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Opening Extract from...

THE SILENT HOUSE

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Prologue

There was someone else in the room.

Jaxon rubbed his eyes groggily. Light from the lamppost outside was spilling through the gap in the curtains, and he could see the shape of a grown-up standing by the door. Who was it? He couldn't tell, his eyes blurred with sleep.

Only half awake, he rolled out of bed and patted his little sister Lexi in the bed next to his. He poked her to see if she was awake, but she didn't move. His other sister, Kasey, was asleep on the other side of the room, her chest rising and falling.

Go back to sleep, the grown-up signed.

Jaxon looked down at his hands, which glistened with something dark and sticky. He saw the same dark stuff on his sister.

Why won't Lexi wake up? Jaxon signed, his confusion over Lexi's lack of response eclipsing his concern about who was in his room.

The grown-up turned to look at the little girl in the bed. They stood over Lexi for a moment, and Jaxon saw their hands moving frantically over her body. They stepped back, one hand raised to their face, then bent over as if they were about to be sick.

Jaxon was too sleepy to resist when the grown-up pulled him out of the room and into the bathroom. They didn't turn the light on, but used a torch to check none of the red had got on his pyjamas, before carefully washing his hands. The light blinded him, keeping the grown-up in shadow.

Did I do something wrong? he asked.

Back to bed now. Don't tell anyone. It's a secret, okay? Their hands shook as they signed to him.

He nodded again, allowed himself to be led back to his bed. Lexi still had stuff all over her, but maybe they would clean her up next. As he drifted off to sleep, wondering who had been in his room, he didn't notice the adult was still standing by his bed, head bowed and shoulders shaking.

They let out a howl of anguish, but nobody in the house heard.

Chapter 1

Saturday 3rd February

'I'm the interpreter,' I said clearly, as I leant over the police tape. My breath fogged in the cold morning air as I spoke. I pulled out my ID badge and waved it at the nearest uniformed officer, a luckless PC who was clearly having a hard time keeping the nosy neighbours back. He only looked about twenty, his eyes bloodshot from tiredness. The card I handed him was my expired ID from the last agency I worked for, the photo an old one. My face had rounded out in the years since it had been taken, but the brown eyes and long dark hair hadn't changed. I hadn't got around to having something new made when I went freelance. I'd been putting it off, out of a fear it'd jinx my fledgling business. The main thing was that it still opened the doors I needed it to.

Those three words were usually met with a look of relief on emergency call-outs, and this time was no different. The PC waved me over to the edge of the crowd and lifted the tape for me to slip under. I could feel the eyes of the onlookers on my back, wondering why I'd been allowed passage. I assumed they were neighbours, their attention drawn by the lights of the emergency vehicles; few people would be passing through this area of Scunthorpe on a Saturday morning, and if they saw police here they wouldn't be inclined to stop.

'Wait here, please,' he instructed me, leaving me on the pavement as he approached the house.

There were officers in white paper suits milling around in the doorway. Other uniformed men and women moved amongst the crowd, notebooks in hand. It was seven on a Saturday morning, didn't these people have better things to do, instead of gawping? A shiver ran through me as a memory surfaced, but I pushed it back down again.

I hovered halfway along the path, unsure if I should go up to the house or stay where I was. The street was typical for that part of Scunthorpe. Rows of identical council houses squashed together, the gardens and exterior walls in varying stages of disrepair. There were neat gardens, clearly loved and tended; there were front yards that were more like the municipal tip in miniature form. How could people cope, living in such disarray?

Past the houses to my left, the road sloped downwards to meet a large patch of waste ground, which stretched away towards the imposing silhouette of the steelworks, jagged against the dark sky. Much of Scunthorpe had been built on the garden city model, but nothing grew amongst the rubble. The street lights enhanced the shadows and for a moment I thought I saw movement. Probably a fox.

In full daylight, the houses on this street looked shabby and rundown, but in the gloom of the winter morning they were bathed in the eerie blue glow of the police car lights. Three cars, lit up but with their sirens off; an ambulance, paramedics moving around inside it but with an air of despondency rather than urgency. It was serious, then.

A phone call first thing in the morning never brings good news. Within an hour of my mobile buzzing me awake, I was pulling up six houses down from the address I'd been directed to. I couldn't get any closer because of the police cordon holding back the gaggle of inquisitive neighbours, pyjamas and slippers visible under their coats. I glanced at the windows nearest to me and saw signs of more observers – corners of curtains pulled back, silhouettes at dark windows. None of them would have known what was happening. Even I had been given the barest of detail, and I wouldn't know more until I went inside.

I ran a hand through my bed hair. I had been on call for the emergency services for six months, and in that time I'd learnt that the people who needed me at short notice would prefer me to be quick rather than smart. If I turned up to a regular job in the afternoon looking like that I probably wouldn't get much repeat business, but when it was an emergency call-out for the police, all bets were off. Still, my professional life was dogged by that little voice in the back of my mind saying that nobody would take me seriously, and my dishevelled state did nothing to quieten it. I grabbed a brush from my bag and tried to sort my hair out while I waited.

