

MY LITTLE GIRL

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DAY ONE

I spy her in her red dress, those dark waves tumbling down her back. What a happy child. Even against such a riotous backdrop of colour and sound and light, she shines.

I don't want to do this. I've never taken anything that wasn't mine to take. But there's no doubt in my mind this is what I have to do. It's the only way to balance the scales. The only way to make them pay. Why should they get the perfect family and the happy ending? It's my turn now...

CHAPTER ONE

JILL

Our faces have become stretched and distorted, our bodies thin and wavering in the glass. My seven-year-old granddaughter Beatrice and her best friend, Millie, are laughing so much, I worry they might make themselves sick. Especially after eating that enormous bag of sticky candy floss. My daughter-in-law Claire won't be happy that I've let them have so much sugar, but it's a special occasion, a treat. What's the point of being a grandparent if I can't spoil my only grandchild? I conveniently set aside the fact that it's actually my son, Oliver, who's treated them.

Oliver bought the fair tickets and gave me thirty pounds to spend on the girls, bless his heart. He was supposed to have brought Beatrice and Millie to the funfair this evening, but the poor boy has been so tired and stressed with work this week that I offered to do it for him. I know Claire has got it into her head that I can't mind my granddaughter responsibly, but I did raise my own child without any major mishaps, so I think I can just about cope. Oliver decided it would be best if we didn't actually tell Claire about it until afterwards. We'll say it was a last-minute work emergency. She's out with her friends this evening, so I'm sure she'll be nice and relaxed. She'll be fine.

She needn't have worried. Everything's going swimmingly. We're all having a wonderful time – me especially. Being here with

the girls is making me feel young again. I remember Bob and I brought Oliver to this very same fair when he was a little boy. *My Bob*. I've been utterly lost without him these past four years. That heart attack was so sudden, so cruel. We should have had so much more time together. Tears prickle behind my eyes and I give a big sniff, tell myself not to be so maudlin. I'm here with my lovely Bea, having a rare fun evening. I can't spoil it with sad thoughts.

'Granny!' Beatrice takes my hand and pulls me into another of the little chambers in this labyrinthine hall of mirrors. Disconcertingly, the walls are jet black in this room, making it hard to gauge exactly how large the space is. Beatrice's mahogany hair is swinging, her dark eyes flashing. She looks like a little Spanish dancer in her red dress with frills around the hem, and her matching sparkly red sandals. Thankfully, she's always loved to wear swirly dresses and bright colours, unlike her friends who all seem to go for today's dreadfully boring fashion of jeans and leggings and those atrocious dark-coloured hoodies. *No*, my little Bea is gloriously extrovert and colourful, just like me.

I smooth my hands over my turquoise paisley wrap-dress and pat my long wavy hair, greying now, but still a hint of the glossy brunette I used to be. I glance up and join in the peal of Beatrice and Millie's laughter as we clown around in front of a mirror that takes up the whole of one wall. It's widened our bodies so that we appear to be almost square.

I'm thrilled the girls are having such a marvellous time. Maybe after this evening Claire will realise that I'm perfectly capable of looking after my own flesh and blood. I wish my daughter-in-law and I got along better. I really, genuinely do. I've tried and tried, but she's so spiky, so dismissive. I get the feeling that she just tolerates me.

'Granny, your phone's ringing,' Beatrice reaches into my handbag and pulls out my mobile phone, passing it to me.

'You've got good hearing,' I tell my granddaughter. 'I can't believe you heard that above all the noise in here.'

Beatrice and Millie giggle and race over to the mirror on the far wall. I peer at my phone screen to see a missed call from Laurel, my ex-daughter-in-law, Oliver's first wife. I'll call her back later.

'Wait for me, girls!' I hurry after them, my phone still in my hand, but it starts vibrating. It's Laurel again. I suppose it must be urgent if she's trying a second time. 'Girls,' I call, 'I'm just going to take this call. Stay where I can see you.'

'Don't worry, Granny!'

I slide the icon across the screen. 'Laurel?'

'Jill.'

'Hi, Laurel. Everything okay? You'll have to speak up. I'm at the fair with Beatrice. The music's too loud to hear anything properly.' I glance up to see the girls pulling silly faces at their wobbly reflections and I can't help smiling. A family with young children bustle past and I'm forced to move over so I don't lose sight of my two.

'Sorry, Jill. You're busy. I'll let you go.' Laurel's voice is steeped in gloom.

'No, it's fine,' I reassure, 'I can chat for a moment or two.'

'Are you sure?'

'Yes, of course.'

Beatrice beckons to me to follow them into the next chamber. I edge past the family and a gaggle of raucous teenagers, anxious not to lose sight of my young charges. The next chamber is as bright as the previous one was dark, with wide red-and-white-striped walls giving the impression we're inside a stick of rock or a candy cane. It's busier in here, and Beatrice is almost camouflaged, her scarlet dress the same shade of red as the walls.

'Did you say you're at the fair?' Laurel asks.

'Yes, with Beatrice and her friend. I thought I mentioned it to you yesterday.'

'Maybe. I can't remember. No Oliver?'

