

# The Lost Finch

By  
MJ Birkett

First Published in Great Britain in 2022

Copyright © MJ Birkett Publishing.

All characters in this publication are fictitious and any resemblance to real persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental.

Paperback ISBN 978-1-8384489-9-8

MJ Birkett Publishing: Salisbury

[mark@mjbirkett.com](mailto:mark@mjbirkett.com)

For Mum

|                                                                     |     |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------|-----|
| Part 1 — Scarlet .....                                              | 4   |
| Chapter 1 — Baby Scarlet, 4 weeks old (1980s, Gadsby Street) .....  | 5   |
| Chapter 2 — Baby Scarlet, 0 weeks old (1980s, Hospital).....        | 32  |
| Chapter 3 — Adult Scarlet (2000s, Cemetery).....                    | 37  |
| Chapter 4 — Baby Scarlet, 1 week old (1980s, Gadsby Street) .....   | 43  |
| Chapter 5 — Adult Lilly (1990s, Court) .....                        | 57  |
| Chapter 6 — Baby Scarlet, 2 weeks old (1980s, Pub).....             | 61  |
| Chapter 7 — Adult Scarlet & Nick (2000s, Hakasan Restaurant) .....  | 68  |
| Chapter 8 — Adult Lilly (1990s, Brothel).....                       | 77  |
| Chapter 9 — Baby Scarlet, 3 weeks old (1980s, Higham Lane).....     | 80  |
| Chapter 10 — Adult Scarlet (2000s, Lambeth College) .....           | 98  |
| Chapter 11 — Baby Scarlet, 4 weeks old (1980s, Gadsby Street) ..... | 104 |
| Part 2 — Summer .....                                               | 109 |
| Chapter 12 — Uncle Nick (2000s, Maternity Ward) .....               | 110 |
| Chapter 13 — Aunty Lilly (1990s, Turbine Crescent) .....            | 120 |
| Chapter 14 — Uncle Nick (2000s, City Police Station) .....          | 124 |
| Chapter 15 — Aunty June (1980s, Ivan’s Bedroom).....                | 133 |
| Chapter 16 — Nanny Evelyn (1980s, School) .....                     | 144 |
| Chapter 17 — Aunty Lilly (1990s, Turnpike Crescent) .....           | 155 |
| Chapter 18 — Uncle Nick (2000s, Benson Tower) .....                 | 159 |
| Chapter 19 — Aunty Fran (1980s, Marston Lane) .....                 | 169 |
| Chapter 20 — Pam (1990s, Quaglino’s Restaurant).....                | 178 |
| Chapter 21 — Aunty June (1980s, Churchyard) .....                   | 190 |
| Chapter 22 — Baby Summer (2000s, Harvester).....                    | 194 |
| Chapter 23 — Nanny Evelyn, Part 1 (2000s, Gadsby Street).....       | 206 |
| Chapter 24 — Adult Summer (2020s, Cannes).....                      | 217 |
| Chapter 25 — Nanny Evelyn, Part 2 (2000s, Gadsby Street).....       | 223 |

## **Part 1 — Scarlet**

## Chapter 1 — Baby Scarlet, 4 weeks old (1980s, Gadsby Street)

Francis Finch rested her bike against the depot wall and nipped into the warehouse to pick items: sachets of tea, sugar, and cereal. Toilet-rolls, toothpaste, and bubble-bath. Everything the old biddies needed. She dumped the items in her basket and set off.

‘Thanks for covering Gina’s shift,’ the gaffer said, staring at her legs as she cycled away, pressing the pedals fast.

The town drifted by and her body warmed, fighting against the brisk chill. First stop. She wiped the sweat from her forehead while pushing her bike between two terraced houses. A cut-through lane.

She mounted the bike against the brick wall, jamming the handle into the drainpipe. She knocked, but let herself in without waiting for an invitation. ‘Hello, Mrs Elliot? It’s Francis Finch. Gina’s still off sick, so you’ve got me again. I’ve got your items. Mrs Elliot?’

Fran placed the shopping on the kitchen counter and meandered into the house. ‘Mrs Elliot?’

‘Oh, hello dear. Sorry, I wasn’t paying attention. Look at this precious baby,’ Mrs Elliot said, rocking a tiny newborn from the comfort of her armchair. One month old. Fran smelt its warm flesh before she saw its scrunched-up face, and as its features came into view, she radiated the largest smile, inducing colour into her pale cheeks. ‘These are my neighbours, Joe and Sally.’

‘Nice to meet you,’ Fran said, lowering herself beside the armchair, ready to coo the newborn. Mrs Elliot lifted the baby, gesturing for Fran to take her. ‘If you’re sure?’ Politeness.

Mrs Elliot and her neighbours insisted Fran have a cuddle. The baby passed over.

‘Oh, you are a little sweetheart. Aren’t you? Yes, you are. Yes, you are,’ Fran said, the infant gripping her finger with its entire hand. She leant into her forehead and inhaled. New baby smell. ‘You must be so proud. She’s gorgeous.’

‘She is. But sadly, she’s not ours,’ Sally McGuinness said, sitting in the armchair opposite and reaching for a cashew nut from the little bowl resting on the coffee table.

‘Joe and Sally are foster carers. They look after unwanted little babies until the council finds them a proper home,’ Mrs Elliot said, attempting to stand. ‘Do you want a cup of tea, Francis, dear?’

‘That’s my job,’ Fran said, her trance with the baby breaking as she remembered she was at work. ‘I’ve left your items on the counter. Let me make you a cup of tea and pop them away.’

‘Sit down.’

Mrs Elliot patted Fran on the back and shuttled past in her old lady slippers. ‘I’ll sort it. Not dead yet. And besides, you’ve got your hands full. Sit down, duck. Enjoy the baby.’