The white-suited officers in the entrance to the house had dispersed, leaving a couple with their arms around each other, and I felt a jolt of concern as I recognised them. Alan Hunter, and Elisha . . . I couldn't remember her surname. So, if it was their house, what had happened there? As I watched, the pair separated. There was blood on Elisha's clothes, but she didn't look hurt and the paramedics weren't with her. Alan's eighteen-month-old daughter, Lexi, was my sister's goddaughter. As I pictured her, a horrible thought struck me. Where were the children?

I'd waited for long enough. I needed to know what had happened in that house, and I looked around for a police officer to ask. At that moment, a dark-haired woman came out of the house and marched straight up to me, her hand outstretched.

'DI Forest. You're the British Sign Language interpreter?' Her suit beneath her white overalls was rumpled, but her eyes were sharp.

I nodded. 'Paige Northwood.' At least she gave my job its correct title. Most people called me 'the signer', or worse, 'the signing lady'.

'Come with me. We need to collect some clothing and the woman isn't cooperating.'

'What's happened here? I need context,' I told her as she hurried away from me back towards the house.

DI Forest waved a hand dismissively. 'We don't have the full information. That's why you're here. Right now we need to collect this evidence then get this couple to the station.'

Gritting my teeth in frustration, I followed her. At the door, Forest handed me my own protective paper suit to put over my clothes. After I spent a minute wrestling with it, she ushered me inside. The front door led into the living room, and I could hear voices and footsteps overhead. DI Forest took me straight through a door opposite, into a rear hallway. A door to my right led to the kitchen, and the stairs were to my left. Alan and Elisha were now standing at the foot of the stairs, clinging to each other once again.

The hallway was sparsely decorated – laminate floor, magnolia walls. It reminded me of the house I'd grown up in, another one with the drab decoration of the local housing association. No photographs, no artwork, just a small mirror halfway along the passageway. At the foot of the stairs, by the back door, was a scooter. It looked about the right size for a five- or six-year-old – probably Jaxon's, Alan's oldest child. There was a strange smell in the air – a fuggy mixture of cigarette smoke, marijuana and something else, something more organic. At the top of the stairs I could see figures moving around, but the landing was in darkness, hiding their features.

The phone call that morning had been very curt, simply saying that there had been an incident with a deaf family and the police needed a British Sign Language interpreter immediately. They gave me the address, but no information about what had happened or who was involved. I realised I was shaking as the potential seriousness of the situation hit home: from the amount of blood I could see on Elisha's clothes, someone must have been seriously injured. It was mostly on her sleeves and chest, but I could see smudges on her pyjama bottoms too, probably where she'd wiped her hands.

One of the paper-suited officers was trying to explain something to Elisha, waving a large brown evidence bag in front of her and pointing to her clothes. The woman pleaded with her, but Elisha shrank away; the officer looked at DI Forest and shrugged. I recognised Elisha from the Deaf club, and I spotted a flicker of recognition on her face when she saw me. She was only in her early twenties, as far as I knew, but at that moment she looked much older. There were dark circles under her eyes, which darted back and forth between the two police officers.

'Please could you explain to Miss Barron that we need to take her clothes for evidence? She is allowed to go and get changed, but we need to take those clothes with us. She and Mr Hunter then need to come with us to the station so we can take their statements and their fingerprints.'

'Whose blood is it?' I asked Forest, but she frowned at me and jerked her head in Elisha's direction, as if to say get on with your job. I gave Elisha what I hoped was a supportive smile, trying to keep the fear from my face, and signed the detective inspector's request. Alan had his arm around her, protectively, and looked unwilling to let go. Whenever I'd seen Elisha in the past, she'd been well turned out – not overly dressed up, but neat, as if she looked after herself. This Elisha looked like a different woman. Her brown hair was a mess, half of it falling out of her ponytail. She was wearing an old pair of pyjamas with a couple of holes in. She had probably just got out of bed when it happened, but still, I was surprised by her appearance. Whatever had happened must have been traumatic, to have wrought such a change in her.

As I signed, Alan's knuckles whitened and Elisha grimaced. She shook her head in answer to the request and hugged herself tightly.

'She's refusing,' I told them.

Forest frowned at me again, as if I were the one saying no. 'That's not an option. Her clothes are evidence and we need to get them from her, one way or another. I don't have time for this,' she added with a hiss.

Elisha was surrounded by hearing people making demands she didn't understand because they weren't using her language, not because she wasn't capable of carrying out their requests. I felt for her, and wasn't surprised she was shutting down. Looking at the exasperation on the officers' faces, I decided it would be best to take the firm approach and get this over with quickly.

You need to give those clothes to the police, now. Doesn't matter that you don't want to, you have to. Go upstairs, get changed and give those clothes to the police.

Now.

I was rewarded with a long stare then finally a shrug. Alan narrowed his eyes at me, but his grip on Elisha's shoulder loosened and his arm dropped to his side.

'You come upstairs with me?' Elisha asked. Her speech was soft, and the detectives looked surprised to hear her reply.

I checked it was okay with the officers, then nodded.

'Wilson, take her upstairs to get changed, then send the interpreter back down to me,' Forest snapped as she moved back towards the living room.

