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The Child

Written by Fiona Barton

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THE Child

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For M & D

'When truth is replaced by silence, the silence is a lie.'

Yevgeny Yevtushenko

Chapter 1

Tuesday, 20 March 2012

Emma

My computer is winking at me knowingly as I sit down at my desk. I touch the keyboard and a photo of Paul appears on my screen. It's the one I took of him in Rome on our honeymoon, eyes full of love across a table in the Campo de' Fiori. I try to smile back at him, but as I lean in I catch a glimpse of my reflection in the screen and stop. I hate seeing myself without warning. Don't recognize myself, sometimes. You think you know what you look like and there is this stranger looking at you. It can frighten me.

But today, I study the stranger's face. The brown hair half pulled up on top of the head in a frantic work bun, naked skin, shadows and lines creeping towards the eyes like subsidence cracks.

Christ, you look awful, I tell the woman on the screen. The movement of her mouth mesmerizes me and I make her speak some more.

Come on, Emma, get some work done, she says. I smile palely at her and she smiles back.

This is mad behaviour, she tells me in my own voice and I stop.

Thank God Paul can't see me now, I think.

*

When Paul gets home tonight, he's tired and a bit grumpy after a day of 'bone-headed' undergraduates and another row with his head of department over the timetable.

Maybe it's an age thing, but it seems to really shake Paul to be challenged at work these days. I think he must be starting to doubt himself, see threats to his position everywhere. University departments are like prides of lions, really. Lots of males preening and screwing around and hanging on to their superiority by their dewclaws. I say all the right things and make him a gin and tonic.

When I move his briefcase off the sofa, I see he's brought home a copy of the *Evening Standard*. He must've picked it up on the Tube.

I sit and read it while he showers away the cares of the day, and it's then I see the paragraph about the baby.

'Baby's Body Found,' it says. Just a few lines about how a baby's skeleton has been discovered on a building site in Woolwich and police are investigating. I keep reading it over and over. I can't take it in properly, as if it's in a foreign language.

But I know what it says and terror is coiling round me. Squeezing the air out of my lungs. Making it hard to breathe.

I am still sitting here when Paul comes down, all damp and pink and shouting that something is burning.

The pork chops are black. Incinerated. I throw them in the bin and open the window to let out the smoke. I fetch a frozen pizza out of the freezer and put it in the microwave while Paul sits quietly at the table.

'We ought to get a smoke alarm,' he says, instead of shouting at me for almost setting the house on fire. 'Easy to forget things when you're reading.' He is such a lovely man. I don't deserve him.

Standing in front of the microwave, watching the pizza revolve and bubble, I wonder for the millionth time if he'll leave me. He should have done years ago. I would if I'd been in his place, having to deal with my stuff, my worries, on a daily basis. But he shows no

sign of packing his bags. Instead he hovers over me like an anxious parent protecting me from harm. He talks me down when I get in a state, invents reasons to be cheerful, holds me close to calm me when I cry, and tells me I am a brilliant, funny, wonderful woman.

It is the illness making you like this, he says. *This isn't you.*

Except it is. He doesn't know me really. I've made sure of that. And he respects my privacy when I shy from any mention of my past. 'You don't have to tell me,' he says. 'I love you just the way you are.'

St Paul – I call him that when he's pretending I'm not a burden to him, but he usually shushes me.

'Hardly,' he says.

Well, not a saint, then. But who is? Anyway, his sins are my sins. What do old couples say? What's yours is mine. But my sins . . . well, they're my own.

'Why aren't you eating, Em?' he says when I put his plate on the table.

'I had a late lunch, busy with work. I'm not hungry now – I'll have something later,' I lie. I know I would choke if I put anything in my mouth.

I give my brightest smile – the one I use for photos. 'I'm fine, Paul. Now eat up.'

On my side of the table, I nurse a glass of wine and pretend to listen to his account of the day. His voice rises and falls, pauses while he chews the disgusting meal I've served, and resumes.

I nod periodically but I hear nothing. I wonder if Jude has seen the article.