Mrs Elliot flopped her hand at the sofa. ‘Take a break while you can. You’re rushed off your feet.’

Fran would usually protest, insist on making the tea while Mrs Elliot argued back. The charade would continue for a few rounds, and then Mrs Elliot would surrender. Fran provided company as well as delivering bits and pieces. But with the tiny baby in her arms, professionalism melted. She sank into the sofa beside Joe and abandoned her sense of duty.

‘You don’t think of babies in foster care. People imagine teenagers. Children. Do you get many?’ Fran said.

Sally had filled her mouth with cashew nuts. Her hand covered her mouth, and she animated chomping to excuse the lack of immediate

response. Joe stepped in. 'Not too many babies. Mostly young children and teenagers, as you say, but we've had three or four. Over the years.'

'Four!'

The cashews were gone, freeing Sally McGuinness to speak. 'I remember each. I know I'm not their mum, but each baby is unique. Unforgettable. Well, to a mother-figure, anyway. Joe's brilliant, but they're all the same to him.'

She leant forward to squeeze his knee and kiss his cheek, an advantage to there not being much room between the floral sofa and armchair.

'It's true. Nappies. Lots of nappies. Even more milk,' Joe said, reaching out his hand to let the baby resting in Fran's arms squeeze his finger. She thought him a kind man.

'Do you find it hard to let them go?'

'Never pleasant, but there's compensatory joy. With babies, you know there will be a happy ending,' Sally McGuinness said, grinning. 'She's taken to you.'

She admired the natural way Fran handled the baby. 'She's been a crier. More so than usual,' she added, cupping her hand in the bowl of cashews and scooping another bundle.

' "Happy ending?" ' Fran said, repeating Sally's phrase while flooding the baby with more smiles and silly nods.

'There are plenty eager to adopt an innocent baby. It's almost certain she'll end up with a loving couple who'll spoil her rotten. The older kids, though. They break your heart. People think they're too troubled. They go from home to home. Town to town. I think her mum—' Sally switched from generalisations and spoke about the infant in Fran's arms. '—She must have known at some intuitive level it was better to act quickly.'

Sally placed another cashew into her mouth, sucking out a little of its sweetness before she crunched.

‘Did you know her mum?’ Fran asked.

‘Not personally,’ Sally said with the single cashew in her mouth. ‘Teenager—’ she moved another cashew nut toward her mouth. ‘—Nurses said she already had a baby, and they hadn’t bonded. Apparently, she thought it’d be better to give this one over before it got too late. Tragic really. Poor girl.’

Fran’s arms steeled around the bundle of warmth on her lap. ‘Do you know where the girl’s from?’ She said.

‘Here. They avoid transferring babies too far away for their first few weeks in case circumstances change. The policy is to allow the mothers to take them back if they reconsider. But from experience, it rarely happens.’

Sally continued chatting away, but Fran entered a trance.

‘Your tea, love,’ Mrs Elliot said, re-entering the room and placing two cups of tea in lilac mugs on the coffee table. She stood in front of the small gas fire boxed to the wall. Fran barely noticed her presence. Her mind blocked the immediate sense of the room. Its flowery furniture, shaggy carpet and chintzy ornaments. Sally’s chatter blurred into background noise, emanating from somewhere much further away. Mrs Elliot’s colourful cardigan dulled into low resolution charcoal. Her heart repeated a strapline. *She is your niece.*

‘Are you ok, love?’

The room quietened as Sally, Joe, and Mrs Elliot picked up something was wrong. They each stared at Fran. Sally nudged Joe’s knee with her own. He drew forward and reached out to withdraw the baby, which triggered Fran to lock her arms. It led to an awkward altercation. Joe’s forearm pressed on her wrists, but Fran did not loosen. Mrs Elliot gasped.

‘Francis, love!’ she said, her upper body bending over the coffee table. Her hands waving in Fran’s face. Fran was a lovely, rational lady. This wasn’t her. ‘Francis, dear!’

Mrs Elliot increased the volume of her voice as Joe attempted to remove the baby again. ‘Francis, come on now, dear. Mr McGuinness needs her back. Francis!’

‘Please, let me hold her. Just a little longer.’

Fran’s grip remained hard, but a softness crept into her voice. It eased Sally and Joe’s anxiety. A little.

‘We’re just a tad worried, love. You’re distracted,’ Sally said, releasing the couple of cashew nuts from her hand onto the coffee table, and then raising her palms to signal Joe could ease up, at least a little.

He leant into the sofa, not relaxed but posturing as if he were.

‘I’m sorry for scaring you, but I won’t hurt her. I’m not like that,’ Fran said, keeping her eyes on the baby.

‘Oh, love. I didn’t think for a second you would hurt her,’ Sally said, even though she didn’t believe it. She had experience of diffusing these situations. Assert trust. De-stress the person. Help them transition into a rational headspace and get them to comply with small reasonable requests. She continued to speak, keeping a conversation brewing. ‘We’re just a bit worried that she’ll be scared if you grip too tightly. What is it, love? What’s happened? You can tell us.’

Fran’s arms eased, and the baby wrapped her little fingers around her thumb. She burped, causing a tiny splutter of milk to surface. Fran dabbed her sleeve on the baby’s mouth and her entire body warmed as if she had thawed from a miserable outing. Her senses returned. She ignored Mrs Elliot’s bemused stare and looked at Sally McGuinness. ‘She’s my niece.’

