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The Child Inside

Written by Suzanne Bugler

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THE CHILD INSIDE

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PAN BOOKS



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PROLOGUE

I walked out of that hospital into the hazy sunlight, and I forced myself to smile. Other people were smiling, so I did, too. And I walked tall, even though it hurt. Andrew walked beside me, with Jonathan bounding along beside him. I did not look at them. I did not want to see them, or hear them, though see them and hear them I would, for evermore.

The car was in the long-stay car park, around the side of the building. I let myself into the passenger seat and waited, while Andrew put Jonathan and my overnight bag into the back. And then he got in, and he took a long, deep breath.

'You okay?' he said.

And I said, 'I'm fine.'

ONE

The house is in one of those tree-lined avenues between Kew Gardens and the station. I find it easily enough. I got the address from the class list and looked it up in the *A–Z*, and when I spoke to Oliver's mother on the phone to confirm she said, 'Oh, you can't miss us, we're the one on the corner with the huge skip outside.'

So I find it easily enough, but because of the skip there's nowhere to park. There's no space on the road, never mind the fact that it's all permit holders only around here, and that the drive outside the house, where we would have pulled in, has got the skip on it. So I end up driving all the way to the end of the road and across and around again, with Jonathan whining in the back, 'Can't you just park?' and 'We're *miles* away now.'

I find a meter eventually, in the next street. And as I dig around in my bag for change, Jonathan says, 'Why couldn't you just drop me outside? I don't want you coming in.'

I look up and see his face in the mirror, pink-cheeked and scowling.

'I have to come in,' I say. 'I'm not just going to drive off and leave you there.'

'Well, don't stay then,' he says anxiously. 'And don't start talking.'

'Jono, I have to be polite,' I say gently.

And he says, 'And don't call me Jono.'

He does not mean to hurt me. He does not mean to be rude. I tell myself this, and yet my heart slides into a lost place deep inside me, a place where once there was warmth and need.

We let ourselves out of the car and I lock it behind me; the bolts click loudly in the quiet street. My son cannot bear to look at me. Instead he stands there, staring at his feet and wrestling with his demons, as I feed coins into the meter, and on the five-minute walk back towards Oliver's house he keeps a constant two steps ahead of me. But when we get to the house he hesitates; he doesn't want me with him, yet he cannot bring himself to walk up the pathway without me and stops, reluctantly, to let me go first.

'Well, go on then,' I say, stopping too.

It's a big house, as are all the houses in this street: Victorian and double-fronted with a wide front porch. But it isn't the house that's making him nervous; lots of his new friends at his new school live in big houses. He's getting used to that, I think, and so am I. After all, if you scrimp and save and push to get your child into a private school, he's bound to make friends with kids who live in bigger houses than his, have better holidays and flasher cars. No, it isn't the house that's the problem; it's me. That I exist. That he even needs to have a mother at all.

He rings the doorbell and his neck is stiff with shame.

They have one of those intercom things. A woman's voice crackles through it and I have to lean over Jonathan's head to say, 'Hi, it's us. It's Jonathan.'

And then the intercom buzzes and Jonathan shoves me back with his elbows, hissing, '*Shush!*', his pink cheeks turning scarlet, and the door clicks and swings open.

Oliver is standing there, and behind him his mother. We haven't met before. She is tall and thin with fine blonde hair, and she sticks out a confident hand. 'Hi,' she says, 'I'm Amy.'

And I say, 'Rachel. It's nice to meet you.' Her hand is cool and smooth in mine; I grasp it and let it go. She folds her arms then, languidly, across her stomach, and leans slightly to one side. I find myself mirroring her movements, though I am not so thin, or so at ease.

'Sorry about the skip,' she says. 'Did you find somewhere to park? It's a nightmare around here.'

'Just up the road,' I lie. And to Jonathan, who is disappearing up the stairs with Oliver, I call, 'Bye, Jono,' followed needlessly by 'I'll come back for you later.'

How desperate I sound. And how I could kick myself for calling him Jono in public. He doesn't reply. He runs up the stairs away from me. I can sense his anger from right down here.

Amy gives me a thin and, I suspect, slightly condescending smile.

'He'll be fine,' she says, as if I thought he wouldn't be.

And I should go now. I should smile back and say, 'I'll pick him up at six, shall I?' and make to dash off, as if there's something I must do, somewhere I must be. But I don't. Instead I do what Jono hates me doing – I linger as if I daren't let him go. And I try to chat.

'You've got a lovely house,' I say.

And Amy shrugs and looks about her, a little startled, as if she really hadn't noticed, and says, 'Thanks.'

Still I don't go.

'It needs a lot of work, though,' she says.

The hallway is wide, with rooms off to both sides and stairs up the middle. Further down I spot the evidence of decorators: a stepladder and paint pots along the side, and on the wall three large different-coloured swatches splashed out to view. I spot this and I latch on.

'You're choosing colours!' I gasp, on a catch of breath, and clasp together my hands. My enthusiasm has her turning, looking where I am looking.

'Yes,' she says and takes a few steps backwards down the hall, and I follow her, deeper into her house. 'Can't make up my mind between these two.' She points at the wall with a manicured finger and we stand there, side by side, contemplating the three shades of cream. She's taller than me, and out of the corner of my eye I can see the steady rise and fall of her chest inside her close-fitting sweater. She smells of lemons.

'I just adore decorating,' I say. 'We've just finished doing our house.'

'Really?' She's not as interested as I'd hoped. So I try harder.

'It is difficult, though. Choosing the right colour. You wouldn't think one shade would make a difference, but it does.'

'Mmm,' she says. 'It bores me stupid. Clive's the fussy one. He thinks all these colours are wrong.'

'Is Clive your husband?' I ask, and this is my cue for her to say, *Yes, and you know he'd love to meet you. You must come round sometime, you and your husband. You must come round for dinner.* And through my head runs a whole host of fantasies, of her family and ours, sharing summer barbecues and lazy afternoons drinking wine and laughing while the children play; of trips to the beach, where the men and boys horse around catching balls, and she and I laze and

gossip on stripy towels, in charge of the picnic. We could be like those people in restaurants on Sundays: those families who always know people and come out in their crowds, to spread themselves noisily around the long, central tables and throw order after smiling order at the red-faced, overworked waiter – *Would you mind . . . ?; Could you just . . . ?* – while families like mine are squeezed onto the tiny tables in the corner, to quietly watch and wait, and envy.

She doesn't say anything of the sort, of course. She doesn't even offer me a coffee. And why should she? She'll have her friends. She'll have her busy, busy life.

Upstairs a door opens and I hear the children's footsteps running across the landing. Jonathan will be furious if he catches me still here.

I see Amy look at her watch, and quickly I say, 'Goodness, is that the time?' And, as I should have said five minutes ago, 'I really must be going. I'll come back at six, shall I?'

'No hurry,' Amy says, and she leads me back to the door. Her smile is pleasant, but distant. 'Clive and I aren't going out until eight. You can make it six-thirty.'

It's not much after three, but whatever light there was is rapidly fading. It's a dull, cold day, and everything is clouded with greyness. I walk briskly away from their house, but as soon as I am out of sight I slow right down, dragging out the distance back to my car. I've got nearly three and a half hours until I can collect Jonathan again, but what am I going to do in that time? It would take me half an hour to get home, and more than that to come back again later, because by then it will be busier on the roads. And what would I do at home anyway? Empty the dishwasher. Sort out the washing. Kill time till it is time to return.