Chapter 2

Tuesday, 20 March 2012

Kate

Kate Waters was bored. It wasn't a word she normally associated with her job, but today she was stuck in the office under the nose of her boss with nothing to do but re-writes.

'Put it through your golden typewriter,' Terry, the news editor, had shouted across, waving someone else's badly written story at her. 'Sprinkle a bit of fairy dust on it.'

And so she did.

'It's like Mike Baldwin's knicker factory in here,' she complained to the Crime man, sitting opposite. 'Churning out the same old rubbish with a few frills. What are you working on?'

Gordon Willis, always referred to by the editor by his job title – as in 'Get the Crime man on this story . . .' – lifted his head from a newspaper and shrugged. 'Going down to the Old Bailey this afternoon – want to have a chat with the DCI in the crossbow murder. Nothing doing yet, but hoping I might get a talk with the victim's sister when it finishes. Looks like she was sleeping with the killer. It'll be a great multi-deck headline: The Wife, The Sister and The Killer They Both Loved.' He grinned at the thought. 'Why? What have you got on?'

'Nothing. Unpicking a story one of the online slaves has done.' Kate indicated a pubescent nymph typing furiously at a desk across the room. 'Straight out of sixth form.'

She realized how bitter – and old – she must sound and stopped herself. The tsunami of online news had washed her and those like her to a distant shore. The reporters who once sat on the top table – the newspaper equivalent of the winner's podium – now perched at the edge of the newsroom, pushed further and further towards the exit by the growing ranks of online operatives who wrote 24/7 to fill the hungry maw of rolling news.

New media stopped being new a long time ago, the editor had lectured his staff at the Christmas party. It was the norm. It was the future. And Kate knew she had to stop bitching about it.

Hard, she told herself, when the most viewed stories on the paper's slick website were about Madonna's hands being veiny or an *EastEnders* star putting on weight. 'Hate a Celebrity' dressed as news. Horror.

'Anyway,' she said out loud, 'it can wait. I'll go and get us a coffee.'

Also gone were the days of the CQ – the Conference Quickie – once enjoyed by Fleet Street's finest in the nearest pubs while the executives were in the editor's morning meeting. The CQ was traditionally followed by red-faced, drunken rows with the news editor – one of which, legend had it, ended with a reporter, too drunk to stand, biting his boss's ankle and another reporter throwing a typewriter through a window into the street below.

These days the newsroom, now in offices above a shopping mall, had windows hermetically sealed by double-glazing and alcohol was banned. Coffee was the new addiction of choice.

'What do you want?' Kate asked.

'Double macchiato with hazelnut syrup, please,' Gordon said. 'Or some brown liquid. Whichever comes first.'

Kate took the lift down, pinching a first edition of the *Evening Standard* from the security desk in the marble lobby. As she waited

for the barista to work his magic with the steamer, she flicked idly through the pages, checking for the by-lines of friends.

The paper was wall-to-wall with preparations for the London Olympics and she almost missed the paragraph at the bottom of the News in Brief column.

Headlined BABY'S BODY FOUND, two sentences told how an infant's skeleton had been unearthed on a building site in Woolwich, not a million miles from Kate's east London home. Police were investigating. No other details. She tore it out for later. The bottom of her bag was lined with crumpled scraps of newspaper – 'It's like a budgie cage,' her eldest son, Jake, teased her about the shreds of paper waiting for life to be breathed into them. Sometimes whole stories to be followed up or, more often, just a line or a quote that made her ask, 'What's the story?'

Kate re-read the thirty words and wondered about the person missing from the story. The mother. As she walked back with the coffee cups, she ticked off her questions: *Who is the baby? How did it die? Who would bury a baby?*

'Poor little thing,' she said out loud. Her head was suddenly full of her own babies – Jake and Freddie, born two years apart but known as 'the boys' in family shorthand – as sturdy toddlers, schoolboys in football kit, surly teenagers and now adults. *Well, almost*. She smiled to herself. Kate could remember the moment she saw each of them for the first time: red, slippery bodies; crumpled, too-big skin; blinking eyes staring up from her chest, and her feeling that she had known their faces for ever. *How could anyone kill a baby?*

When she got back to the newsroom, she put the cups down and walked over to the news desk.

