

ONE YEAR LATER

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ONE YEAR AGO, SOMERSET

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NICK

As far as I know, it happened like this. To my shame, I wasn't there when it mattered.

Of course you weren't! Bethany would interject, if she were here now. *You're always bloody late!*

They'd all travelled down on the Friday and I could have got a lift, but I was working. I planned to go that Saturday morning but, thanks to my catastrophic timekeeping, I missed my train. The next one left an hour later and stopped at every hole in the wall and that, I guess, is why I wasn't there when it counted. Still, at the time, I was pretty pleased with myself, because I'd found this toy unicorn with purple fur, massive sparkly blue eyes and a rainbow horn that I knew Ruby-May would love. I still have it. I suppose I should give it away, but I don't like to think of another child playing with it.

It was 15 August, the day before Ruby-May's third birthday, and everyone had gathered at Dad's. The Pines is a rambling farmhouse that our parents, David and Eleanor, converted years ago, and although it no longer has the land it came with, it still has a huge garden. It sits on the lower slopes of the Mendips in Somerset, the woods behind, green fields gently falling away in front of it. On a good day – and 15 August, with its clear blue skies, was one of those days – you can see over the tops of the seaside towns of Clevedon and Weston-super-Mare and all the way across the Severn estuary to Wales. It's where we grew up, Amy, Bethany and I.

That afternoon, Amy, my eldest sister, and her husband, Matt,

drove to Clarks Village in Street. The Clarks factory, where they make their famous, sensible shoes, is there, as well as an outlet mall. They took their oldest two children with them, Theo and Lotte, so they could buy them a cheap pair each, ready for the new school term at the start of September. Amy wanted to pick up some extra things for the party too – she'd made the birthday cake and she had some sliced white for the children's sandwiches, but she thought she'd get a quiche, posh crackers and cheese, and sparkling soft drinks made out of insane combinations of fruit and flowers, which no one in their right mind should buy. At least that's what I imagine she wanted. I can't believe she would have given Ruby-May a bought cake back then, even though afterwards she couldn't manage to heat up a ready-meal. Or eat. They left Ruby-May behind. The toddler would have caused chaos in the shop, and as she was only going to nursery in the autumn, she didn't need new shoes.

Our middle sister, Bethany, had offered to look after Ruby-May. Bethany's good with children. She's a TV presenter, so you can imagine that her over-the-top energy, disregard for rules and ability to perform on demand goes down well with small people. So that afternoon, as I was inching across the countryside, Brean Down a gleaming Arthurian mound in the distance, *Blade Runner: The Director's Cut* playing on my iPhone, Amy, Matt, Lotte and Theo were in Street looking at shoes, and Bethany, Ruby-May and Dad were at The Pines. Dad is in his seventies now and is not as sprightly as he was. He spent most of the afternoon dozing on a wooden sun-lounger in the herb garden at the front of the house: it's a real suntrap.

I should mention at this point that they weren't the only people at The Pines. Matt's teenage daughter, Chloe, from his previous marriage, was sunbathing next to Dad. After a while, she grew bored and went indoors – to do her homework, she said, but she was probably attempting to hook up with her friends over the lousy

Internet connection. I found her half-empty glass of lemonade later, abandoned by the garden table, with a striped straw and a drowned wasp in it.

The only other person who was there that day was also inside. Luca – Amy and Matt’s ad-hoc childminder. The master’s degree he’s studying for is in child psychology, although I’m not sure how relevant that is, but his ability to relate to kids is probably why Ruby-May loved him so much. Matt has to leave the house by 7.30 a.m., and Amy has a part-time job as a charity fundraiser, so for three days a week Luca took Lotte and Theo to and from school, and looked after Ruby-May during the day. I guess he’d have taken her to nursery that September, if things had turned out differently.

