anyone said. It was her fault Noah was dead. She'd wished him gone. She hadn't meant it, of course, but she'd got exactly what she'd asked for. Maybe, deep down, in a corner of her mind too dark for her to see clearly, this *was* what she wanted.

Maybe she'd even made it happen.

'He kept crying,' she burst out suddenly. 'No matter what I did, I couldn't make it stop.'

'He had colic, Maddie,' Lucas said hoarsely. 'He couldn't help it.'

She stared down at her lap. Her legs were jiggling, but she seemed powerless to stop them. 'I could hear it in my head, all the time. The non-stop screaming, on and *on*. Sometimes I didn't know if it was him crying, or me. I tried to be patient, I did my best for him, but nothing made him happy. No matter what I tried, it didn't make any difference. He never stopped *screaming*.'

'It wasn't your fault, Maddie.'

'I couldn't make him better. I'd feed him and change him and cuddle him and nothing helped. I couldn't stand it anymore.' She covered her face with her hands. 'I just wanted it to *stop*.'

When Lucas spoke again, he sounded wary. 'Maddie, what are you trying to say?'

'I wished he hadn't been born,' she said bleakly. 'I wished he wasn't here. Sometimes ... sometimes I even prayed he'd just

disappear. That someone would just ... *take* him.'

'Maddie—'

'Didn't you hear me?' she cried wildly. 'I wanted someone to take my baby! What kind of mother would fantasise about something like that?'

'It's not your fault,' Lucas said again, but his voice sounded less certain.

He sat next to her and put his arm around her, and she leaned into the familiar bulwark of his shoulder, but it no longer seemed comforting or safe. He was like an oak that had been hollowed out, as vulnerable as she to the coming storm.

## Chapter 10

### Saturday 10.00 a.m.

The door opened. One of the doctors who'd met them from the ambulance came into the room, followed by a middle-aged woman wearing round gold spectacles and a painfully sympathetic expression.

'Mr and Mrs Drummond, first let me offer you my deepest condolences,' the doctor began, pulling up a hard plastic chair opposite the sofa and placing a file on the coffee table. 'I am so very sorry for your loss. I can't begin to imagine how you must be feeling.'

Maddie stared at him blankly.

'My name is Leonard Harris, and I'm the duty doctor at A&E today. This is Jessica Towner,' he added, as the older woman took another chair beside him. 'She's our family liaison and bereavement counsellor. She's here to help you through the process and explain everything that will happen next.'

'I'm also very sorry for your loss,' the woman murmured, her voice a respectful whisper. Maddie had to strain to hear her. 'I'm here to help you in any way I can. I know what a distressing time this is, so if there's anything I can do to make things a little easier, please ask.'

The doctor leaned forward, his clasped hands dangling

between his knees. 'I know you must be in a state of shock right now,' he said, 'but there are a few questions I have to ask. There are certain procedures we have to go through, and a few decisions you need to make, which Jessica will discuss with you in a moment. If we can sort some of these things out now, you'll be able to go back to your family and grieve without any more interference.' He waited a moment for this to sink in, and then reached for his file. 'We just need to check a few facts first. Your son's name is Noah Michael Drummond, correct?'

'Michael was after my father,' Maddie said automatically. It was suddenly important they understood her son wasn't just another statistic, a name on their forms. He would never have a chance now to show the world who he was. She had to speak for him. 'We both liked the name Noah. We wanted something old-fashioned.'

'And he was born on the third of February this year?'

Lucas nodded.

'There were no problems with the pregnancy or birth? No complications during labour or delivery?'

'No, none.'

The doctor ran through a series of routine questions about Noah's birth and the first few weeks of his short life. Maddie tuned him out, letting Lucas answer all of them. She found herself unable to concentrate on what the doctor was saying. The questions were pointless anyway. Apart from colic, Noah had never had a single thing wrong with him, not even a cold.

Her pregnancy had been ridiculously easy, and Noah had had a normal birth, her labour taking less than four hours from her waters breaking to his delivery. She hadn't even needed an epidural. She was good at having babies. Shelled them like peas, her mother said.

'Maddie,' Lucas murmured, squeezing her hand.

They were all looking at her. Clearly, someone had asked her a question.

'I'm sorry,' she said thickly. 'Could you say that again?'

'I know it's difficult, Mrs Drummond. I'd just like you to walk me through the last time you saw Noah alive.'

