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Written by M. J. Arlidge

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The Doll's House

M. J. ARLIDGE



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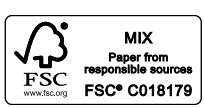
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The Doll's House

I

Ruby tossed fitfully in her bed after a disturbed night's sleep. She seemed to have been in and out of consciousness for hours – not fully awake, but not truly asleep either. Wild anxiety dreams collided uneasily with the odd sensation of her mother carrying her to bed. That had felt nice but was impossible of course. Ruby lived alone and it had been fifteen years or more since her parents had had to do that.

Ruby regretted her session at Revolution last night. Angry with life, she had been in self-destructive mood, unable or unwilling to turn down the free drinks offered by hopeful lads. There had been pills and cocaine too – the whole thing had been a blur. But had she really drunk so much, taken so much, that she should feel *this* bad?

She turned over again, burying her throbbing head in the sheets. She had important stuff to do today – her mum was coming round soon – but suddenly Ruby couldn't face any of it. She just wanted to hide away from the world, cocooned in her hangover, safe from the intrusion of family, responsibility, betrayal and tears. She wanted her life to go away – for a couple of hours at least.

Putting her head under the pillow, she groaned quietly. It was surprisingly cool underneath – cooler than usual – and for a moment she felt refreshed and soothed. This would be a good hidey-hole for a litt—

Something wasn't right. The smell. What was it about the smell of the sheets? They smelt . . . wrong.

Alarm started to burrow through her hangover. Her sheets always smelt citrusy. She used the same fabric softener her mum did. So why did they now smell of lavender?

Ruby kept her eyes closed, the pillow clamped over her head. Her brain ached fiercely as it spooled back over last night's events. She had snogged a guy, flirted with a few more . . . but she hadn't gone home with anyone, had she? No, she had made it back to her flat alone. She remembered dropping her keys on the table, drinking water straight from the kitchen tap, taking some Nurofen before flopping into bed. That *was* last night, wasn't it?

She could feel her breathing becoming shallow now, her chest tightening. She needed her asthma inhaler. Stretching out her arm, she groped for the bedside table – drunk or not, she always left her inhaler within easy reach. But it wasn't there. She reached out further. Nothing. The *table* wasn't bloody there. Her hand collided with the wall. Rough brick. Her wall wasn't like th—

Ruby pulled off the pillow and sat up. Her mouth fell open, but only a weak gasp came out – her body frozen in breathless panic. She had gone to sleep in her nice, cosy bed. But had woken up in a cold, dark cellar.

2

The sun was high in the sky and Carsholt beach looked magnificent, a long swathe of golden sand merging effortlessly with the gentle waters of the Solent. Andy Baker patted himself on the back – Carsholt was literally at the end of the road, so even though the beach was beautiful, there was hardly ever anybody down here. Cathy, him and the kids had the place to themselves and were set fair for a perfect Saturday by the sea. Picnic, bit of frisbee, a few beers – already the stresses of the working week were melting away.

Leaving the boys to dig their trench – a prelude to pitched battles between his boisterous twins – Andy set off by himself towards the water's edge. What was it that was so calming about this place? The isolation? The view? The sound of the sea lapping the shore? Andy let the water run over his toes. He had been coming here since he was a kid. He'd brought his wife – his first wife – and the boys here. That hadn't ended well of course, but looking over towards Cathy, digging and joking with Tom and Jimbo, Andy now felt blessed.

This place was his sanctuary and he looked forward to it all week. Running a security business sounded

good on paper, but it was non-stop aggro. You used to be able to get decent people on your books, but not now. Maybe it was the influx of foreigners or just modern times, but every third employee seemed to have a drugs problem or an eye for the girls. Last month, he'd been sued by a nightclub owner who'd caught one of his guys dealing ketamine in the club toilets. He was getting too old for stuff like that – perhaps it was time to think about retiring.

A noise made Andy look up sharply. It came from behind him. From the direction of the boys. They were shouting. No, they were screaming.