'No. Claire's out with friends and Oliver's tired, so I offered.'

‘And Claire’s okay with that? With you taking Beatrice?’

I hear the scepticism in Laurel’s voice and I get a sudden urge to defend Claire.

‘She doesn’t know yet, but she’ll be fine.’ I do feel slightly guilty that Laurel knows my relationship with Claire isn’t exactly the best in the world. I mean, I love my daughter-in-law, of course I do, she’s Beatrice’s mother. But I’ve always clicked more with Laurel. It’s a personality thing. And I suppose I haven’t quite come to terms with the fact that Laurel and Oliver are no longer together. Even though it’s been over eight years since they divorced, Laurel and I stayed friends. ‘Is everything okay?’

‘I’m just feeling a bit... down. My flatmates are always out having fun, my art isn’t selling enough to let me give up my shifts at the restaurant. I’m just calling to moan. Sorry. I’ll go.’

‘Oh, Laurel. You know you can have a moan whenever you like.’ I feel sorry for her. She hasn’t moved on from Oliver. Never met anyone new that she stuck with – or who’s stuck with her. I feel it’s the least I can do to be an ear for her when she needs it.

‘Thanks, Jill. I don’t know what I’d do without your friendship.’

I realise that I’ve lost sight of the girls for a moment. ‘Hang on a sec, Laurel. I just need to...’ I take the phone from my ear and glance around the room, the wavering reflections merging with the sudden crowd of visitors. I catch glimpses of red that make my heart skitter with relief, until I realise it’s just the candy-striped wallpaper, or someone’s T-shirt. Suddenly, I’m very hot and very cold all at once.

‘Beatrice!’ I cry, my voice tremulous and thin. ‘Bea!’

A few people turn to stare, but I don’t make eye contact. I’m too busy scanning the room. They’ve probably just gone into the next room. I need to calm down.

‘Are you okay?’ A young woman touches my arm, her brown eyes filled with worry.

‘My... my granddaughter and her friend. They’re only seven. I can’t see where they are... Beatrice! Millie!’

‘Oh. We’ll help look. Don’t worry. What do they look like?’

‘Beatrice has dark hair, a red dress. Millie...’ What does Millie look like? *Focus, Jill*. ‘She’s got dark-brown hair and she’s wearing grey leggings and a T-shirt with a picture of a dog. You know, those little dogs with the squashed faces.’

‘A pug?’

‘Yes. Yes that’s it.’

‘Is that her?’

I look to where the woman is pointing, and feel my shoulders grow light with relief as I spot Millie pulling faces in one of the mirrors. ‘Oh, thank goodness. That’s her friend, Millie. Thank you.’ I smile at the woman who says something comforting and gives a little laugh. If Millie’s over there, then Beatrice can’t be too far away.

I remember Laurel’s still on the phone which I’m clutching tightly, my palm now slippery with sweat. I bring it back to my ear. ‘Sorry, Laurel, I’ve got to go. I’ll call you back, okay?’

‘Is everything—’ She’s still speaking as I end the call. I’ll apologise later, but right now I can’t relax until I’ve laid eyes on my granddaughter. I stride over to Millie who glances up with a shy smile.

‘Having fun?’

She nods.

‘Where’s Beatrice?’

‘She’s...’ Millie frowns and looks to her left, and then to her right. She turns and scans the room. The hot and cold feeling returns, along with a loud and juddering heartbeat.

‘Millie.’ I take hold of her shoulders. ‘Which way did she go?’

Her face pales. ‘I don’t know.’

I take the girl’s hand and head to the next room of mirrors, the walls a kaleidoscope of colour. It’s full of families and friends laughing, the music is pounding, the air stifling. There’s no sign of Beatrice. Perhaps she went back to the previous room. I almost

drag Millie with me and we push our way back through the crowded candy-striped room and into the black room once again. My worried, distorted reflections loom back at me.

'Beatrice!' I cry, my voice not powerful enough to cut through the laughter and the music. 'Beatrice! Where are you?' Maybe she went outside. It's so hot in here, she probably needed some fresh air.

'Still looking for your granddaughter?' I whirl around and see the face of the young woman I spoke to a moment ago.

'I can't find her!'

'Don't worry. She'll be here somewhere. Age seven, dark hair, red dress, right?'

I nod. *It'll be okay. She'll be fine.* I'm sure I'm panicking over nothing. I remember losing sight of Oliver when he was just a little younger than Beatrice. It was in a department store and he was hiding among a rack of winter coats. Little scamp. I got the store to put out an announcement over the tannoy. Scared me silly at the time. This will be the same thing. Of course it will.

Millie and I quickly scour each room in the hall of mirrors before stumbling outside into the warm evening sunshine. Millie is crying now, big gulping sobs and fat tears that slide down her face. I should comfort her, but I can barely see straight, barely breathe. I scan the area, but there's no sign of my granddaughter.

She's not in there.

She's not out here.

Where is she? She can't have just disappeared into thin air. I'm sure she must be somewhere nearby. She has to be.

How will I tell Oliver and Claire that I've lost our darling Beatrice? *They'll never, ever forgive me.*