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# I

MARCH 1997

When the call came, they were at the cinema, watching a Weekend Classics screening of *Rear Window*, which they'd both seen before, but so had everyone else, that was the whole point. Not that Chrissie and Stuart were Hitchcock scholars; they were only there because it was something to do while they waited for the call, but everyone else in the audience looked studiously reverential, as if there'd be a test afterwards, or a Q&A with Hitch himself. Then Stuart's phone began to buzz and bounce in his jacket pocket, and the silent, unanimous censure spread like a cloud of dry ice through the auditorium, especially when not only did he fail to switch it off, but also took it from his pocket and lifted it higher so that Chrissie could see too. *Angela Holt*. They looked at each other across the phantom glow, and the name on the screen seemed to pulse like an artery. Their immediate neighbours tutted now, and darted pointed looks, but Stuart answered the call, right there in the middle of row G; he answered the call, stood up, and started making a path none too gently down through the legs to the central aisle, saying, 'Angela, hi, hang on, I'm just . . . sorry? No, it's fine, one moment, just bear with me . . .' while Chrissie followed, apologising in frantic whispers to their fellow

cinemagoers, who stared at her, and refused to forgive. It was, after all, unforgivable.

Out in the foyer, Chrissie hung back while Stuart did that thing he always did on the phone, stalking about like a caged tiger, the handset pressed hard to his right ear. He always looked cross when he took a call; he always looked as though he was locked in verbal combat. She leaned against a wall and stared at the film posters without seeing them, hugging herself, wondering what news Angela had, bracing herself against over-optimism, and then he was in front of her, his face bright and alive with news.

‘A girl,’ he said. ‘She’s three. A very good match, Angela says.’

‘A girl,’ Chrissie said, on an outward breath. A girl, aged three. Older than they’d originally wanted, but they’d let go of all their own criteria months ago. So, a girl of three. A very good match. Such a strange term. Like an arranged marriage. She felt light-headed and let herself slide down the wall and sit cross-legged on the floor.

‘She’s in foster care, been there best part of a year,’ Stuart said.

‘A year? Wow.’

‘Yeah.’ He paused, considered the twelve months they hadn’t known about her, then carried on. He was aware of an usher and a girl at the pick ’n’ mix staring at them, doubtful looks on their faces.

‘Angela says she could be ideal, although it’ll have to go to panel obviously, but she says we could meet her soon, just a brief visit. She’s in Whitstable of all places.’

‘Nancy hasn’t mentioned her. Does she know her?’

‘I expect so. We didn’t talk about that.’

‘What’s her name?’

Stuart halted. ‘Ah, I didn’t ask.’

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Chrissie laughed. ‘Stu! Here, let me call her back,’ she said, and reached up for his phone. ‘Remember what Nancy said?’

‘I know!’

‘If you can’t live with the name . . .’

‘You can’t live with the kid, I know.’

She looked up at him while the phone rang out, said, ‘God, what if she’s called Angela?’ then swiftly adjusted her tone when the other woman picked up.

‘Oh, hi – hi, Angela! Hi, hello, yeah, it’s Chrissie . . .’ she said, and then tailed off when Angela immediately interrupted and began to speak. Stu couldn’t tell what she was saying, but he heard the familiar cadence of her voice and pattern of her speech, her pedantic, circuitous way of communicating the simplest of messages. Of the two adoption officers currently invested in their future, this one – Angela – was senior to the other one – Nancy – yet her relationship skills were, by comparison, completely unevolved. Arm’s-length and no closer, was Angela’s philosophy, so that, eighteen months after they first met, they still felt they barely knew her. And yet they did know this: she always had something to say, and she liked to take her time saying it. Now Chrissie, who hadn’t even managed to ask her question yet, suddenly saw and seized an opportunity.

‘No, yes, I see, no, it wasn’t that, it’s just, we wondered what her name is?’

Pause. Stuart heard Angela’s pedantic drone, circumnavigating the answer. What the fuck? he thought. Just say the name, lady. Then Chrissie’s face seemed to soften and her eyes met his, shining.

‘Oh, really?’ she said. ‘Ah, wow. No, no, sure. Thanks so much, yes, aha, yes, thanks again, bye.’

She hung up.

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‘Well?’ Stuart asked.

‘Sunshine,’ Chrissie said. ‘She’s called Sunshine.’

Outside, they walked in the rain without noticing it, and told each other the things they knew they should remember; how far there was still to go, how they should pace themselves, hold this new breakthrough close, not tell a soul until there was something more certain to say. Then Chrissie caved in and rang Nina, and Stuart rang Carly in New Jersey. They stood facing each other in the street, a few feet apart so their conversations didn’t collide, but looking directly at each other as they talked, then, afterwards, he opened his arms wide, and she stepped into them.

‘Sunshine,’ Chrissie said, into the warmth of his neck. ‘Can you believe that? Wouldn’t we have chosen it, for a daughter? She’s Sunny for short.’

‘Beautiful,’ Stuart said, and pressed his lips on her hair. He held them there for a moment, then said, ‘What did Nina say? Bet she was happy?’

Chrissie nodded. ‘Cautiously happy. I ought to tell Mum, now Nina knows.’

‘She’s right to be cautious,’ Stuart said. ‘We mustn’t run away with this.’

‘How to help it, though? I have this strange feeling.’

‘What, that she’s ours?’

‘No, no, yeah, sort of, yeah – a feeling that she’s who we’ve been waiting for, which is crazy. I want her, I just really want her.’

‘Nancy’s Law,’ Stu said, smiling. ‘Maybe she makes a good point, after all.’

Nancy Maitland; loopy, lovely, with a kind of robust zest for the task of finding Chrissie and Stuart’s child. Early on she’d told them – confidently, if she might – that she believed

adoption placements were driven by fate, and when Chrissie and Stu had swapped sceptical glances, Nancy had only nodded and said, ‘I know you think that’s claptrap, but there’s a child out there who already belongs to you. You just don’t know each other yet.’

Chrissie hadn’t bought the theory at the time, not at all; but now she wondered if she’d absorbed by osmosis some of Nancy’s blind faith, because suddenly the world contained a little girl called Sunshine, and Chrissie had a sensation quite new to her, and very powerful, that this child’s path and her own were about to converge. It wasn’t merely a tug on the heart. She knew what that felt like; she’d had that before: Billy, a four-month-old baby boy, offered as a possibility by Angela, then placed elsewhere by Nancy; Rosie, the two-year-old girl they’d never met in the end; Celeste, another name, another baby, who had drifted into the frame, then out again, and now Chrissie couldn’t even remember why. But Sunshine. Sunshine. Something did feel different. Something did feel right. Something connected to instinct; those feelings that reside in the gut and require neither thought nor learning, but that you somehow know should be trusted.

She said, ‘So, what did Carly say?’

‘She knew I was about to call,’ Stu said. ‘She sensed I had news about a child.’

They both laughed. You could never really tell Stu’s mother anything she hadn’t already gleaned through her famous sixth sense, but she wore her white witchery well. It manifested in a kind of bottomless positivity.