When her back was turned, I rolled my eyes, but followed the officer and Elisha upstairs to her bedroom.

There was a flurry of activity on the landing as we climbed the stairs, and a door slammed, so by the time we reached the top there was nobody there. My unease grew.

'Please could you take your clothes off and put them in this bag,' the officer asked Elisha, clearly relieved to have me interpreting.

Elisha nodded and pulled a clean t-shirt out of a drawer. I averted my eyes while she changed, but the officer continued to watch her.

'I need to know – what happened here?' I muttered to the officer as Elisha changed, but she shook her head.

'DI Forest will fill you in on anything you need to know. I can't discuss it.'

I decided not to push it. The officer took photographs of Elisha's clothing before bagging each item separately. Once I had heard the two paper bags rustle, I turned around, swallowing hard when I realised that Elisha still had a smear of blood across her forehead, going up into her hairline.

'Thank you,' the officer said, and nodded to me. 'DI Forest would like you to return to the living room. Elisha, you can go back and join Alan.'

'Sure,' I replied, quickly translating this for Elisha.

We stepped out onto the landing and were descending the stairs when I heard a door open behind me. I leapt in fright as Elisha let out an unearthly wail, and I realised she was saying a name.

'Lexi! Lexi!'

I turned around on the stairs, expecting to see the little girl. Instead, I saw the open door to the other bedroom and, beyond the officer in the doorway, a toddler bed. My legs went from under me and I fell onto the step. Lexi was lying on the bloodstained mattress, her lifeless eyes open and staring.

I gasped and covered my mouth to stop myself retching, and the officer in the doorway turned, noticing us.

'Shit, get that door shut,' I heard someone say, then our view was obscured once more.

The officer who took us upstairs muttered something under her breath, then guided Elisha towards the stairs, but I was in the way. I wasn't sure if my legs could hold me, so I swivelled around on the step and squashed myself against the wall so they could get past.

I clasped my shaking hands around my knees and swallowed several times to get rid of the bile in my throat. Lexi was dead. Lexi had been killed. How was I going to tell Anna? My sister doted on her little goddaughter.

Elisha ran down the stairs and flung herself at Alan, sobbing as she pressed her face into his chest and clung to him. Alan just stood there, his face blank, not even putting his arms around her. He looked up the stairs and our eyes met, but I looked away quickly. I felt another stab of fear when I thought about his other two children – where were Jaxon and Kasey? Were they dead too?

I needed fresh air, so I forced myself to move. As I stood, someone came out of the smaller bedroom and walked past me on the stairs. It was a different female police officer also dressed in a white paper body suit. She had a large evidence bag in her hand, and she shielded it with her body as she squeezed past me. When she turned, I got a clear view of the bag and its contents: a teddy bear. I remembered taking Anna shopping to buy it when Lexi was born. Its fur was so soft.

I followed her down the stairs, and as she moved into the light in the hallway I saw a dark stain on the bear's foot. Blood. There was blood on Lexi's teddy and they were taking it away for evidence. The room lurched and I stumbled towards the open back door in my haste to get outside, where the rush of cold air precipitated a violent reaction and I vomited onto the cracked patio. Shaking, I sank down onto the doorstep, spitting out the last of the bile in my mouth. What the hell happened in that house?

The officer I knew only as Wilson appeared next to me and handed me a bottle of water. I gave her a grateful smile and rinsed my mouth out, then took a big gulp.

'Sorry, you shouldn't have seen that.'

I made a strangled noise that was somewhere between a laugh and a sob. 'This isn't the sort of job I normally do.'

'Are you okay? Do you know the family?'

I glanced up and saw a wary look in her eyes. I knew there was a potential conflict of interest, but I nodded anyway. 'I know them vaguely from the Deaf club. I know Alan's ex, Laura. Lexi and Jaxon's mum.'

Laura was good friends with my sister, Anna, and I'd known her since I was eighteen. I'd occasionally spent time with Lexi in the last eighteen months, and another wave of horror hit me as I thought about her.

I swallowed and took a deep breath. 'My job can involve working with people I know, in sensitive situations. The Deaf community is small, and you won't find a local interpreter who doesn't know them. I just hadn't expected to arrive here to find out a child is dead.' I swallowed the bile that yet again rushed to the back of my throat, and continued: 'When I'm on call it's usually hospital work, telling doctors what happened and where it hurts. Nothing like this.' I did my best to keep my voice steady, professional, but it cracked a little at the end. I held back the information that Lexi was my sister's goddaughter. Even in my shocked state, I knew I wanted this job; I had to know what had happened. I didn't want the officer knowing the full truth of how close I was to this, in case she told the detectives and they called a different interpreter.

Wilson flashed me a brief smile. 'I understand. Are you okay to continue?'

I nodded. There was no way I'd let them replace me. I needed to be there.

She led me back into the house and through to the living room. As we entered, DI Forest frowned, but the man with her smiled warmly and introduced himself as DC Singh. Alan and Elisha had disappeared, either into the kitchen or outside with another officer, I assumed.

'We need to get back to the station and take statements,' Forest said.

'I'm ready,' I said.