I learned all of this later. At the time I wouldn’t have known the minutiae of their daily lives and I’d never met Luca. I usually just turned up with sweets and caused chaos. That’s what uncles do, right? Anyway, Luca was there to celebrate Ruby-May’s birthday and maybe have a break from Bristol and enjoy the countryside. That morning he’d got up early and gone for a run.

At least, that’s what the police told me.

Luca is tall and rangy, and I imagine him loping through the dawn-stretched shadows across the dew-soaked fields. He said he spent the rest of the day in his room, studying.

I say *his* room, although it was actually Eleanor’s, our mother’s. She used to paint there because it has the best light in the afternoons – it’s at the front of the house, but at the far corner. You can see part of the herb garden from one of the windows, and glimpse the lines of thyme that she sowed in the cracks between the paving stones. Now it’s the spare room: Dad painted it white, even the floorboards, and a rug covers the worst oil-paint stains. When the sun warms the wood, I can still smell the linseed.

I don’t go in there much.

I’m procrastinating.

So, as I was saying, Bethany was playing with Ruby-May. They would have gone outside. Bethany doesn't like being cooped up or staying still. And it is an amazing garden if you're a small child and you're fearless, or haven't yet learned to be fearful. Bethany would have been tearing around the place: hide-and-seek in the orchard, singing and swinging Ruby-May on the rope strung from the large tree in the corner, racing across the lawn, mooing at the cows in the field at the end. She doesn't have the patience for imaginary games, so they probably avoided the wooden Wendy house with its teaset laid out ready for a pretend birthday party; and I can't believe she'd have gone near the ruins of the old cottage, after what happened there when we were kids. She also avoided the pond.

The pond is large, for a garden. In summer, when the water level dips, it still comes up to my waist. Our mother designed it: that August, the flags had finished flowering, but there were water lilies and dragonflies patrolling its borders. Eleanor used to sit on the sloping bank on a mossy bench and paint it. Once we were born, she refused to have it filled in, although Dad said a child can drown in just two inches of water. Maybe even then he didn't quite trust our mother's maternal instincts.

Dad had the local builder put up a low fence around the pond: it's high enough to deter a small child, and he installed a gate with a Yale lock on it. You need a key to open it. Eleanor hated it and stopped painting the water lilies. *No loss to the art world*, I thought, when I was younger. *It's not like she's bloody Monet*. But I know now that some artists still hold it against my father. It was all part of the story they told about him: how he tried to lock Eleanor up, hedge her in. Control her. *Make her look after her own children*.

That afternoon Bethany saw she had several missed calls. The phone signal is terrible at The Pines. Because she works in TV, there's no such thing as a weekend. The producers, the researchers, her agent all call her any time of the day or night. I thought it was

an affectation back then. Bethany was working on a high-profile TV programme called *The Show*. Very meta. It was prime time, BBC1, but a new co-presenter had just been brought in, who was younger, bouncier, bubblier and mixed-race with a Scottish accent – the BBC was trying to up its diversity quota. Tiffany McKenzie. I thought Bethany was being an insufferable diva and didn't want to share the spotlight; I didn't realize what she was going through.

Sometimes, in the early mornings, it's as if there's a film projected against my eyelids: Ruby-May is a blonde blur, streaking through the orchard, her long hair stretched out behind her; the grass is preternaturally green, sun sparks off the red Katy apples and a cloud of rooks is flung across the sky.

Bethany woke our father and deposited Ruby-May on his lap. She told him to look after his granddaughter for half an hour while she went inside and made some calls on the landline.

It was more like an hour by the time she'd finished talking to her agent, the director of the shoot, the producer, the executive producer and then her agent again, to complain about what the director, the producer and the executive producer had said, and no doubt she also had to coordinate with her personal make-up artist, because *The Show* had axed hair and make-up during the latest round of cost-cutting.

The garden was unusually quiet when she went back out, blinking at the harshness of the sun after being cosseted by the dim light filtering through the mullioned windows into our dining room. She walked round the house to the herb garden and saw that Dad was still there, slumped in the sun-lounger, fast asleep.

There was no sign of Ruby-May.