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Breathing in Colour

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Extract

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Chapter One

The night she learned of her daughter's disappearance, Alida's head was full of the past.

Sleep had eluded her for hours, and although she was still in her bedroom, she was sitting on the swivel chair at her desk in front of the bay window, her hair falling forwards in loose, dark spirals as she looked at the object she held in her hands. Her slender knees were drawn up to her chest and she had pulled on her oldest cardigan, which was made of raw silk fibres knotted together in shades of red. Years ago, she had slipped it on to keep her warm while she breastfed. Wearing it reminded her of simpler times. The bedroom was filled with amber shadows from the bedside lamp, and through a crack in the curtains the sky was beginning to lighten. Three floors down, the occasional car rumbled past as London began to stir.

In her hands, Alida was holding a four-inch long treasure chest originally made of cardboard, but unidentifiable as such due to the profusion of sequins glued to every surface, gold, silver, green, so that even after more than a dozen years, the little box shimmered. Mia had presented her with it one Mother's Day before she turned six, before their world changed beyond recognition.

Alida recalled Mia's stripy scarf trailing to the ground, her smile almost too wide for her small face as she ran towards her across the playground and thrust the treasure

chest – still sticky in places – into her hands.

'These are the stars we catch before I go to sleep,' Mia had announced, her eyes ablaze with pride as she pointed at the sequins. 'When the pink ones sparkle, they fizz in my mouth like sherbet.'

Her talented, multi-sensory daughter. Whenever a sequin dropped off, Alida would stick it back on with Superglue so that now the chest had a smooth, tight carapace, broken by the protrusion of sequin edges when she ran her finger over it. The chest, more Superglue now than cardboard, had become a permanent feature on Alida's desk. More than any other object, it evoked the happiest moments of her life; the time when she, Ian and Mia had formed a tight circle of love and anything had seemed possible.

As usual, Alida tried to shift her thoughts away from the event that had destroyed their happy balance. Closing her eyes, she tipped her head back to ease her neck muscles. In her mind's eye, she saw an image of a man with a silver disc in place of a head standing in a yellow desert. The sun flashed off the disc. It was something she had dreamed earlier that night; one of the many disconnected but highly real dreams she'd had before emerging from sleep altogether. The disc-headed man had been holding Mia's treasure chest in one of his hands, she remembered now. And in the open palm of his other hand had lain a baby with curled fists and carved, still features. He had stretched both arms out to Alida in invitation, as if asking her to make a choice.

The telephone shrilled; a shocking sound in the silence which caused Alida to swivel quickly around in her chair to stare at it. Instantly, she thought of Mia. She had only telephoned once in all the many weeks that she'd been travelling in India, but Alida was ever hopeful. Perhaps Mia had mixed up the time difference and that's why she was calling so very early.

Or perhaps she was in some kind of trouble.

Putting the treasure chest hastily back on her desk, Alida jumped to her feet and scrambled across the bed. She picked up the phone on her bedside table on the second ring.

'Hello?'

At first, the only word she even half understood was 'madam'. Her first confused thought was that if the disc-headed man had a mouth to open, he too would speak in this exotic jumble of sounds and call her madam in a voice as rich as treacle. But as the plastic casing of her phone pressed coolly against her cheek, the caller's words separated from the accent which wound around them and hung in the air like a threat.

Alida jerked her body upright.

'Who are you?' she demanded. 'What's happened?'

Now the man's voice scraped through her ears like gravel. As Alida listened, the hand holding the telephone tightened until the knuckles strained at the skin.

'India, you say?'

Her voice was high and anxious. 'Yes, Mia Salter is my daughter, but what . . .? Her passport? Gone missing? I'm sorry, you'll have to speak more clearly, there's such a bad echo. Which is missing, the passport or my daughter? Oh my God. Eight days? No, no, she hasn't contacted me . . . The morgue? What are you suggesting? Are you trying to tell me you think my daughter is dead? . . . Dead, I said . . . My God, do you really think she. . . A pen, yes. Wait, let me just . . . OK, ready. Case file number . . . got it. Madurai, southern India . . . Guru? That's the name of the hotel? Hotel Guru. Room seven. I'll take the next possible plane . . . Yes, I realise that, but she could be hurt, she might need help, she might be lying senseless in a ditch somewhere . . . I *am* calm, but how would you feel if it were your daughter? . . . I said how would you . . . I understand. I'll be there as soon as I can. I'll find her.'