Sally avoided the impulse to look at her husband, feeling it was important to maintain eye contact with Fran. She examined her face, believing there was truth there. Mrs Elliot's attention departed. She went inward, searching for her memories of who and where Francis Finch fit. Her hand gushed to her mouth as the pieces slotted together, like the end of an Agatha Christie novel (she had a stack on the dining table). 'Oh gosh dear, you're Fae's daughter — from the Co-op. Her youngest, Evelyn, isn't it? She had a baby a year back? She's had another?'

Fran responded without removing her gaze from the baby's eyes. 'We can't let her go again. We didn't want our Lyn to give her up.'

Eventually, she searched the room for feedback. Sally sighed and gave Fran what she was looking for.

'Look, if she is your niece, you'll have rights. Obviously, I'll need to ring the social and go through the details, but when all is said and done, if you're willing to accept guardianship, you can. She can go with you. May sound a tad harsh, but the state views it as one less problem for them.'

Fran squeezed tighter. She expected a fight, one with the odds stacked against her. Not an offer to bring the baby home.

'Just like that? I can take her now. Just like that?'

It was absurd. Unbelievable. Authorities didn't work like this.

Sally McGuinness pounced into action, a deep pragmatism and sense of service activating and overriding her own desires and needs. 'Let me ring Reeta from the social, tell her what's happened and confirm everybody is who we think they are — and of course, it won't be "just like that". They'll need to visit your house and talk to everybody. But yes. It's unlikely two babies were born at the same hospital, on the same day, to an already teenage mum. So chances are she is your niece. And assuming you don't live in a drug den or hostile environment—'

'—We don't!'

‘Then yes. She’ll go with you.’

Sally McGuinness walked across the room. She had to keep moving. Keep acting. ‘I’ll nip around to use the phone; get the process started.’

Fran convinced herself the baby was her niece. The tiny fingers gripped her thumb, and she just knew she was a Finch.

Mrs Elliot sank into her chair and made her reservations clear. ‘Oh dear, but what about poor Evelyn? What’ll she say?’

Fran ignored her. She watched Sally McGuinness wrap around the front garden and disappear into her house. In her absence, Joe assumed her peacekeeping role. He rephrased Mrs Elliot’s questions with a simpler one of his own. ‘Do you live with your sister?’

He laid his hands on his thigh.

‘Will that matter?’ Fran questioned back, stiff.

Mrs Elliot wedged herself back into the discussion. ‘Dear, if she gave the baby up...?’

She perched closer to the edge of the armchair as she spoke. Fran, again, ignored her. ‘Mr McGuinness, will it matter?’ She repeated, her pulse quickening. She felt as if she were treading a rope-bridge across a nasty cavern.

‘Not really. If a willing relative accepts guardianship, the social will—’

‘—I will accept guardianship,’ Fran said, needing to breathe, but refusing to do so until she had crossed the bridge. She was one step closer. One step closer to taking her niece, but it still felt too precarious to let her guard down.

Mrs Elliot, alarmed at the speed of movement, tried to slow things down. ‘But what about Evelyn? It must have been a tough decision for her to make, and now you’re taking it away!’

Her hands gripped together, and her body rocked a little to offset the emotion. She wasn't comfortable intervening.

'She won't have to do anything. Me and Ma will—'

'—Dear, come-on now. It's not about that. The girl is her mother, and she made a tough decision to do best by the child.'

Fran pivoted upward with the baby clutched in her arms. She turned her back on Mrs Elliot and planted small kisses on the newborn's soft cheeks. The affection balanced her dual emotional state of resentment toward Mrs Elliot and absolute devotion toward the baby and just about restrained her impulse to fight. Also, the stillness provided space for her to register genuine hope. Mrs Elliot wouldn't be trying so hard to convince her not to take the baby if there wasn't a serious chance of it happening. 'What would you do?' Fran asked, expecting only one answer from the old lady.

'Duck, it isn't about me. Or you.'

The tension in Mrs Elliot's shoulders loosened a little, and her bosom lifted. She breathed into her old lungs. Whereas Fran stiffened and her neck tensed. Mrs Elliot continued. 'Dear, it isn't our decision. It's Evelyn's. She obviously thought this was best.'

Fran strode to the window, baby still in hand. She rocked and planted more kisses; this time on her forehead. 'I don't even know your name,' she said aloud, noticing a tiny scar at the back of her tiny ear. She leant in to kiss the lobe and whispered, 'let's call you Scarlet. Scarlet Finch.'

'Her name is Annabelle,' Mrs Elliot said, having not heard Fran's whisper and having not been able to lip read with Fran's back still turned to her. 'Annabelle,' she repeated.

Fran twisted to face Mrs Elliot squarely, boring every ounce of strength she possessed. 'Her name is Scarlet.'

Mrs Elliot sighed but nodded as Sally McGuinness appeared in the front garden. She gave a selfless smile from the other side of the glass, which Fran caught as she twisted. She could tell from Sally's face it was good news. Scarlet was coming home.

Fran scooted around Mrs Elliot's coffee table with Scarlet still gripped in her arms. She was ecstatic, but told herself to wait. She shouldn't believe what was happening until she had definitive confirmation. But it felt like Christmas Eve. She had no serious doubt Santa was coming. Just an inability to tolerate the wait. Fran knew Scarlet was coming home.

'I'll collect my bike this afternoon,' she said. Statement, not request.

But Mrs Elliot couldn't let the conversation drop. 'Are you sure this is right, Francis? Why don't you go home and discuss it with your Ma and young Evelyn first?'

She shuttled to blockade the exit.

'—Besides, it's a long walk.'

Her arms folded across her self-knitted cardigan. The door blocked.

'It's fine,' Fran said, wedging herself into the small gap between Mrs Elliot and the wall, forcing the old lady to shift and stiffen.

Sally McGuinness came along the corridor and settled the tension. She told Fran it was good news. Mrs Elliot shifted out of the way.