'Do you mind if I have a look at this?' she asked Terry, waving the tiny cutting in front of him as he tried to make sense of a feature on foreign royals. He didn't look up, so she assumed he didn't.

Her first call was to the Scotland Yard press office. When she'd started in journalism, as a trainee on a local paper in East Anglia,

she used to call in at the local police station every day to lean on the front desk and look at the logbook while the sergeant chatted her up. Now, if she contacted the police, she rarely spoke to a human being. And if she did, it was likely to be a fleeting experience.

'Have you listened to the tape?' a civilian press officer would ask, in the full knowledge that she hadn't, and she would find herself quickly re-routed to a tinny recorded message that took her through every stolen lawnmower and pub punch-up in the area.

But this time she hit the jackpot. Not only did she get through to a real person, it was someone she knew. The voice on the end of the phone belonged to a former colleague from her first job on a national newspaper. He was one of the poachers turned gamekeepers who'd recently joined the safer, some said saner, world of Public Relations.

'Hello, Kate. How are you? Long time . . .'

Colin Stubbs wanted to chat. He'd done well as a reporter, but his wife, Sue, had grown tired of his rackety life on the road and he'd finally given in to the war of attrition at home. But he was hungry for details about the world he'd left, asking for gossip about other reporters and telling her – and himself – over and over that leaving newspapers was the best thing he'd ever done.

'That's great. Lucky you,' Kate said, determinedly upbeat. 'I'm still slogging along at the *Post*. Look, Colin, I saw something in the *Standard* about a baby's body being found in Woolwich. Any idea how long it'd been there?'

'Oh, that. Hang on, I'll pull up the details on the computer . . . Here we are. Not much to go on and a bit grim, really. A workman was clearing a demolition site and moved an old urn and underneath was this tiny skeleton. Newborn, they say. Forensics are having a look, but it says here that early indications are it's been there a while – could be historic, even. It's a road in student land, towards Greenwich, I think. Don't you live round there?'

'North of the river and a bit further east, actually. Hackney. And still waiting for the gentrification train to stop. What else have you got? Any leads on identification?'

'No, newborns are tricky when it comes to DNA, says here. Especially if they've been underground for years. And the area is a warren of rented flats and bedsits. Tenants changing every five minutes, so the copper in charge isn't optimistic about it. And we've all got our hands full with the Olympics stuff . . .'

'Yeah, of course,' Kate said. 'The security must be a nightmare – I hear you're having to bus in officers from other forces to cope. And this baby story sounds like a needle-in-a-haystack job. Look, thanks, Colin. It's been good to catch up. Give my love to Sue. And will you give me a call if anything else comes up on this?'

She smiled as she put down the phone. Kate Waters loved a needle-in-a-haystack job. The glint of something in the dark. Something to absorb her totally. Something to sink her teeth into. Something to get her out of the office.

She put on her coat and started the long walk to the lift. She didn't get far.

'Kate, are you off somewhere?' Terry shouted. 'Before you go, you couldn't untangle this stuff about the Norwegian royals, could you? It's making my eyes bleed.'

Chapter 3

Tuesday, 20 March 2012

Angela

She knew she was going to cry. She could feel it welling up, thickening her throat so she couldn't speak, and went to sit on the bed for a minute to postpone the moment. Angela needed to be on her own when it came. She'd tried to fight it over the years – she never cried, normally. She wasn't the sentimental sort. Nursing and living the army life had trained that out of her a long time ago.

But every year, March 20th was the exception. It was Alice's birthday and she would cry. A private moment. She wouldn't dream of doing it in front of anyone, like the people who stood there and wept in front of cameras. She couldn't imagine what it felt like to be on show like that. And the television people kept on filming, as though it was some sort of entertainment.

'They should turn off the camera,' she'd said to Nick, but he'd just grunted and kept on watching.

