

**NO
PLACE
TO
HIDE**

ALSO BY J.S. MONROE

Find Me

Forget My Name

The Other You

The Man on Hackpen Hill

**NO
PLACE
TO
HIDE**

JS MONROE



An Aries Book

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Head of Zeus Ltd
First Floor East
5-8 Hardwick Street
London EC1R 4RG

WWW.HEADOFZEUS.COM

For Hilary, Felix, Maya and Jago

FAUSTUS: For the vain pleasure of four and twenty
years hath Faustus lost eternal joy and felicity. I writ
them a bill with mine own blood. The date is expired.

This is the time. And he will fetch me.

—Christopher Marlowe, *Doctor Faustus*

The new camera appeared last week. Perched high above the platform in Wiltshire, it watches the early morning commuters like a heron waiting for fish. Patient, predatory. Two women hurry past, unaware they're being observed, keen to secure seats on the London train. Behind them, a late-runner jumps on board between the closing doors. He slumps down by the window, breathless, sweaty, staring back at the receding camera.

Up in south-east London, a helicopter arcs across a grey sky, the clatter of its blades cutting through the din of rush hour traffic. Effortlessly, it banks back towards a busy junction, losing height as it approaches. A woman taps on her steering wheel, checks her baby daughter in the car seat beside her, smiles at her son in the rearview mirror. She glances up at the traffic lights, but it's the helicopter that has her attention, hovering in front of her like a behemoth, a sleek camera slung beneath its belly.

Further south, in Lewisham, a courier driver is already running behind with important medical supplies for the hospital. It's a temperature-controlled delivery and he hopes he's not too late. A dashcam points towards the road ahead. Another is angled back at his face. Keen to make up time, he accelerates, brakes too suddenly, cursing the car in front of him – and the AI technology that will slash his pay.

Meanwhile, over in Cambridge, a student locks up his bike, chatting with a female friend. He seems relaxed, almost carefree, as he strides across the college courtyard, catching

at spilled anatomy lecture notes. Outside the porters' lodge, a CCTV camera, fixed to the ancient wall like a giant insect, clocks their arrival. His friend walks inside but he hesitates, studying the camera. Deep within its lens, a tiny red light pulses impassively.

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What's the time, Mr Wolf? Adam counts to twenty paces before he glances up at the security camera. Yesterday he barely managed ten. When he was a child, he used to love the thrill of the stop-start steps, the mounting tension. *Dinner time!* But he's not playing games now. If only his life were so simple. The camera appeared a month ago, at the bottom of his road, impaled on a thirty-foot steel pole. Sometimes the lens moves, angling its Orwellian gaze on the local youths who gather below. Every time Adam leaves the house, he tries to ignore it, walk past without looking up, counting his paces like a child, but he can't. He has to stop, convinced that the camera's started to watch him too, which is ridiculous. He's a law-abiding citizen. Makes sick children better. Not exactly a crack dealer.

'I'm tired,' Freddie, his five-year-old son says, tugging at Adam's sleeve.

'Tired?' Adam says. 'How can you possibly be tired, monkey? We've barely made it out the front door.'

Earlier, Freddie announced that he wanted to walk to the park today, but now he wishes to be carried. And who is Adam to refuse? He scoops Freddie up onto his shoulders, at

the same time wedging one foot under their jogging pram's back wheel to stop it rolling down Maze Hill. He knows he's a soft touch. Too soft, according to his wife, Tania.

'I've got it,' Adam says, as Tania offers to take the pram. Their six-month-old daughter, Tilly, has finally given in to sleep after a busy night.

Tania lifts up her hands in mock surrender. She's exhausted, tired to the core. Tilly's still breastfeeding and Freddie's been playing up all week.

'Sorry,' Adam says, letting her take the pram. Freddie buries his hands deep in his dad's hair, kneading it like Play-Doh. Adam tries to do everything at weekends, which only seems to make things worse.