*Oh, God,* Maddie thought, spots dancing in front of her eyes. *Oh, God.* She was never going to see him open his eyes again. Never see him smile ...

'Maddie,' the bereavement counsellor interjected suddenly. 'Would you like to step into the bathroom for a moment to tidy up?'

'You're leaking,' Lucas murmured.

She glanced down. The entire front of her T-shirt and fleece were soaked with breast milk.

The counsellor led her to a small en suite bathroom at the back of the room and shut the door behind them. Maddie stood mutely as the older woman unzipped her fleece and gently pulled her soaked T-shirt over her head as if she were a child. It was like her body was crying, the milk running down her skin in an unstoppable flood of tears.

‘Here, love, use this towel,’ Jessica said, as Maddie unhooked her sodden maternity bra. ‘I’m going to find you a clean T-shirt and bra from our donations box. Would you like me to see if I can find you a breast pump, so you can express a bit, just to tide you over?’

Maddie nodded. When Jessica slipped discreetly out of the room, Maddie sank onto the closed lavatory seat, pressing the towel against her chest. What was she supposed to do with all this milk now? You couldn’t just stop breastfeeding overnight. When Jacob had been nine months old, he suddenly refused to nurse and she’d ended up with mastitis. It’d been agony. Emily had been so much easier. She’d been able to wean her gradually, tapering the number of her feeds over a period of weeks. She’d have to do the same now, she supposed, expressing just enough milk to keep from getting engorged, until her milk flow dried up naturally. She realised with a nauseating sense of horror she’d effectively be weaning a dead baby.

The counsellor returned a few minutes later with the promised clothes and a hand-held plastic breast pump. ‘If you’re wondering what to do with it, there’s a milk bank here at the hospital,’ she said gently, as if she’d read Maddie’s mind. ‘They use it for premature babies in the NICU. You could donate your milk, if you wanted. It wouldn’t be wasted.’

Maddie nodded, not trusting herself to speak. The idea of expressing milk for a dead child was more than she could bear.

Jessica left her alone in the bathroom and she pumped off

just enough to relieve the fiery heat in her breasts. When she was done, she put on the bra and plain white T-shirt Jessica had found for her and returned to the grief room. Another man had joined the doctor and Lucas while she'd been gone. She knew immediately he was a policeman, despite the raincoat he'd tactfully buttoned up to hide his uniform.

'PC Tudhope is going to sit in, so we don't have to go through the same questions again later,' Lucas said.

'It's just a formality,' the constable added quickly. 'Please, it's not my intention to intrude on your grief or suggest any wrongdoing on your part at all.'

'It's fine,' Maddie said dully.

'Mr Drummond has explained that he was away for work until this morning,' the doctor said, picking up his file again. 'So perhaps you could start by saying how Noah seemed to you yesterday?'

'He seemed fine,' she said helplessly.

'Was he eating normally? Did he show any signs of distress at all? Did you notice if he had a temperature?'

'His temperature was normal. I know, because I checked it twice. Emily and Jacob – our other two children – they both have chickenpox, so I thought he might get sick, but he didn't have a fever and he took all his normal feeds. He seemed fine,' she said again.

The doctor looked up from his notes. 'Your other children have chickenpox?'

‘Emily came down with it a few days ago, and then Jacob the day before yesterday. Why? Is that what—’

‘We can’t rule anything out at this stage,’ the doctor said, gently cutting her off. ‘So, what time did he go down for the night?’

‘His last feed was around ten. He doesn’t usually settle properly after it, because he has colic. I’ll put him down, but he doesn’t really sleep for more than a few minutes at a time. He cries for hours, sometimes. Nothing seems to help.’ She glanced at Lucas as if for confirmation, and he took her hand and squeezed it. ‘We’ve tried everything: colic tablets, gripe water, rubbing his back, a warm hot-water bottle on his tummy, massage, everything. I’ve even tried changing my diet and cutting out dairy and anything spicy, in case it’s something in my milk upsetting him. I asked my doctor if it might be my antidepressants, but he said they wouldn’t affect it. The only thing that seems to help Noah is walking up and down the corridor with him. You can’t even sit down, or he starts crying again.’

It suddenly occurred to her she was still speaking about her son in the present tense. But she didn’t have to worry about Noah crying anymore. Nothing would ever upset him again.

The policeman’s expression sharpened. ‘You’re on antidepressants, Mrs Drummond?’