‘Ah, but she was sweet,’ Stuart went on. ‘Six in the morning at Cape May, and I’d clearly woken her, but she was like, “Darling boy, a child named Sunshine has infinite potential for joy.”’

A child named Sunshine, Chrissie thought, the words drift in her

mind for a few moments. There had been no one, and now there was Sunshine. A small girl, untethered in the world, whose destiny was now tilting towards Chrissie and Stuart. Extraordinary, she thought. Extraordinary.

Later, she did her duty and rang Diana, her mother, in Barnsley, and they talked about the weather and her dad's new car – a Bentley, of all things – and the new colourist at her hair salon in Sheffield who'd trained in London with Trevor Sorbie, before Chrissie at last broached the subject of Sunshine and caused a heavy silence to descend, a hundred and eighty miles away in South Yorkshire.

'I see,' Diana said, at last. 'Well, you've come this far before, Christine, and still been thwarted.'

'I know, Mum, but the system owes us, and Stu and I both have a good feeling about this one.'

'That's all very well, but it's not about a feeling, is it? It's about whether it goes your way.'

Chrissie rested her forehead against the kitchen wall and listened to her mother warning against false hope. She spoke from experience, because they'd been extremely unlucky so far, they'd been disappointed and demoralised, and had discovered that, in the parallel world of adoption, a child could be offered with one hand, then taken away with the other; available, then unavailable, as if, like a covetable couture handbag, they came in and out of stock, and bad luck, you'd missed out again. So yes, her mother knew well enough how Chrissie had suffered, because so had they all; but Diana's concern, as ever, came out as a kind of thistly impatience, as if all the brutal iniquities of the system they'd experienced were only to be expected, so why the fuss? Sadness was weakness, in Diana's opinion; she could barely tolerate it, and she possessed only this brand of mothering; steely, unbending, a cold fierce love.

They'd got off on the wrong foot from the start, of course, when the day before their first adoption workshop, Diana had phoned to say it was all a waste of time, since they weren't husband and wife, and Chrissie had said, 'Ah, well, about that . . .' and then had had to confess the thing she'd been putting off, and putting off – that she and Stuart had got married three weeks ago, very quickly and quietly, at the Old Marylebone Town Hall; just Sol, Julia, Rocco and Kim in attendance, and coffee and cake afterwards at a cafe in York Street.

'We'll have a big wedding celebration when the time's right,' Chrissie had said, into the arctic silence. 'And that day, the day of the party, will be our real wedding, because the other was just for the paperwork, right? A formality. We didn't dress up, even.'

And this, finally, had forced Diana into a response. 'Please tell me you didn't wear jeans, Christine,' she'd said.

That was a year and a half ago, and now here they were still, wearily engaged in the attack and parry of a telephone chat about whether or not they should allow themselves to hope.

'Well, look,' Chrissie said, doodling on a notepad by the telephone and listening with only half her mind on Diana's doomy pragmatism, 'we've been given every reason to feel encouraged this time.' She'd written *Sunshine Stevenson* and *Sunshine Woodall*, and now she stared at the names, and adorned them with tiny flowers on snaking stems that twisted and curled through the letters.

'Your dad'll be worried sick when I tell him.'

'About what?'

'About another one not working out, obviously.'

'Well,' Chrissie said in a measured tone, 'I suppose that's understandable.'

'Anyway, who'll look after the child when you're playing concerts till all hours?'



‘Well, that’s a hypothetical problem if we don’t get her, right?’

‘I didn’t say you wouldn’t get her; I said it was a worry that you might not.’

‘Agreed, it’s a worry, but Stu and I are trying to stay positive.’

‘So, tell me again then, how you’ll manage this small child, with your lifestyle.’

‘Mum! My lifestyle? I’m home more than most working mothers! And we’ve both given up cocaine until the adoption papers are signed.’

‘Christine!’

‘Joke. Obviously. Come on, Mum, please, we’ve been through this so many times.’

‘Yes, we have, but I still don’t know how you’ll cope, or why you want to complicate an already very complicated life. It’s not unmarried girls giving away their perfect babies these days, it’s children from drug addicts, children who’ve been neglected.’

‘Mmm,’ Chrissie said, absently, ‘you’ve mentioned that before, once or twice.’ On the page of the notepad she’d written, *A child named Sunshine has infinite potential for joy*, and now she thought, thank you, Carly.

‘Now you’re being facetious.’

‘Mum, I know you’re anxious about this, but I’m sure you’ll feel better when there’s a living, breathing child instead of all this constant speculation.’

Diana snorted. ‘Don’t psychoanalyse me, Christine.’

Psychoanalyse Diana, thought Chrissie; where would she possibly begin? She sighed into the phone. Her mother was exhausting. How much of her adult life had she spent talking Diana down from the ledge of her furious indignation?

‘I just want you to be happy for me, Mum,’ she said.

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‘If it all works out, I’ll be very happy for you, Christine,’ Diana said. She sounded hurt now, and Chrissie took her cue and softened her tone.

‘It’ll work out, Mum. We’ll make it work out.’

‘A little girl, you said?’

‘Sunshine, three and a bit.’

‘Sunshine? As in, sunshine?’

‘Yeah, Sunny for short.’

There was a protracted sigh. ‘Well,’ Diana said, ‘there’ll only be one of those on the school register,’ and this was her, giving a little ground, and on these terms they were both content to say goodbye. Chrissie put the phone down, and, with the notepad in hand, she went to find Stuart.

‘Sunny Stevenson,’ she said, showing him her artwork. ‘Or Sunny Woodall?’

‘Sunny Stevenson-Woodall?’

‘If it worked double-barrelled, we’d both be using it. I think it’s one or the other.’

‘Sunny Stevenson, then,’ Stuart said. ‘Alliterative and lyrical.’ It was Chrissie’s surname, and she smiled, and kissed him.

‘I knew I liked you, for some reason,’ she said.

‘We’re totally doing what we’re not supposed to do,’ Stuart said, suddenly serious.

‘Yeah. But this is happening,’ Chrissie said. ‘Your mother’s seen it in the tea leaves.’

There was going to be a child of their own; two of them, maybe three – vocals, drums, guitar – and everyone who knew them knew they’d make beautiful babies. They’d met in 1982 on a music course in Liverpool, first year, first week, first day. Chrissie had opened the door into her boxy room in the hall of residence and almost immediately she had shoo away her

parents, desperate that her glamorous mother didn't speak to anyone in the embarrassing Queen's English she tended to use on strangers, or that Doug didn't start mending a dripping kitchen tap or bleeding the radiators. He was proud as punch of Christine, he kept saying, while Diana wondered things out loud; which shelf of this horrible fridge might be Christine's? Who would put brown carpet and curtains in a girl's room? She maintained her usual elegant hauteur until the time came to say goodbye, when she surprised herself and her daughter by finding it hard to let go. Her hug was too tight, too lengthy, as if she was trying to communicate something very important, for which she didn't have the words.