Alida's hands were shaking too badly for her to slot the cordless telephone back onto its stand. Instead she slid it onto the bedside table and stared frozen-eyed into the orange glow of her nightlight. Her mind flashed with accident scenes: concertinaed train carriages, turned-over buses. Bloodied tarmac. In the warm light, the worry grooves on Alida's narrow face were softened and her eyes, deep and dark, were Mia's.

'Daughter is lost,' the Indian policeman had said with a shrug in his voice as if advising her not to waste her airfare. 'Find her cannot guarantee.'

Alida could taste bile at the back of her throat. The bedroom around her seemed vast; she felt shrunken. 'Not again,' she whispered.

'Many foreigners go missing,' the policeman had said. 'Often we find them well and alive. But accidents also are possible. Then unhappily we find them in the morgue.' In the aching space behind her eyelids, Alida could feel the memories escalating into grief and rage as they had done before.

Her bedroom was steeped in expectant silence. 'I'm not going to cry,' she muttered. 'It can't be too late.'

The curtains were momentarily parted as a waft of air tumbled in from the night and rolled across the wooden floor. Its coolness enveloped Alida like a shroud as she sat on the bed, so that she curled her toes up and shivered.

I'm going to India, she thought, and in one smooth motion she gathered her limbs and leaped from the bed.

Still trembling, blinking away the stars floating in her vision, Alida stood barefoot on the floor and tried to think rationally. She switched on the main light and flung open her wardrobe. A life-sized baby doll slid onto the polished wooden floorboards. She picked it up by its soft belly and crammed it back into her workbag, leaving ten plastic toes and a bald head visible above the leather rim. Pushed against the back of the wardrobe was the old-fashioned

brown suitcase which had once belonged to her father. When the case was lying open on the bed, Alida realised she didn't know where to begin. What would she need in India? On the duvet, she made a comforting pile of make-up and shampoo. She picked out a pair of low-heeled sandals. Then she saw the framed head-and-shoulders photograph of Mia which she kept on her bedside table. As she picked up the delicate silver frame, she had a disconcerting image of herself traipsing through the streets of India, showing people the picture and explaining that this was her lost daughter.

In the photograph, Mia was standing under a tree in Hyde Park on a blue January morning. The wind had loosened her corkscrew curls of dark hair so that individual strands snaked around her face, which was rosy with cold. Mia had a theory that on windy days she and her mother both ended up looking like Medusas, their hair whipped into a halo of snakes. Her eyes, caught in the wintry sunshine, were dark gold beneath strong, curved eyebrows and her wide mouth rocked with laughter as she breathed out a big white cloud of cold air. That day, the tensions which spiked the two of them apart had momentarily subsided, and they had fallen into step like experienced dance partners. 'Take a picture of my cloudy white breath flying away from me on the wind,' Mia had said. Alida had taken several, with Mia laughing as she tried to make different shaped clouds. The picture had been taken eighteen months ago, when she had just turned seventeen. Alida tipped it gently into her handbag.

She had to tell Mia's father. His most recent address wouldn't be written inside Mia's passport, which was where the police must have found her own contact details. Would it be acceptable, she wondered, if she just emailed him from India with the news? Sighing, she retrieved the telephone from the edge of her bedside table.

'What?' complained a husky female voice after three rings.

‘Maggie, it’s Alida. I need to speak to Ian.’ She could hear the wobble in her voice, and frowned.

‘At half five in the morning?’ But she was already handing the telephone over. Alida pictured Ian’s crumpled, unshaved face, his dirty-blond hair flopping over his eyebrows and the bright blue of his eyes blinking awake.

‘’Lida. Something wrong?’

‘It’s Mia.’ Alida bit her lip, her feet freezing on the floor. ‘I got a call. She’s in India.’ To her dismay, her voice tripped up on the word India and tears started to slide from her eyes.

‘I know she is,’ said Ian impatiently. ‘It’s been three months now, hasn’t it?’ His voice was ragged around the edges, as if he’d had too much to drink the previous night. ‘What did she say?’

‘Nothing, I didn’t speak to her.’ Alida coughed to get the lump out of her throat. ‘It was a policeman.’ Teardrops were rolling off her cheeks and landing in hot splashes on her vest top.

‘What?’ Now Ian’s voice was sharp with concern. ‘What the hell did he say?’

‘He. . . Mia’s lost.’

‘Lost? Alida, *stop* crying for one second and give me the details.’

