

THE STOLEN CHILD

Sanjida Kay



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To Jasmine

*Come away, O human child!
To the waters and the wild
With a faery, hand in hand,
For the world's more full of weeping
than you can understand.*

'The Stolen Child', WB Yeats

LONDON

MAY

She's coming! She's going to be early! I half knew it, felt it in my bones. Thank goodness Ollie believed me and helped me get the nursery ready. We have all the essentials: a cot, a buggy, a pile of nappies, Sudocrem, an adorable rabbit with Liberty-print ears. Babygros. A moses basket. Blankets. Bottles. A mobile that sings and cascades coloured lights across the ceiling.

'Zoe! The taxi's here!' Ollie shouts.

He's standing looking out of the window of our first-floor flat. He has his coat on already and is holding mine for me.

As he carefully slides my jacket over my out-stretched arms, I say, 'I haven't finished the mural!'

The mural is my way of trying to keep calm during the pregnancy and I wanted it to be finished and perfect before she arrived. It's on the nursery wall and it's of Ilkley moor, where I grew up: the Cow and Calf rocks at sunrise, a friendly giant called Rombald striding through the purple heather. Ollie kisses my cheek.

'It looks wonderful. She'll love it just as it is. And you'll have time to finish it when she's here.'

We already know we're having a girl.

'I won't!' I say, my voice rising in pitch. 'Babies never sleep. They're up all night. I'll be too tired to paint!'

'Newborns sleep all the time. Especially bottle-fed ones,' says Ollie, steering me towards the door, his arm around my waist.

He's the youngest child in his family and I have no siblings, so

what do we know? But Ollie has read the most enormous stack of books about babies so maybe he's right. I tried, but it made me even more stressed. What if she gets colic, roseola? Has a febrile seizure?

'The bag!'

'I've got it,' he says. He packed it weeks ago, just in case.

'What about—?'

'I've put your handbag in and I've got money and my phone. I'll grab the car seat. We don't need anything else.'

He smiles gently at me. The seat is already by the door. Ollie said we should bring it just in case we can take our baby home straight away. Ollie researched the best one to buy online. He joined forums on Mumsnet and the Baby Centre and took out a subscription to *Which?* I found one in a charity shop, but he was horrified and made me take it back. Apparently it's not safe to buy second-hand baby car seats.

'I can manage,' he says, carrying everything. 'Careful on the stairs.'

He's noticed the tears blurring my vision. In the car he holds my hand. He tells the driver we need to get to hospital as fast as possible. The man looks at me in the rear-view mirror and then at the baby seat. He looks puzzled for a moment, and then he smiles.

'Hold on to your hats, ladies and gentlemen,' he says. He's wearing a turban.

We drive past a kebab shop, a Polish grocer, a newsagent with red peppers and oranges stacked in Tupperware bowls outside, and then he veers abruptly down a side street, hurling us over the speed bumps. Red-brick blocks of flats merge into white and brown Victorian semis with palm trees and mock orange trees in the gardens and we shoot onto Chatsworth Road opposite a storefront full of succulents and Kilner jars and a Spanish deli with jamon in the window. Just before the traffic lights, past a pizza restaurant

that looks like an upmarket pub, the driver takes a sharp right. The baby seat tilts forwards. I glance in the window of a toy shop with a pink wooden castle, all fairy-tale turrets and gold flags, on display.

I've lost my bearings.

'Almost there,' says Ollie, squeezing my arm.

The young woman at the hospital says, 'It's going to be an emergency caesarean.' She leans forward. 'The baby is at risk if we don't operate.'

'She's premature,' I say. 'Four weeks. It's too early—'

'They'll take good care of her. She'll be put straight into an incubator.' She takes my hand in both of hers. I try and recall her name. Sarah. That's it. I should have remembered.

She says softly, 'We did warn you this was likely to happen, Zoe.'

I nod and gulp back hot tears. Ollie passes me a tissue. I blow my nose. I don't want my baby to be cut out. Surgically removed as if she were a tumour. Put into a box. I want to hold her in my arms, still slick with blood and mucus.

'We're prepared,' he says, and takes my hand, lacing his fingers through mine.