'Right,' Doug had said, when the embrace lengthened into awkwardness. 'Let's be off, let's leave the lass to it,' and Diana had released Chrissie all in a rush and stepped away, a look of confusion on her face, like a sleepwalker who'd woken up in a strange place. Other students and their parents had stared covertly, in the way people always did at Diana. She was dauntingly lovely, possessed of a level of beauty that was almost inappropriate, and certainly disapproved of in everyday life. She looked a lot like Anne Bancroft – perfectly coiffed dark hair, smoky, smouldering eyes, the same exquisite symmetry to the face – and sometimes she got stopped in the street for an autograph, but only when she went beyond Barnsley, because there, everyone knew she was just Diana Stevenson, Doug Stevenson's stuck-up wife, Christine Stevenson's mother. Oh, how Chrissie had wished she had a plain, plump mum, in her growing-up years. How she'd longed for a homely storybook mother, with flour on her hands and flowers on her pinny. Diana had worn tailored tweed suits and silk blouses for her job as PA to the local head of the National Coal Board. She wore a single strand of pearls, and a sable collar on her winter coat. She wore red

lipstick, and darkened her Anne Bancroft eyebrows with a special pencil, and nobody else quite like her existed in Barnsley. Doug had his own extremely profitable chain of plumbers' merchants, and was a tall, good-looking fellow who knew how to dress, but Diana was a knock-out, and she knew it.

'Yes,' she'd said, to Doug, outside the hall of residence. 'Let's leave her to it.' She'd pulled a powder compact from her handbag, opened it and assessed her immaculate face in the tiny mirror, dabbed at her small, straight nose with the sponge, then replaced it and snapped the compact shut. Then she'd drawn a long, controlled breath and said, 'There's a payphone in the foyer, Christine, so I'd like to hear from you once a week, beginning tonight.' She'd turned away, and sashayed over to Doug's silver Ford Granada, while Doug had given Chrissie a squeeze and said, 'I love you, cherub,' then hurried off to open the passenger door for his wife and settle her in the seat. He'd tooted the horn as they'd swept away, and Chrissie had known what her mother would be saying. *For God's sake, Doug, show some decorum.*

And when they'd gone, and Chrissie had turned to go back into the hall, there was Stuart, walking in too, and smiling at her.

Now, the two of them sat in their living room with glasses of wine, trying to talk and think of other things, but really only wanting to speak again to Angela Holt. They knew there was no good reason to bother her, other than to be sure they hadn't only imagined a girl named Sunshine, but eventually Stuart said, what the hell, he'd call her, and think of something relevant to say when she answered. But her phone rang out without being picked up, so they sat for a short while feeling thwarted and obscurely anxious, and then were disproportionately delighted when his phone rang. It was Angela. Stuart

answered with an over-ecstatic ‘Hi!’, which made Chrissie start to laugh, and clearly gave Angela pause, because she said, ‘Stuart? Is that you?’

‘Yes,’ he said, moderating his tone. ‘Hello, Angela. Sorry, I was just—’

‘I seem to have a missed call from you.’

‘Yes, I’m sorry.’

‘It is Sunday.’

‘I know, sorry.’ He mimed the slitting of his throat with one finger: death by Angela. Chrissie smiled encouragement.

‘What is it, Stuart?’ Angela asked, all snip and snap.

‘We wondered how soon we could meet Sunshine,’ he said, and Chrissie gave him a thumbs-up for his creative thinking, but from Angela there was a short silence followed by a deep professional sigh.

‘Look,’ she said, ‘I fully appreciate your feelings of urgency, but while I do think you could be perfect for Sunshine, it still needs to be green-lighted by the panel, as you know. We can’t simply rush forwards; the protocol is in place for good reason, tried and tested checks and balances we’re all obliged to abide by.’

Stuart crossed his eyes at Chrissie and she grinned.

‘Oh, sure, we know the ropes. But when do you think we *might* meet her?’ he asked. ‘Just, y’know, an estimate?’

‘A couple of weeks’ time,’ Angela said. ‘Maybe three. I’ll need to speak again to Sunshine’s caseworker about timings. You haven’t met him, he’s fairly new to the team, he’s called Brendan Cassidy, and he’s met Sunshine and the foster family, he can tell you much more about the child. He’ll call you tomorrow to arrange to see you, so if you can make yourselves available at a time to suit him, that would expedite the process.’

‘Sure,’ Stuart said. She talked like the

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logistics manager of a haulage company. ‘Has Nancy met Sunshine?’ he asked, and Angela might or might not have tutted, it wasn’t quite clear. She said, ‘I don’t see what bearing that has on anything, but no, she hasn’t.’

‘But she knows about her, right?’

‘Of course she does, Stuart, and, while you’re on, I might as well tell you we’ll need a recent photograph of the two of you. The foster parents and Brendan will introduce the idea of you to Sunshine before she meets you, and a visual image is the start of that process.’

‘Yes, sure, we’ll dig one out and get it to you pronto.’

‘Good,’ Angela said. ‘I’ll look forward to that, then, and we can proceed accordingly. But please do wait to hear from me, Stuart. I know you ring Nancy whenever you like, but I gave you this mobile number only for essential calls; it wasn’t intended as a hotline.’

‘Of course,’ Stuart said. ‘Of course, I’m sorry, I totally understand, I’ll bike a photo over to you, and then you let me know when you need us.’

Chrissie mouthed, ‘And thank you,’ at him, so he said, ‘And thank you, Angela.’

‘My pleasure, Stuart,’ Angela said, and the line clicked into silence.

Stuart let out a long breath and said, ‘Jeez, she’s a ball-breaker,’ and Chrissie said, ‘But she has our Sunshine.’

‘Brendan Somebody has our Sunshine, in fact,’ Stu said. ‘He has to give us the once-over, although God knows what else there is to discover, because they already know everything from how often we argue, to where you buy your knickers.’

Stuart bent down to where Chrissie sat on the sofa, her legs curled beneath her, a glass of red wine in her hand, her unruly fair hair loose about her shoulders. She looked barely older

than the day they met. He kissed her on top of her head, then on the cheek, then on the mouth.

‘I’ll get the photo box out,’ he said.

‘A recent one, though? And not a publicity shot, obviously. But can you think when we last had our picture taken together?’

‘Last July,’ he said, and grinned. ‘Dancing on the table of that absinthe bar in Antibes,’ and she laughed so much he had to take the glass from her hand.

They found a respectable picture of the two of them on that same trip, sitting side-by-side on the wide medieval city walls of Antibes, with the Mediterranean glittering in the background, and each of them looking what they considered acceptably normal. Stone-cold sober, eyes open, nice smiles; the sort of people who might make suitable parents for a child named Sunshine. Then Stuart wandered off to read the music reviews, and Chrissie lost the rest of the evening going through the box, all the way to the bottom, to where she knew their youngest selves were waiting. Two-year-old Chrissie standing between Diana and Doug in an attitude of complete ownership; seven years old and posing on the doorstep in her first Brownie uniform. Skinny little Stuart, five years old in the ocean at Cape May; nine years old and at his first summer camp in the Catskills, hanging upside down from the accommodating bough of a maple. Sea-side pictures, picnic pictures, gap-toothed school pictures. A snapshot of Stuart on his way to the high school prom – young rebel, no tux, no bow tie, just a vintage dress shirt, and a scowl – and a picture of Chrissie screaming with laughter on a log flume at her school leavers’ outing to Blackpool. No siblings, either of them; no rivalry for their parents’ attention. Always, just Chrissie and Stuart in their separate existences, captured by the loving gaze of the eye in the lens.