‘I had postnatal depression after Jacob,’ she said, wondering if he would judge her for it. ‘I’ve been on them ever since.’

‘My wife hasn’t had a depressive episode in nearly two years,’ Lucas interjected quickly.

The doctor made a notation on his pad. ‘Was Noah’s colic worse than usual last night?’ he asked.

‘No!’ Maddie exclaimed. ‘That’s the thing! He didn’t have colic! He didn’t cry at all!’

‘Did you think that odd?’

‘I thought maybe he’d finally outgrown it. Doctors call it hundred-day colic, don’t they?’ she asked desperately. ‘He’s not quite ten weeks old, but I thought maybe he was growing out of it a week or two early, like Jacob did. I didn’t go in to check on him because I didn’t want to wake him. Jacob’s colic was never as bad as Noah’s, but—’

‘You didn’t check on him?’ Lucas interrupted. ‘All night?’

Maddie hesitated. How could she admit she hadn’t checked on their son because she’d been worried sick about why her husband had borrowed some money without telling her? How utterly trivial and unimportant it seemed now. ‘I was just so grateful he’d stopped crying, I didn’t even think why,’ she said wretchedly.

‘In most cases like this, there’s nothing you could have done even if you’d checked him every ten minutes,’ the doctor said gently. ‘I know it’s easy for me to say, but please don’t blame yourself.’

The constable leaned forward. ‘Mrs Drummond, just so I can be absolutely sure of the timeline: you put him to bed around ten last night, and he seemed perfectly fine, everything normal. And then you didn’t look in on him again until this morning, at around

seven-thirty, when you found him?’

It didn’t matter how nicely they said it. She hadn’t bothered to see if her baby was all right because she’d been too thankful he wasn’t crying. All that time she’d been praying he wouldn’t wake up, he’d been lying in his cot, cold and dead.

‘I didn’t set my alarm, because Noah usually wakes me long before I need to get up,’ she said, anguished. ‘As soon as I woke up, I went to check on him, but—’

‘No one’s blaming you,’ the doctor said again.

‘You were the one looking after the children yesterday? They weren’t with a childminder or relative?’ the constable asked.

‘No, I stayed home with them because Emily and Jacob were sick.’

The constable glanced briefly at Lucas, his expression considering, and then back at Maddie. ‘No one else was there to help you, Mrs Drummond?’

‘Candace – that’s Lucas’s sister – she stopped by for about half an hour mid-morning. She helped settle Noah down when he woke up, actually, but other than that, it was just me all day.’

‘We’ll need to speak to your sister, sir,’ the constable said.

Lucas nodded. ‘I can give you her number.’

There was a knock at the door. A woman with dark red hair peered in and signalled to the constable, who got up and exchanged a few words with her in the doorway.

‘Can we see Noah now?’ Maddie begged the doctor. ‘Please. I can’t bear to think of him on his own.’

‘He won’t be on his own,’ Jessica reassured her. ‘I’ll take you to him in a few minutes, as soon as we’re done.’

Maddie saw the constable glance over his shoulder at them. He finished his conversation with the red-haired woman and she left. Something in the constable’s demeanour had changed when he took his seat again; a subtle professional shift which reminded Maddie that beneath the tactful raincoat, he still wore a police uniform.

‘It seems a doctor has examined your baby and found considerable bruising to the side of his head,’ he said, his tone carefully neutral. ‘Would you mind explaining that?’

## Chapter 11

### Saturday 11.00 a.m.

The policeman had addressed both of them, but Maddie felt as if every pair of eyes in the room was directed at her.

‘What bruises?’ she exclaimed, knowing exactly what they meant.

‘On his forehead and left cheek,’ the constable said, indicating their location on his own face. ‘Two long heavy marks running in parallel, quite clearly delineated. They would have been obvious to you, I’m sure.’

Lucas’s expression cleared. ‘Oh, that. He got wedged against the side of the cot a couple of days ago.’ He looked at Maddie. ‘Remember? Those red marks on the side of his face from the bars?’

She felt like she was going to be sick. She’d lied about those marks on the spur of the moment, because she hadn’t wanted Lucas to think she was getting ill again. It’d taken so long for him to trust her properly again. Even after her depression had finally lifted, she’d seen the flicker of doubt in his eyes every time he left her alone with the children. She simply hadn’t been able to face putting it there again.