'Normally we would have asked you to meet us there, but the communication barrier has slowed things down. Now you're here, hopefully we can get on with things.'

Forest turned on her heel and walked out of the front door, leaving Singh looking a little awkward. He gestured for me to follow, then directed me to where Alan and Elisha were waiting.

I explained the situation to them, and once I was sure they were going to cooperate, I ducked under the police tape and walked back to my car. There were still some onlookers milling around, and I could feel their eyes on my back as I walked away. As I unlocked my car door, I realised my hands were shaking, and I rested my head on the steering wheel before I set off for the police station, taking deep breaths. What the hell could have happened to that poor little girl? And how was I going to tell my sister?

Chapter 2

On arriving at the police station, Alan and Elisha had their fingerprints taken. I interpreted the detectives' explanation that it was for elimination purposes, but Alan continued to look wary. The officer taking their prints looked them up and down then spoke slowly, with an unnatural sing-song tone to her voice. When Elisha looked to me for clarification of what she'd said, the officer sighed and went through her exaggerated instructions again while I cringed behind her. Only when Elisha snapped, 'I'm deaf, not stupid,' did the officer shut up and let me take over.

It took an hour to get everything sorted, and before they were ready to take statements I found myself sitting in a waiting room, reading the same five posters repeatedly. I considered sending Anna a message, to break the news to her, but I decided against it. Hopefully she wouldn't find out before I was finished at the police station, then I could call her and tell her face to face. I pressed my lips together to stop my jaw trembling as I imagined my sister's pain at the death of her goddaughter.

Singh brought me a cup of coffee, which I drank gratefully despite its murky grey colour. I'd been to bed late the previous night, anticipating a weekend lie in, and I was finding it hard to stay awake.

'Before we begin, I'll give you the basic background.' Singh sat down opposite me and rubbed the bridge of his nose before continuing. 'I'm sure you realise this is a very serious situation. We were contacted via the emergency text service just after six this morning, saying a child was dead. CID were called in due to the suspicious circumstances, and myself and DI Forest are part of the incident team who'll be dealing with the case from now on.

'There are two adults who were present at the time the child's body was discovered: Alan Hunter and Elisha Barron, both of whom are deaf. There are also two other children, who haven't been harmed.'

I let out a breath I hadn't realised I'd been holding. At least Jaxon and Kasey were okay.

'The dead child's name is Lexi Hunter. She was staying with her father for the weekend, although normally lives with her mother. Her brother, Jaxon, and half-sister, Kasey, were asleep in the same room when it happened.'

The implications of what the children might have witnessed stunned me for a moment, but before Singh continued I held up a hand to interrupt him.

'Where are they? Jaxon and Kasey?'

'We contacted the duty social worker, and they're being cared for. Jaxon should be back with his mother shortly, although we'll need to arrange to interview him in a couple of days.'

Drawing in a sharp breath, I wondered how Singh could deal with things like this every day. The prospect of interviewing a six-year-old about the death of his sister sounded awful. I knew I should tell him that I already knew the family, but I didn't want him thinking I shouldn't be working on the case, and I let the moment pass.

'We need to establish what happened and what Alan and Elisha can tell us, but we need to take their statements individually,' Singh continued. 'They've been reluctant to be separated until you were here. We'll need to speak with
Lexi's mother once we're finished here, as well.'

'Does she know? Laura, has someone told her?'

'Yes,' he replied, his deep voice reassuring me. He either didn't notice my slip, showing I knew Lexi's mum's name, or he let it go. 'We sent officers over as soon as we were given her address. Her mother is also with her.'

I knew Laura was living with her mum, so at least she had her there for support. From what I'd heard, Bridget Weston was a strong woman, so hopefully something like this wouldn't break her completely, devastating as it would be for the whole family. I worried how Laura would ever cope with a tragedy of such magnitude.

DI Forest approached as Singh finished filling me in.
'Is there anything else you need to know before we begin?'

I swallowed, not wanting to ask but needing as much information as they could give me. 'How did Lexi die?'

Forest grimaced, her mouth pulled tight in a straight line. ‘There will have to be a post-mortem. Until we have the results, I’m afraid we can’t discuss it with you.’

I bit back a response. There must have been more she could tell me, but I couldn’t bring myself to push for it yet. As the interviews progressed, there’d be things I didn’t want to hear, but it was my job. I’d been present during some of the most private moments of people’s lives: I’d been there when a doctor told someone they had cancer; I’d had to inform a client that his wife was filing for divorce; I’d worked with social services, in homes and in court, when children were being placed under child protection orders or were being removed from their families. I had learned to deal with not being able to talk to anyone else about my work, about the things I heard and experienced, but in nine years I hadn’t learned to separate myself emotionally from my clients and their experiences. When I understood my clients’ emotions, it helped me to interpret them more accurately, reading their facial expressions and body language to help me modulate the tone and inflexion of my spoken English translation. This empathy never made my job any easier, though.

Forest led me through to an interview room where Elisha was sitting at a table, hands clasped around a cup of tea. I smiled in an attempt to reassure her, then sat down opposite her so she could see me clearly.

‘Elisha, we need to take your statement about what happened to Lexi. Do you want the BSL interpreter here?’ Forest asked as soon as we were all settled.