‘I’m sorry, I’m just . . . She didn’t pay her hotel room for a week and the police found her passport but nobody’s seen her and I don’t even know if they’re looking properly because he said there were no guarantees and just talked about morgues, although sometimes they do find foreigners alive and well, he said, but when he said the word “morgue” something burst inside me because I could see her, I could see—’

‘You’re completely incoherent. I’m coming over.’

The line went dead.

Alida laid the telephone face down on the bed. She closed her eyes and saw Mia stretched out like a paper doll

on the coroner's table. Images arched across her mind, as short-lived and as mesmerising as fireworks. Ian, hurling a Moroccan vase across the sitting room of the house they had once shared, his eyes slits of fury as it shattered against the wall. A beautiful baby with curling eyelashes and chafed red skin on her chest. Mia huddled naked on a stone floor while her kidnappers debated whether to rape her again or slit her throat. Then she saw the disc-headed man from her dream. He was standing up again in the desert, his fists closed this time. He was only there for a second, but he was very real. His skin gleamed brown in the sunlight. When he vanished, Alida opened her eyes and forced herself to think. Ian's job as a computer systems analyst took him to North London four out of five days a week, but he lived nearby. He would be there in fifteen minutes, filling her flat with the smell of his over-sweet aftershave and issuing orders. She walked into her dolphin-tiled bathroom and splashed cold water over her face. When she returned to the bedroom she dialled Ian's mobile number.

'Don't bother coming round,' she told him calmly, sitting down on the bed.

'Why not?'

'I'd rather just speak to you on the phone,' she said, lifting her chilly feet from the floor and drawing her knees up to her chest.

'I'm practically on my way out of the door already,' he protested.

Alida stifled a sigh. 'I don't want you to come round.'

Ian's voice hardened. 'Look, our daughter is in Christ knows what trouble, and I'm coming over to discuss it with you. Like it or not.'

'No, Ian,' she said firmly, drawing the edges of her cardigan over her toes. Tough gold crackles of embroidery thread spiked through the weave and she twisted them together between forefinger and thumb. 'I have a lot to

organise. I'm going to India to look for her, you see.'

There was a pause.

'You're *what*?'

'I'm going to find her.'

'The idea of you in India is laughable. What would someone like you be able to do for anyone in a country like that?'

'What's that supposed to mean?' Her tone was dismissive, but she was hurt.

'It means, Alida, that you're the kind of woman who refuses to go camping because she's worried about insects coming into the bloody tent. If you can't even sleep in a tent, how do you think you'll survive on your own in a place like that? You're just not up to it.'

Alida's free hand gripped the edge of the bed. It pained her that even during such a conversation as this – the conversation no parent ever wants to have – they still found it hard to be civil: Ian undermining her at the first opportunity, her biting back retorts which would lead to a row. Not for the first time, she reflected that there was an unbearable intimacy to sharing a tragedy with another person. Together, she and Ian had discovered that life could give with one hand then snatch away with the other, leaving them limbless, blank with despair. Even now, the two of them couldn't look at each other without glimpsing, with dread, the private pain ingrained in the other's face. They protected themselves by keeping their contact with each other minimal and bordering on animosity.

'You won't go,' Ian said into her silence, 'so I won't waste my breath talking about it.' Then, as if he realised he'd been too harsh, a conciliatory note crept into his voice and it took on the warm rumble that Alida had once loved. 'Look, 'Lida, if you really don't want me coming to the flat, then just give me all the details again. Tell me everything that policeman said. Every word of it.'

When they had finished, Alida sat staring at the bedroom

door. Talking with Ian had made Mia's disappearance real. He was going to make some calls, he said, to the British Embassy and to the police station in Madurai, to get the ball rolling. If need be, he would fly out there himself. Neither of them had referred again to Alida's statement that she was going to look for Mia. She got up and went to her desk, which was awash with papers. Scribbled notes and word clusters lay side by side with A4 transparencies featuring genital warts. Alida juggled jobs ranging from proof-reading to working as an English teacher in a language centre, and she had been lecturing teenagers and pre-teens on the risks of unprotected sex for seven years in London schools. The programmable baby dolls she took along to the sex education classes always created interest, and having had Mia when she was only nineteen, Alida was well equipped to discuss the issues involved with early motherhood. She opened the top drawer and scooped up her passport and emergency credit card. Today was 19 July 2008, and her passport was valid for two more years.