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She spread the photographs out on the carpet, absorbed and transported by the familiar images. On their opposite sides of the Atlantic, they had lived their young lives, and surely there'd been another fate in store for each of them then; another future? But the cards had fallen in their favour. Chrissie had travelled ninety miles to university, Stuart had travelled three thousand, and for the first couple of terms they were only friends, but that was never going to last, everyone knew it, they seemed a matching pair. When the box of photographs came to the part in the story where their stars aligned, Chrissie held her breath for a few moments and unconsciously placed a hand over her heart, at the glow in their faces, their casual, youthful beauty, their unconcern, their insolent confidence that together, now, they were invincible.

Stuart had turned up in Liverpool not with accompanying parents, but on his own, by plane and train, and to Chrissie this had been most alluring, added to which he carried a guitar on his back like the freewheelin' Bob Dylan, and he'd said, 'Hey, am I glad to see *you*,' in his New Jersey drawl. They'd both enrolled for the same degree – music performance and technology; a fantasy course, Chrissie had thought when she'd found it, a course she might have invented – she'd had to read the prospectus two or three times before she'd believed in it, this launch pad into the industry, taught by musicians and sound technicians, who were looking for passion and performing experience over exam results. There was a recording studio and a small stage for live performances and, at once, Chrissie had felt she'd found her people. Everyone there had lived and breathed music. Within days, her new friend Stuart had formed a band he called The Lineman, with two edgy London boys: Sol Cooper on bass guitar; and a guy who only called himself Rocco on drums. All three of them had **Copyrighted Material** – her voice, her



keyboard skills, her look – and for a while she'd made them beg while she'd considered her options. But she'd already known in her heart where she belonged, and soon she was their lead singer, keyboard player, and songwriter too, her delicate, confessional lyrics a gift for Stu's shimmering chords.

They'd tried hard to remain platonic, protecting the fledgling band from a messy romance, spending many a long night resisting each other while working on words and melodies. And it wasn't until one of their earliest professional gigs that Stu had finally understood what she meant to him. They were in a room above a pub in Glasgow, a hubbub of people drinking, talking, disregarding the young band at the back of the room. Chrissie, waiting to begin, affronted by their inattention, spoke into the mic, and said, 'Good evening, everyone, please can we have some hush? We're about to play our songs for you.' There was a short, startled hiatus in the activity, but then all the faces in the small crowd slowly, miraculously, turned to the stage, and The Lineman played their set. From the start to the end, it was golden, and no one shone brighter than Chrissie, and Stu had known there could be no other woman in the world he wanted more. Their romance wouldn't be messy, it would be epic, and it would be lifelong; that's what he told her, and she was inclined to agree. So they became the couple they were meant to be, and she went on the pill and didn't come off it until ten years later, when she was twenty-eight, he twenty-nine, and they'd decided to start their own family of freewheelin' kids.

And even now, with all that had passed, and all she trusted that was to come, she found she still hadn't entirely forgotten those babies, those imaginary children of their own making, and remembering was like pressing down on a bruise. Pressing down, feeling the pain, but never speaking of it because they'd agreed that acceptance was a positive state, not merely a hopeless

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one, and they were already lucky; lucky far beyond their teen-aged dreams. But she hadn't known what success meant, when she was younger; she'd thought success was an album going platinum or a sold-out tour of the States, until there'd been this one precious and vital thing she'd had to accept seemed indisputably beyond her reach.

For a while, Chrissie sat very still in her pool of memories. Then she stood up sharply, leaving the photographs spilled across the floor, and went to look for Stuart. She needed his reliable shoulder, and his certainties.

The day before they were to meet Sunshine, Stuart had the welcome distraction of a meeting with Lila from the management company, so Chrissie called Nancy, who said she absolutely understood her restlessness and would happily meet her for a chat, in a cafe in Muswell Hill.

Her large black bicycle was chained up outside and she was already seated at a table with a coffee for each of them, by the time Chrissie arrived. She leapt up to greet her, and enveloped Chrissie in the sort of flamboyantly committed hug that made the people around them wonder what they were to each other.

'It was so good of you to come,' Chrissie said when Nancy released her, and then she took her seat, listening to Nancy tell her, oh no, it was fine, it was no trouble, she didn't have long but she would always make time, it was her job, that's why she'd given them her number. She'd become more friend than adoption officer as the months had passed, but she lived south of the river, somewhere beyond Peckham, and now Chrissie felt her own neediness had almost certainly put Nancy out, and she felt selfish for making the phone call, although Nancy's expression was a study in empathy as she reached across the table and rested a hand lightly on Chrissie's arm.

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‘You look . . . overwound,’ she said. ‘Try to relax, Chrissie, I promise you, all will be well.’

Chrissie held Nancy’s gaze, hoping – as usual – for some kind of mysterious succour from this young woman, whose somewhat hectic, home-knitted appearance – wild and wiry hair, a permanently ruddy complexion, lumpy jumpers in rainbow colours – belied an uncanny talent for stillness, as if the turbulence of the world couldn’t touch her. Now, she kept her placid, pale-grey eyes on Chrissie and said, ‘This is going to happen. Sunshine is your child,’ and of course it was precisely what Chrissie wanted to hear, yet now it had been said, Nancy’s statement felt fanciful and unsafe, plucked from thin air with no basis in fact.

‘Oh, I do hope so,’ Chrissie said, on a deep outward sigh. ‘But, well, I think about the past, and what happened before, and I know how it can all slip away, and now this little girl, well, she’s far more than an idea, she’s a living, breathing, beautiful reality, and I feel—’

‘I know how you feel,’ Nancy said, cutting in. She smiled and took hold of Chrissie’s hands across the table. ‘But I want you to believe in this match, because I do, very fervently.’

‘And yet, you haven’t met her,’ Chrissie said.

‘Oh, but I know her, through Brendan,’ Nancy said. ‘She’s his responsibility, so there’s been no reason for me to meet her, but I know all about her, from him.’

‘Right. Are any other couples meeting her?’

Again, a pause; then, ‘Chrissie, try not to think of this as a competition.’

‘But it sort of is, isn’t it?’

‘No, it isn’t, it’s a search, and yours has ended. Keep the faith, Chrissie. You and Stuart are a perfect match for Sunshine, and I wouldn’t say that if I didn’t wholeheartedly believe in it.’

The Truth According to Nancy; it was irresistible. ‘You can feel it in your water, right?’ Chrissie said, with a smile.

Nancy laughed. ‘In my water, my bones, my heart and my soul. I’ll be thinking of you tomorrow, sending waves of love. I’d send waves of luck too, but you won’t need it.’

‘Thank you, Nancy,’ Chrissie said, and they drank their coffee and chatted about other things, and when finally they parted and hugged tightly again, Chrissie thought she might actually be able to physically feel the warm waves of the young woman’s conviction. Still, though, as she watched Nancy weave away along the Broadway on her bicycle, Chrissie knew she wasn’t quite ready to go home to the empty flat. Nina, she thought; I need to talk to Nina.