'We have a car. Joe can drive us,' she said, resting her hand on Mrs Elliot's arm. A gesture to say she appreciated the effort. But that it was also over. Futile to persist with trying to stop an inevitable course of action.

Fran halted her advance along the wallpaper and Mrs Elliot moved back to give her room while Sally McGuinness continued to lubricate their standoff. 'Joe, why don't you take Fran to the car while I pop and collect Annabelle's things?'

Fran's impulse was to snap Scarlet's real name, but she clamped her tongue. Mrs Elliot recognised the restraint. She appreciated Fran's fierce maternal instinct and accepted, as Sally had already done, the baby was going home. That it was right.

Mrs Elliot relaxed her cardigan-covered arms and capitulated. She moved away from the exit and said what Fran held back. 'The baby's real name is Scarlet.'

It was her way of giving approval; of telling Fran she understood what she was fighting for; and that, despite her conservatism and grave reservations regarding the way it was being done, she agreed with what she was doing.

Sally McGuinness nodded with another selfless smile, accepting the name change without a flicker of protest or sense of loss even though she felt a deep pain at seeing the child she'd mothered for the last few weeks renamed on the spot as if she were some branded product. No longer hers. But she knew it wasn't about her. 'Of course,' she said. 'I'll collect Scarlet's things.'

Her tone was compassionate.

'Joe,' she said, letting her husband know she was ready. He led their collective exit.

Outside, he opened the car door of the rusty-orange Ford and Fran climbed in, Scarlet locked in her arms. Mrs Elliot leant against the porch wall, watching them sitting still in the car. Sally collected bottles of milk, clothing, and a few toys. With the things, she climbed into the backseat and waved goodbye to Mrs Elliot. The car spluttered into life, and Mrs Elliot waved back. She watched them and the car disappear before going inside.

Five minutes later, they pulled onto the pavement outside Fran's house. Curtains twitched in the terraced windows as neighbours wondered who the fancy car belonged to and what it was doing on their

predominantly carless street. Rose, the neighbour, grabbed her shopping trolley on the pretext of heading to the Co-op. She stepped onto the street. 'Hello, dear. Who's this beautiful little darling?'

She shuffled forward to coo at the baby. 'Oh, she's adorable. Yes, you are. Yes, you are,' she said, leaning forward to peck and then brush the baby's cheek.

Sally straightened her back after curving out of the car. With bags in hand, she joined Fran and Rose. 'Hello, Mrs Finch. I'm Sally McGuinness—'

'—That's only Rose, the neighbour,' Fran said, dismissing the lady and her trolley. She clambered to the door, fishing for keys, but Ma opened it from the inside.

Rose waved hello/goodbye at Sally and the baby, then continued wheeling along the path to distance herself, but not so much she wouldn't be able to hear any ensuing commotion.

'What's going on? I thought you'd gone to work,' Ma said, looking confused, even though she had a firm idea of what was happening. Behind her, June came thrashing along the corridor, smelling drama. She slid around Ma to inspect the fuss first hand.

'Fran?' June said to her sister, springing onto the pavement from the doorstep. 'What's going on?'

Unlike Ma, she wanted an answer.

'Meet Scarlet,' Fran said, radiating joy as if she were holding a puppy with a singular purpose in the world. Spread happiness.

June was unimpressed that the fuss was about a baby. 'Who the fuck's Scarlet?'

Ma mustered her entire might to not slap her daughter's legs. Angry at June's language. 'Don't swear in the middle of the street,' she said, causing June's muscles to tighten. There was an unusual fire in her

breath, and she seldom told them off for real. Let alone in front of strangers. What was going on?

From the upper window of next door, Winston and Ivan's brutish faces appeared. They hung out to see the car. Though seeing June, they seized the opportunity to fire a few nasties. 'Another sprog? Can't be yours, June! Nobody touch that,' Winston said, sniggering to his little brother, who also laughed, even if it was less enthusiastic. Less visceral.

'Fuck off, Waverley, you nonce!' June replied, knowing how much Winston hated it. She spat on the pavement beneath his window and then stuck her middle finger at him, smiling.

Winston fired another missile; this time to Fran, who he mostly ignored. 'Frank Boucher finally give you one then, Francie?'

Mrs Winstanley, their mother, opened the front door and stepped onto the street. She looked at her boys from below and told them to go inside. 'I'm sorry, love,' she said, turning to Ma. 'You know what men can be like.'

'Don't worry, Iris. You know we don't pay no attention to them,' Ma said, reassuring Iris it wasn't her fault for the way Winston and Ivan had turned out.

'Mrs Finch, shall we go inside?' Sally McGuinness said, stepping toward the house.

Ma moved aside. 'Of course, come-in.'

Fran and Sally slid past. Ma sucked herself into the coats to make space. More psychological than real. A gesture to imply room. Their bodies brushed against each other as they crossed. Fran's face beamed with joy as she carried Scarlet inside. Once she and Sally cleared the door, Ma peeled off the coats and stepped onto the doorstep. She whispered, 'You too, June.'

But Iris and her boy-men heard.

‘Yeah, get inside before they catch you, nut-job!’ Winston said.

‘Fuck off, Waverley!’

June stuck her middle finger at Winston again, and he did the same back. Ignoring him, she went inside, slamming the door harder than she meant to, eliciting another scowl from Ma, who even leant forward to tap her thigh. And although it had no force, June sobered at the contact. Ma was not physical. The tap was tantamount to a slap in other households.

Ma shuffled into the kitchen, heading on autopilot for the kettle. ‘Can I make you a cup of tea?’

‘That would be lovely,’ Mrs McGuinness said, leaning against the twenty-year-old kitchen cupboards.