I was surprised at the question, but then I remembered the confusion when Elisha spoke at the house. Many deaf people speak as well as use sign language, often combining the two, and others don’t sign at all. I treated every client differently, depending on how they chose to communicate. ‘Yes, please. I don’t always understand people speaking.’

You want to speak, or you sign and I speak for you? I signed to Elisha.

She wrinkled her nose as if she were thinking, then signed, *You speak.*

I relayed this to the detectives, and Forest nodded at Singh to continue.

‘Okay, Elisha. Paige will interpret for you, and we’re videoing this interview,’ Singh began, indicating the camera. ‘Do you think you can tell us what happened?’

Elisha’s eyes darted around the room for a moment, then finally she looked at me so I could interpret Singh’s question.

I told you in the emergency text, she signed with a frown. *I found Lexi in her room. I don’t know what happened.*

‘I understand that, but we need a lot more information about what happened, now that we have an interpreter.’

I explained this to Elisha, adding in that the police needed to do it properly. Still, she looked distressed. *I don’t want to talk about it.*

I interpreted this and DI Forest sighed briefly before she replied. Didn’t she know that Elisha could read her frustration in her body language?

‘We need to hear it from you, exactly as you remember it. It’s important we find out what happened to Lexi.’

Elisha closed her eyes for a moment, then started to explain.

I woke up early and went to check on the children. There was blood on Lexi’s head, and on her bed. It was all over her. I checked, and she wasn’t breathing. Elisha looked at the floor, and I wondered why she was so defensive, what she was scared of.

‘Why don’t we start from last night,’ DC Singh suggested, his calm tone contrasting starkly with Forest’s. ‘What time did Lexi go to bed? Start from there.’

Elisha pinched the bridge of her nose, then covered her face with her hands for a moment before she responded. She was terrified.

The children went to bed at nine. They all sleep in the same room when Jaxon and Lexi are staying. We've only got two bedrooms. She glared at Forest as she signed, as if the detective inspector was somehow responsible for their lack of living space.

'How often do Jaxon and Lexi stay?' *Most weekends*.

Singh made notes as I translated. 'And when did you next go into the room?'

I checked on them every half hour, maybe every hour. Jaxon takes a long time to go to sleep, so I had to check he wasn't disturbing the girls.

'What time did he go to sleep?'

Elisha shrugged, then looked down at the floor again. Her arms were wrapped tightly around herself. It had been mild for February, but there was a chill in the room that morning.

She gave me an imploring look. *I don't think I can do this.*

I interpreted this and Forest pursed her lips. 'Give us as much information as you can, but we may still need to ask you some more questions when you've finished, if there's something else we need to know.'

For a moment I thought Elisha would refuse; she looked to the door, as if she were contemplating leaving, but eventually she nodded.

Alan went out to the pub, so I put the children to bed at nine, then went back downstairs. I kept checking on them every half hour until they were all asleep. One time I went in and Jaxon was under his bed, but he went to sleep around eleven, I think. I checked on all three of them, and Lexi was fine. I saw her mouth move as she sucked her dummy. She paused. *I went to bed then. I woke up around two, but I didn't go back into the children's room until this morning.*

'What time did Alan come home?' DI Forest asked.

Around two. That's why I woke up.

'Would you normally check on the children in the night, if you woke up?' *Maybe.*

'Did Alan check on the children when he came upstairs?'

Elisha's eyes darted to the side and she fidgeted for a moment before she replied. *Alan didn't come upstairs. We had a fight because . . . because he was really drunk. I made him sleep on the sofa.*

The two detectives exchanged looks and DC Singh made a note of this before gesturing for Elisha to continue.

She picked at her fingernails for a moment. *As soon as I got up this morning, something didn't feel right. I went to check on the children again, and Lexi was lying on her front, with her head on one side. Her hair was in her face, but I brushed it out of the way. Her eyes were open and my hand felt sticky. I could see blood on her clothes, on her bed. The back of her head was all covered in blood.* Tears slid down Elisha's face as she looked at her hands, which were shaking.

I shuddered at the memory of Lexi's body, some of the blood clearly visible from where I had been standing. I wished I could blank it out, forget what I saw, but I knew I never would. DI Forest shifted in her chair, and asked Elisha to continue.

I knew she was dead. I reached down to touch her, to make sure. That's how I got her blood all over me. Elisha sniffed and swallowed, more tears threatening to spill over. From the shape of the bloodstains on her clothes, I thought she had probably picked Lexi up and held her close.

Her face looked . . . strange, she continued. *I don't know if something happened to it, or if it was just because she was dead, but her face was the wrong shape.* She shrugged, unsure of how to express herself further. She swallowed again.

Someone did this while I was asleep. How could someone come into my house and do this? Why couldn't I have woken up? Elisha's words made me shiver at the thought of someone walking around the house, knowing they couldn't be heard. I thought she was going to carry on, but she wrapped her arms around herself again and shook her head to indicate she didn't want to say any more.

'What about Jaxon and Kasey? Did you check on them?'

It took a moment for me to get Elisha's attention, but in the end she took a shuddering breath and looked at me.