Already Andy was sprinting across the sand, his heart beating sixteen to the dozen. Was someone hurting them? He could see Cathy, but where were the boys?

'Cathy?'

She didn't even look at him.

'CATHY?'

Finally, she looked up. Her face was ashen. She tried to speak, but before she could say anything the boys crashed into her, holding on to her for dear life.

Andy stared at them, confused and fearful. As Cathy clasped the boys to her chest, her gaze remained resolutely fixed on the trench. Was it something in there that had spooked them? A dead animal or . . .

Andy approached the lip of the trench. He had a sense of what he would find. Could see it in his mind's eye. But even so, his heart skipped a beat when he peered

into the hole. The sides were steep, the trench was deep – three feet or so – and there at the bottom, perfectly framed by wet sand, was the pale face of a young woman.

3

Snow blindness studded her vision and her chest tightened still further. Ruby was in the midst of a full-blown asthma attack now, her panic making her breathing short and erratic. She could feel her heart thundering out a remorseless rhythm, as if it were going to explode. What the hell was happening? Was this *real*?

She sank her teeth into her arm. The pain coursed through her fleetingly, before she released her grip to try and suck in more air. It *was* real. She should have known by how bloody freezing she was. Shivering, she lay down on the bed and tried to calm herself. The thought of not having her inhaler was freaking her out, but she had to try and control her panic or she would black out. And she couldn't do that. Not here.

Calm. Try to be calm. Think nice thoughts. Think of Mum. And Dad. And Cassie. And Conor. Think of fields. And rivers. And sunlight. Think of being a kid. And playgrounds. And summers in the garden. Running through the sprinkler. Think happy, happy thoughts.

Ruby's chest was rising and falling less violently now, her breathing a little less desperate. Keep your cool. It will be fine. There will be a simple explanation for all

this. Propping herself up on her pillows, she took a deep breath and suddenly called:

'Hello?'

Her voice sounded strange, her words flopping dully off the exposed brick walls. The room was in darkness, save for the light that stole under the bottom of the door, providing just enough illumination to reveal her situation. The room measured about fifteen by fifteen and would have looked like any other bedsit – a bed, a table and chairs, an oven and kettle, some bookshelves – except for the fact that there were no windows. The floorboards that formed the low ceiling above were wooden but oddly betrayed no cracks or chinks of light.

'Hello?' Her voice quivered, as she fought to suppress the panic that gripped her. Still no answer, no signs of life.

Suddenly she was on her feet – anything not to be sat still thinking horrible thoughts. She crossed the room, working the handle of the heavy metal door, but it was locked. Frantically she did a circuit of the small room, looking for some means of escape, but found nothing.

She shivered. She was scared half to death and cold to the bone. Her eyes alighted on the cooker. It was an old gas one, with two ovens and four hobs. She was suddenly seized with the thought of turning it on. The four hobs would warm the place up and brighten it a little too. She turned the dial and pressed the ignition. Nothing. Ruby tried the next, then the next. Still nothing.

She walked round the cooker to check out the back. She didn't know the first thing about cookers, but perhaps there was something obvious?

It wasn't connected. There were no pipes at the back connecting it to a gas supply. It was just for show. Ruby slumped to the ground. Tears came fast now, as her confusion collided with fear.

What was this place? Why was she here? Questions spun round Ruby's head, as she tried to process this strange reality. She was slipping fast into despair, tears rolling off her chin on to the floor.

Then suddenly a noise nearby made her look up.

What was it? Was it upstairs or down here?

There it was again. Footsteps. Definitely footsteps. They were coming closer. Stopping outside the door. Ruby jumped to her feet, alive to the danger.

Silence. Then suddenly a wicket hatch in the door slid open and a pair of eyes filled the slit. Ruby stumbled backwards, pressing herself into the corner of the room – she wanted to be as far away from the door as possible.

The sound of bolts being unlocked.

'HELP!' Ruby screamed.

