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The Stolen Child

Written by Sanjida Kay

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THE STOLEN CHILD

Sanjida Kay



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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 outstretched 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 BabyCentre 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 I was nineteen and Ollie was twenty, 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-blonde 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.

SEVEN YEARS LATER

ILKLEY

AUGUST, SATURDAY

Ben's helping and I can feel my stress levels rise. He's managed to smear icing from his wrists to his elbows and his chocolate grin is as wide as the Joker's. I glance at the kitchen clock. In forty-two minutes the first guests will arrive. We're still icing Ben's birthday cake. I'm trying to get the buttercream to stick to the sponge and not my knife without ripping off the surface; Ben is sucking the beater. I haven't changed out of my jeans that sag at the knees and Dad's old shirt yet and there are still balloons to be blown up, party bags to be filled, cocktail sausages and cheese-and-pineapple sticks to be skewered. I sprinkle sugar stars randomly over the top of the cake and plonk two candles in the middle. Ben looks happy.

It's a far cry from Evie's second birthday. By then she was already talking in full sentences, demanding a princess cake. Ollie ordered one from Bettys. It cost a fortune and it was beautiful – pale pink icing fell like folds of fabric, a tiny sugar princess rising from the midst of her Victoria sponge ballgown. The cake was so sweet it set your teeth on edge. I look up, hoping to see Evie. The kitchen is at one end of the house. When we moved in, Ollie had the partition wall knocked down and now the whole downstairs space is open. Light floods through from Rombald's Moor behind us and the hills on the far side of the valley. I'd hoped she'd help – enjoying her role as a big sister; cutting the crusts off cheese sandwiches and wrapping up the yo-yo and the bubbles for pass-the-parcel – but she's nowhere to be seen.

'Evie! Evie?' I shout.

She loves making cakes. And it's not like her to miss out on the chance of licking the bowl. There's no sign of her and I feel uneasy. She's been behaving oddly round Ben for the past few months now.

Bella, who's finished lapping icing sugar off the chair Ben is standing on, clicks across the polished wooden floor towards the garden. We always had English springer spaniels when I was growing up; after my mum died, I bought a liver and white puppy to remind me of her.

I rinse out the dishcloth and wipe Ben with it. It's not hygienic, but I'm running out of time.

'Chocolate,' he says happily, pointing to his mouth.

I've invited too many toddlers. What is it that BabyCentre says? You should have the same number of guests as the age of the child? It seemed a bit unfair for Ben to have only two kids at his party and I couldn't just invite some of his friends and not others. In the end, I asked everyone at his nursery – and nearly all of them are coming. Is there any point in changing Ben? I roll his sleeves down and smooth his blond hair flat. The cowlick curl at the front bounces up. I give him a cuddle and kiss his fat cheek and he wriggles away from me, desperate to run after Bella. Unlike Evie, who was always so still as a small child. Almost unnaturally so.

I look at the clock again. Where the hell is Ollie? He said he had to go back to work. On a Saturday. On the day of Ben's party. I'd protested as I was wrestling with the Sellotape and flowery wrapping paper that was all I could find in the house at 10.30 last night. He'd made a face and said it was unavoidable.

'I'll go early, catch the first train. I'll be back, don't worry,' Ollie had said.

He didn't say whether he'd be back in time to help or if he was planning to arrive as the party was going to start. He'd left before I'd stirred, shutting the front door too hard, waking Ben and sending

Bella into a flurry of barks. I clear up the chocolate icing and streaks of butter from the work surface. The entire kitchen is stainless steel – the tops, dishwasher, fridge. Ollie insisted and it looked brilliant until the kids got their hands on it. Now it's covered in smeary fingerprints. I chuck the bowl and beater in the dishwasher and I'm just making a start on chopping the cheese into cubes, when the doorbell rings. I swear and wipe my hands on my trousers. In my head, I'd imagined myself welcoming the first parents and their children with Ben clinging to one leg, wearing his tractor top, Evie in that polka-dot dress I love, and I would look chic, with glossy hair, in kitten heels, skinny jeans and my new Breton top. Some chance.

Before I can reach the hall, Andy shouts, 'It's only us,' and half falls in with his two children, Sophie, who is Evie's best friend, and eight-month-old baby Ellen.

'So lovely to see you,' I say, embracing Gill, his wife.

'We thought you might need some help,' she says. 'Sophie. Go and find Evie.'

Gill unpacks her bag. She's brought brownies and flapjacks, all home-made and chopped up into bite-sized squares, a bumper pack of Hula Hoops and a huge, almond-studded fruit cake from Bettys.

'For the grown-ups,' she adds.