Ma hovered the kettle in the sink and then looked at her slippers while the tap filled it with water. She braced herself for the conversation.

‘You know who Scarlet is, don’t you Mrs Finch?’ Sally said.

Ma broke the gaze toward her slippers and pulled the kettle away before it overflowed. ‘Who gave her that name?’

Fran spoke up. Proud. ‘I did.’

She sat at the tiny table wedged into the crowded kitchen. Not enough room to sit at. Though they did. She gazed at Scarlet’s sky-blue irises.

Ma brought herself to ask the question. ‘Why’s she here?’

She plonked the overfilled kettle onto the base and then dragged her body along the edge of the work-surface. She opened the back door. Aerated the kitchen, but not so much for the neighbours to hear their conversation.

Fran switched to incredulity. ‘It’s her home, Ma! Why else would she be here?’

It was the most natural truth to her, and she couldn't understand their lack of instantaneous joy.

Ma lit a cigarette and stared at the red light on the kettle. She blew her cigarette smoke while listening to the mechanisms choking in the machine, then returned to the sink where she stared out the window. The garden needed mowing. She took another long drag, exhaled, and then asked the only thing she needed to know. 'Mrs McGuinness, is it permanent?'

Sally McGuinness answered Ma while smiling at Fran, who had barely removed her eyes from Scarlet the entire time. 'It is if you're willing to take her.'

'Of course we are! I've already said this,' Fran said, causing Scarlet to squirm at her uncontrolled burst of energy.

Ma turned and rested her back on the counter. 'It's just—'

'—Ma! This is her home.'

'I know it is—' she said, picking up a tea towel and clenching it with both hands. '—But what if Evelyn doesn't want her?'

June bent down and examined Scarlet's face. 'This is her baby?'

They ignored her stupid question.

'Ma, we can look after her, even if—' Fran said.

'—I'm not worried about us looking after her.'

It was rare for Ma to interrupt. She twisted her body back to the kitchen window and continued speaking with her back turned to them. '—Will they allow us to keep her even if Evelyn doesn't want it?'

Mrs McGuinness knew she was the representative of Ma's "they".

'Yes—' she said, landing a nuke strike in Ma's heart, whose legs dilapidated. Whose muscles turned to jelly in one swoop. Strength

melted. Struggled to keep upright. ‘—Just show the social you are a responsible caregiver. Both willing and able to provide a safe home. There is no more to it. They will pop over to check and confirm details but believe me, I’ve been in many homes and they’ll have no problem here.’

Ma swept across the kitchen and lifted Scarlet from Fran’s arms, planting kiss after kiss, and wetting every inch of her delicate dry skin and soft hair. Scarlet sank into Ma’s grandma-bosom, and released several joyful squeaks beneath a symphony of cooing and coddling. ‘Hello, you. Hello, you. My precious little angel.’

Her words rolled into a slow chant, which whirlpooled the little thing into a mystical sandstorm of love. Ma nodded along as Sally McGuinness spoke through details, but she didn’t listen properly; neither did Fran. June was the only one paying attention. She didn’t see the fascination or hype with the baby, and though she kept it quiet, she doubted whether they were doing the right thing.

After a good forty minutes, Sally McGuinness left. A social worker had confirmed the baby’s identity on the phone, and another would visit the home later that afternoon. It was done. Outside, Joe McGuinness leant against his car, smoking cigarettes. Ivan and Winston bombarded him with questions about the car’s intricate workings and performance. He answered, even though he really just wanted to smoke his cigarettes in peace. As his wife came out, he squashed a half-smoked one into the pavement, freeing his hands. He gave her a long, loving hug. They got into the car and drove home alone. Quiet and a little sad. Another baby moving on to live without them; another baby with this chapter—them—erased from its life.

In the living room, Ma and Fran fussed and cooed Scarlet, but June sat on the sofa, fidgeting. Her feet dug into the cushions; her hands wrapped around her shins; and her chin pressed into her kneecaps. ‘What about Evelyn?’ She said, unable to remain silent any longer.

Fran responded in a bored, unimpressed tone. ‘What about her?’

She knelt on the floor beside Ma's chair and played with Scarlet while she sat on Ma's lap. She bobbed Scarlet's tiny fists up and down.

June found herself in the unusual situation of defending her younger sister. 'She gave her up, and you've gone against her decision. I'm not sure it's right.'

'—She's our niece!' Fran said, certitude spitting across the room.

June submitted to its intended shame. Her cheeks rouged beside her chin-supporting kneecaps. She chewed her lip and decided it was better to leave the conversation where it was. Maybe Fran was right? She watched her playing with the baby and reconsidered. Nothing. The seed of doubt only grew in her gut until it felt like early appendicitis. It wasn't right. But this wasn't her area, and she would not get involved. She lumbered off the sofa and sulked out of the room. A silent protest.

Hours rolled by with Fran and Ma enchanting Scarlet into her new home. They got Evelyn's first born, Lilly, to crawl toward her baby sister. To stare and become mesmerised by something so similar. Only a year between them. Evelyn was pregnant with Scarlet within six months of giving birth to Lilly.

June, upstairs, grew restless. She ventured into the attic, searching for things she cleared away when Lilly arrived. She resented giving up what little space she had, but did it without complaint. Or much. This time, though, she would defend her territory. Would fight. The baby wasn't having any more of her space. Fran could sacrifice. And what better way to make the point than reclaiming old belongings?

She took an old chair from Ma's bedroom and positioned it beneath the attic hatch. After removing her boots, she climbed onto the chair, stretched her fingertips to the square wooden block, and pushed until it popped open. She lifted her feet onto the banister while pressing her palms into the wall. Her slim waist limited the banister's moans, but it squeaked and swayed. She'd not lifted herself into the attic in years. And although she had always been tall, more able to get up than her

sisters, she didn't really like the attic's dark and dusty enclosed space. As soon as whatever box or bin-liner Ma passed up, she'd toss it away and get out.