But she didn't get any further. The door swung open, flooding the room with light. Ruby clamped her eyes shut, blinded by the sudden burst of illumination. Then slowly, cautiously, she opened them again.

A tall figure stood in the doorway. Silhouetted by the

light behind him, she couldn't make out his features. He was just a shadow – hovering, watching.

Then as suddenly as it had opened, the heavy door slammed shut again. They were together in darkness now.

Ruby covered her face with her hands and prayed to a God she didn't believe in, pleading with him to have mercy on her. But for all her praying, she couldn't block out the sound of the footsteps approaching her.

4

The wind buffeted DI Helen Grace as she sped along the coastal road. She hadn't been down this isolated spit of land before and she liked what she saw. The wildness, the isolation – it was her kind of place. With the road open before her, she ratcheted up her speed, pushing hard against the strong headwind.

Soon the crime scene came into view and she eased off on the throttle, bringing her Kawasaki's progress down to a respectable 30 mph. DS Lloyd Fortune was waiting for her by the fluttering police tape. Young, smart, the poster boy for ethnic-minority policing in Southampton, Lloyd was destined for great things. Helen had always liked and respected him, yet still it felt odd having him as her number two. Charlie had been temporarily promoted to DS during their pursuit of Ella Matthews, but her elevation had never been made permanent. And as soon as Charlie had announced her pregnancy, it became academic – she would remain at her former rank of DC for the foreseeable future. It wasn't fair, but that was the way it worked, the odds forever stacked against working mums.

The old team was breaking up. Tony Bridges had left

the Force for good, DC Grounds was due to retire shortly and Charlie was on maternity leave, a few weeks shy of giving birth. Lloyd was the new DS, they had two new DCs – the Major Incident Team had a very different feel now. If she was honest, it made Helen uncomfortable. She hadn't got a handle on the new personalities, was yet to establish an easy rhythm with the freshly assembled team. But the only way to do that was to go through fire together.

'What have you got for me, Lloyd?'

They were already making their way under the police cordon and across the sand towards the trench.

'Young female. Buried about three feet down. Found by a couple of kids an hour or so ago. They're over there with their parents.'

Lloyd indicated the family of four, huddled in police blankets, giving their statements to a uniformed officer.

'Any connection to the victim?'

'No, they come here most weekends. Usually have the place to themselves.'

'Anybody live near here?'

'No. The nearest houses are three miles away.'

'Does it pick up anything from the lighthouse at night?'

'It's too far round.'

'Making this a pretty good deposition site.'

They walked in silence to the lip of the trench. Meredith Walker, Southampton Central's Chief Forensics Officer,

was at the bottom, carefully excavating the body. Helen took in the scene, the white-suited Forensics Officer crouching sinisterly over a woman who looked completely at peace, despite the wet sand that stuck to her hair, eyes and lips.

The woman's face, shoulders, upper torso and arms had been revealed. Her limbs were painfully thin and the skin very pale, which made her single tattoo stand out even more. Despite the partial decomposition, she was a strangely beautiful sight, her black hair still framing those vivid blue eyes. It reminded Helen of the Grimms' fairy tales, of gothic damsels awaiting love's true kiss.

'How long has she been down there?' Helen asked.

'Hard to say,' replied Meredith. 'The sand at this depth is cold and wet – ideal conditions to preserve the body. There are no animals or insects to get to her here either. But it's not recent. Given the levels of decomposition, I would say two, three years – Jim Grieves will be able tell you more once he gets her back to the mortuary.'

'I'll need the Crime Scene Photos tonight if possible,' Helen replied.

'Will do. Though I'm not sure how much help they'll be. Whoever did this has been careful. Her earrings and nose studs have been removed. The fingernails have been cut. And you can guess what time and tide have done to any residual forensic evidence.'

Helen thanked Meredith and walked down to the

water's edge to get a better view of the scene. Already her nerves were jangling. This was a careful, premeditated disposal by someone who knew exactly what they were doing. This wasn't the work of an amateur. Which strongly suggested to Helen that their killer had done this before.