Alida connected to the internet and found an open return flight from Heathrow to Madurai with Gulf Air and then Indian Airlines, stopping in Dubai and Bombay. It cost seven hundred pounds, which she would have to dig out of her savings account next month to pay off the credit card bill. The journey would take eighteen and a half hours, and she was flying at five that afternoon. Heathrow was an easy tube ride from South Kensington, but she would book a taxi to the station. She was about to stand up when her stomach twisted in panic. A visa, she thought. I'll need a bloody visa. She Googled 'Indian embassy visa' and found the High Commission of India website. *Passport photos*, she scribbled. *Visa fee*. She could pick one up from India House that morning.

By the time nine o'clock came along, Alida was fully packed. She sat cross-legged on the bed next to her suitcase, wrapping up the details of her life. At this moment

she didn't care about proof-reading deadlines or piles of bills mounting on her doorstep, but her mind was rushing ahead in full organisation mode, and she gave it free rein. She couldn't bear the idea of sitting and doing nothing – every action had to have meaning, had to constitute a step in the direction of finding Mia. She cancelled her classes and lectures for the next month. She left messages on her friends' answerphones explaining the situation and asking them to email her. She organised a direct debit with her electricity and telephone companies.

Finally, she broke the news to her mother and listened to her crying down the phone.

'Do you remember,' said her mother eventually, 'the day after her second birthday, when she removed her dirty nappy by herself and clouted poor Ian around the head with it as he lay in the grass trying to sunbathe?'

'She's not dead,' Alida said more brutally than she intended. 'Not dead, only lost. Temporarily misplaced. Please don't talk about her as if she were dead and all we have left are memories.'

'What'll I do if you don't come back either?' Her mother was quietly desperate. 'Get on a flight out there and get lost myself?' Alida nestled the phone closer to her ear and closed her eyes briefly in sympathy because she knew how hard it was to speak your greatest fears aloud. 'What's the good of us all following each other like sheep over a precipice?' she continued, and Alida knew she would be gripping the phone hard with her bejewelled fingers, leaning forwards on the sofa, her brown eyes sharp with the pain of this news. 'Let the police do their job. You won't know where to start. Do you realise how many people live in that country?'

She went on in the same vein for fifteen minutes, prodding at her fears until she had shaped them into something she could bear to look at. Alida listened patiently. In contrast with Ian's instant dismissal of her travel plans, her

mother accepted her departure. She understood about the memories.

When Alida eventually allowed herself the time for a shower, the strong beat of the water revived her, stinging her nipples to hardness. She closed her eyes and let water stream over her face. She was counting, working something out. A few tears escaped from her eyes and were washed away. By the time she stepped steaming from the shower, Alida had finished her calculation.

She had not seen Mia for eighty-nine days and seventeen hours.

Chapter Two

Thursday, 15 May 2008

This is quite a daring thing I'm doing – travelling alone aged eighteen and a half through a country so full that it reminds me of my first time in the sea as a three-year-old in a floppy sunhat and my Pink Panther swimming costume. I waded in up to my waist holding my father's hand, and I gasped and gasped at the cold salt pushing into and around me, the gelatinous seaweed sliming up through my toes, the sunlight splashing so brightly on the tips of the waves that I heard musical notes as I watched. My father asked if I was enjoying myself and I couldn't respond. The velveteen foam, the thorny cries of the gulls, the cold potato grasp of his hand: these things took up all the spaces of my mind. Entering the sea was all-round sensory submersion and it turned me into a walking jelly. Being here is the same. I feel that no part of me can close itself off from India; it enters me from all around and, wholly submerged, I float in it, drown in it, sleep and dream and cry in it.

I've been here for three and a half weeks, and for the past ten days I've been having astonishing dreams. The dreams are full of the past. They show me in bright, alive images things that have been holding their breath in a corner of my mind for most of my life. The memories are different weights and shapes, and almost all of them scald

me. I want to nail them to the page so that I can look at them without flinching. That's what this notebook is for.

Christmas 1995

Their voices slice up through my bed until the mattress is studded with pins which prickle my skin. She is half crying, half shouting. His chocolaty voice is trying to cram her words back into her mouth but they spill out in shards. I climb down onto the floor. Now the pins are in the carpet, puncturing the soles of my feet. I tiptoe painfully onto the landing. Here, it is much louder.

'. . . not in control any more. The whole thing could just fly apart, don't you get it?' she cries.

I kneel silently on the carpet and push my face between the banisters to hear better. The cool wood on my cheeks makes a comforting frame.