I feel as if I've known Gill and Andy forever. We met at Leeds University. Andy studied History of Art with me. I used to be Gill's best friend but I hardly ever see her these days. She's a lawyer.

'I don't know how you found the time,' I say, taking a flapjack. Gill works even longer hours than Ollie.

'Ollie's working?' she says, looking around for my husband.

I make a face. He hasn't replied to my texts asking him when he'll be here.

'I'll do this while you change,' she adds, eyeing my outfit, and getting mugs, a cafetière and coffee out of the cupboard. 'Andy, love, put the party playlist on.'

I can't find my stripey top so I end up wearing my favourite shirt that's worn a bit thin in patches, and ballet pumps. I had my hair cut short after Ben was born and now it's grown into a ragged bob. It's still blonde but my beige roots are showing through. It's definitely not glossy. I give my hair a quick brush and tuck it behind my ears. Gill's hair is immaculate: recently highlighted, smooth and as shiny as oiled teak.

By the time I come back downstairs, the first families have already arrived. Andy is surrounded by toddlers and is blowing up balloons. Songs from *The Jungle Book* are playing, Gill has laid the rest of the party food out on paper plates on one of the worktops in the kitchen. Ben is shrieking with delight and wiggling to 'I Wanna Be Like You'. Ollie hasn't arrived and there's still no sign of Evie but I assume she's in her bedroom with Sophie.

'Let's play musical statues!' I say, cranking up the volume so the toddlers will start dancing. I begin twirling and stamping my feet until they join in.

I pass the remote to Andy and take the laundry basket – now full to the brim with presents for Ben – upstairs so they'll be out of the way of little people who might be tempted to start opening them. I catch sight of Sophie, curled up in an armchair, watching something on the iPad.

'Sophie? Where's Evie?'

She shrugs and doesn't look at me. 'She didn't want to play with me.'

'Evie?' I call.

I can't hear anything. When was the last time I saw her? I leave the presents on the landing and climb the stairs to her room, but she's not there. I check my studio, the bathroom and our bedroom, but there's no sign of her.

'Evie!' I shout more loudly, in case she's hiding somewhere and can't hear me above the sound of 'Colonel Hathi's March'.

I push open the door to Ben's room. I give a little scream, floored by the sight that greets me. Evie is hard to spot at first. She's at the far end of the room, balancing on the end of Ben's bed. She looks guilty for a second and then defiant.

'Evie! What have you done?'

I can't quite make out what it is at first. The room is full of streamers criss-crossing the space from Ben's bed to the wall and back again – like those crazy webs made by spiders given drugs. There are things hanging from them. I duck under one. She's unwound balls of wool in all different colours and tied the ends to the furniture. She's attached postcards to the skeins with yards of Sellotape and, dangling from the bottom of the cards, are socks. She's stapled one of Ben's socks to every card! A jumble of thoughts goes through my mind all at the same time: it's so bright and dense I feel as if it'll bring on a migraine; it's going to take a hell of a long time to clear up; Ben's socks are ruined. A less logical part of me is applauding the unbridled creativity of the sock-stapling. I also feel like shaking her. Hard.

She jumps down from the bed.

'It's a surprise for Ben,' she says.

'Evie. It's Ben's party.' I try not to shout. 'Why are you doing this when you could be downstairs joining in?' Is it really something she thinks Ben will like (he probably will) or is she being deliberately naughty and attention-seeking because it's his birthday? I sigh. 'What is the matter with you?'

She shakes her long brown hair over her shoulder and frowns at me.

'You always ruin everything,' she mutters.

'Come with me, right this minute.'

I take her hand and pull her along, giving her a little push towards Sophie when we get back to the sitting room. I'll have to talk to her after the party. I call Ollie but it goes straight to voicemail. I leave him an angry message.

An hour or so later, all the children are sitting in a line at small wobbly tables and chairs that I've borrowed from several parents. They've exhausted themselves with pass-the-parcel and musical chairs, they've burnt off their sugar rush and they're reaching the end of lunch. It's suddenly quiet. Even the parents have stopped talking. I light the candles on the birthday cake and carry it over. Late summer sunlight, angling off the steep moors behind us, slants through the French windows. The children look up and start to sing.

Ben is shouting, 'Cake!' over and over.

He's my longed-for son, the one I felt I'd waited a lifetime to meet, the baby I thought I'd never have, the child I love so much I feel my heart might burst. I'm singing and smiling and my eyes are filling with tears, and then I look up and catch sight of Evie. She's standing, half in the shadows, where the old dining-room wall used to be, wearing a dress I've never seen before. She's watching me and she's scowling.