Of course I checked on them. They were both asleep. Kasey didn't wake up, but she was breathing deeply. Jaxon woke up when I touched him. He looked confused, not scared, so I don't think he saw what happened. He didn't understand what I was doing.

'Is that when you contacted the ambulance?'

Elisha nodded. *I've got the emergency SMS on my phone, see?* She dug her phone out of her pocket to show the detectives.

Singh made a note of something, then leant forward. I definitely got a good cop, bad cop vibe from those two. 'Did you tell Alan what had happened?'

When I interpreted this question, Elisha pressed her lips together so tightly half her face went white. She nodded, then her eyes flicked towards the door again.

'Was he awake?'

She shook her head, but offered no more information. Singh wrote something down, but didn't push the point.

'We want to ask you a couple of questions about Lexi now. Would that be okay?'

Wiping her eyes with the torn cuff of her jumper, she agreed.

'Did you look after her a lot, when she and Jaxon stayed over?'

Quite a bit. Alan's very busy, and I have Kasey, so I usually have the three children together.

'Have you noticed anyone behaving strangely around Lexi recently?'

Elisha frowned and shook her head. *I don't know what you mean.*

'Has there been anyone acting suspiciously, doing anything that worried you, around the children?'

No, nobody. Well . . . She paused mid-sign, and I thought she was going to carry on, but she just shook her head.

Singh looked at me, but Elisha stayed still and didn't sign anything else.

DI Forest cleared her throat. 'We need to wait until the results of the post-mortem confirm cause of death. That's why we need as much information as possible right now.'

Why would someone kill Lexi? As I interpreted this, I realised Elisha was asking me, her desperate face appealing to me for an answer to make sense of what happened. The facade she had been putting on slipped, then crumbled. She reached a hand up to her head and dug her fingers into her scalp, rocking as she sobbed. I laid a hand on her arm, but I knew I couldn't offer much comfort.

When her sobs subsided, she looked back at me again. *She was a beautiful little girl, always happy.* The tears still rolled down her cheeks, and she buried her face in her hands.

I could feel my own emotions churning. I hadn't had time to process the thought that I was working with the police as part of a murder investigation. I agreed with Elisha – surely nobody would have any reason to harm a young child?

Singh flipped back a couple of pages in his notes. 'You said that Alan slept on the sofa because you had a fight. Did he stay there all night, or did he come upstairs at all?'

Elisha glanced at the door yet again and chewed her lip for a moment. *He stayed downstairs. I don't like it when he gets really drunk, so he slept on the sofa.* She didn't make eye contact with me when she signed this, and I got the feeling she wasn't telling the truth, but I could hardly say that to the detectives. I didn't think she could take much more of this questioning. She was perched on the edge of her chair, poised for flight.

She started to sign something to me, but I was distracted by a knock on the door. A uniformed officer opened it and beckoned Singh over with an apologetic grimace. The two men bent their heads together and muttered to each other for a moment before Singh nodded and followed him out of the door.

I could see past him to where another detective was arguing with Alan Hunter, who was clearly confused and upset, waving his arms around and gesticulating in frustration. As Singh stepped out to

try to sort out the situation, Alan made eye contact with me, and he looked frantic. As the door shut behind them, Elisha began to cry again.

Chapter 3

I'm Deaf, but I'm not deaf. Growing up, I was the only hearing person in my family, which makes me Deaf with a capital D. I was always part of the Deaf community, and BSL was my first language. Being Deaf is a cultural identity, not simply a term for hearing loss. You can have full hearing and still be considered part of the Deaf community. I can't put my finger on when I started to slip into the role of family interpreter. It was the easiest way to get anything done; I translated the world for my parents and my sister, before email and texting made communication more accessible. I never intended for it to be my job, though. It was something I fell into for convenience, then never found my way back out of. Most of the time, I didn't mind it, but certain jobs made me rethink my options.

The fear in Alan's eyes as Singh had left the room set my adrenaline pumping, and when I looked down, I could see my hands trembling. Forest, Elisha and I waited in the interview room, the tension palpable. Elisha rocked on her chair, pulling her hair out of its ponytail so it fell over her face. Using her hearing aids, I wondered how much she could hear of the commotion outside the door.

After a few minutes, Singh stuck his head around the door. 'Miss Northwood, can we have your assistance, please?'

I explained to Elisha where I was going, then slipped out, heart hammering with trepidation. Calming down traumatised clients wasn't part of my remit. In the corridor, Alan sat on the floor, with his back to a wall and his knees raised. He squared his jaw and glared at Singh and the other detective who were standing over him, his eyes rimmed with red, but he didn't move.

'Mr Hunter has calmed down sufficiently, I think. Please could you explain to him that we'll take his statement as soon as we've finished with Miss Barron, then we will take both of them to stay somewhere else.'

I did as Singh asked, and Alan grunted in response. *I don't care about the statement. I want my children back. Social services can't take my children. Jaxon and Kasey are staying with me.*

Singh nodded when I had translated. 'Of course, I understand your concerns, but we have to check them over to make sure they're okay. They could have witnessed a very traumatic event. It's normal for us to contact social services when something like this happens.'