Now, though, she had a torch. A fancy Maglight nicked from Ivan's car. They'd never owned one before, and Ma wouldn't risk them using candlelight in case it caused a fire. June hadn't stolen it because she wanted a torch for the attic. She stole it because it belonged to him. Hoped he might come asking her about it. Any opportunity to chat. No matter how trivial. She stole his stuff whenever the opportunity arose. She loved him. Loved his things.

For the first time, June saw the attic lit up. Much vaster than she'd imagined. Awe inducing. She'd felt nothing like that at church christenings or weddings. The illuminated beams and short brick walls dividing the terraces' attics mesmerised her. Feeling confident, she stood upright, knowing she wouldn't bash her head. She'd been afraid of spiders and bugs scuttling into her hair, but now she could see there was nothing to fear. Indeed, there was hope and opportunity. The walled boundaries ended halfway to the roof. Passable. She tiptoed to it and shined the torch over. A little bundle of bags and boxes illuminated around the neighbour's hatch. Rose's stuff. She twisted to shine the torchlight on the opposite wall, preying it was equally passable.

Jackpot.

June trod the planks over to it. To Ivan's wall. She shined the torch, and it illuminated a similar cluster of boxes and bin-liners around the hatch. His stuff. Access to his bedroom. Access to him. She felt like a character in the Goonies discovering one-eyed Willy's treasure.

She gripped the torch with her teeth, slided over the wall—avoiding contact with the beams—and lowered herself onto Ivan's planks. Her shins pressed into Ivan's dust. She crawled beside Ivan's dark, seaweed-looking oceans of insulating wool bordering both sides of her body. A few of the boards creaked, but her petite frame prevented too much

noise. At the stockpile around the hatch, she began loosening several of his bags.

‘June, what’re you doing?’ Ma said, her voice filling the attic with a God-like omnipresence. It almost caused June to drop the torch and create a thud on Ivan’s hatch. With it still gripped in her teeth, she scuttled back over the wall, but hid it before dropping her head into the hatch. She saw their upstairs corridor, but no Ma. Paranoid. She lowered her voice. Not wanting it to carry.

‘What? Nothing. Just getting a few bits.’

Her head dangled out of the hatch. She could not afford for anybody to share her newfound secret. If Ma, Fran, Winston or Ivan discovered the attics joined, they might do something about it. She had to protect her treasure. Her hair drooped over her face, making her look like a demonic doll.

‘Don’t fetch anything unnecessary. We have to make extra space for Scarlet. In fact, we should put things up there,’ Ma said.

June lost the zeal to defend space in the bedroom. Adventures of getting into Ivan’s bedroom occupied her imagination. She could look and touch his underwear. Smell his socks. Examine his dirty magazines and see the type of women he masturbated over. She could rub his toothbrush over her own teeth and taste his saliva. Her soul energised with missionary purpose. Giving-up a bit of space was of flea-sized significance compared to all this. Irritating. Whereas Ivan’s house offered June a divine experience. Unregulated access to the man she adored. Or at least his things.

‘Don’t come down yet. I’ll hand you a few more things,’ Ma said, seizing the opportunity. It was usually such a hassle, but June didn’t argue in her state of ecstasy. Her head still flopped out of the hatch while her imagination throbbed with excitement, blood gushing into it and eliciting dangerous levels of fantasy-inducing oxygen. *Socks. Pants. Dirty*

*T-shirts. Socks. Pants. His toothbrush. Socks. Pants. Crusty used tissue paper. Passion upon passion.*

Ma pushed a bin liner of old clothes and items into June's hair. 'Put those up while I grab a few more bits.'

June pulled herself from the junkie honey-prison, harbouring dormant within every addict's soul. She took the bag and placed it onto the plank, the path bridging fantasy and reality. For now, the bag of crap would protect her secret. Ma passed another couple up. A barricade. A cluster of crap blocking the way to the magic wall. Reinforcements to protect her little secret.

June slid out of the Hatch. Her feet landed on the banister, less elegant than a ballerina's descent. She fixed the lid and then returned the chair to Ma's bedroom. Afterward, she closed her own bedroom door, lay down, and dreamed of Ivan. When would he and his family leave the house?

Meanwhile, Evelyn and her squaddie-date had returned to Birmingham New Street to take the train home. They stopped beside the shopwindow of H. Samuel where he jested about wedding rings. 'That one'd suit ya.'

The squaddie pointed to the most expensive ring on the display.

'Who says I want to get married?'

Evelyn's girlish blush betrayed the womanly act she was going for.

'Ya say'in ya wouldn't want me babies?'

He sounded out whether she really liked him, whether she wanted to go on another date, but his soft boyish tone and flushing cheeks betrayed the intended bravado. He misread the deepening rouge of her cheeks for innocence and coyness when really she was just embarrassed. She

had avoided her motherhood status; was determined to remain quiet about it. He would find out eventually. Of course he would. But it wouldn't be because of her inability to swallow a few emotions. She would not cause his fading interest. She would not cut short their romance.

Evelyn forced reality into her gut. Let bacteria eat it for lunch. Though she knew it would only satisfy their hunger for so long. Reality always returns. She knew her life would be difficult. Contain a lot of hard feelings.

'Come-on, ya must want kids one day, eh?'

Evelyn slid against the glass of the window display. Jewellery dazzled. Gold wedding rings. Diamante necklaces. Brass bracelets. Silver earrings. 'That's pretty,' she said, stopping to point at a barbell.