'You're collapsing into yourself, Alida. Who's that going to help?'

Her low, furious reply drills the air and turns it smoky grey. On my tongue, there's the faintest taste of ashes. I look down so that my eyes are almost closed, and swivel my gaze to the left. I can see the bottom of the sitting room door. It's half open, but they are beyond my vision.

'. . . no support. All you're interested in is getting our sex life back on track, as if that's the answer to everything.'

I edge further forwards and my ears burn against the wood.

'You can't shut yourself off from pleasure for the rest of your life.'

'Pleasure? Do you really think pleasure still exists for me in any way or form?'

My head pops through the banisters and the pressure eases off my ears. I can see further into the sitting room now. I can see the crackling green branches of the Christmas tree. The fairy lights are switched off. I can see the lower half of my mother as she sits in the armchair by

the window. Her pale shins protrude from her dressing gown. Her hands are twisted into a bony sculpture which rests uneasily on her lap.

'Don't let what happened distance you from Mia.'

I listen intently, but I don't catch her murmured reply. There's a long pause. Too long. They must be getting tired. Any minute now they'll leave the sitting room and discover that I'm not in bed. I pull my head sharply back but the banisters grip it from either side. I push forwards, pull back. How could my head have grown bigger so fast? I pull until it hurts but still I can't get back through.

I'm here for good.

They'll have to feed me through the banisters, bring me a potty to wee in. Tears cut across my eyes and I consider calling down to them for help but my mother's voice wobbles through the door.

'. . . nonsense she comes out with, Ian. Recently she insisted that when the blackbirds sang in the garden, she could see golden bubbles coming out of their beaks. She's six years old and she talks as if she's taken LSD. If she weren't so caught up in her own little world, then perhaps—'

I scream, loud and wide. My scream tastes of vomity burps. It fractures the air in the hall.

They come running, orange and blue bounding up the stairs side by side.

'Stuck!' I screech, and blood slams through the veins in my head.

My father puts his hands on his hips and laughs in a shower of colour, but she pauses on the stairs with her hand at her throat. Her eyes are fixed on my face. She knows I heard her unfinished sentence. She knows I completed it in my mind and that it has already become part of me.

I continue to wail while my father soaps my ears to make them slippery and coaxes my head back through the

banisters. When my mother moves forwards to fold me into her arms, I don't let her touch me.

Spring 1996

I can be invisible.

I can disappear along the thin sigh of my breath, grow so quiet and still that I am not even sure I exist any more.

The gap between the double bed and the floor was just wide enough for me to slide into, shifting crablike until I reached the centre. My chest grazes the underside of the bed at the crest of every breath. I am a star-shaped spy, my fingers and heels making friends with the dust. How long have these soft balls of fluff lain here and what secrets have they heard my parents whisper?

Alida – that's what I call her nowadays, because the word 'Mummy' flays her face open like a slap – Alida is making the bed.

I drop my eyes sideways and watch her bare feet step nimbly as she tweaks and plumps. The cherry-red polish on her toenails is chipped. Her thoughts are far away from me, struggling through memories she cannot bear to remember or forget. She doesn't sense the tickle of my fingertips on the carpet. She doesn't hear the muffled booming of my heart.

Very soon I will be nothing more than a star-shaped scattering of fluff.

When I was a baby, my mother was a carousel of colours, the most dazzling thing I had ever seen. She smelled of milky vanilla love. She bounced and turned like the clown mobile above my cot. She spread warmth around me in orange layers and her hands comforted and played. If she vanished from sight for too long, I screwed up my fists and eyes and screamed myself purple. When she reappeared, relief would flood my nappy in a lava spurt of urine. She was everything to me, a giant with a giant's strength.

Now she is different. She has shrunk and her eyes don't laugh in streams of sparks. I want to be small again, but every day I grow bigger and she grows further away.

When he knelt by my bed to kiss me goodnight, Daddy said he might have to go away soon. His tie flopped onto my chest and I held it with both hands. It was slippery red and green stripes.

'Where away?' I asked. When he sighed, I tasted ashes on my tongue. I stared at him then, wide awake. Thin red threads trembled across the whites of his eyes. 'Don't go away,' I said. He laid his head on my chest and seemed to fall asleep. I clutched his tie and tried to count the hairs sprouting from his ear. His head was heavy and I didn't know what to do so I just said it again and again in a smashed glass voice.

'Don't go away.'