The Drowning Girl

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Extract

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PROLOGUE

Sometimes I picture it. I know I shouldn't, but sometimes I can't stop myself. I find myself imagining what she went through. The astonishing colour that bloomed in the water all around her, the bright, bright red of arterial blood, as she drifted in and out of consciousness, the world still briefly present for her, then slipping and spinning away. How she moved down through the water, feeling its heavy, deadly pull, the drag of it on all her limbs, because nothing had been left to chance, her pockets were weighted with stones. How she held her breath and held her breath, then couldn't hold it any more. They say it's pain you'd feel then, don't they? A searing pain in your lungs, as the water surges into you. That drowning may be the most painful death. I think of that sometimes: to open your mouth and breathe in pain, feel death come rushing in.

CHAPTER 1

It's pleasant here in Karen's kitchen, talking about our children, sipping Chardonnay, with before us on the wide oak table the wreck of the children's tea. I glance around the circle. You can tell that everyone's dressed up in honour of the party—Fiona has glittery earrings, Michaela is wearing a clingy wrap top that frames her lavish cleavage. But only Karen has a proper costume: she always feels that as hostess she has licence, and today she's a rather glamorous witch, in a black chiffon frock with a raggedy hem and with lots of Rouge Noir on her nails. Behind her on the windowsill there are lighted pumpkin faces, and the candle flames shiver and falter in the draught that sneaks in round the frame.

The children yell. We turn towards the open door of the living room, watching as the magician pulls some spiders out of his sleeve. Leo, Karen's husband, who's in there keeping order, applauds with great enthusiasm. The magician is exceptional, everyone keeps saying so—Karen was brilliant to find him. He looked quite ordinary, arriving in

his Transit van, prosaically dressed in jeans and a Coldplay T-shirt. But now, in his cloak of indigo silk with a silver pattern of planets, he has a presence, a mystery.

'I do like clever hands,' says Michaela. 'Can I take him home with me?'

He flings two scarves up into the air, that come down tied together. The children watch wide-eyed. All their own outfits look a little random now—masks hanging off, cloaks slipping from shoulders. Josh, Karen's son, is at the front, with stick-on scars from Sainsbury's on his arms, and Lennie, her little girl, is sitting next to Sylvie, dressed as a witch's black cat. Sylvie has bunched up the skirts of her snowflake dress and is absently sucking the white ribbon hem. She really wanted to be a cat like Lennie, but the black cat costume in Clinton Cards was one of the most expensive, and I took the cheaper snowflake outfit from its peg and held it against her, hoping to persuade her without her getting upset. She looked at herself in the mirror. The dress was white and frothy, of some muslin-like material with trailing ribbons. She has hair like lint, no colour, the slightest smudge of freckles on her nose. Pale things suit her. For myself, I like colour, I'd love to dress her in the rainbow—but too much brightness seems to overwhelm her. She smiled at her reflection, pale and perfect against the whiteness of the dress, and to my relief she was easily persuaded. Though I hate these moments, always, the everyday abrasions, the things I so long to buy for her that I'm sure would make her happy, at least for a little while. None of the other mothers round the table, I suspect, would understand this, nor would they know the panic I feel when Sylvie grows out of her shoes, or at the arrival of a birthday invitation, requiring a present I haven't budgeted for.

The women are exchanging the numbers of party entertainers. I let their voices float past me. Through the window behind Michaela I can see into Karen's garden, where the brown light of evening is draining down into the wet, heavy earth. The shape of the tree house where Lennie and Sylvie play in summer is sharp as though cut with a blade against the luminous sky. It's so still today—not a breath of wind, not a sigh. When we came here, Sylvie and I, when we parked and got out of the car, the stillness fell over us, a stillness like a garment, unbroken and entire. Even the wind chimes hanging from someone's apple tree were silent, no sound at all in the wide parked-up street but the clear sweet pipe of a bird. There was a rich smell of October, of earth and rot and wet leaves. Sylvie ran on ahead of me. I'd put her in her white summer sandals to match the snowflake outfit, and they have hard soles that made a clear *click click* in the stillness. I called after her: 'Be careful, Sylvie, don't get too far ahead.' She turned to face me, standing on tiptoe, reaching her arms out to either side, her face intent with concentration, as though she were balancing in a tricky, difficult place. As though she could fall off.