The squaddie took her hands from behind. He wasn't interested in the jewellery. He was interested in her. His body spooned into her back and his lips kissed the back of her neck. 'I really like ya, babs.'

Evelyn felt the moisture in his words. He then twisted her around and pulled their bodies together, face-to-face, with the window-display supporting her back. 'Yas a keeper,' he said before planting his bulbous lips on hers, tasting the top layer of her cherry lipstick. The shake of trains pulling onto platforms beneath the shopping centre channelled up her body. Welcome tremors.

Afterward, she stared without restraint at his eyes. She wondered who he was beneath the barrack boy banter and the smooth talk. He misread her contemplation for romantic enchantment, telling himself she felt a divine love that elevated her from the here and now. A boyish grin broke out across his face, energised by the throb of validation her misidentified love triggered in him. His lips stretched until he looked like a football hooligan with a Chelsea smile. 'Come-on,' he said, propelling their joined hands into a swing that sliced the air, back and forth until the ticket barriers forced them to separate.

He re-gripped her hand on the platform and continued holding it as they boarded the train and then waded along the aisle looking for seats. His palm was hot, and his fingers forced Evelyn's fingers to space more than was comfortable, but she liked the idea of him possessing and protecting her. Perhaps he would stick around if the feeling strengthened?

'I'll walk ya home,' he said once the train arrived in Nuneaton station.

'You don't need to.'

Now she was coy.

Outside the station, they meandered to the ring-road. Hand-in-hand, they sounded out their next steps.

'I want to, babs—' he said, referring to the walk home and stepping toward Attleborough where Evelyn lived. She smiled at his insistence. '—Besides, we need to agree on our next date.'

As they cut through the churchyard, squaddie John described Manchester, promising to take her next weekend. Once they reached home, he leant in for a longer kiss. His eyes were closed, but Evelyn kept hers open. She stared at the bushy brow above his closed eyelids, tasted the salt and vinegar lingering on his lips from the packet of crisps they'd shared on the train, and wondered what he would think if he learnt she had a kid. Kids.

The kiss ended, and their eyes met. She touched the fur of his eyebrow. He smiled. 'Ya really are gorgeous, ya know that, right?'

She removed her hands from his face, summoned an appropriate flush of modesty, and diverted the conversation from her appearance. 'I better get in before June comes and poaches you.'

The key entered the lock, but Fran opened the door from inside. Evelyn's big sister stood on the flowery carpet holding Scarlet, the baby Evelyn had given up for adoption. Fran smiled like a victorious captain

returned home from a self-started war; the sound of war drums beating in the distance. The squaddie presumed it was the same kid June held when he called for her that morning. Evelyn knew immediately it was not.

‘It’s Scarlet!’ Fran said, expecting Evelyn to be joyous.

Evelyn’s lungs took too much air. They felt like cups overflowing with too much water. She couldn’t breathe, but she had to. A pragmatism kicked in. She hurried a goodbye, attempting to rid Brummie John from the ensuing argument (and to prevent the revelation of her motherhood). One problem at a time. But before she could get him away, June rushed down the stairs, amplifying the drama, and Ma ambled toward the door with her own gleeful, expectant grin. ‘Can you give me a minute to say goodbye?’

A dispassionate coldness steeled Evelyn’s plea to her sisters and Ma.

Fran became outraged. ‘Evelyn, it’s Scarlet! Your baby. She’s more important than some worthless squaddie; just tell him to piss off, and come meet her properly.’

Evelyn exploded.

‘Who do you think gave birth?’

Her fingers dug into her own skull as Brummie John looked like an abused dog kicked by its owner. Even June experienced a hot-flush of unfamiliar yet throbbing compassion. Her heart reached out to her little sister.

Silence brewed anger like a broth turning bad. Spoiling by the second. The sisters suspected one another of foul play. Their minds raced. Each over-calculating their next move. But it was futile. Raw emotion and chaos erupted. The sisters fired accusations and insults, spearing one another with javelins of half-truth, and allowing their passions to surge.

'I meant her away,' Evelyn said, ablaze as the embers of the earth's crust. Her eyes crackled and blasted awful sincerity. Ma's tears mixed with her mascara and ran like soot down her face, as did June's. The neighbours pressed hands into their chests as they stood against jarred open doors. Yet no tears welled in Fran. She remained aggressive and pitiless. Unapologetic in her fight.

She hurled ice-blue, evangelical stalagmites at her ungrateful baby sister. 'She's your daughter, you selfish cow! I can't believe you would wish her away. What sort of mother would ever do that?'

She saw Evelyn as obstinate, a spoilt brat who refused to acknowledge, let alone appreciate, what her family had done for her.

'I want her to have a better life!'

Evelyn's ferocity energised in response to Fran's attack. Her words were strong, not meek, like a fire eating its way to the higher floors of a burning building. There was no compassion or let-up in either Evelyn or Fran's stance. They both spoke with absolution and terrifying condemnation of what the other had done. They charged the atmosphere with a nasty storm cloud.

'You had no right.'

Fran extended her arm and pushed baby Scarlet across to Evelyn. Into the smoke. Her little limbs lingered over the doorstep like an immigrant with feet in different lands. Caught between borders. Mom and aunt. Scarlet's tiny eyes squinted and her soft exposed arms tucked into themselves. But Evelyn's fury expanded into the force of a black-hole, causing Fran to pull her back into the safe orbit of her domain. 'Well, it's tough. She's staying with us. You're her mum and you'll thank me one day for what I've done, even if you're too damn selfish to see it now.'

Fran spoke with absolution. Her missionary words pierced Evelyn's darkness, but made other parts more resolute.