Nina ran a small art gallery in Highgate, and had a tiny flat and a large studio for her own use, above it. If a customer entered downstairs, a bell rang upstairs, and Nina would down tools and descend the winding wooden staircase. But today was Monday, when the gallery didn’t open, so Chrissie sat and watched Nina paint, knowing she had her entirely to herself. Nina had her back to Chrissie, and was pushing cadmium and cobalt greens about on a canvas with a palette knife, but she was paying perfect attention, Chrissie could tell that from the angle of her head, and the quality of her silence.

‘Stu and I know too much about the system to be able to relax,’ Chrissie said. ‘That’s the problem. We know things now we didn’t know before.’

‘Mmm,’ Nina said.

‘We won’t be the only couple meeting Sunshine.’

‘You might be,’

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‘We won’t, there’ll be others, I’m certain. There’ll be other couples, with steady jobs and big houses and a nice car they don’t have to share with their friends.’

Nina put her palette knife down and turned from the canvas. She was almost as blonde as Chrissie, no traces of grey yet, and today she had her hair scraped back with the help of a fat brown elastic band. Her face had its usual scrubbed-clean look, bare of make-up. She said, ‘Hasn’t Nancy spent all these months telling you those things don’t matter?’

Chrissie said, ‘I know, but—’

‘And wouldn’t Nancy have told you if there were other couples meeting Sunshine?’

‘She swerved the question; I don’t think she’s entirely sure,’ Chrissie said. ‘But I bet there are, and I bet Angela Holt and Brendan Cassidy and probably even Nancy Maitland are going to end up choosing them.’

Nina looked round at her and smiled. ‘You sound like you did when you were ten, and didn’t get picked by Sharon Machin for her skipping games.’

‘Well, yes,’ Chrissie said. ‘Now you mention it, that’s exactly how I feel.’

Nina laughed, and looked at Chrissie with indulgent fondness. ‘She was a nasty piece of work, wasn’t she?’

Chrissie nodded. ‘God, yeah. She rubbed mashed potato on Terry Butler’s glasses at school dinner.’

‘Blimey, that’s dark. What became of her?’

‘Dunno,’ Chrissie said. ‘Prison warden, maybe.’

Now they both laughed, and Nina wiped her hands on her jeans then came over, and sat down opposite Chrissie. She pulled a cigarette out of her top pocket, and popped it into her mouth.

‘Don’t lose heart,’ she said. The cigarette lagged when she

spoke. Her matches were just out of reach, and Chrissie tossed them to her. Nina struck one, lit the cigarette, and took a long drag. She only ever smoked in her studio, said it helped her to work. It was one of the reasons Chrissie liked being here, the smell of tobacco smoke. Also, the smell of turps, which she found equally soothing. She wondered, sometimes, if the hours she'd spent up here with Nina counted as substance abuse.

'Did I tell you, there are no birth parents on the scene?' Chrissie asked.

Nina raised her brows. 'Yeah? Wow, how come?'

'She was dropped off at a housing office in South East London, Brendan said. Left there, by a young woman who scarpered.'

'Did they catch her on CCTV?'

Chrissie shook her head. 'Apparently not; she'd barely stepped inside the building when she managed to hand her over. Imagine doing that?'

'Desperation,' said Nina, 'can make people do the strangest things.'

'Yeah, I guess. Anyway, it simplifies the process, in a way.'

'Does it?'

'Brendan said so.'

'Well, good,' Nina said. She tipped her head and blew a column of smoke at the ceiling. 'And it sounds to me as though Brendan liked you a lot, otherwise you wouldn't be where you are now. They're not looking for big houses, Chrissie, they're looking for lovely people, and you and Stu are the dictionary definition of lovely. See what happens tomorrow, enjoy the experience, be yourself, and everything will be all right.'

Chrissie felt tears pool in her eyes. This happened a lot, these days; she felt nervy and restless and as vulnerable to acts of kindness as she was to misfortune. But Nina was right about Brendan – he had seemed to like her. He had been friendly and

unthreatening and a bit shambolic. He'd arrived by bicycle and forgotten to take the clips off his trousers, and then a kind of nervous energy had seized him and made him garrulous, and he'd spent the first ten minutes marvelling at their wall of music – all the CDs and LPs on purpose-built shelves the length and height of their living room. He said, 'I don't know much about music, me,' and then proved it by pulling out random sleeves and saying things such as, 'Velvet Underground? Funny name for a band,' then putting them back in slightly the wrong place, and Stuart had done a supremely good job of pretending not to care. Then, finally, Brendan talked to them about Sunshine, showed them her notes – scant details, really, and nothing at all about her infancy. He told them she was a lovely child, affectionate and sociable, and how well she'd settled with her foster parents, then asked them questions about their professional set-up, and how they'd fit their life as performers around a child, and Chrissie said – as she'd said before, to a poker-faced panel intent on winking out a sex and drugs confession – that, apart from some studio work, they had no commitments until a European tour early summer next year, no gigs for months. So, she repeated, in the immediate future, just studio work, and song-writing at home, and anyway, if she had to give it all up for Sunshine, she would. She felt Stu looking at her, and kept her eyes resolutely on Brendan.

'Coo-ool,' Brendan had said, looking right back at her and seeming a little awed, although if he hadn't heard of The Velvet Underground, then he certainly hadn't heard of The Lineman. He'd been nice though, once he calmed down. He'd been with the agency a little under three months, he told them, and he seemed a good addition; more ordinary than Nancy, more relatable than Angela. When Chrissie had asked why Sunshine had been twelve months in foster care, he'd said, 'Good question,



and I don't know,' which had been unhelpful, but endearing. Also, he'd kept the best till last and produced with a flourish an unexpected bonus, a short video of Sunshine playing in the back garden of her foster home; an amazing, surprising glimpse into her life, and her image was imprinted on Chrissie's mind's eye now: a little girl with a perfectly round face, a mass of dark, rich, brown curls, and a bold, humorous, defiant expression. She didn't look cowed by circumstance. Smaller, perhaps, than Chrissie imagined a three-year-old would look, but also very doughty and determined in dungarees and little blue boots. Years ago, when she, Chrissie, had idly and complacently thought about the family she and Stuart would have, she'd always pictured three fair-haired children; but here had been this girl with hair the colour of mahogany and dark, sparkling eyes, and Chrissie had thought, *Oh, my daughter!* She'd glanced at Stu, wondering if he'd had the same visceral flash of recognition, but he'd only smiled at her, then looked back at the screen, where a man off camera was saying, 'Say hello, Sunshine,' in a coaxing voice. The child had taken a deep breath and yelled, 'Hello!' and waved in a wild, outlandish arc, then dropped her arm, turned, and run off down the small garden and out of shot.

'I just won't be able to bear it, Auntie Nina, if we don't get picked,' Chrissie said, now, and Nina said, 'I know you think that, but you will.'

'Get picked?'

'No, bear it. But there's a strong chance you will be chosen, I'm sure they're being just as careful about your feelings, as they are about the child's. They don't want the same thing to happen again, any more than you do.'