'I can hear my feet, Grace. I can hear them.'

'Yes,' I said.

'I've got noisy noisy feet. I could be a dancer. Listen, Grace. I'm a dancer, aren't I, Grace?'

'Yes, you're a dancer,' I said.

She did a neat pirouette, pleased, self-aware in her elaborate dress, then ran on again, white as a wisp of smoke or mist against the grey of the pavement, at once so pale and so vivid, as if she were the only living thing in the whole still darkening street.

A few doors up from Karen's house, someone came out

with a pumpkin and put it on their windowsill and lit the candle inside. We stopped to admire the pumpkin. The face was carved with panache: it had a toothy, rakish grin.

'He's smiling, Grace, isn't he? He's smiling at us.'

'Yes, he's smiling,' I said.

She was happy for a moment, trusting, feeling the world to be benign. I wrapped my hand around hers. Her skin was cold, but she nestled her hand quite firmly into mine. I love it when she's happy like that.

The magician is building to his grand finale. He wants a volunteer. All the children have raised their hands, urgent and eager, frantic to be chosen. Sylvie too has put up her hand, though not so keenly as the other children. There's often a little reserve about her, something held back. I will him: *Please don't choose her, please please don't choose Sylvie.* But he does, of course, drawn perhaps by her reticence. He beckons to her, and we watch, all the mothers, as she walks out to the front and he seats her on his chair.

Karen glances towards me, with a quick reassuring smile.

'She's doing great,' she murmurs.

And she's right: for the moment Sylvie seems quite poised and controlled, clasping her hands together neatly in her lap. Her lips are pursed with concentration; the expression is precisely Dominic's.

The magician kneels beside her.

'No worries, OK, sweetheart? I promise not to turn you into a tadpole or anything.'

She gives him a slight smile that says this is naive of him, that of course she knows how the world works.

He scribbles in the air with his wand, mutters something in Latin. A flourish of his cloak entirely covers her for an instant. When he flings back the silk with a slight air of

triumph, a real live rabbit is sitting in Sylvie's lap. The children applaud. Sylvie hugs the rabbit.

Fiona turns towards me.

'That's your little girl, isn't it?' she says. 'That's Sylvie?'

'Yes,' I tell her.

Sylvie is stroking the rabbit with cautious, gentle gestures. She seems oblivious of the other children. She looks entirely happy.

'I'm not surprised he chose her,' she says. 'That white-blonde hair, and those eyes.'

'She was sitting right at the front, I guess,' I say.

'She's just so cute,' says Fiona. 'And I'm always fascinated by the way she calls you by your Christian name… Of course, in our family we're rather more traditional.'

'That didn't come from me,' I say.

But she isn't really listening.

'Was it something you felt very strongly about?' she says.

Her crystal earrings send out spiky shards of light.

'Not at all,' I say. 'It was Sylvie's choice. It came from her. She never called me Mum.'

The woman's eyes are on me, taking in my short denim skirt, my jacket patterned with sequins, my strappy scarlet shoes. She's older than me, and so much more solid and certain. Her expression is opaque.

'Just never said Mama? What, even when she was just beginning to talk?'

'No. Never.' I feel accused. I swallow down the urge to apologise.

'Goodness.' She has a troubled look. 'So what about her dad? What does she call him?'

'She doesn't see him,' I tell her. 'I'm a single parent. It's just us—just me and Sylvie.'

'Oh, I'm so sorry,' she says. As though embarrassed that she has called out this admission from me. 'That must be quite a struggle for you,' she goes on. 'I honestly just don't know how I'd cope without Dan.'

There's a surge of noise from the living room, where the children are tidying, under the watchful eye of the magician. The rabbit is in a basket now.

'He's doing the games, as well,' says Karen. 'Isn't that fabulous?'