It made her feel uncomfortable, but apparently lots of people liked it. The sort of people who tried to be part of the news.

Anyway, she didn't think anyone would understand why she was still crying all these years later. Decades later. They'd probably say she'd hardly known the baby. She'd had less than twenty-four hours with her.

But she was part of me. Flesh of my flesh, she told the sceptics in her head. *I've tried to let go, but . . .*

The dread would begin in the days before the baby's birthday and she'd get flashbacks to the silence – that bone-chilling silence in an empty room.

Then, on the day, she would usually wake up with a headache, would make breakfast and try to act normally until she was alone. This year, she was talking to Nick in the kitchen about the day ahead. He'd been complaining about the mountain of paperwork he'd got to deal with and about one of the new lads, who kept taking days off sick.

He ought to retire, she thought as she listened. He could have done it two or three years ago. But he couldn't let go of the business. He said he needed a purpose, a routine.

He doesn't give any sign that he knows what day this is.

He used to remember – in the early days. Of course he did. It was never far from anyone's thoughts.

People in the street used to ask about their baby. People they didn't know from Adam would come up to them, squeeze their hands and look tearful. But that was then. Nick was hopeless with dates – deliberately, Angela thought. He couldn't even remember their other children's birthdays, let alone Alice's. And she'd stopped reminding him. She couldn't bear the flash of panic in his eyes as he was forced to revisit that day. It was kinder if she did the remembering on her own.

Nick kissed her on the top of her head as he left for work. And when the door closed behind him, Angela sat on the sofa and let herself cry.

She'd tried to train herself to put the memories away. There wasn't much help at the beginning. Just the family doctor – poor old Dr Earnley – who'd patted her shoulder or knee and said, 'You will get through this, my dear.'

Then, later, there were support groups, but she'd got tired of hearing her own and other people's misery. She felt they were just circling the pain, prodding it, inflaming it and then crying together. She upset the group when she announced that she'd discovered it didn't help to know other people hurt too. It didn't take away her own grief – just added layers to it, somehow. She'd felt guilty, because when she'd been a nurse and someone had died, she used to give the grieving family a leaflet on bereavement.

I hope it helped them more than it did me, she said to herself as she got off the sofa. *Mustn't be bitter. Everyone did what they could.*

In the kitchen she filled the sink with water and started preparing vegetables for a casserole. The cold water numbed her hands so she found it hard to hold the knife, but she continued to scrape mechanically at the carrots.

She tried to summon up an image of what Alice would be like now, but it was too hard. She only had one photograph of her. Of Alice and her. Nick had taken it on his little Instamatic but it was blurred. He'd taken it too quickly. Angela braced herself against the kitchen counter, as if physical effort could help her see her lost baby's little face. But it wouldn't come.

She knew from the photo that Alice had a fuzz of dark hair, like her brother, Patrick, but Angela had lost a lot of blood during the delivery and she was still high from the Pethidine when they put her baby in her arms. She'd asked Nick afterwards – after Alice was gone – but he couldn't tell her much more. He hadn't studied her as Angela would've done, memorizing every feature. He'd said she looked lovely, but had no details.

Angela didn't think Alice looked like Patrick. He'd been a big baby and Alice had been so fragile. Barely five pounds. But still she'd studied Paddy's baby photos, and the pictures they took when their second daughter, Louise, came along ten years later – 'Our surprise bonus baby, I call her,' Angela told people – willing herself

to see Alice in them. But she wasn't there. Louise was blonde – she took after Nick's side.

Angela felt the familiar dull ache of grief round her ribs and in her chest and she tried to think happy thoughts, like the self-help books had told her. She thought about Louise and Patrick.

'At least I have them,' she said to the carrot tops bobbing in the dirty water. She wondered if Lou would ring her that night when she got in from work. Her youngest knew the story – of course she did – but she didn't talk about it.

And she hates it when I cry, Angela said to herself, wiping her eyes with a piece of kitchen roll. *They all do. They like to pretend that everything is fine. I understand that. I should stop now. Put Alice away.*

'Happy birthday, my darling girl,' she murmured under her breath.