How could she have known that one stupid, pointless lie might return to haunt her? But if she admitted it now, Lucas would

never forgive her. And what did it really matter, in the end? It had nothing to do with what had happened to Noah.

‘They’d almost gone,’ she protested. ‘They weren’t really bruises, anyway, just pressure marks. You could hardly see them.’

‘There may have been considerably more bruising beneath the skin,’ the doctor said. ‘It might not have become evident until after death, when the body stops healing itself. It’s certainly possible the marks could have become more pronounced post-mortem than you remember.’

‘But it happened days ago!’ Maddie cried, aghast. ‘He’s been perfectly fine since then. That couldn’t have caused ... it couldn’t have caused ...’

The doctor’s eyes filled with pity. ‘We won’t know until we’ve had a chance to examine him properly, I’m afraid.’

Maddie felt like she was going to pass out. She’d killed her baby. She’d dropped him and then she’d covered it up. She’d lied to her husband and slept while her baby died alone.

The policeman wrote something down in his notebook. ‘Can you tell me exactly what happened for him to get those marks, Mr Drummond?’

‘I wasn’t there. Maddie told me what had happened the next morning.’

‘Perhaps you could explain, then, Mrs Drummond?’

There was no inflection in his voice, but again Maddie felt the weight of the unspoken accusation. She had to tell them the truth.

If there was any chance at all that Noah's accident had killed him, she had to admit what had really happened now. They'd understand she hadn't meant to hurt him. Even if they didn't, what was the worst they could do? Throw her in jail? It didn't matter. Nothing mattered now.

Except her children. She thought suddenly of Emily and Jacob, waiting for her to come home, scared and anxious. Jacob might not understand what was happening, but Emily would. They needed her. She should never have lied in the first place, but there was no going back now. If she told this policeman the truth, how did she know they wouldn't arrest her, there and then? She couldn't help Noah now, but she could help Emily and Jacob.

'He got himself wedged in the corner of the cot during the night,' she said, trying to still her nerves. 'He gets very restless at night because of his colic. He was perfectly fine,' she added quickly. 'His cheek was just a bit red for a day or so, that's all.'

'Was his neck or head constricted at any point? Between the bars or in the gap between the side of the cot and the mattress, for example?'

'No. He'd just wriggled himself into a corner, that's all.'

The constable nodded. Maddie had no idea if he believed her or not.

'I realise you all have a job to do, but my wife has explained what happened,' Lucas said, with quiet dignity. 'We've just lost our son. We need to get home to our other children. If you have any more questions, we'd be happy to answer them another time,

but for now, we just want to say goodbye to our baby and go home to grieve with our family.'

The police constable got to his feet. 'Of course. My sergeant says they've finished at your house, so you're free to return. Again, Mr and Mrs Drummond, my very deepest condolences on your loss.'

'I'm afraid I have to return to my rounds,' the doctor said. 'Jessica will take you to see Noah and explain the procedure from here. If you have any questions, please feel free to come and find me at any time.' He extended his hand first to Lucas and then Maddie. 'I really am so very sorry.'

'Can you just tell me ... would he ... would he have suffered?' she asked quietly.

'No. No, it would have been very quick. I doubt he'd even have woken up. He wouldn't have felt any pain.'

Maddie flinched. He might not have felt pain, but he'd died alone. The thought shredded her heart. She should have been there with him. She'd failed him when he'd needed her most.

Once they were alone, Jessica opened her folder and handed Lucas a small booklet. 'I'm afraid there's an awful lot of paperwork associated with death,' she said apologetically. 'This should help you through the majority of it. Unfortunately, you won't be able to register Noah's death until after the inquest.' She gave Maddie another leaflet. 'The Lullaby Trust offers support to families after the death of a child. They're wonderful, and I recommend getting in touch with them when you feel ready. You

can call their helpline any time and they have a number of online forums for parents who are in the same situation as you. They also have a network of parents who have lost a child in the past and have been trained to offer support to those similarly bereaved.'

'There's so much to take in,' Maddie said.

Jessica smiled sadly. 'I know. The review booklet in your packet outlines the steps you have to go through and will answer many of your questions. I'll give you my contact details and, of course, you can get in touch any time.'

'What about the funeral?' Lucas asked. 'When can we arrange that?'

'Not until after the inquest, I'm afraid.'

Maddie felt the room swim. 'He has to stay here till then?'

'I'm afraid so.'

'Can we at least bring our other children here to say goodbye to him?' asked Lucas.

