PROOF

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Toll House.indd 1 17/01/2022 10:35 am

Toll House.indd 2 17/01/2022 10:35 am

THE TOLL HOUSE

CARLY REAGON



Toll House.indd 3 17/01/2022 10:35 am

SPHERE

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Dedication to come

Toll House.indd 5 17/01/2022 10:35 am

1

TWELVE MONTHS AGO

The house was further away from the town than Kelda had expected, a mile or so along the Old Turnpike Road. She'd spied it from a distance, a darker smudge against the dull green-brown of the autumn fields.

'It's over there!' Dylan pointed from the back seat of the car, telling her what she already knew.

Apart from the house and a wood behind, the landscape was featureless. A landscape she wanted to love but which left her feeling cold. All this space: the streams and little ditches, the flat fields used for growing cabbages and potatoes, the dead straight road. She fought the instinct to make a U-turn back into town, ring the estate agent and say she'd changed her mind. But after the effort of finding the place, she knew she couldn't do that. It was all she could afford, the leftovers from

Toll House.indd 1 17/01/2022 10:35 am

savings she'd put aside for university, five years living at home and working flat-out in Tesco.

They parked beneath a shuttered bay window and got out, stretching their legs from the journey.

Dylan wrinkled his nose. 'The house doesn't look very happy.'

'What do you mean?' Although she knew *exactly* what Dylan meant. The photos on Rightmove had been deceptive, taken in a better light. The front of the house was dirty and there were weeds sprouting from the mortar. But it was more than that. There was something not quite right, something she couldn't pinpoint.

'It looks like it's crying.'

'Old houses often look like that,' she said, pushing the feeling aside. 'It just needs some TLC, that's all.'

The house sat squarely on the road, an old toll house from the time when the route had been busy. She could still read the tolls for various horse- or mule-drawn vehicles stamped in black metal above the bay window. Nowadays, the main road into Stonebridge – the town she couldn't quite see from here because of another larger wood – cut through the fields on the other side of the river, winding through an industrial estate. It was hard to imagine the Old Turnpike Road as it had been, busy with carts and carriages and horses spreading muck.

She glanced at the empty road, instinctively reaching for Dylan's hand.

Dylan pulled back. 'Mum!' he pouted. 'I'm not a baby anymore. I'm almost six.'

'Exactly,' she said. '*Only* six.'

'Can we go and get ice cream now?'

'Not until the estate agent arrives. Then I promise you, ice cream. Come on, let's explore the garden.'

Toll House.indd 2 17/01/2022 10:35 am

They followed a path around the side of the house to the back. It was far from grand, smaller even than the house they'd shared with Mum, but perhaps that added to its charm, made it more homely? She peered through a narrow window into what seemed to be a kitchen: a sink with a dusty bottle of Fairy Liquid, a cupboard set in the wall, doorways leading off on either side. She tried to imagine living here, away from Mum and her childhood town, away from the job she hated. A new life with her own rules.

Behind her, Dylan was balancing on the pile of stones near the path.

'Look at me!' he shouted, wobbling. He spread his arms wide and sailed into the grass.

'Careful,' she said, smiling.

She crossed the path onto the lawn. Everything was unkempt: tangled bushes, shin-high grass, weeds instead of flowerbeds. But at least it was enclosed. She imagined Dylan playing here, splashing in a paddling pool or racing across the lawn with his Batman figures. She climbed onto the stones and looked over the garden wall. Apart from the small wood behind the field at the back, it was the same stark landscape as everywhere else.

When they'd finished exploring, they sat on the lawn, enjoying the early autumn sunshine and playing rock-paper-scissors until Dylan got bored. She plucked the long grass whilst Dylan hunted for sticks, thinking of the new job she'd found advertised on the internet, PA for a small market research company. She'd applied on a whim, not thinking she'd get it, but she'd been offered it there and then at the interview.

'Mum! Look over here!' Dylan was trying to prise something out of the wall, levering it with his stick. An earthenware pot, wedged in a crevice.

