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Fox & Ink Books

For my agent, Clare, who believed
in this story from the very beginning.

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Set in 10/16pt Kingfisher by Amy Cooper.

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Chapter 1



My breaths cloud in the frigid December air as I watch the sleeping baby. It's lying in a navy pram parked outside the stationery shop. Taking a step closer, I notice the baby's knitted bonnet, and the blanket it's swaddled in, are soft pink. A girl, then. The wool is bobbly, a dropped stitch here and there.

Pulling my scarf more tightly around my neck, I stare into the shop, looking beyond the festive display of watercolour paints, oils, chalks and drawing paper. Lottie is behind the counter wrapping purchases for the baby's mother who swished inside a few minutes ago without a backwards glance.

The handle of the pram gleams in the late afternoon light; an instruction to draw closer still. My throat tightens as the baby stirs.

It would only take a moment. I imagine lifting the baby from the pram, holding her close and breathing in her sweet, milky smell. Curling my gloved hands into fists, I try to squeeze away the compulsion. I count to five, concentrate on the scent of roasting chestnuts being sold from a handcart outside King's College.

An elderly woman in a lopsided cloche hat bustles past, her shopping basket bumps against the pram wheel. The baby startles, lets out a jagged cry. People should take better care.

The woman turns, as if she has read my thoughts.

"Oh. I do apologise." She takes a step back, glances into the pram. "What a little dear you have there."

"Yes, she is." *Did I just say that?* I feel a strong desire to take back the words. Through the shop window I see the baby's mother place her purchases into a string bag. She turns and catches my eye, a frown puckering her weary face.

"You'll be looking forward to Christmas this year, then," says the woman, bending to pat the baby's blanket. Her cloth gloves are brown, the fingertips worn and frayed. Perhaps she has held the hand of a grandchild while wearing them, plump fingers grasping hers. "A new life. So important to keep looking forwards," she prattles on.

"Yes, she's a darling." Where are these words coming from? This baby is nothing to me. *But she could be.* The taste of my words and thoughts are like soured cream on my tongue.

The shop bell jangles a warning. The baby's mother is returning.

"Well. Merry Christmas, then," says the woman, giving me a quick nod, and a look tinged with compassion, before continuing along the parade of shops.

She must have seen the dark smudges under my eyes, the lank, grey-flecked hair peeking out from beneath my hat. My sallow cheeks, the red blemish on my chin that has hung about for weeks. I've an urge to call the woman back, tell her I haven't always been like this. But of course, I don't.

The baby's mother steps outside, adjusting the fur collar of her coat. Such luxury.

Feeling an ugly pulse of anger, I step forwards and gently tuck in the baby's blanket. A baby left outside a shop exposed

to damp fog and the breath of strangers. It's not right. Then I lean into the baby's mother and whisper, lighter than a feather, "You want to be careful. Someone could take her."

The mother rubs her ear, takes a step back and gapes at me, perhaps wondering if she misheard. This is Cambridge after all, a place of scholars and intellect. Where respectable middle-aged women like me do not linger over strangers' prams.



Chapter 2



The familiar scent of paper, paint and the tang of turps helps anchor me, as I step into the stationers, black dots dancing before my eyes.

Lottie looks up, gives me a friendly smile. "Good afternoon, Mrs Pemberton. Just the usual, is it?"

"Yes, please," I say, loosening my scarf to ease the knot in my throat.

Lottie turns to open a drawer containing the rows of graphite pencils I come in to purchase once a month. The girl's dark hair is shorter than usual, cut into a flattering style that skims her shoulders. It's many months since I stepped inside a hair salon. It is not just the expense, although that's part of it now I'm no longer employed. More the thought of having to sit rigid in a chair while a stranger's hand snips and curls and primps at my neck. *Being trapped, unable to escape.*

Lottie seems distracted and I worry that her brother has worsened. More than once she's spoken of the deadly golden artillery shell which exploded at his feet last year on the front line, the oozing blisters of yellow fluid that broke out on his pale skin. He suffers the effects, the mustard gas still rattles in his lungs, which even now wake her from her sleep, make her think he's drowning in his own breaths.

When she tells me such things, I always make the

sympathetic noises expected of me, until all I see in my mind's eye is my husband Theo. Then I covertly guide my attention to something else until she finishes. The gleam of a nib pen in a walnut case. Or a pot of green ink – the type he used. Theo said the colour was kinder than black, less fussy than blue. Lottie knows about my husband, of course, but is sensitive enough not to mention him. For that small kindness my loyalty remains fierce to her and this shop.

I watch the mother with the pram through the shop window. She's hunched over the baby, and I soon hear the squeak of wheels on damp paving as she moves on.

While Lottie busies herself wrapping the pencils, I study the display of art materials on the counter. A travelling watercolour set in an opaque glass case, the rounds of paint like perfectly placed stepping stones. My heart thuds, the compulsion rising again.

Inching closer, checking I'm not being observed, I ease a roundel of poppy-red watercolour paint from its case before slipping it into my coat pocket.

"Will that be all?" asks Lottie, turning back to hand me my purchase.

"Yes, thank you." I take off my gloves and pull my purse from my cloth bag. My legs buzz, as if electricity is fizzing through my veins. A crushing swell of guilt and anxiety rises as I hand over payment, hoping Lottie can't see the tremor in my hand. I wait for Lottie's eyes to widen, fix on me with disbelief as she notices the missing paint. But instead, she looks to the door as another customer enters the shop, bringing with him a swirl of cold air.

Standing safely outside, I slip a hand into the pocket where the stolen paint lies, enjoying the cool feel of the roundel in my palm. Theo. What would he make of me now? How the angles of his soft face would harden with disappointment at my petty theft.

Heat gathers in my midriff and rises upwards, bringing a familiar surge of nausea as my heart palpitates. Pressure builds at the base of my skull as my armpits moisten. *Take a breath, Della. One minute and it will have passed.*