'No!' Maddie exclaimed.

'Actually, Maddie, we do recommend siblings be allowed to see their brother or sister,' the counsellor said gently. 'Children are very literal. They need to see what death means. It helps them understand what's happened and that the baby has really died and isn't coming back.'

Maddie choked back a sob. Lucas reached for her hand and she gripped his fingers, too distraught to speak.

Jessica picked up her folder. 'If you'd like, I can also make footprints of his hands and feet, as keepsakes. Would you like a

lock of his hair as a memento? I can arrange that, too.'

'Yes, we'd like that,' Lucas said hoarsely, as Maddie nodded.

'I'll have everything sent on to you,' Jessica said. 'If you're ready, I'll take you to see him now.'

Maddie clutched Lucas's hand as they followed Jessica back through the hospital foyer towards the lifts. All these people going about their normal daily lives. Queueing for coffee, reading newspapers, checking emails, as if nothing had happened. As if her baby hadn't just died. That woman dragging her screaming toddler away from the sweet counter in the hospital gift shop had no idea how lucky she was that her little girl was still alive. Right now, she was probably wondering why she'd bothered having children. She didn't realise the happiness she took for granted could be snatched away in an instant.

A couple with a newborn in a plastic car seat followed them into the crowded lift, wearing the proud, self-conscious expressions of new parents. The young mother fussed with the baby's blue blanket, tucking it tightly around his crumpled red face. *It doesn't matter what you do, Maddie wanted to tell her, you can't keep your baby safe. You can do everything right: you can keep his head warm and test his bathwater with your elbow and put him to sleep on his back and keep small parts out of reach and it still won't be enough. It will never be enough, because while you're sleeping, death can steal your baby without you even knowing.*

Lucas saw her staring. He moved to block her view and she

buried her face in his chest. Her legs shook and she would have fallen if he hadn't held her.

When the lift doors opened, Jessica led them along a labyrinth of hospital corridors and then stopped by a plain, unmarked door. 'I want you to prepare yourselves,' she said quietly. 'It's going to be a shock, seeing him again.'

'Can we hold him?' Lucas asked.

'If you'd like to. It can be very upsetting for some parents. He won't be warm, the way you expect. But you can spend as much time with him as you need. After you've gone, I'll take the hand and footprints and a lock of his hair. You can bring your other children back later today or tomorrow to say goodbye to him. There's a very helpful leaflet in the packet I handed you about explaining death to very young children.'

Lucas turned to Maddie. 'Are you sure you want to do this?'

She nodded bravely, her chest suddenly tight. Her breath was coming in shallow gasps. It took every ounce of her resolve not to turn and run away.

Jessica opened the door. The room was bright and well-lit, painted a soft lilac with a frieze of white lilies running midway around the wall. A matching blind filtered sunshine from the small window. It reminded Maddie achingly of the hospital room she'd had when Noah was born.

Summoning all her courage, she gripped Lucas's hand and approached the small transparent cot in the centre of the room. It looked exactly like the ones in the maternity ward. A tiny figure

lay swaddled in the middle of it. The stillness in the room was tangible. This wasn't a child who was sleeping. The essence that had been Noah had palpably gone.

Maddie gazed down at the pale white face, as cold and inanimate as a carving. Two livid purple bruises stood out shockingly against his blue-white skin and she wondered how she could have not noticed them before. He looked like a little waxwork doll, not human at all.

And finally she understood her baby was dead.

## Lydia

She's never seen Mae this angry. Her mother shouts so loud that spit comes out of her mouth and her eyes almost pop out of her head. Do you know what you've put me through, you little cunt? Bowing and scraping to them stuck-up bastards to get you back. Just to keep a bleeding roof over me head!

Mae makes her take off the dress Jean gave her, and the shoes, and refuses to let her put on her old clothes, so she has to sit, shivering, in the corner of the room in her underwear. You think you're better than me, do you, with your fancy airs and graces and your posh dresses, you'd better think again, you're nothing without me, nothing, do you hear me, you little piece of shit?

The gloomy house seems even darker and more scary now. It smells bad and there are mice and spiders everywhere. Every night, she cries herself to sleep on the bare scratchy mattress, trying not to think about the pink sheets or the way Jean used to stroke her hair and tuck her into bed. It doesn't take long for the hunger pangs to come back, gnawing away at her insides. When Mae beats her for sneaking downstairs for a drink of water, she doesn't even bother to protect herself. She just wants it to be over.