Leo comes to refill his glass. He's wearing a polo shirt that doesn't really suit him: he's one of those substantial men who look best in formal clothes. He greets us with the exaggerated bonhomie that men always seem to adopt on joining a group of mothers. He comes from Scotland and has a mellifluous Gaelic accent. He puts his arm round Karen, caressing her shoulder through the chiffony fabric of her frock. I can tell he likes the witch outfit. Much later, perhaps, when the party is over and the clearing up is all done, he will ask her to put it on again.

Michaela leans across the table towards me. She wants to talk about nurseries. Am I happy with Little Acorns, where Sylvie goes? She's heard that Mrs Pace-Barden, who runs it, is really very dynamic. She has her doubts about nannies. Well, you never get to see what they're actually up to, do you? She heard about this nanny who fed the kids on a different flavour of Angel Delight every lunchtime, because the mother said to be sure to give them plenty of fruit. I turn with relief from Fiona. In the living room, the magician is setting up a game of apple-bobbing. The girls make an orderly queue, though Josh and some of the other boys are racing around at the edges of the room.

The wine eases into my veins. I have my back to the liv-

ing room now; I let my vigilance relax, enjoying this conversation. I love to talk about Sylvie's nursery—it's my one big luxury; I was thrilled when they gave her a place. The candles glimmer and tremble on the windowsill, and behind them, in Karen's garden, darkness clots and thickens in the hollows under the hedge.

Out of nowhere, some instinct makes me turn. It's Sylvie's go at apple-bobbing; she's kneeling by the bowl. I don't see exactly what happens. A commotion, a scrabble of boys near the bowl; and then water everywhere—all over the stripped pine floor, and on Sylvie's hair and her clothes. I see her face, but I can't get there in time, can't undo it. I'm too late, I'm always too late. She's kneeling there, taut as a wire, the other children already backing away from her: tense, white, the held breath, then the scream.

The children part to let me through. I kneel beside her and hold her. Her body is rigid, she's fighting against me; her screams are thin, high, edged with fear. When I put my arms around her, she pushes against my chest with her fists, as though I am her enemy. Everyone's eyes are on us: the other children, fascinated, a little superior, the women, at once sympathetic and disapproving. I glimpse the magician's look of startled concern as he gathers the other children together for the next game. I try to sweep her up in my arms, but she's fighting me, I can't do it. I half carry, half drag her into the hall. Karen comes after us, closes the living-room door.

'Grace, I'm so sorry,' she mouths at me through Sylvie's screams. 'I forgot Sylvie's thing about water. It's my fault, Grace, I should have told him… Look, don't forget her party bag, there are pumpkin biscuits…' She thrusts a coloured plastic bag in my direction, but I can't take it, my hands are full with Sylvie. 'Don't worry, I'll keep it for her. Hell, Grace…'

I kneel there clasping Sylvie on the pale expensive carpet in Karen's immaculate hall. Sometimes when Sylvie works herself up like this she's sick. I know I have to get her out.

'It was a lovely party,' I tell her. 'I'll ring you.' Sylvie's screams drown out my words.

Karen holds open the door for us.

I manoeuvre Sylvie down the path and along the darkening pavement. Her crying is shockingly loud, ripping apart the stillness of the street.

When I get to the car I hold her tight against me and scrabble in my bag for the keys and manage to open the door. I sit in the driving seat, holding her close on my lap. We sit there for a long time. Gradually she quietens, the tension leaving her; she sinks into me, crying more gently. Her face and the front of her dress are wet, from the water that splashed on her, and her tears; her eyelashes are clumped together, as though with cheap mascara.

I dry her face and smooth her hair.

'Shall we go home now?'

She nods. She climbs into the back and fastens her belt.

My hands on the steering wheel are shaking, and I'm cautious at junctions, I know that I'm not driving well. My car smells as always of pollen, from the flowers I deliver; I flick a broken frond of fern from the dashboard onto the floor. I glance at Sylvie in the rear-view mirror. Her face is absolutely white, like someone coming round from shock. There's a dull weight of dread in my stomach, the feeling I always try to overlook or push away: the sense I have that there's something about Sylvie that is utterly beyond me. There's too much sadness in her crying, too much fear.

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