

THE TWELVE

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‘Prepare to be spellbound by this brilliant story of loss, resilience, and the enduring quest for truth in a universe where anything is possible.’

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THE TWELVE

LIZ HYDER

ILLUSTRATED BY TOM DE FRESTON

Pushkin Press
Somerset House, Strand
London WC2R 1LA

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First published by Pushkin Press in 2024

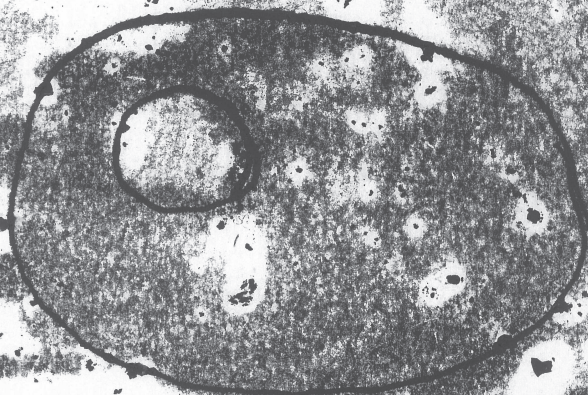
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ISBN 13: 978-1-78269-398-7

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Designed and typeset by Tetragon, London
Printed and bound in the United Kingdom by Clays Ltd, Elcograf S.p.A.

www.pushkinpress.com



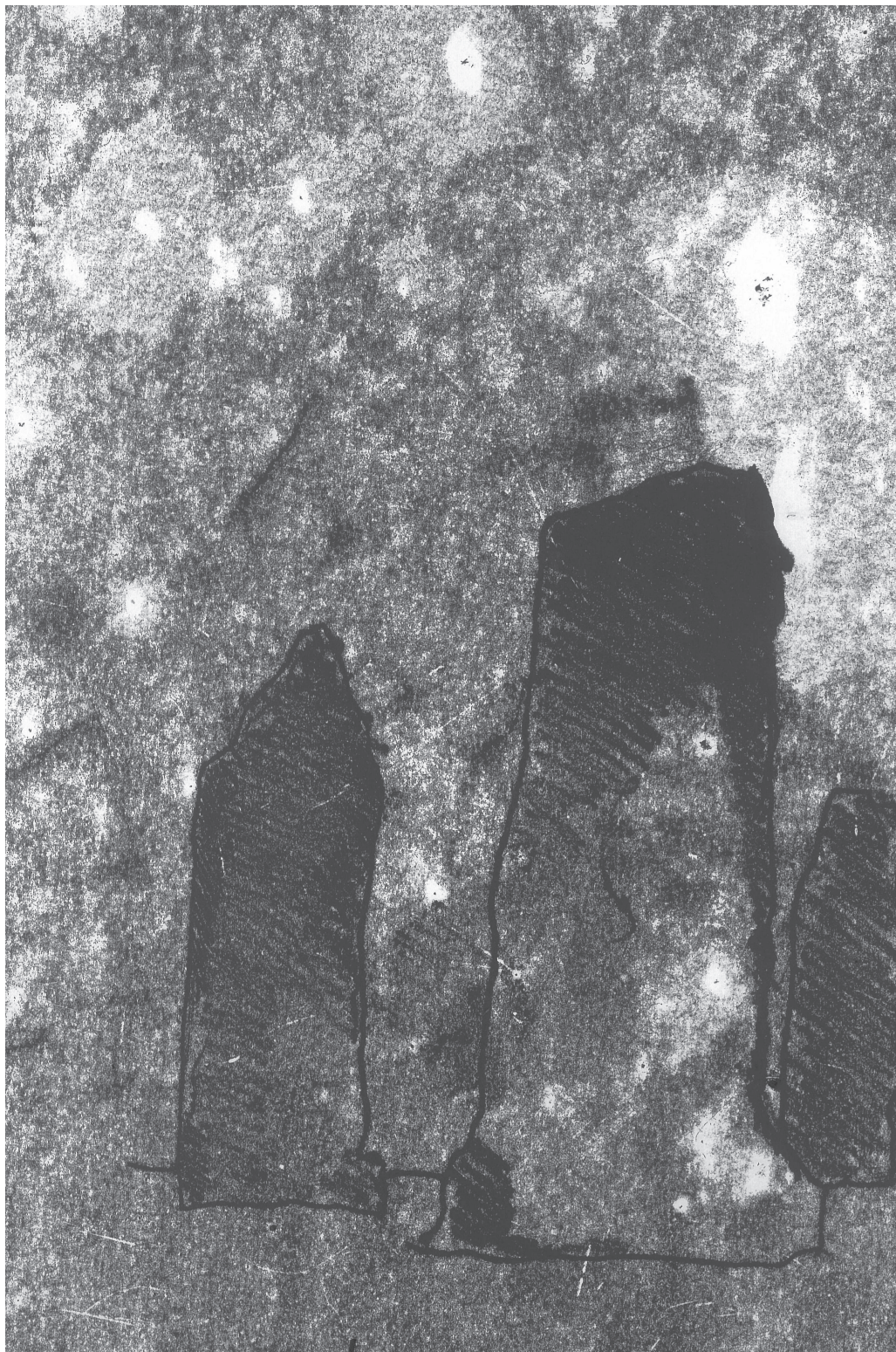
"The black hole teaches us that space can be crumpled like a piece of paper into an infinitesimal dot, that time can be extinguished like a blown-out flame, and that the laws of physics that we regard as 'sacred', as immutable, are anything but."