Mae has so many special friends these days, she can't keep track. They don't just come at night, now, they come at all hours, with their big bellies and greasy hair and their way of looking at her that makes her skin feel itchy like it's covered with bugs. She

sees them giving Mae money sometimes and cigarettes.

One day, she goes to the bathroom and walks in on one of the men, bare-chested, doing up his trousers. She sees his *thing*, it's all white, unnaturally white, like a strange pale worm curled up in a nest of brown hair, and she can't stop staring even though it makes her feel sick to look at it. He laughs, do you want some girlie, you want some of this? and she turns and runs out of the bathroom.

But Mae is waiting. How much? Mae asks the man. He laughs again, but Mae doesn't laugh, her eyes narrow and her face gets that *look*, like when she strangled the ducks in the bath with her bare hands. Come on Jimmy, how much?

Time to earn your keep, Mae tells her. She drags her by the hair into her bedroom, and it smells bad in here, sweaty and damp and something else, something that makes her wrinkle her nose in disgust. Mae's never let her come in here before. There is a red scarf thrown over the lamp on the dresser and strange pictures on the walls. She tries to free herself from Mae, she has a really bad feeling in the pit of her stomach – *danger danger* – but Mae smacks her around the head so hard her ears ring and she feels dizzy, and the man is here and the two of them pick her up and toss her on the bed as if she is as light as a kitten.

Then Mae leaves her alone with the man, and she starts to cry, she's scared, *so scared*, and she tries to scramble away across the bed, but the man is too quick for her, he catches her by her skinny ankle and drags her back across the bed and pins her down, and

she closes her eyes tight, tight. If she keeps them shut, maybe none of this will be real.

She'll wake up in her pretty bed with the pink sheets and none of this will be real.

## Chapter 12

### Saturday noon

She couldn't stop screaming. She refused to look at the cold, dead baby in the crib, the full enormity of her loss finally hitting home. Lucas wrapped his arms around her, but she thrashed against him, unable and unwilling to be comforted. In the end, one of the doctors prescribed some kind of tranquilliser for her, Valium or Xanax, by this stage Maddie didn't care; she simply took what they gave her, praying it'd knock her out, praying she'd wake up and find this had all been a hideous nightmare, nothing but a bad dream.

But everything stayed savagely real. She and Lucas left the hospital without Noah, her arms horribly empty, travelling home together in silence in the back of a taxi. Mercifully, the driver didn't try to talk to them, depositing them outside their house with a sympathetic discretion that suggested he'd worked the hospital route before.

Maddie glanced up at the nursery window as they got out of the cab. It was still thrown open from where she must have flung it wide to shout down to Lucas for help. Was that really just six hours ago? Already, it seemed to belong to a different life.

The house was grimly quiet when they let themselves in. Emily and Jacob were at her mother's and the police had gone. It all

seemed so eerily normal. Dirty plates from last night still lay soaking in greasy water in the sink. Damp washing sat in a plastic laundry basket, waiting to go into the dryer. Sarah had put Noah's changing bag away out of sight, but his bottles were still lined up on the kitchen windowsill and his bouncer remained in its usual place in a safe, draught-free corner of the kitchen, his favourite blanket folded neatly across it ready for him.

Maddie snatched it up and buried her face in it.

Lucas touched her shoulder. 'Darling, don't. You'll just make it worse.'

She raised her head. 'How?' she said dully. 'How could it be *worse*?'

Shrugging him away, she drifted through the silent house, roaming from room to room, randomly picking things up and putting them down as if she'd never seen them before. Nothing seemed familiar. Lucas followed her, but didn't try to comfort her again.

'Don't,' he repeated, as she reached the foot of the stairs.

She ignored him, heading upstairs to Noah's nursery. 'You can turn this room back into your office, if you like,' she said over her shoulder as he followed her. 'I know how much you've hated having to share the downstairs study with me.'

'Maddie ...'

'Or we could make this into a spare room. It's a bit small, but you can fit a single bed in here and a dresser, once we get rid of Noah's changing table. And the rocking chair,' she added, her

voice suddenly bitter. 'I want that chair out of the house.'

She yanked open the little blue chest of drawers and grabbed a neat pile of Babygros and threw them on the floor and then opened a second drawer and started emptying that too.

Lucas shut the drawer. 'Leave this.'