Toll House.indd 3 17/01/2022 10:35 am

She pulled herself up, lethargic, like time had slowed down. Her limbs felt heavy. A feeling she could sleep right there if she allowed herself to. But Dylan was insistent. 'Come on, Mum.'

'Here, let me.' She walked towards him and wriggled the pot back and forth, getting dust on her hands, freeing it with a jolt.

'What is it?' he said.

The lid was crawling with spiders. Trying not to flinch, she lifted it off and laid the pot on the grass.

Blank eyes stared back at her. Perfect whites.

She gasped, drawing her hands away, almost toppling the pot.

'What is it?' Dylan tugged at her sleeve.

'Nothing.' She shook her head and looked again. 'It's just a pile of pebbles. For a moment, I thought . . . ' An odd feeling crept over her: there was someone there, someone watching them crouched on the grass. She drew an arm around Dylan and surveyed the empty garden.

'Thought what?' Dylan said. He dug his hands into the pot, the pebbles rippling through his fingers.

'Nothing. I'm just being silly.' The feeling deepened. A stirring in the pit of her stomach. Not some*one* but some*thing*. The house. It seemed to want her, need her, like it had claimed her already. Perhaps this is what it meant to call a place home? She looked across at the dull windows and crumbling brickwork. The house wasn't perfect, far from it in fact, but it could be hers. *Theirs.* And no one else's.

A creak as the garden gate swung open. She jumped up, stifling a cry. Behind them, on the path, was a man in a suit. 'Miss Johnson?'

She relaxed – it was just the estate agent, it *had* just been

Toll House.indd 4 17/01/2022 10:35 am

the estate agent – and dusted herself down. 'That's right. Call me Kelda. And this is Dylan.'

The estate agent beamed as he crossed the lawn.

'Pleased to meet you,' he said, ruffling Dylan's hair. 'Right young man, shall we take a look inside?'

2



1863

The silence is unnerving, a deadly hush, not even the hoot of owls in the wood. I climb the stairs, lantern raised high, watching my shadow as it dances along the banister. There's a stillness in the air, thick with the heat of late summer, only the flickering of moths in the shadowy light. I run up the last few steps and across the landing, throwing wide the bedroom door.

The midwife spins towards me. 'You should not be in here.'

I push past her to the bed, catching my feet on the clothes on the floor. My wife lies silently in a heap of twisted linen, her eyes shut tight as if she is praying.

Fear grips my chest. 'Why is she quiet?'

The midwife wipes her brow; the hours of attending to my wife have taken their toll.

Toll House.indd 6 17/01/2022 10:35 am

'She needs cutting, that's why. The poor girl's exhausted. The shoulder's stuck. Look here.' She picks up a knife and points it at Bella's legs. There are marks on her thighs and darkness between them on the sheets. I had not realised the business of childbirth was quite so bloody.

I take hold of Bella's hand and squeeze it tight. No response. 'Hurry to the town,' I say, setting the lantern on the table. 'Fetch Dr Marsh.'

'Dr Marsh? That charlatan? I wouldn't trust him with my life, not with all his books and his grand ideas.'

'Good God, look at her! She needs a medical man. Someone with experience, with knowledge.'

'It's a mile and a half to the doctor's house. I've done the cutting before.'

A moan from the bed. Bella's eyes flick open, latching on to mine. A tremor of understanding. I reach over, snatch the knife from the midwife and hurl it at the wall.

'Now,' I scream. 'For God's sake, go now!'

'Sir, I must insist!'

'Damn you, woman. She's dying!'

The midwife crosses the room, drops her bloody apron in a heap, then gives me one last look before disappearing into the darkness.

'Bella!' I kneel beside the bed, brushing away the herbs laid on the pillows, sweeping a pile of white pebbles to the floor. A tinkle as they land. 'I am here. Do not be afraid!'

Bella moans almost imperceptibly, her cheeks the colour of milk. 'Please,' she whispers, little more than a breath. 'Please . . . I need . . . '

'Do not fret. She is gone and I am here. Your husband.' I reach for her hand.