Why? Alan was tense, but I could see the pain on his face, and I understood. Someone had taken one of his children from him, and he desperately wanted to see the other two, to reassure himself.

'Mr Hunter, someone murdered one of your children only a few hours ago. It is in Jaxon and Kasey's best interests that we make sure they haven't been harmed.'

I was surprised by the tone in Singh's voice, but his stern facial expression did the trick, and Alan's head drooped. He screwed his face up; I thought he was trying not to cry.

'Now, we need to finish taking Miss Barron's statement, then we'll speak to you. DC Benson will take you back to wait in an interview room.'

I translated, and Alan nodded, so Singh and I went back into the room where Elisha and Forest waited. Elisha jumped backwards in her chair when the door opened, and looked relieved when she saw us. I wondered who she'd been expecting.

We went over Elisha's statement, and she agreed to everything. For a moment, I thought she wanted to add something, but she dropped her eyes from mine and we left the room.

The two detectives compared notes, and I was shown to a waiting area. A couple of minutes later, Elisha was also escorted in, but I didn't make eye contact with her, bending down to pull a bottle of water out of my bag. It could feel strange, ignoring a client in the middle of a job, but there was nowhere private to have a break and I desperately needed one. If it hadn't been such a horrific situation, I might

have looked for another coffee, but it didn't feel appropriate to go wandering around the station, somehow. Water would do.

I could hear the detectives muttering in the hallway, but they didn't look my way. Checking my phone, I wondered again if I should call Anna. She was a night owl like me, but it was gone ten so she'd probably be awake. I told myself I was putting it off for her sake, when really a part of me hoped she would find out from another source so I didn't have to be the bearer of such terrible news.

After waiting for about ten minutes, I got up to stretch my legs. The police station chairs weren't chosen for comfort, and I needed to get some blood flowing if I wanted to stay awake. Forest and Singh had disappeared, and I stood in the doorway and glanced down the corridor. A couple of uniformed officers were walking past, and as they did I caught a snippet of their conversation.

'. . . sick, bashing a little girl's head in like that.'

'People like that shouldn't have kids if they can't protect them. Imagine not knowing someone was in your house, in your kid's bedroom.'

The world started to spin, and I needed to grab on to the door frame for support. The PCs suddenly noticed I was there, and one stepped forward to check I was okay. I shook him off and stormed up the corridor looking for Singh and Forest. Trying several doors, I found them in an office, leaning over a desk. I was so desperate to know exactly what had happened, I didn't care if I was interrupting them.

'Is there a problem?' Forest asked, looking at Singh even though I knew she was talking to me.

'What happened in that house? What happened to Lexi? Who could have done this?' I blurted it out before thinking.

Forest's face darkened and the atmosphere became noticeably colder. 'We can't discuss the particulars of the case with you.' The set of her jaw told me she expected that to be the end of the discussion, but I couldn't just leave it there.

Breathing deeply to try and stop myself from shaking, I stepped closer to her.

'I have been thrown into this situation with no information, no warning about what I was going to hear. Thanks to your officers I've seen the body of a dead child, something that I will never forget. I need to know what happened!' I knew my voice was becoming shrill, but I didn't care any more. I trembled as the image of Lexi's battered body rose unbidden in my mind, and I took some deep breaths.

'Miss Northwood, we have already said—' Singh began, but I cut him off.

'Tell me, please!' My voice broke and I let out a strangled sob before covering my mouth with my hand.

The detectives stared at me in silence for a second before Forest took a step towards me. She was invading my personal space, but I didn't move; I wouldn't let her intimidate me. I focused on my breathing and tried to swallow down the lump in my throat.

'Miss Northwood, if you continue to overstep the boundaries, we will be forced to employ someone else. Do I make myself clear?'

The iciness of her tone brought me to my senses. Of course they couldn't tell me what happened, however much I wanted to know. Mumbling an apology, I backed down, taking a step sideways and leaning on the door. I wiped my face surreptitiously, embarrassed at losing control. Forest looked as if she was about to say something else, but Singh headed her off. He indicated for me to follow him out of the room, and the three of us walked to the interview room in silence. I found myself hoping the next interview would be quick and straightforward; the emotional strain was taking its toll on me.

Alan Hunter was a big man, and when I saw him folded into one of the chairs in the interview room, I was worried it might break. He was tall as well as stocky, with close-cut hair that was prematurely greying. I knew he was older than Elisha, but I was pretty sure he was only in his early thirties. He looked wired, his eyes bright and alert, which surprised me, considering what had happened and the fact that he'd allegedly been up late drinking then had slept on the sofa.

‘Mr Hunter, I understand this is a very upsetting and distressing experience for you, but it is important that we take your statement about what happened last night. Any information you can give us will help us to find out what happened to Lexi.’

I don’t know what happened. Maybe it was an accident.

I translated this for the detectives while Alan sat bolt upright in his chair, flexing his fingers.

‘We won’t know anything for certain about how she died until the post-mortem is complete,’ Forest said. There were dark circles beneath her eyes, and I wondered what time she’d been called out.

Alan scowled but didn’t respond, so Forest continued. ‘Where were you when Elisha discovered Lexi had died?’ He shrugged, but didn’t offer anything further.