Evelyn responded with an iron voice. 'I love her. I will always love her. But I cannot be her mother. She deserves better. She can't stay. You can't have her. She isn't some doll, Fran!'

'—Don't be so self-pitying!'

From behind, Brummie John reached for Evelyn's hand. She evaded it and stepped forward to take Scarlet from her self-righteous sister. Evelyn softened as she looked down into her daughter's vulnerable face, but hardened as she shifted back up to continue the fight. Lava swirled around her pupils. 'Give her back,' she said, taking one last hug.

John's fingers brushed the back of Evelyn's wrist.

Fran felt her providential power melting, as if God was leaving her crusade, abandoning her righteous mission. It wouldn't do. She fought harder. Against God himself if need be. She released a fierce bolt of desperation. 'You know she's 15. You're touching up a minor, you dirty bastard.'

Vindication eased the heat of Evelyn's fire despite the nasty attack on John. Fran was suffering, resorting to cheap attacks because she was losing the moral high ground. Evelyn wouldn't blink if John slipped away, never to be seen again. Piercing her older sister's self-righteous hubris was worth ten thousand Johns. But by a miracle, John stuck. He stepped closer, pressed himself against Evelyn's back. His chest supported the back of her breast bones. His solidity absorbed and safeguarded her further heating. She held her position. 'You're wrong Fran. You've crossed a line, and you know it.'

Evelyn's shoulders loosened a fraction further. 'She has to go back.'

But Fran, in true evangelical fashion, could not surrender. It was not an option. 'You can't stop her staying.'

Evelyn mistook it as an expression of hopelessness, but Fran meant what she said. She stared at Scarlet and her heart broke as it continued

to beat. But neither the break nor the beat distorted her feeling of certainty. Fran persisted.

‘You can’t make us. We have the right to keep her.’

Like a judge slamming his gavel, Evelyn felt a strange premonition, an ominous future awaiting them all.

A cry broke the stalemate as Lilly’s cry leaked from the living room into the corridor. Ma went rushing for Evelyn’s firstborn. She returned with Lilly in her arm, and Fran used it to launch her ultimate weapon. ‘Squaddie, meet Lilly. Evelyn’s eldest.’

Evelyn felt the tension in Brummie John’s arms, now wrapped around her waist. But it was another miracle. His flesh remained attached to hers. He felt well over his head. He did. But for whatever reason or virtue, he stayed put. Strong. Gripped to Evelyn, and the more Fran attacked her, the firmer he stuck.

Evelyn, though, had reached her limit. More heat and she’d become Chernobyl. She pushed Scarlet to Fran and moved away from the doorstep. The baby winced as it flew from mom to aunt. ‘She has to go back.’

Evelyn’s voice was now more sombre than angry.

Fran scootched Scarlet into a firmer grip and dismissed her sister’s declaration. ‘We have the right—she’s going nowhere.’

But again, Evelyn misread Fran’s remarks for desperation. She turned away from her baby and sister, and John pulled her head into his chest.

Fran, smelling the weakness, mobilised herself for victory. ‘I mean it. We have rights. The social are on their way and they’ll confirm everything if you don’t believe us. The foster carer has been on and off the phone all morning. She’s said they’ll grant full permission for us to raise her even if you don’t want it; you selfish cow.’

Brummie John found his voice.

‘That can’t be right.’

Buoyed by his intervention, June found the courage to voice her own opinion. She stepped past Fran and the baby onto the street to stand closer to her little sister and the squaddie. ‘Fran, if Evelyn—’

Fran shut her down.

‘—it’s done June. She’s staying, and that’s that.’

‘Then I’m going,’ Evelyn said, depleted of energy and fight. She twisted to face her older sister, and even though she knew begging would have no effect, she tried it as a last resort. As expected, Fran declined to proffer any form of mercy or compromise. Like a hard-faced empress, her ice-blue eyes froze over, her back stiffened and her voice turned cruel. She treated Evelyn as if she were vermin. Returning Scarlet to foster care was an abomination worthy of old testament justice.

‘—That’s your choice,’ Fran said, adjudicating the matter.

Ma whimpered from behind with baby-Lilly in her hands. ‘Where are you going to go?’

Evelyn didn’t know, and she didn’t hide it. ‘I don’t know, but it won’t be here, Ma. Not like this.’

Brummie John’s arms remained stuck on Evelyn’s. Fran, noticing, couldn’t refrain from kicking her when she was down. She didn’t believe he would take her in, and still outraged by Evelyn’s selfishness, she snided at the prospect of her staying with him. ‘Is your squaddie going to take you into the barracks?’

‘—I’ve got places I can stay,’ Evelyn said, lying.

Fran took the advantage and turned away. ‘Ma, will pack your things,’ she said, glancing over her shoulder to add, ‘John can collect them for you.’

It was her last word. She withdrew into the house, Scarlet in arm. Ma lingered on the doorstep, her lips whimpering.

‘Please, Evelyn, just come in. We’ll work it out.’

Ma’s plea was sincere, but lacking in expectation. Evelyn hurt too much to return, and at some level, Ma knew. She recognised the sacrifice in her daughter; giving the baby away was not selfish. But Ma could not think that way. Her own impulse to provide for Scarlet’s needs—to be the one to love her no matter what, regardless of whether it was selfish—meant she could not support Evelyn’s nobler aims.

‘Come in, June,’ Ma said, gripping the door handle. The conversation was over.

June leapt to hug her little sister with the most forceful squeeze she had ever mustered for anybody within the family. Evelyn felt her ribs contract. June’s arms finally unwrapped, and she went inside. Ma closed the door. Her eyes wet. Her heart heavy.

On the street, Brummie John hugged Evelyn tight. The neighbours scuttled behind their own shutting doors and sliding nets and the moon edged itself into view.