Toll House.indd 7 17/01/2022 10:35 am

'But the midwife . . . Where is the midwife?'

'Shush. Shush. Calm yourself. It is not such a bad thing, calling the doctor at a time like this.' My eyes stray to the herbs scattered on the floor; how much Bella trusts her own medicines. I squeeze her fingers. 'You cannot always rely on your herbs, my love.'

She sinks back into the pillow, her eyelids closing. I think of all the times I've watched her, running her hands over her swollen belly, wonder shining in her eyes at the life within. After all her losses, it's the one hope she clings to. She will do anything, *anything*, to protect this child.

The minutes slip by. Her hand grows clammy in mine. The silence deepens, only the occasional tremulous sigh. At last, I hear the clop of a horse outside.

I kiss Bella's damp forehead. 'He is here! Dr Marsh!'

The lantern light jumps ahead of me as I run down to greet him. 'Thank the Good Lord you are come.'

The doctor ties up his horse and follows me gravely into the house, swinging his bag. When he sees Bella, he frowns. 'You should have called me sooner.' He gets to work, lifting the hem of the shift that is hitched above her waist, grabbing hold of the baby's head. It's an unearthly thing, hairless and shiny with fluid.

'Go downstairs,' he says without taking his eyes away. 'Fetch me more water.'

I pick up an upturned basin from the floor and hurry down to the garden. It takes an age, lowering the bucket into the well, pulling it back up again. The sky is speckled with stars, but the house at my back is dark and brooding. Bella's blanched face swims in my mind as I slosh the water from the bucket into the basin, then stumble back inside, careless in my haste.

Toll House.indd 8 17/01/2022 10:35 am

Water spills over the rim and splashes on the floorboards as I carry it through the house and up the stairs.

The bedroom has changed in the short time I've been gone. The stench is worse. The stillness near complete. Only the doctor's heavy breathing punctuates the quiet. I watch as he slides his fingers further beneath my wife's taut skin, expecting her to cry out, to protest. But she doesn't. She doesn't say anything. This time, she makes no sound at all.

Something snaps.

The baby slips from Bella's body like an eel, trailing its long silver cord and landing in the doctor's lap. He rubs it for signs of life, but there's no cry. No shuddering breath. Silently, he wipes his blood-bathed hands on a rag, then picks up the baby and carries it to Bella.

'I'm sorry,' he says, shaking his head as he feels for her pulse. 'It's as I feared. The strain was too much for both of them.'

I push the doctor aside, his words making no sense. 'Bella!' I shake her roughly, lifting her shoulders up off the sodden sheets.

Bella's mouth is open, but there is still no sound.

'My love.' The words choke in my throat as the truth jolts through me. My eyes flit to the baby at her side, laid in the crook of her elbow, its skin like curd. 'Please, don't leave me. Not like this. Not before our time is done.' I climb up next to her, not caring what the doctor thinks.

I close my eyes, shutting out the room, but it's still there in my mind. Not Bella but Ma, the night they laid her out; the same bed, the same dark covers, the same yellowed sheets. I remember Pa bending over me and lifting me away, his rough hands digging into my sides. But I wouldn't go, not that easily. I was only a child at the time, but I clung onto the body with all my might. They had to prise my fingers from her clothing, one by one.

Toll House.indd 9 17/01/2022 10:35 am

I nuzzle into Bella, drinking her in, smelling the sweat on her skin and the grease in her hair, feeling the lingering warmth of her body through the thin weave of her shift.

Midnight slides towards morning.

Doors open and close. Words are spoken, soft as feathers. There is movement of pillows and linen and blankets. The lantern is long extinguished. A breeze from the window. The heady smell of late August.

Dr Marsh rouses me. Bella is tidied up and the baby is nowhere to be seen. The doctor looks tired. Red eyes, face as white as paper, his hands scrubbed clean of her blood.

'You need to let her go,' he says. He turns to the window, to the sound of coach wheels rattling towards the tollgate. 'There is work to do. It is time to start the day.'

Toll House.indd 10 17/01/2022 10:35 am