JOHN WHEELER,
physicist (1911–2008)

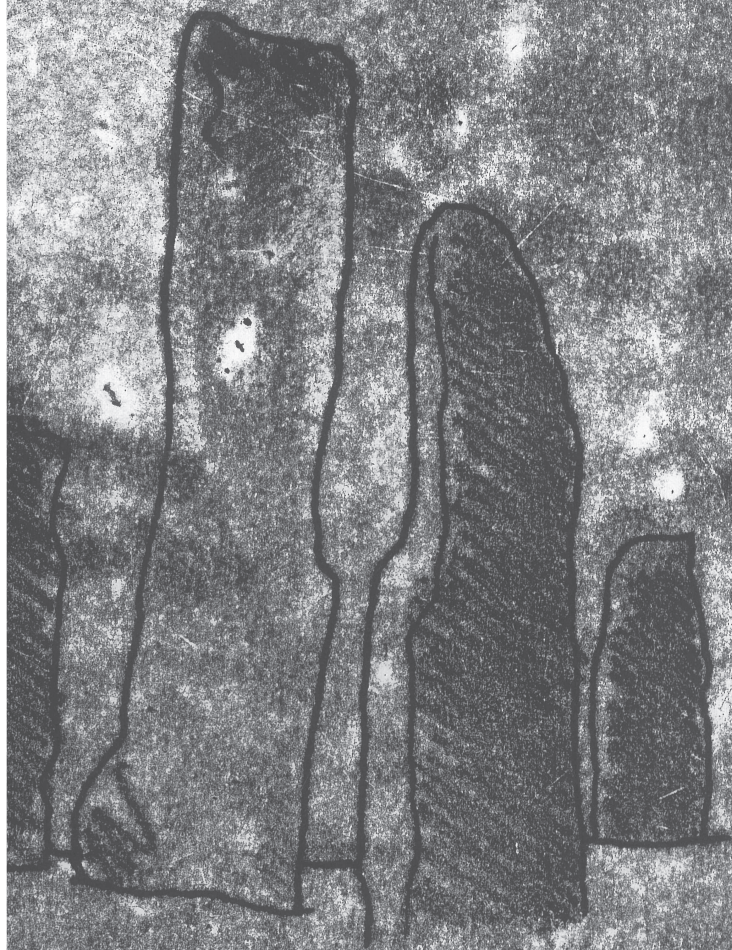
"Alice laughed: 'There's no use trying,' she said; 'one can't believe impossible things.'

'I daresay you haven't had much practice,' said the Queen. 'When I was younger, I always did it for half an hour a day. Why, sometimes I've believed as many as six impossible things before breakfast.'"

LEWIS CARROLL,
Alice in Wonderland



WINTER SOLSTICE
December 1999





Someone is sneaking around my bedroom.

My eyes snap open and I'm alert in the dark. Hot under my duvet. No one's allowed in my room without permission, not even Mum.

Is it her? Jemima? Has she somehow broken in?

I hold my breath and my heart thumps so loudly, it feels like it'll leap out of my chest. But then I hear something else. Outside. The faint rush of the sea, of waves on shore. I'm not at home at all, not in London but hundreds of miles away on the Welsh coast. On a sofa in the sitting room of a caravan that Mum's friend has lent us for Christmas.

Then it can't be Jemima! She wouldn't have followed me all the way here. Would she...

I slowly raise my head, eyes adjusting to the darkness, and there it is. A velvet silhouette by the front door, paused by the lock. A small, human-shaped ink blot.

I reach under my pillow for the torch I was using to read by before I fell asleep, pointing it towards the figure. Like a magic trick, the beam of light transforms the shadow back to a person in an instant.

Libby! Of course! I breathe a sigh of relief as my daft little sister guiltily stares back at me. But then I realize what she's wearing. Green pinafore dress and those red boots Mum bought for her birthday, no pyjamas in sight...

"What're you doing?" I ask, sitting bolt upright.

"*Nothing!*" she says firmly as I glance at the clock on the wall — half eleven! Long past both her bedtime and mine.