‘You weren’t in bed,’ Singh said, trying to draw a response.

His upper lip twitching, Alan tapped his finger to his nose.

‘None of your business,’ I translated.

‘Mr Hunter, we are trying our best to help you. We want this over with as much as you do. If you don’t talk to us, it prevents us from finding out what happened.’

At this, Alan spread his hands before replying. *I went out to the pub. I’d had a bit to drink, so I decided to sleep on the sofa. Elisha gets grumpy with me if I wake her up. Happy?* I tried to convey the angry sarcasm of Alan’s body language in my tone of voice.

Singh made a note of his response. Forest looked like she’d just bitten a lemon, and I noticed her eyes narrow as she formed her next question.

‘Elisha told us that the two of you had an argument when you came home, and she refused to let you upstairs. So, which is it?’

Fine. She said I was too drunk. She was pissed off, so I slept on the sofa.

‘Did you go upstairs after she was asleep?’

No! Alan jerked forward on the chair as his anger and frustration poured out. *I know what you’re trying to say, but I would never hurt my kids.* His hands moved so fast I could barely keep up, his signing unclear because of the sheer emotion behind his words.

It’s her fault! It’s Elisha’s fault that Lexi is dead. She should have looked after her better. She should have checked on her. She was supposed to check on the children, to make sure they were okay, but she didn’t. And now Lexi is dead! And someone has taken my other children away.

Alan’s face contorted with rage, but tears flowed down his cheeks. Singh and Forest looked comical, with matching raised eyebrows, taken aback by the sudden outburst. Singh leant over to whisper something in Forest’s ear, and Alan glanced at me for a translation.

I shrugged. *Can’t hear,* I signed to him.

‘Why didn’t you check on the children yourself?’ Singh asked.

When I interpreted this for Alan, he made another jerky movement and I instinctively sat back.

I was drunk and she made me angry. I passed out on the sofa before I even thought about going to check on the kids, he replied eventually. His face fell as he realised he couldn’t put the blame on Elisha without assuming equal responsibility.

He looked up, as if something had just occurred to him. *Someone must have come into the house and killed her. A stranger. Why didn’t I wake up? How did they get into my house?* I was finding it increasingly difficult to follow his signing – I was tired and he was erratic, the worst possible combination.

‘That is a question we wanted to ask you. First it was Elisha’s fault, now it’s a stranger who just wandered off the street into your house, upstairs and into your children’s bedroom? How do you think this stranger got in? None of the doors appeared to have been forced.’ Forest couldn’t hide the scepticism she felt, and Alan could read it on her face as clearly as I could.

I don’t know! I don’t know what happened. My little girl is dead. There was a long pause before Alan shook his head. *Don’t you understand how hard this is for me? Someone was in my house, and I didn’t protect my children. I should have protected my little girl.*

I was still translating his signs when he got up and stormed out of the room, slamming the door so hard I felt the wall behind me shake.

Singh turned to Forest. 'Do you want me to go after him?' Forest stared blankly at the door for a moment, then shook her head. 'We'll bring him back in once we've got the results of the post-mortem. We can't do any more until we've got some evidence.' Singh nodded his agreement.

'With his record, we might be safer bringing him in anyway. They'd better find the murder weapon soon,' Forest muttered, glancing over the paperwork in front of her. She looked up and appeared startled when she realised I was still in the room. That wasn't unusual – people get into the swing of a conversation and forget the interpreter is there.

'Thank you, Miss Northwood, you can go. We need to speak to Laura Weston later today, though, if you're available?'

I was surprised she'd want to employ me again, after my earlier outburst, but I flashed her a professional smile and handed over my card with my mobile number on it. 'Of course. Just let me know what time.'

She nodded and I got up to leave. Singh shook my hand and ushered me to the front door.

'We understand this is a difficult situation, such a tragedy in a close-knit community. A word of warning, though. DI Forest won't put up with you speaking to her like that again,' he told me once we were outside. The meaning was clear in his voice: I could keep the job as long as I remembered why I was there. I nodded and thanked him, and he flashed me a smile before heading back into the station.

Standing at the edge of the car park for a moment, I rubbed my eyes and tried to wake myself up enough to drive home. I thought about Jaxon and Kasey, how they were coping with this, and if social services had managed to find a support worker who could sign. Maybe Jaxon had been taken back to Laura's. I couldn't imagine what it would be like for them, too young to understand what had happened to their sister.

I left the shadow of the police station behind me and walked across to my car. It was bright yellow, the only splash of colour on the grey street. Before getting in, I paused, hand on the door, and looked back. My heart picked up its pace as I realised I was being watched from the entrance to the station. I couldn't tell who the silhouette belonged to. For a moment I stood there, hoping it was someone who happened to be leaving behind me, but the figure remained motionless, facing in my direction.

After a moment, the figure pushed open the door, and I realised it was Alan Hunter. He lit a cigarette, not taking his eyes off me. It was probably coincidence that he'd followed me outside, but I shivered nonetheless. Without waiting to see if he was watching me leave, I climbed into the car and got out of there as quickly as I could.