The wait is interminable. The smell of boiled eggs and slightly burnt mince drifts down the corridor from the cafeteria. It makes me feel even more nauseous. I grip Ollie's hand so hard my nails cut his palm. He winces and gently removes it from my grasp. He puts his arm round me instead.

'It's going to be okay,' he says, whispering into my hair.

I squeeze my eyes shut and push away the pain of those years of longing and miscarriages; forget the blood, 'Scissor Sisters' playing

on the radio as the surgeon bends over me, tears running into my ears. That's all in the past. It's finally happening. This is what we've always wanted. We've been together for eight years, since we were nineteen and, now, we're going to have a baby at last. We're going to be a family.

I can't stop myself. 'What if. . .' I say.

We've been over this endlessly, with each other, with officials and doctors. We've been told all the risks. It's been brutally spelled out to us. She's so premature she might die. She could be brain damaged. They told us to wait before we gave her a name. They said if we named her, it would make it harder. But we ignored them. We're going to call her Evelyn Catherine Morley. Catherine after my mother; Evie for short.

I remove Ollie's arm so I can look at him properly. He has blue eyes and dirty-blond hair that flops over his forehead. Mine would be the same colour but I've been dying it since I was at university. 'Natural blonde' it says on the packet. I've just done my roots because I know, once Evie is here, I won't have time. Ollie's expression is kind. He's listened to me and reassured me patiently for months.

'Don't worry,' he says again. 'It will be all right.'

How does he know? It was far from all right in the past. The room we're in is painted white with grey linoleum and terrible pastel-coloured paintings on the wall. I imagine telling my daughter about those paintings one day, when she's old enough to understand how we waited for her to be born with such love and hope: *Stippled, like the French Impressionists, I'll say, but fake, modern, vacant. Do you know what I mean? When you're waiting for someone as important as your baby to be born, you want everything to mean something.* And she'll open her eyes wide and say, *Did you know, Mummy, some artists even use scribbling as a technique?*

'I love you,' Ollie says.

'I love you too.'

‘It’s going to be okay.’ He kisses me on the forehead. ‘We’re going to take our daughter home very soon.’

I can’t believe how tiny she is. Her entire body could fit in one of Ollie’s hands. We press our faces against the incubator.

Ollie has tears in his eyes. ‘Evie Cathy Morley,’ he says. ‘Our daughter.’ He hugs me tightly. ‘We did it,’ he whispers.

We aren’t allowed to touch her yet. She’s encircled by tubes. There are flashing lights and beeping monitors next to her trolley. She’s wearing a cream cap to keep her head warm. It would fit a doll. She’s turned away from us, so I can’t see her face. Her body is emaciated, arms and legs like sticks, ribs winging out with each strenuous breath. She’s covered in downy hair. I walk round to the other side so I can look at her properly. I feel a hot flare in my chest: fear or love. I can’t tell.

I bend down so I’m level with her and peer in. It’s so hot in here, I can barely breathe. A shock of black hair juts out from beneath her hat. There’s something odd about her features. Something is not quite right. I struggle to inhale. Something is wrong. Seriously wrong. Evie opens her eyes for the first time since we saw her. They’re large and unfocused, enormous in her minute face. They’re too far apart and a colour I can barely describe. But they’re definitely not blue. Her skin is pale brown. She doesn’t look like our child. She doesn’t look like a baby at all. Not a human one. Sarah puts her hand on my shoulder. I’m hyperventilating.

‘She may have Foetal Alcohol Syndrome,’ she tells me. Sarah has been our case worker throughout the pregnancy. ‘It’s normal in a situation like this. We’ll run tests later, when she’s stable. Right now,’ she says, ‘Evie is being treated for drug addiction.’

Ollie is openly weeping. We knew it was likely, but we still hoped she'd be okay. He reaches for me, tries to pull me closer.

'Is she going to make it?' he asks.

Sarah hesitates. 'We don't know yet. But the team here will do everything they can to save her. To cure her. It's why we chose this hospital,' she reminds us. 'They specialize in treating the babies of drug addicts.'

I stand up abruptly. I need some air. I have to get out of here. I'm shaking with rage.

I could kill Evie's mother.