'Remember Billy though?' Chrissie said. 'Swooshed off to a couple in the home counties'

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‘Well, sure, of course I remember, and it was tough, but that child was not your child.’

‘Now you sound like Nancy.’

‘No, I don’t mean it’s all written in the stars, I just mean, they went elsewhere for solid reasons to do with their needs and their own best interests, not because the Fates had other ideas – and not, by the way, because you and Stu fell short.’

No, thought Chrissie. But she’d held Billy, the baby, in her arms for an hour. He’d smiled up at her; he’d clutched her thumb in his fist; he’d reached up and pulled her hair; he’d fallen asleep.

Nina looked at Chrissie’s expression and sighed.

‘Cup of tea?’ she asked. ‘Or glass of wine?’

At first, Nina Baker had been friends with Diana. Well, not friends exactly, but friendly acquaintances, exchanging pleasantries at the Barnsley Market veg stall where Diana found Nina working, one February morning in 1972. Nina had an open expression and a ready smile, and on that first encounter she gave little Christine an orange wrapped in tissue paper, fastened with a sticker that said *Produce of Israel*. She was younger than Diana – twenty-five to her thirty-one – but clearly she’d already lived a life, spoke of London, and Paris, and a failed attempt at selling her own paintings. Diana had said, ‘What on earth are you doing in Barnsley?’ and Nina had laughed and said she liked it, it was the friendliest place she’d ever lived. From the outset, Diana took an interest; she told Doug about Nina later that same day, said she’d seen something in her, and clearly she was wasted on a fruit and veg stall. So Nina became Diana’s discovery, and was gradually absorbed into their family life, encouraged all the while by Diana, to fulfil her potential. She paid her to look after her son, and Chrissie so that Nina,

in turn, could rent a better flat and fund a foundation course, and, eventually, a fine art degree, in Sheffield. When Diana decided to take a job in the offices of the coal board, it'd been Nina – by then Auntie Nina – who stepped in to help at home so that Doug could run his plumbing empire and Diana was relieved of domesticity. She became essential to all three of them, but especially to Chrissie to whom she was part of the fabric of her upbringing. And when Chrissie and Stuart finally gave up their itinerant life and bought a flat in Muswell Hill, Nina had already moved back to London to run the art gallery, a couple of miles away.

She was perhaps the most self-contained person Chrissie knew. The gallery was only sparsely visited by customers, leaving Nina with acres of time to paint, cook, walk, read, and listen to music. She had a handful of very good friends scattered across the world, she lived alone, she was serenely content, and it had ever been thus, Chrissie thought now, as she walked back home after two hours in her company, feeling not exactly peaceful, but certainly much restored. You knew what you were going to get from Nina, she thought; she was completely reliable. Once, when Chrissie was young, she'd asked, 'Why aren't you married, Auntie Nina?' and Nina had smiled and kissed the top of Chrissie's head and said, 'Because, my kitten, I have you,' and after that, Chrissie asked the same question often, just to hear the answer.



Sunshine's foster parents lived in a quiet Whitstable street, not far back from the sea. It was long and narrow and allowed no visitor parking, so Stuart and Chrissie had to prowl around in the car in tense silence until they found a place they could pay to park, then feed the meter until the time they'd

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paid for matched the time they knew they had. Just an hour, today. An hour, to meet the child who might be their daughter. Stuart dropped the money all over the pavement, and his hands shook as he retrieved the coins then slotted them into the machine, and Chrissie shivered in the April sunshine as she watched, although around them there were people heading for an afternoon on the beach, in shorts and summer dresses.

They'd had a dreadful journey; the longer they were on the road, the further away Whitstable had seemed. They shared this elderly vehicle with their drummer Rocco and his girlfriend Kim – dear friends, indispensable friends, but, on this occasion, unreliable friends, because, when Chrissie and Stu picked it up from them in Kentish Town, the tank was all but empty, and they'd driven to the nearest petrol station with dry mouths and pounding hearts, convinced they were going to run out. Then they'd crawled through the Dartford Tunnel in a line of cars that had moved slow as molasses for no evident reason, and then again on the M2 as they'd inched their way towards, and past, an accident. They'd allowed an extra hour for what should have been a ninety-minute journey, and had needed every second of it, and now they were here, on time, but strung out tight, too tense to talk, so they held hands and walked up the street to number twenty-three, and knocked on the door. It was so hard to arrange their faces into relaxed and friendly smiles in readiness for it opening, but they did their best, and suddenly, there they were, being shown by Barbara and John into their small front room where Brendan Cassidy had already taken a seat on the sofa. There were two other foster children, narrow-eyed, wily-looking twin boys of about six years old, with bright-orange hair, and names that Chrissie and Stuart were told, but immediately forgot. Sunshine wasn't there. She'd gone down for a nap, Barbara said. Copyrighted Material

‘She’ll be awake soon enough,’ she said. She looked them up and down rather boldly, evidently judging their appearance: lean and blonde, good-looking in a way that Barbara probably recognised but almost certainly didn’t admire. Scruffy, her eyes said. Jeans and T-shirts. Dirty canvas pumps.

‘Brendan says you’re pop stars,’ she said, and he immediately reddened and Stuart laughed.

‘We don’t play pop and we’re not stars, but otherwise, spot on.’

‘I said musicians in a band, actually,’ Brendan said.

‘Well, you look like pop stars,’ Barbara said. ‘Don’t they, John? Look like pop stars?’

John said, mildly, ‘I’ve no idea what a pop star looks like on their day off.’

Chrissie, feeling brittle, said, ‘Any chance you could wake up Sunshine?’

Barbara looked at her as if she’d just suggested they blow up the house.

‘Not a good idea,’ she said. ‘I’d never wake a child from a nap; they do their growing when they sleep. She’ll not be long; would you like a cup of coffee while we wait?’

Chrissie and Stuart did not want a cup of coffee, they only wanted to meet Sunshine, but they said yes please. John said, ‘Please, make yourselves comfortable,’ and they thanked him, though neither of them remembered to sit down. Chrissie smiled at the twin boys and they stared at her insolently, like a pair of urban foxes. Stuart chatted awkwardly to Brendan about their drive down from North London, which he said had been fine, because he didn’t wish to talk about its awfulness. The twins suddenly began to wrestle on the floor and roar at each other, grabbing each other in lethal-looking chokeholds. John said, ‘Lads, take it outside,’ but they either didn’t hear or they ignored him, rolling around, that’s what he said, about, their white

faces turning puce with the effort of trying to throttle each other. Then Barbara pushed the door open with her hip and came in with two mugs of coffee, but, as she passed them over to Chrissie and Stuart, she tipped her head and said, 'Ah, I can hear her now,' and she turned on her heel, so they stood there, clutching their unwanted coffee, watching the door, feeling, each of them, that this over-populated little room was not the place to meet Sunshine. Even Brendan seemed different, watching them in this new habitat with a kind of detached, anthropological interest.

