

The Playroom

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Chapter 1

Extract

WEST YORKSHIRE
1997

ONE

The yellow school bus dropped Sophie Kenyon at the bottom of The Grove, as usual. But instead of going straight home she walked slowly past the entrance to her street and took Wells Road up towards the moor, holding her satchel by its straps at arm's length, so that it was almost dragging along the ground beside her. She kept her eyes down and as she got higher up the hill she began to cry.

A middle-aged woman with a wide hat and a brown Spaniel on a leash passed her without looking. The dog paused momentarily to sniff her leg, but Sophie didn't notice it. She was too lost in herself.

For the same reason she didn't see the van coming up behind her, from The Grove. When it was close, however, she heard the engine slowing and she looked up. A man was leaning through the open window of the driver's door, speaking to her. Through the tears she couldn't see his face well, but he was asking her if she was OK. Though his voice sounded kind and concerned, she didn't know him, so she turned away without answering and walked on, hurrying a little. It was only as she opened the gate onto the moor that something clicked in her memory and she realized she had seen the van before.

She stopped, turned round and looked back down the road, drying her eyes so that she could see properly. The van had gone.

She looked around her. She was on the edge of Ilkley, about to step onto the moor. The area was wealthy, full of large, detached houses built at the turn of the century. Below and to both sides were high walls enclosing large gardens backing onto the moor. Some of the houses belonged to school friends or people her father knew. The whole area was familiar to her, safe. She looked back up towards the high horizon, jagged with pine trees. It was a bright summer day, too warm for either a coat or a jumper, 23 June 1997, her birthday and the

start of her teenage years. Something she should have been celebrating.

She stepped onto the dirt track up to 'the tarn', as it was known locally. The mud under her shiny, black school shoes was baked solid by a week of high temperatures and no rain. She was wearing her navy school tunic, short white socks and a loose white shirt, open at the neck – she had removed her tie that afternoon during art class. She still had smudges of paint on her hands and fingers.

As she walked she remembered she had seen the van as she was getting off the bus last week. She had noticed because she had seen it two nights in a row, turning onto Eaton Road after her. It was a white van with a faded blue stripe along the side, as if it had once been a police van, but the stripe had been painted over. The realization triggered a tiny trace of confusion, somewhere in the back of her mind, but not enough to make her change her plans.

When she reached 'the tarn' she saw with dull pleasure that she had it to herself. She could see no one else in any direction. Being alone was what she preferred these days. She sat down on a bench.

She had been coming here nearly all her life, first with her mother, then with her nanny, then by herself. The place was a duck pond, surrounded by small trees and bushes, hidden from view by the folds of the moor. She liked many things about it – particularly the memories it brought: her mum standing at the water's edge and throwing scraps of bread onto the water; the feel of her mum's long fingers interlaced through her own; the scramble of the ducks all rushing to get the same piece of bread. She could see it all happening now as if her mum had never been taken from her. It brought a lump to her throat. She tried to ignore it and concentrate on other details. There were other reasons she liked being here. She liked sitting in silence beside the water watching the birds, dreaming she was somewhere else.

The lump got the better of her and she started to cry again. Everything about the day was miserable. They were organizing a party for her back at the house. She knew they would be wondering where she was. It was meant to be a surprise party, but she knew all about it because she had overheard them planning it one night in their bed. That wasn't all she heard from their bed. There were louder, stranger noises too, things Trisha Merrington had told her about in science classes.

She hated her father's new wife, more than she had ever hated anything in her life. The woman was too young, too stupid, too pretty. She didn't even speak English properly. She knew why he was with her, knew what was going on and thought it was pathetic. Because of her, because he was with her and because he was continually taking her side, she was beginning to hate her dad as well.

She felt sick thinking about what she would have to go back to. There would be bunting and balloons, party games, musical chairs and ducking apples – as if she were eight years old. To make things worse they had secretly invited all her friends. The whole thing would be embarrassing, juvenile. She looked at her watch. Ten to five. They would be beginning to worry about her already. She stood up with a sigh.

He was standing right in front of her. She hadn't noticed him approach because she had been too lost in her own thoughts.

'Sophie?' he asked.

She recognized the voice at once. He was the driver of the van.

'I work for your dad.'

She frowned. 'What do you mean?' He was standing too close to her, boxing her in. She looked quickly to either side. The paths were deserted still. 'My dad doesn't have anybody working for him,' she said. She was about to add, '*He's a judge,*' but quickly thought better of it. What if this man was someone her father had sent to prison, someone dangerous?

'I look after him,' the man said. 'I actually work for the police.'

She looked up at him, relaxing a little, but still worried. 'Look after him?'

'I work with something called Special Branch. Your dad has to deal with a lot of evil people at work. You must know that already. I watch over him. It's my job to protect him from them.'

She frowned again. Her father had never mentioned this. She took a step back. 'What do you want? Have you got ID?'

He stepped forwards, towards her, at the same time digging in his pocket and flashing a pass at her, a laminated piece of card with his photograph on it. She had time to register the face – his – and the West Yorkshire Police logo, then it was gone. She noticed he was wearing a dark grey suit. 'Something bad has happened,' he said. 'Your dad is in Bradford, in a safe place. You can't go back to your house. I've been sent to bring you out to him.'

Her heart began to beat faster. 'What has happened?'

He smiled at her. 'We are in a hurry, Sophie,' he said. 'Follow me back to the van and I'll tell you on the way.' He began to walk away from her.

She followed, feeling suddenly panicky, frightened. 'What has happened?'

'Nothing to worry about.' He was two steps ahead of her, walking swiftly. 'We just can't go back to your house. Not right now.'

'Why?'

'Some men are there. They are trying to kill your dad.'

She gasped in shock, stopping.

He stopped as well and leaned towards her, putting an arm around her shoulder. 'I shouldn't have told you,' he said. His voice was gentle. 'What you need to know is that your father is safe and we are dealing with it. I'll take you to him and you can have the party later, when all this is over.'

She looked down at his hand, where it was resting against her upper arm. The nails on his fingers were bitten back, cracked, the tips of the fingers stained yellow. She felt a ripple of disgust run through her.

'Let's go,' he said, still holding onto her.

She had to walk quickly to keep up with him. The way he had his arm around her meant she would actually fall over if she didn't hurry. She tried to control the panic she was feeling about her dad until they got back to Wells Road. Once there she saw the van parked up by the gate to the moor.

He stepped over to the passenger door, taking his arm from her, then paused.

'Best if you travel in the back,' he said. 'We don't want them spotting you.'

She nodded and followed him to the back of the van. As he was opening the doors, she said, her voice trembling, 'Are you sure my daddy is OK?'

He opened the door and smiled at her. He had a nice smile, reassuring. 'He's safe,' he said, pointing into the van, indicating that she should step in. She saw that the back of it was empty except for a mattress lying on the floor. It looked dirty. There were no windows. 'And you will be too,' he said to her. 'Once we get you out of here.'

The mattress puzzled her and she hesitated. But only for a second.

She climbed inside, then turned round to look at him, but already the door was slamming shut.