'How I manage without you is a mystery,' Tania says as they continue down the road in the spring sunshine. A gentle breeze is blowing in from the south. Before they had children, Saturday mornings used to be a highlight of their week. Lie-ins and lovemaking followed by runs along the towpath, moseying around the market, drinks at the Cutty Sark Inn. Now it's the playground in Greenwich Park. The soft-play area on Creek Road if it's raining.

'The camera's doing a good job,' Adam says, looking up at its menacing dark glass. He hasn't told Tania that he thinks it's filming him. 'No trouble.'

'The guy in the corner shop says it's not a police camera,' Tania says as they turn off into the park. It's true: there's no official sign, nothing to say who actually erected it. 'M15, apparently,' she adds.

'He would say that.'

Adam has to listen to a new conspiracy theory every time he pops in for a pint of milk. But he still can't resist another

glance back at the camera after he lowers Freddie to the ground. Has it moved, changed angle? It's no good. He should seek proper help. Accept how bad things have become: that he's convinced he's being observed every hour of every day. Filmed. Last week, he even asked a colleague in psychiatry about it.

'Scopophobia – a fear of being watched,' his colleague said, rather pompously. 'Own it and become an actor. Actors love being watched.'

That's the irony. Adam was an actor once, when he was a medical student. But he couldn't tell the psychiatrist that university was where it all began. He's never been able to tell anyone.

Five minutes later, on the bench together with a couple of coffees, they watch Freddie run about the playground. Tilly is still asleep in the pram beside them, which doesn't bode well for later. At least it gives Tania a break. Adam's desperate to launch Freddie skywards on the swings, spin him dizzy on the roundabouts, but he knows that Tania wants to talk.

'I think I'll go down to Mum and Dad's this afternoon,' she says, tucking a strand of her long, light brown hair behind an ear. 'They haven't seen the kids for weeks.'

'Today?' Adam says, failing to hide his disappointment. The plan had been for her to go on Monday, but he doesn't want another row with Tania. There have been enough of those in recent weeks.

'Of course, that's fine,' he adds, feeling sick. He so wants Tania to be happy, but it's as if a light has gone out in her life and he doesn't know how to switch it back on. 'If you're not too tired. I could drive you down, take the train back?'

'I'm fine,' she says.

They sit in silence, watching a group of women jog past. When he and Tania used to go running together, they synced their Bluetooth headphones to the same playlist. It felt like they were in a movie – in a good way.

‘I just need some time,’ she says quietly, sipping on her coffee. ‘You always say that you want me to be happy, but you also don’t want our kids to be brought up by strangers.’

‘Tania, that’s—’

‘I just miss my job, that’s all,’ she says, interrupting him.

Tania was a successful GP before she had children. A professional, independent woman.

‘And you’re better with the kids than I am,’ she adds.

Before he can answer, Adam spots someone on the far side of the playground filming him on his phone. His mouth dries, pulse starts to quicken. Could it be him? Instinctively, he stands up, considers his options. The man is in his forties and Adam’s sure he recognises him from university.

‘What is it?’ Tania asks, looking up at him.

Perhaps he’s imagining it. ‘Nothing,’ Adam says, about to sit down.

The man turns to walk away, but then he stops and holds his phone up in their direction again. It *is* him.

‘Won’t be a moment.’ Adam sets off at a brisk pace through the playground, focused on the man, clenching and unclenching his fists, trying to ignore the adrenaline sluicing through his body. He manages to smile at a fellow dad by the swings as he passes, keen not to create a scene.

The man with the phone is dressed in a black T-shirt and black jeans. Adam’s sure it’s him. The familiar hawkish face and sickly pallor. The same unmistakeable air of menace.

‘Excuse me,’ Adam says as he approaches. The man is lost

in his phone, half turned away from him, and hasn't seen Adam. 'Were you filming me just now? When I was over there?'

'You what?' The man looks up.

It's not him. Shit. Adam knows at once he's made a terrible mistake.

'I'm so sorry.' Adam surveys the playground. A little boy runs over from the sandpit and wraps his arms around the man's legs. 'Forgive me, I thought you were someone else.'

The man gives him a derisive look and walks off with the child, glancing over his shoulder as if Adam's a madman. He was filming his own son.