"Libby! Are you trying to sneak out?"

"*No!*" she says defiantly.

"*Seriously?* God, you're such a bad liar!" I shake my head as I get up off the sofa. "I'm getting Mum."

"There's no point." Libby steps towards me. "She's asleep."

"Well, I'll wake her then!" I say firmly.

"Good luck," Libby says, hands on her hips, as she switches on the main light, dazzling me for a moment.

"You don't even know, do you?" she adds as I blink at the brightness. "She's on sleeping pills. They knock her out at night, and you haven't even noticed."

I take a sharp intake of breath. "Since when?"

"I dunno, weeks maybe."

"What? Why didn't you tell me before? Why didn't you say something?" I push past her to Mum's room, knocking at the door even as I open it.

The covers are up, almost over her head and her breathing is deep and regular, on the verge of snoring. Her hair pools over the pillows like seaweed.

"Mum..." I say quietly, then louder. "*Mum!*" But she's so fast asleep she doesn't even turn. I shake her shoulder, lightly at first, then harder.

"Dead to the world," Libby says, coming to stand beside me. "Told you."

"You're a *dick*, Libby," I say as I step out, shutting Mum's bedroom door behind me.

"*You're* the dick!" she retorts, heading back towards the front door.

I grab her arm. "Hang on! You're not going anywhere! I forbid it!"

"Forbid it!" Libby snorts, trying to unpeel my fingers from where I'm holding onto her. "You're not *Mum*, Kit!"

"It's the middle of the night!"

"No! It's not! But it soon will be—that's why I've got to go now! It's my only chance! Please! I'm running out of time!"

She wriggles free from my grip as I frown at her.

"What d'you mean? *Running out of time?*"

"Winter solstice. Midnight." She looks at me pleadingly. "It's a magic time of year, Kit. *Magic!* The only chance I'll get! And extra special cos of the millennium!"

"What on earth are you on about?"

"The next village, Manorbier, there's a white tower on the church!" she says excitedly. "At the top, there's a pool of water and if you look into it at midnight on winter solstice, it's said you can catch a glimpse of—"

I cut her off by laughing and her face turns to stone.

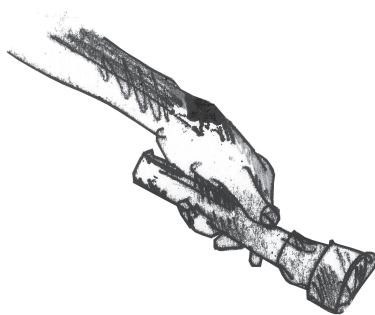
"Oh, for God's sake! Catch a glimpse of what, Libby? Your future? The kid you're going to marry? Christ's sake, it's just a story! You're too old for this! It's like *The Faraway Tree* all over again..."

Her face falls and I feel a flicker of guilt, knowing I've touched a nerve.

"I knew you wouldn't understand!" she huffs. "That's why I didn't tell you! You never believe in *anything* anymore! You're wrong, Kit, that's all! You're *wrong*!"

And with that, Libby pelts to the front door and wrenches it open to a rush of cold air. Her red boots flicker in the moonlight as she leaps out and down the steps.

"*Libby!*" I cry, hearing the panic in my voice and knowing I have no choice but to follow. I reach for my boots and zip them up, grabbing my torch and pulling my coat on as I dash outside. The wind bites sharply as the sound of the sea washes over me, silver clouds dashing across the moon-bright sky. I spy Libby in the distance, those scarlet boots catching the light as she pelts off towards the lane. No time to think, I yank the door closed behind me and run straight after her.



“You make your own future, Libby! It’s just nonsense! *Come back!*” But there’s no persuading her. You can’t reason with Libby when she’s like this. A ball of furious stubborn energy. And although she’s only just eleven, she’s far stronger than I was at her age. I can’t physically stop her like I used to, when I’d wrap my arms around her tight and wrestle her to the floor, hysterical with laughter.

Her mouth rambles as fast as her legs move and I catch snippets of her garbled tale as she goes.

“Look beyond the water on the longest night to see what your future might hold!” she says, again and again, as if bewitched. It’s the usual nonsense. A magic tower, a magic pool of water... She read about the legend in a book. *Of course she did.*

I switch on my torch as we walk at speed, almost trotting, along the dark leafy lane and up through the empty car park and I want her to stop. More than anything I want to hug her and tell her it's okay, that it's just a story and I believed any old nonsense at her age too. I want to promise her we'll have hot chocolate when we get back like we sometimes do at the weekend for breakfast, that she'll have forgotten all this by morning. But then we're by the old wooden gate that leads to the coastal path and all the words fall out of my head.