'Look, here, let me take those mugs, they'll only be in your way,' John said, suddenly, and it was the kindest thing he could've done. He took the coffees off them, and then nudged the nearest twin with the toe of his slipper, and said, 'I bet you two can't get to the fence at the bottom of the back garden before I count to ten,' and the pair of them immediately leapt apart from their strangleholds and raced out, pushing and shoving and laughing as John winked at Chrissie, and said, 'They fall for that every time. Do sit down, you two,' and now, they did.

And then Barbara came back in, holding Sunshine in her arms, and the two of them seemed to Chrissie to be part of the same whole. The child clung on tight, and buried her face in the soft flesh of Barbara's neck, and when Barbara said, 'Here we are, then, who'd like a cuddle?' Sunshine seemed to cling harder, pressing herself further into Barbara's ample body. Barbara ran an expert hand up and down the child's back, patting and soothing and making her so extremely comfortable that it was hardly likely she'd want to leap into the unpractised arms of a stranger.

Chrissie said, 'Oh, no, give her a minute,' and Barbara said, 'She'll come around on her own in a little while usually.' Still

welded together, they sat down next to Brendan, and Barbara prised Sunshine away just enough to swivel her round, so that she was facing out. Chrissie, without meaning to, said, ‘Oh,’ with a kind of gasp, because she was the child Chrissie had known she would be, the child that belonged to her. Her cheeks were pink from sleep, and one side of her face was plastered with curls. Her mouth was turned down, as if ready to cry. Her eyes, thickly lashed, were dark and watchful. Barbara jiggled her knees and Sunshine bobbed up and down and almost smiled. Chrissie felt useless, helpless, but Stuart spoke up and said, ‘Hello, Sunshine, I’m Stuart and this is Chrissie, it’s so lovely to meet you,’ and Chrissie, emboldened, said, ‘It is, and we brought you a present, to say hello.’

At this, Sunshine perked up. She swivelled her head and said, ‘A present,’ to Barbara in a voice that was sweetly low and husky. Chrissie wanted to hear it again.

‘Here,’ she said. ‘It’s in my bag. Will you come over and find it?’

At once Sunshine slid from Barbara’s lap – was it Chrissie’s imagination, or did the woman hold her back, just for a fraction of a moment? – and crossed the room. Chrissie had dropped to the floor, and was kneeling now, although she still felt enormous alongside the child, who was very slight, a tousle-haired pixie. Sunshine bent at the hips and placed her hands on her thighs and peered down into Chrissie’s bag. ‘This?’ she said, plunging her hand in and retrieving a box wrapped in orange paper, with ‘Sunshine’ written across it in silver pen. How they’d agonised in the toy shop over this purchase. Dolls and teddies and Play-Doh and fairy wands and plastic tubes filled with tiny dinosaurs had all in the end been rejected in favour of a jungle jigsaw puzzle, which now seemed the dullest gift possible.

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‘That’s it!’ Chrissie said, and Sunshine clutched the parcel to her chest and stepped away from Chrissie, as if the trophy might be snatched back. She was dressed in thin white leggings and a khaki T-shirt that said *little terror* beneath an image of a wild-eyed troll, and Chrissie tried not to think how much they looked like clothes she would never buy.

‘Well, we weren’t expecting that,’ Barbara said, smiling. ‘We weren’t expecting a present, were we?’

She seemed to be addressing everyone, although she turned, now, to look at Brendan, who didn’t reply and kept his face almost, but not quite, neutral, just allowing himself a small smile that could, quite frankly, mean anything. Chrissie immediately started to panic; had they crashed some secret protocol by offering a bribe to a child they still didn’t know?

‘What do you say to Chrissie, Sunny?’

This was Barbara again, brightly authoritative.

‘Nothing,’ Sunshine said. She squeezed shut her eyes and bunched up her mouth into a soft little knot.

‘Oh, now,’ Barbara said, ‘that’s not what we say when somebody gives us a present!’ She glanced at Brendan, then back at Sunshine. ‘What do we say, Sunny?’

Chrissie looked at Brendan, who was writing something rapidly on a form. Perhaps all this was a test. Or perhaps it was simply that Barbara always needed to parade her own understanding of social niceties.

‘Tell you what, Sunny,’ Stuart said, ‘save it for later. Open it after we’ve gone.’

He knew how to speak to children. He used his own voice, but softened it slightly, whereas Chrissie knew she sounded inordinately bright and cheerful, like a children’s television presenter. The little girl opened her eyes and looked at him shyly.

‘Will you show us the garden?’ he asked.



She nodded, and, tucking the present under one arm, she held out the other so that he could take her hand. That small moment, that first contact between Stuart and Sunshine – how significant it seemed, how moving, and how badly Chrissie longed to experience it. She could see that he'd been right to change the conversation, seize the initiative, and get them out of the room; but how had he understood that when Sunshine was no longer being scrutinised by five adults she'd be released from the pickle she'd got herself into? Chrissie followed them down the small hallway, through a long, galley kitchen, and out through a back door.

'Shall I take that?' she said to Sunshine, and pointed at the present.

'It mine,' Sunny said, and Chrissie smiled and said, 'Yes, it is, but I can keep it safe for you while you play,' and when the child relinquished the box, it felt momentous again, a first act of trust between them, and Chrissie thought, good grief, every tiny thing is imbued with significance; every small gesture magnified, every kind word amplified.

Sunny, looking cheerful now, announced that she could do a roly-poly and Stuart said, 'Me too!' so they performed a few together, on the grass, and the twins joined in, and Chrissie watched them, transfixed by Sunshine's throaty laughter, until Barbara appeared in the door and said, 'Time to say bye-bye, Sunny.'

On the drive home, Chrissie said, 'You're more fun than I am,' and Stuart laughed and said, 'Nah, just more childish.'

'No, you are,' she said. 'You're fun, and relaxed, and you know how to play with a child, but I don't, I don't know what to say, or how to be, I don't even like the way I sound when I do pluck up the courage to speak, and then she bursts into a flood of tears.'

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He slowed the car, indicated, pulled over.

‘Hey,’ he said, and he pulled her towards him, and wiped the tears with his sleeve. ‘It’s been a tough day.’

‘I’m sorry. I’m pathetic.’

‘You’re fantastic. You’ve driven this campaign so far, Chrissie Stevenson, we wouldn’t be here if it wasn’t for you, and you’re going to be an amazing mother.’

Through her tears she said, ‘Am I, though? I felt stiff and awkward back there. I might turn out just like my mother, isn’t that what happens?’

He laughed. ‘No,’ he said. ‘It’s not what happens.’

She sniffed deeply, sat back, looked at him. ‘I want that child,’ she said.

‘I know. Me too.’

‘But didn’t you get the feeling Barbara wants her too?’

He shrugged. ‘No, not really, she was just flexing her fostering muscles a bit, that’s all.’

‘Were you surprised she’d put Sunshine down for a nap?’

‘Oh, well, not really. I don’t know, I guess she knows what the kid needs.’

‘You didn’t find it passive-aggressive?’

Stuart laughed. ‘I did not.’

Chrissie said, ‘You’re funnier than me, and you’re nicer than me too.’

‘Two very good reasons to stick with me, then.’

‘Did you see how much Sunshine loved her?’