'You can take the stair-gate down, now. Noah's never going to need it, and it makes getting up and down the stairs so awkward when your arms are full of clean washing.'

'You're in shock, Maddie. Please, come back downstairs.'

'The world doesn't just stop because Noah died. Things still need to get done. Someone has to sort them out.'

She wrenched the drawers open again and emptied their contents onto the floor. She didn't know if it was shock, like Lucas said, or the medication they'd given her, but she was completely, blessedly, numb. She had to get rid of Noah's clothes and toys, she had to erase every sign he'd ever existed, now, while she still could. She didn't know if she would survive the pain of walking into Noah's nursery, of seeing all his things still here, once that numbness wore off.

She crouched down and began to pull sheets and blankets and towels off the shelf beneath Noah's changing table, until Lucas knelt beside her and put his hands on hers.

'Maddie, *please*. You have to stop.'

Maddie stilled. 'I'm afraid to stop,' she whispered.

'I know.'

'If I stop, I might have time to think.'

‘I know,’ he said again.

‘How can he be gone, Lucas?’ she asked, bewildered. ‘How can this have happened?’

‘I thought we were safe now,’ Lucas said thickly. ‘I thought, we’ve had our share of grief and tragedy. That’s it now. I lost both my parents; you lost Benjamin. I thought at least that meant we were owed some good luck. At least it meant the children would be safe.’

She had no room for pity. She knew that when the drugs wore off, the pain would return. It was actual, physical, as if her chest had been sliced open and her heart smashed into a thousand pieces. Heartbroken was no longer a metaphor but a description.

‘How do we survive this?’ she whispered. ‘How do we even get up tomorrow morning?’

‘We get up tomorrow because we don’t have a choice. Emily and Jacob need us.’

She extricated herself from his arms and stood up stiffly. She couldn’t even begin to imagine how to tell their children that their brother had died. She rested her hands on the rail of Noah’s cot, staring at the mattress as if she could still see him there. ‘I was the one looking after him. I was the one who let him down. You weren’t even here.’

‘I should have been!’ Lucas shouted suddenly. ‘I should have been here!’

‘It wouldn’t have made any difference.’

‘How do you *know*?’

She looked at him. ‘Are you saying there’s something you could have done, that I didn’t?’

His shoulders sagged, the fight suddenly leaving him. ‘No,’ he said wretchedly. ‘No, of course not.’

‘We can’t keep doing this, Lucas. It’s going to tear us apart.’

Even as she said the words, she wondered if it was already too late. You were born alone and you died alone. And now she realised you grieved alone, too.

## Chapter 13

### Sunday 6.30 a.m.

Maddie opened her eyes, and for a few merciful moments, as she hovered between sleep and wakefulness, she'd forgotten. And then remembrance slammed into her like a freight train.

She hadn't known how savagely physical grief was. Losing Benjamin had been bad, but it was nothing compared to this. Her body felt brutalised. She curled herself into a tight ball, hugging her knees to her chest, and pressed her pillow over her ears as if she could use it to block out her thoughts. If she could just get back to sleep, maybe she'd wake up again in her own life, instead of a nightmare that belonged to somebody else.

Her breasts were burning. It was time for Noah's feed. Except Noah was dead.

She threw back the covers and ran into the bathroom, retching violently into the lavatory bowl. She hadn't eaten in thirty-six hours; she was bringing up nothing but bile. She couldn't block the image in her head of Noah lying cold and white and still in that hideous plastic crib. Try as she might, she couldn't summon an image of her son alive.

She rocked back on her bare heels and wiped her mouth with the back of her hand. The phone was ringing, but she ignored it. She couldn't imagine going to answer it. She couldn't imagine

leaving this bathroom at all.

The ringing stopped. She heard the muffled sound of Lucas's voice as he spoke to someone, and moments later, he appeared in the bathroom doorway. He'd pulled on a pair of jeans and a cotton sweater, but he looked haggard and unkempt and at least twenty years older than yesterday. She'd never seen him unshaven, she thought irrelevantly. She hadn't realised he was going so grey.

'That was the hospital on the phone,' he said.

She looked at him blankly.

He rubbed his hand over his stubble. 'They said if we want to take Emily and Jacob in, we need to go today.'

'What for?'

'To see Noah,' Lucas said bleakly. 'We talked about this yesterday, Maddie. The children need to see him, so they can say goodbye. It'll help them understand what's happened and that he isn't coming back.'

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