

HUSH

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For my parents

prologue

Lily built her memories around nothingness, like so much false smoke around an absence of fire. Tiny glimpses of the earth beneath; a faded photograph, the odd fingerprint here and there. A hairbrush, its few buttercup strands still clinging to the redundant bristles. A mirror, so dusty that she couldn't really see the face that was reflected. No great loss there; it wouldn't be the face she was expecting to see anyway.

It had been twenty years since she'd set foot in that house.

Floorboards, thick with dust, audibly protested her presence. There were dark patches where the rugs had once been. An empty bed-frame, curtainless windows. And yet, clothes still hung in the wardrobe. A shirt. Two dresses, too large ever to have been hers.

She heard Richard moving around downstairs, filling the place with noise, as he tended to do. Connie would be here soon. There would be things to do, conversations to be had. It would be better left to Richard, really. He was good at that sort of thing. But that wasn't fair. Not his family; not his responsibility.

She picked up the hairbrush and lifted one of the strands away. Others followed, tangled together, and then split apart, brittle with age. Dust clung to the broken threads and followed them to the floor.

She replaced the brush on the dresser, taking care to put it back exactly, so no dustless space was exposed.

Flickering faces. Daylight. And voices, which seemed to fade in and out of her hearing, some words unaccountably louder than others.

– *Well if you will let her do this to you but I didn't I'm telling you I didn't I just said I know what you said I heard you –*

Connie, eleven, wearing a pink vest, white shorts, ankle socks but no shoes. Laughing, hair flying in her face, or around her face. Movement. Maybe she was running.

No, she'd been shaking her head.

Or she'd spun around, too quickly, to share the joke.

But it couldn't be sharing. Not when Lily wasn't laughing.

– *But Mama I only asked her if she wanted to and then she and now it's all gone –*

Scent of lavender through open windows. Blood. Hers?

– *gone wrong well you know how she gets but I –*

Connie, taller than she should be. And her mother, crouching. On the floor. Shoelaces undone. Or tied together?

And her mother's voice.

We only get what we deserve.

'The wanderer returns.' Richard was smiling, holding out a cup of tea, and Lily was momentarily confused. Where did he get tea bags? Was there even water, or electricity? Then she remembered the camping stove, the provisions. All lined up on the counter now. Orderly, though they weren't staying.

'Hmm.' She took the tea, walked hesitantly towards the patio doors. The kitchen felt smaller, even with the absence of clutter. The stools, red plastic diner stools, had disappeared. So had the blinds. Maybe Connie had taken them. It would be the kind of thing she would do: assuming ownership of something that was shared.

'You okay?'

'Yeah.'

Richard walked around her to open the doors, and stepped outside. The expanse of the garden – the lawn, gently sloping into flowerbeds, then woodland, all overgrown

now, impenetrable. Lily followed him, her steps tentative. It was improbably bright, and still there was that feeling of abandonment. Except not quite.

Whispers of ghosts, gone as soon as they arrived.

It was she who had done the abandoning.

‘Not like the city, huh?’ Richard placed his mug on the wooden table, which was scarred, weatherbeaten, carpeted with moss. It wobbled when he put weight on it, but held.

‘I’d forgotten how quiet it is here.’ She stepped further down the patio, until her toes peeked over the edge, hovering above the lawn. She could remember leaping off, from land into the sea, full of crocodiles.

‘It’s nice. I could get used to it.’ His voice was reassuring, optimistic. Unfazed by her silence, or her hesitation. ‘Do you want to give me the tour, then?’

No.

‘Okay.’

The crunch of tyres on gravel, distant, but there nonetheless. Saving her from her insincerities.

Darkness, or sun obscured by trees. Spots of sunlight, or stars, or maybe lights from the house. Watch missing? Or intentionally left behind. Connie, always laughing, always ahead. Lily trails behind. Unnoticed. Or ignored.

– *but Mama she always ignores me it’s not fair you’ve just got to learn to live with it* –

No, the watch is there. Pink plastic reflects the time, but it’s gone. Numerals blurred, hands vanished. Digital or analogue? Flashing zeros, no time at all.

– *you see Lils there’s this secret place but you can’t tell Mama or I’ll never speak to you again but Mama said we shouldn’t come down here I know that’s why it’s a secret silly now shut up because I don’t want Billy to know you’re here* –

Definitely dark. The house had been asleep, floorboards creaking all the way down the stairs.

But then hadn't she been up there, watching? Twigs snapping underfoot. Carpet between bare toes. Which?