‘I saw how attached she is. But that’s a good thing, right? Attachment?’

‘Did you hear her when she woke up? When Barbara said she’d heard her, did you? I didn’t hear a thing.’

‘I guess you get an ear for it.’

‘D’you think? Will you learn how to listen when she wakes?’

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‘Yeah, of course. It’s quieter at our flat anyway.’

‘But Barbara is basically her mother, isn’t she? As good as?’

‘Well, she calls her Barbara, not Mommy.’

‘Why would she ever want to leave Barbara and John, though? Twelve months is a long time, at that age. A third of her life.’

‘Chrissie, if it was down to Sunshine, right now in this moment, she wouldn’t want to leave, would she? But she’s up for adoption, she can’t stay in a foster home, and so we’re going to do the best job we can of making up for that, and loving her, and raising her.’

‘If we’re given the chance.’

‘Yeah,’ he said. ‘If we’re given the chance.’

She fell silent, then. She couldn’t talk about it any more. It all meant far too much, and nothing they said to each other privately, nothing they thought or felt or wanted, would make any difference to the outcome. Drown it all out, she thought; drown out all the unanswerable questions. She turned on the radio, and as if the station had only been waiting for her, The Pretenders came on with ‘Stop Your Sobbing’, bang on the opening lyric.

‘Ahhhhh, impeccable,’ Stu said. ‘My second favourite Chrissie in the world.’

Some days, everyone – *everyone* – in Muswell Hill seemed to have children, and while she waited to hear once more from Angela Holt, Chrissie felt haunted and taunted by couples who callously paraded their fecundity through North London. They stalked the pavements, with their toddlers in buggies, their babies in slings, their school-age children in bottle-green sweat-shirts and grey skirts or shorts, swinging their book bags and talking and talking and talking, barely pausing for breath. In a queue at the post office, Chrissie found herself gazing into the face of a baby who gazed back from her pram; a baby whose eyes seemed too large for her face, whose lips were like an unfurled flower, whose whole body and being were such a perfectly simple miracle, such a warm and vital work of art, that Chrissie became lost in her longing and had to be called twice to the counter. And when she got home, she'd cried, because her own faith was failing now, her own faith was turning to ashes, and the idea of Sunshine was becoming hard to bear under the weight of the increasing possibility of failure.

And then, glory be, Angela rang. She said she had good news, said she could now confirm they were the only couple considered suitable for Sunshine, and that it was still a long road

ahead, but they'd do their very best to avoid delays, and said a shortage of adoptive parents in the system right now had been very much in Chrissie and Stuart's favour. Put like that, it sounded rather as though they were a last resort, but still, Chrissie's head spun with unfettered joy and she sat down hard on the kitchen chair while she listened to Angela unpacking another series of complicated sentences about the formalities, the matching panel, the dotting of i's and the crossing of t's.

'Ah,' Chrissie said, when her turn came to talk, 'Angela, that's . . . that's . . .' and she started to cry, messily and noisily, gulping and gasping, drowning in her own relief.

'Can you put Stuart on?' Angela asked. But Stuart wasn't at home, so Angela had to wait as Chrissie tried to gather her wits, and said, 'Sorry' and 'Thank you' and 'Sorry,' again, and hoped Angela knew she wasn't unstable, but simply consumed by a kind of exhausted and inexhaustible gratitude.

'Look,' Angela said, 'I'll give you some space to gather your thoughts. Call me back when you're . . . when you've collected yourself,' and she'd scarpered, hanging up the phone – Chrissie imagined – to roll her eyes at her colleagues and get on with something tidy and manageable and bureaucratic, while Chrissie laid her head on her arms and waited for the shuddering emotions to subside.

She realised now that she'd been absolutely braced for failure, and she realised, too, that, for her, that would have been the end of the journey. To be introduced to Sunshine only to have been shown another child that could never be hers – well, she would have borne it, with Stuart's help, but she would never have risked her heart in such a way again.

She concentrated on steadying her breathing. She needed to call Stu, and she'd like to speak to Nancy, and she had to call Angela back. But first she must lower her racing heart and

mind, and she did this by focusing on the image in her mind's eye of Sunshine; Sunshine holding her hand, turning her face up to Chrissie's and calling her Mummy. Picture this, Chrissie told herself, for it shall come to pass. Trust the process, for nothing now will stand in your way. The past year and a half had often felt like a complex strategy game, the rules of which they didn't know; the early days, especially. Adoption workshops, where wary couples sat in semi-circles on plastic chairs in drab local authority meeting rooms, eyeing up the competition, performing tasks, recalling memories, being challenged, again and again, about their own expectations, so that every answer, however honestly given, felt like the wrong one. Boy or girl? Baby, toddler, or a child of school age? Single child or siblings? Could they cope with a history of sustained sexual abuse? Could they cope with mental or physical disability? And to what level? Could they cope with a child who had only ever known violence, hunger, loss? They were told it was OK to say no, but every time they admitted that they didn't think they could provide a home for two or more siblings or they didn't feel able to meet the needs of a severely autistic child, there always seemed to follow a short but intense silence, as if they were being given thinking time, to consider how shallow they were.

Now, Chrissie thought about Angela, who'd merely called with good news, and had received in reply hot tears and gasping incoherence. Poor Angela, so unbending, so formal; what must she have made of it, she who'd never betrayed a trace of emotion, never asked Chrissie or Stu a question that wasn't required by a form? She'd probably be as relieved to be free of them as they would to be free of her, and yet, thought Chrissie, there'd been a quiet kind of merit in Angela's detachment today, a quiet kind of weight to her words; *the only couple considered suitable for Sunshine*. And what had they wished for?

Nothing at all. Angela was no fairy godmother, but still, she'd granted them their wish.

At last, Chrissie dialled Stu's mobile number to share the glad tidings, and on picking up he asked, 'Hey, hi, is it just us?'

'Just us,' she said, and his unalloyed joy made her cry again, but quietly this time; reasonable tears that didn't stop her talking.

'It feels so momentous,' she said. 'Like, y'know, like a breakthrough, like a beginning.'

'Yeah, right?' Stu said. 'The previous stuff, everything we've been through – it makes sense of it all.'

'It does, it really does.' She sniffed deeply, and he laughed.

'Ah Chrissie, we're going to have a blast, we three,' he said.

She smiled into the phone.

'I mean, who would choose the easy route to parenthood?' he said. 'Who wouldn't want this feeling, the feeling we have now?'

Chrissie closed her eyes, and considered how much she loved this man, for saying that. She felt weak with love, she was fit for nothing, she was ready to sink to the floor.

'I love you,' she said, hearing the inadequacy of those words for the first time.

'Love you back,' he said. 'See you later.'

Fully equipped for conversation now, she called Nancy, but her phone rang out without being answered or switching to voicemail. Then, she rang Angela, who answered immediately, and launched into a list of what Chrissie and Stuart should now expect. She said that soon they'd get a date to visit Sunshine again, during which they could spend some quality time on their own with her. The photograph that they'd provided would have pride of place on the wall by the child's bed, and Barbara and John would begin to refer to Chrissie and Stuart as 'your new mummy and daddy'. The'd be in it and back on another