I set the cake down and Ben rounds his rosy cheeks and blows. He looks like a pudgy blond cherub from a Michelangelo fresco. One candle flickers and wavers and Ben tries again, showering spit over the cake. Everyone cheers. Evie folds her arms over her thin chest. She's scrawny, with bony knees. Her hair is dark, her skin is the colour of milky tea and her eyes are streaked green and brown. She doesn't look like anyone else in my family. Normally adoption agencies like to match children to parents who could be their real ones – but after the initial shock, it never bothered me – she's my daughter and I love her. Then Ben arrived, long after we'd given up trying to have kids of our own, with his eyes like his dad's and a dimple in his chin the same as mine. Maybe it's started to matter to her. I want to hug her tightly, but Ben shouts, 'Chocolate! Mine!' and suddenly I'm surrounded by toddlers sticking fat fingers into the icing and grabbing sugar stars.

Everyone leaves shortly afterwards, clutching cake in sticky napkins and a party bag, the parents hyped on caffeine.

'That lasted a lifetime,' I say to Gill and Andy, laughing. 'Will you stay for a glass of wine?'

Gill hesitates. Her free time must be so precious, but Andy is already looking for glasses. I pull a chilled bottle of Chardonnay out of the fridge and unscrew it. The first few sips go straight to my head. I didn't manage a proper breakfast, just Ben and Evie's leftover toast, and since then I've been snacking on a healthy combination of Gill's fruit cake and Hula Hoops.

'Leave it. I'll do it later,' I tell Gill, who's started to pick up hummus-smeared plates.

I throw open the French windows and we walk out into the garden. It's such a gorgeous day.

Our house is the last one on Rombald's Lane. It's tall and thin and made from the dark millstone grit that all the factories round here are built from. The garden is long and thin too, and at the end of it is a small bridleway that runs past the golf course, and beyond that is Rombald's Moor, the famous Cow and Calf rocks on the skyline, threatening to topple over and tumble down the hill.

Andy cradles Ellen on one hip, holding his glass with the other hand. Sophie, overcome with tiredness, folds herself onto Gill's knee as she sits at the trestle table. Bella's tail thumps against my leg. Ben races around on a bright yellow digger. I'm relieved it's over and glad it went well. I try not to let my annoyance with Ollie mar this perfect moment, this small oasis of calm. It's early afternoon, but it feels much later. It's as if autumn is already upon us and yet it's still August. The last day of August. My late summer baby, I think, looking at Ben, his halo of hair gleaming golden in the sunshine.

'She's been a bit out of sorts,' says Andy.

I think he's talking about Sophie, but he nods his head towards Evie, who's playing at the far end of the narrow garden.

'She's probably just jealous of all the attention Ben had today,' says Gill.

'You could be right. It was okay when he was a baby and he was small and cute but now he takes her toys, wants to play with her—'

'Tell me about it! She thinks she's too grown up to be with a little one,' says Gill, giving Sophie an affectionate squeeze.

I look at Andy. He knows Evie better than Gill does. He wrinkles his brow. He doesn't think that's the real reason for Evie's behaviour.

'She has been asking a lot of questions about her parents too. Her biological ones.' I lower my voice and hope Sophie doesn't understand what we're talking about.

'Yeah, she's at that age where she could be starting to think about the, you know, her place in your family, why she looks different.'

He looks awkward as if he might offend me.

'I hope I haven't been spending too much time with Ben,' I say, biting my lip.

Gill snorts. 'You could spend twenty-four hours a day with them and it wouldn't be enough.'

'Like you do, love?' Andy says lightly.

I take my glass of wine and walk over to Evie. There's a tree in the corner – I'm not sure what kind – but it has a fat, knobbly trunk and low branches. Evie loves it and is always making dens in its split innards; now she's swinging from one of the branches and talking to herself. I can't remember if she ate anything at the party.

'Evie, sweetheart,' I call.

She jumps and turns. Her eyes are wide apart and she looks like a startled animal, a cat maybe; there are grass stains on her knees. She's wearing a blue and silver dress – I think it's a copy of Elsa's, the princess in *Frozen*. I didn't buy it for her. I want to ask her where she got it from, but I don't want to upset her. She's frowning at me.

Maybe she borrowed it from a friend? I hold out my arms, trying not to spill my wine, but she backs away.

'What is it?'

'Nothing. I'm playing a secret game. I don't want you to come over here.'

'Can I play too?'

'It wouldn't be a secret then, would it?'

I change tack. 'Did you enjoy the party?'

'Not really.'

'I'm sorry you didn't have fun. You love icing cakes and parties! Weren't you feeling well?'

'No! Can't you even give me five minutes peace?'

I'm startled to hear Ollie's phrase being repeated by a seven-year-old and I want to laugh, but that would make her feel undignified.