'You wouldn't believe how long it took us to get here!' Connie, letting herself in through the front door, weighed down with bags, which she left in a pile on the kitchen counter. She grabbed them both in awkward hugs. 'Oh, I'm glad you remembered to bring tea, I completely forgot.'

'Where are the kids?'

'Just getting out of the car. Luke! Tommy! Where have you got to?'

Within seconds they were underfoot. Lily crouched down to hug them, and stayed there, perched awkwardly, when they moved away. Richard made tea, while Connie bustled around him, unpacking her own provisions. 'Cake, anyone?'

'Cake! Cake!' the boys chorused. Eight and five. Same difference in age as her and Connie. Tom was the protective older brother, making sure Luke got his share, that he didn't drop it on the floor. They took after their father.

'Where's Nathan?'

'Oh, working, you know. He apologised. What are you doing still on the floor, Lils? Get up and give me another hug.'

The second hug was as awkward as the first. As soon as Connie backed away, Lily followed the boys, who had already retreated to the garden. They circled her eagerly, begging for stories, games, treats. She gave them her crocodiles, and watched as they jumped in and out of the water, screaming with pleasurable fear.

'How's she been?'

'Oh, not great. You know. I think... Well, you know how she gets.'

They didn't realise the window was open. Or didn't care. Their words floated out into the air, caught on a breeze, and dissipated into the sunlight.

She could hear them but not see them. Dark, very big. Black. Obscuring faces, hands, feet, fur.

Teeth. All manner of things.

Which came first, blood or screams?

No, not yet.

*– I'm not **sure** I like it out here I want to **go home** stop being such a baby we're going to the **secret place** but I can't see you I don't **like it** where's Mama **oh go on** then run home to Mama see **if I care** –*

She was there, warm hands, kind face, shhhhhh, all okay now.

Not yet.

No carpet now. Twigs, moonlight on skin. Eyes wide. Mouth open. Gape. Footsteps, two sets, tap, crunch, tap. Branches like fingers in hair. Cobwebs on face.

*– are you **sure this is the right** way of course I'm **sure I've been here a thousand** times but not in the dark it's different in the dark will you **just stop** whining –*

Monsters in the dark. But no, of course not monsters.

This is no fairytale.

'Lils. Hey. Lily.'

She spun around. Richard and Connie were standing behind her, twin expressions of concern on their faces.

'Hi. Sorry. Drifted off for a minute.'

'Yeah.' Connie's voice. 'This place does that to you.'

Does it do it to you?

'Mmm.'

The boys had gone further down the lawn, to the edge of the flowerbeds. She hadn't noticed them go. Tried not to think of what lurked beyond.

'We were thinking: we should probably start going through stuff now. Before it gets dark. I don't think this place has electricity any more, you know.'

'No. I don't suppose anyone's been paying the bills.'

'Well, Mama did for a while...'
Connie trailed off, awkward. 'Yeah, you're right, I suppose.'

'There's not much here.'

'Well, no. No one's lived here for ages. She was in care for over two years, at the end.'

'I thought there might have been stuff. That was left behind.' Lily found herself groping for words, and giving up. It was exhausting. Why did no one else seem to be having any trouble?

'I got rid of some of it,' Connie said, carefully. Watching her for a reaction, but Lily had already turned away, looking back towards the bottom of the garden. 'There's still a lot around, though. Maybe we should make a start?'

Lily's voice was small, petulant. 'Richard can do it.'

'No.' Gentle, but firm. 'It's got to be you.'

Lily looked at her face. Unrelenting.

'Right. Me, then.'

Blood. All obscured by. And dark, of course. But blood blacker than the dark.

- I thought you knew the way that's not the point just help me -

No screams now, all quiet. Except that she wouldn't stop crying.

Which one? Did she feel tears? Hadn't ever cried as a baby. Mother told everyone. *The quietest child...*

– he's too heavy not moving I –

And then Mother, crashing, fighting undergrowth. Twigs snap snap snap all over the place.

– What are you girls doing out here –

And silence.

Shhhhh, okay.

We only get what we deserve.

It didn't take long, in the end. They found the important paperwork in one of the kitchen drawers. Made a half-hearted attempt at clearing away some of the residue of their mother's life, but Lily's mind was on other things and Connie didn't want to force her.

Lily didn't go back upstairs. Didn't need to feel the absence of carpet on bare toes. Knew what she'd see if she looked out of the window.

They locked the door behind them, and Connie pocketed the key.