"Brilliantly unsettling" SARAH CROSSAN

WRATH

MARCUS SEDGWICK



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Barrington Stoke

For Peter

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CHAPTER 1
SPRITES

Thursday, 7 July, 6.30 p.m.

Cassie has now been missing for six hours.

Officially missing that is. It's been six hours since her parents went to the police. The police made a statement asking for information, any information, from *anyone* who might have seen *anything*. But no one really knows how long Cassie was missing before those six hours … The question isn't as simple as it might seem.

It's Thursday, 7 July. No one has seen Cassie since Wednesday. Everyone just *thought* they knew where she was. Her parents assumed she was at home, upstairs in her room, after she'd come back from rehearsal. So it's hard to say

when Cassie really went missing. And I have realised something else: in some ways, she'd already gone missing way, way before all this.

Cassie Cotton. Always a bit different.

You might ask: different from what? Or different from who? And I can only tell you: just *different*. I'm no good at this sort of stuff – describing people, telling stories.

Start at the beginning – that's what everyone tells you. So many people say it. Just start at the beginning of the story. But who knows where the beginning of anything really is?

And with Cassie, there are a thousand places to start, and some of them go back weeks and some go back months. Maybe one place to begin in Cassie's story would be four and a half billion years ago, when the Earth was formed. Or to be precise, a short time after this, when the first atmosphere formed. Because it was then that lightning began to strike, crackling strange red electricity into the space between the heavens and the surface of the Earth.

I told you I'm no good at telling stories.

I'll start about six weeks ago. That was when Cassie told me about the sound.

Only six weeks, but a lot can happen in six weeks. Almost as much as can happen in four and a half billion years. It was during lockdown – the last one, before the start of the summer holidays. The lockdown that seemed to go on for ever, during which we all did nothing, when it seemed the whole world was holding its breath.

No, that's not right. At least, that's not how Cassie thought of it. She believed all the *people* in the world were holding their breath, but the world *itself*? The world itself was breathing.

Breathing, slow and deep.

That's what Cassie told me, and she told me how she knew it was breathing.

She'd heard it.

*

You remember? How strict it was during that lockdown? No going out, no going out for *anything*. Stuck at home, day after day, night after night.

Get up. Breakfast. Schoolwork. Dad would make lunch. More schoolwork for me while Dad phoned places trying to find a job of some kind. Then Dad and I would watch TV. Or maybe I'd practise my drums in the garage till one of the neighbours phoned Dad and he'd tell me I had to stop.

Again.

When I put my drumsticks down, all I'd hear was the silence of a town under lockdown. I could actually hear the silence. It wasn't natural. It was almost spooky.

I would go back into the house. Dad would give me a kiss and mess my hair up, and I'd shove him off.

Then he'd say, "Go to bed, Fitz."

And then, that one night six weeks ago, something different happened: my phone pinged.

It was Cassie.

What are you doing?

Sleeping, I messaged back.

Clearly, Cassie replied. I could imagine that teasing look in her eyes as she thumbed at her

phone. Somehow she had this look – I mean, she *has* this look. Cassie can tease you without smiling. She just does it with her eyes. She never smiles. At least, if she does smile, I've never seen it.

Before I could answer, another message came:

Been practising?

I was, I told her, **until the neighbours complained. Again. Surprised you can't hear me from where you are**.

That might have been stretching things. Cassie lives on the other side of the park from us. Her house backs onto it, just like ours does, but it's a big park. And our two sides of the park are *worlds* away from each other. Worlds away.

I'd be happy if I could hear you, Cassie replied. **Anything to drown out that sound**.

What sound? I replied.

That humming. You can't hear it?

What humming? I asked.

Seriously – you can't hear that?

Hear what?! I messaged again.

There was no reply for a few minutes. I thought, *God, I've gone and upset her somehow*. I tried to tell myself not to be so paranoid. Then I wondered why Cassie was messaging me in the middle of the night.

In my mind I imagined walking across the park, in the dark, from my house to hers. We weren't really that far apart, but in lockdown Cassie might as well have been on the far side of the moon.

I wondered if she was only sending messages to *me* late at night or if she was messaging George and Francis too – the other members of our band. Just as I was wondering that, my phone pinged again.

Never mind, said Cassie's message.

I didn't know what to reply and I felt stupid. *Think of something to say*, I told myself. *Why aren't you funnier?* Like George. People like funny people.

Then there was another ping.

I've been talking to the guys, Cassie texted.

So it wasn't just me she'd been messaging. I felt emptier inside.

Cassie messaged again.

Wanna try a new sort of sound?

Sure, I replied. I mean, I'm only the drummer, right? And I had no idea, really, but I wasn't about to say, **No, Cassie, I don't want to try a new sort of sound**.

Neat, she said. **I've been working on some stuff**.

At least someone's made use of lockdown, I replied, which I thought was pretty funny. I waited for a reply, but I didn't get one.

She'd gone.

I turned the light off and lay there in the dark. I tried to hear the sound Cassie had talked about – the humming noise. I couldn't hear anything, apart from that endless silence – if you can hear silence.

I wondered what Cassie had meant by a new sound, and how Francis was going to like that. Francis is in my year at school and he started the band. He made himself lead singer. He named it. *Scott*, he called the band, because his surname is

Scott. It's a terrible name, but no one could come up with anything better. So Francis said anyway.

Francis knew George played a bit of bass, knew I'd got a new drum kit for Christmas. When I say "new" drum kit, I don't mean brand new. I mean new *to me*. It was second-hand of course, but I told Dad I loved it just as much as if it had been brand new, and that was true.

I haven't forgotten Dad's face when he rolled up the garage door that Christmas morning ...

We were both shivering in our dressing gowns in the street looking like idiots. Dad shouted, "Ta-daa! Your new kit!"

His face was all excited, but nervous too, in case I didn't like the present. I could see that, and I was all ready to put on an act and say, *Yeah, Dad, I love it*. But I didn't have to act. It was brilliant.

So about eighteen months ago, Francis came up to me and George one day after school. He said he was forming a band and he needed players. Francis was going to write the lyrics and sing. And he asked if we knew any guitarists.

George said, “There’s a girl in S4 who plays guitar. But she’s weird. That’s what my brother says.”

Francis looked thoughtful. “Oh yeah, her name’s Cassie something …”

“Cassie Cotton,” I said.

George and Francis both looked at me.

“My dad did some work for her parents,” I explained, shrugging.

This was true. Dad used to be the manager of a print shop on the high street and Cassie’s parents had ordered a load of leaflets to be printed for one of their campaigns. Her parents founded and run a charity called Green Scotland, which raises awareness of local environmental issues – organises protests and stuff like that. They’re a big deal around here.

“I’ll ask Cassie tomorrow,” said Francis, and that was how the band was formed.

So I was lying in bed, wondering what Cassie meant by “a new sound”, and how Francis was going to like that. Our band had been playing

together for a year or so. A bit more than that maybe, but the lockdowns interrupted it a lot. When school was open, we rehearsed in the music room and I used the school's drum kit, which isn't as good as mine. In fact it's a piece of rubbish, but I couldn't take my drums to school twice a week.

Then I started thinking about Cassie again, and wondered why she'd ended our text conversation so abruptly. There one second, gone the next. No goodbye.

As I lay in bed, there was something I didn't yet know. Because, not long after Cassie heard that sound, she told me that she was going to disappear. And the thing that haunts me is this: I didn't believe her.