I carefully set my wine glass down on the lawn and it promptly topples over, spilling my Chardonnay. I lunge at Evie and grab her and tickle her, trying to dispel her bad mood. She screams and kicks and not in a playful way. And then she bites me. I cry out and let go. I look down at the wet patch on my shirt and feel raised welts of teeth marks in my skin. I'm about to tell her off when Ollie steps into the garden.

'Hello, everyone,' he calls. 'Christ, it looks like we've been hit by a tornado. How can a few toddlers make that amount of mess?'

I follow his gaze and see that from one end to the other, the house is a chaos of wrapping paper and bits of rubber from burst balloons. The mini chairs are upended, there are heaps of messy plates on every surface and half-eaten bits of pineapple and sausages and crushed crisps strewn across the floor. He's frowning – presumably because we haven't cleared up and we're out here drinking wine. I scowl at him – he can hardly turn up after the party's over and complain about the state of the dining room. I want to ask him

why the hell he didn't get back in time, but I need to deal with our daughter first.

'Evie. . .' I say.

She runs away from me, her shiny dress slippery against my palm as I reach for her. When she's upset she normally goes to Ollie, but she races past him and into the house. I hear her clatter up the stairs. Those high-heeled silver sandals aren't hers either.

'I'm sorry I'm late,' says Ollie. 'Work was manic. We've got a deal going through and I couldn't get away.' He raises his eyebrows at me. 'What's the matter with Evie?'

'She's—'

'Being Evie?'

Ollie retrieves my toppled glass and refills Andy's. He doesn't catch my eye. He doesn't want me to make a fuss or tell him off for missing the party in front of our friends.

'Cheers!' he says, chinking a bottle of beer against Andy's glass, and he kisses Gill on the cheek.

He's right. I should let it go. He said he couldn't help it. And Evie is just a little jealous. She'll be fine after she's had a slice of cake and Ollie's made a fuss of her. Ben has had a brilliant time. My husband hands me my glass, full to the brim with green-gold wine, and I stifle my resentment and attempt to smile at him. I mustn't lose sight of what we have – two beautiful children; an amazing house that I never, in a million years, thought we'd be able to afford; Gill and Andy, my best friends – and this perfect day. I take a deep breath and feel my shoulders relax. I can smell the faintest trace of heather, drifting down from the moor.

I don't get Ben to bed until almost 8.30 p.m. That's after clearing up the detritus from the party, unravelling the carnage Evie had

created in his bedroom, two hours of putting him in his bed, finding him wandering down the landing, cuddling him, tucking him back in. In the end, I ignored him and he fell asleep curled round his tractor at the bottom of the flight of stairs to Evie's bedroom. I carry him gently back to his own room. For a moment I kneel by his bed and rest my head on the duvet. I tell myself it's just to check he's still sleeping. He snores loudly and snuffles and grunts like a hedgehog. I'm so tired I could stay here. Ben has dropped his afternoon nap and, because he's sleepy, he's cranky in the afternoons and I have no respite – no chance to catch up on emails or even have a cup of tea, go to the toilet or have a shower by myself – and he's not going to bed on time either. It makes no sense – he needs to rest. On the worst nights I find myself pleading with him to go to sleep. Ollie won't get up with Ben because he says he has to have a clear head for work. I'm an artist and somehow Ollie thinks it's okay for me to paint even when I feel slightly insane.

I force myself to rise and tiptoe out of his bedroom. I go downstairs and pour Ollie and me a large glass of Merlot. Ollie's lit the first fire of the year – it's already chilly now the sun has set.

He glances at his watch and does a double take that would be funny if he were smiling. 'Jesus. I'm meant to be at The Bar.'

'You're going out?'

'Work,' he says, patting his pockets for his phone and wallet. 'I'm sure I told you. Thank God I persuaded them to meet me in Ilkley and not Leeds. I won't be late. Sorry, darling. I know I left you to deal with the party on your own.'

His tone implies it was some dreadful chore, and not a joyful occasion he should have wanted to be there for.

'Do you have to go?'

'Yes. Sorry.'

'But you've already been out all day. You missed your son's second birthday!'

'I said I was sorry. I told you, I've got an important deal I need to finalize. Believe me, I'd much rather lie on the sofa with you.'

He kisses me on the cheek.

I bite my lip. I don't want to become one of those women who nags or moans. I pour his wine into my glass and put on my favourite movie, *Gone with the Wind*, to stop myself from feeling angry with him. I kick off my slippers and curl up alongside Bella in the corner of the sofa. I bury my hands in her soft fur and she sighs contentedly. I sip my wine and congratulate myself on surviving a two-year-old's birthday party without a jot of help from my husband.