I pause for a moment as Libby slips through, letting the gate creak shut behind her. The steep cliff edge is just off to my left and I'm suddenly grateful for the thick blanket of clouds that arrive overhead, stifling at least some of the moon's power. I hate heights with all my being but I can't let Libby head off on her own in the middle of the night, I can't, so I take a deep breath and force myself on. The fierce wind drops to a whisper and the roar of crashing waves fills my ears as I focus on the bright ring of torchlight on the steps of the winding path ahead. I daren't risk looking out towards the sea—if I see how high up we are, I'll freeze in fear, I know I will.

Libby hates me bringing up *The Faraway Tree* but it's the same thing all over again. Years ago, she tried to run away to the hollow tree by the big pond in the forest. An old oak that had eaten away its own insides, you could stand up in it as if it were a kind of tree cave. It had been there forever, even Mum remembered playing in it as a kid. And Libby, gullible little Libby, somehow managed to convince herself that not only was the book real, but she'd found the actual magic tree from it too. She knew we wouldn't believe her so she planned her own solo expedition—to climb to the top and

step through the clouds into another world. Seriously, that was her plan. She'd woken me in the night then too, back when I still shared a room with her. Rabbit in the headlights when I turned on my bedside lamp. Her rucksack crammed with stale half-eaten rolls she'd saved from packed lunches over the past week at school. She was six then. The amount I've teased her since. I thought she'd grown out of all that...

"You don't have to come with me! Just go back, Kit!" Libby hisses as she finally turns inland, off the coastal path onto a narrow lane, and I breathe a sigh of relief to be away from the cliffs at last. A sign points towards Manorbier and I allow myself a smile, amused suddenly, because all I can think is how bloody stupid Libby's going to look when she sees nothing but her own reflection in that water...

It's a strange name, Manorbier. I thought it was pronounced fancily like it was French but it's just "manor" like a big house and "beer" like the drink. The village itself is small and pretty with a deserted feel. There's only a smattering of streetlights and not all of them are working. In the dark gaps between, I look up to see how much the moon lights up the whole sky now—a ghostly glow behind the clouds. I turn off my torch and pocket it, just in case anyone might spy the two of us, out alone in the dead of night. Even without it, I can make out the shape of cottages and the white road markings. It's so different from London with its perma-glow of orange streetlamps. So quiet too, without the constant noise of sirens and late-night drinkers we get back home.

Home...

I swallow at the thought. A flicker of last Friday in my mind. Still images like photos, snapshots of memories. The

bike flying into the canal. The splashes of water freeze-framed for a moment as it hit the surface. The look of surprise on Jemima's face as I launched myself towards her. I shake the memory from my head. She's hundreds of miles away. *I'm safe. I'm safe. For now anyway...*

"Hurry up, if you're still coming!" Libby calls, and I follow her as she turns left and up a steep slope. That's when I get my first view of it—the old church standing guard at the top of the hill. Its distinctive white tower, so bright. I follow Libby on the path that snakes up to it and, in the distance, I spy the horseshoe curve of Manorbier bay, and the faint glow of a dying fire on the beach.

An owl hoots in the woods nearby as we reach the crest of the hill and turn left, heading up a handful of steps to the church itself. Libby reaches for me, clasping my hand, and we look up, side by side, at the white tower looming over us. It looks as if it were crying. Tears of black run down from underneath the high-up windows, smearing the white walls below like mascara. There's a stillness in the air but a crackle of electricity too, like you get before a storm.

Above us, the thick clouds part, and the full moon, high in the sky, emerges in all her glory, a beautiful circle of light that paints every cloud silver and makes the white tower glow even brighter. Winter solstice. The longest night of the year.

Libby takes a step towards the porch but it's as if the light of the moon suddenly makes me see things more clearly. My skin prickles. Mum would kill us if she knew we were here and I wish I'd tried harder to wake her.

"Wait!" I say, gently pulling Libby back. "Hang on just a minute."

“What is it?” she says.

“Where’d you say you read about this again?” I ask.
“The legend of the white tower on solstice? Which book was it in?”

I see the flicker of a lie ripple across her face.

“You didn’t read it anywhere, did you?” I ask flatly. “Tell me the truth, Libby. *Right now.*”

“She told me not to tell anyone...” Libby says meekly, looking at her feet.

“Who did?” I ask, grabbing her by the shoulders as my blood runs cold. “Who told you not to tell anyone?”

“The girl in the shop at the caravan park! She told me to come alone. You shouldn’t have followed me! I *told* you to go back!” She looks at me boldly but there’s a flicker of doubt in her eyes.

“Jesus, Libby! Why didn’t you tell me this before? You know you can tell me anything!”

“No, I can’t! Ever since you went back to school after the summer, you’ve been weirder and weirder! Sitting in your room for hours, never letting me come in. And I knew you’d overreact like you always do! She was only trying to be helpful! And besides if you’re right and I’m wrong, you can tease me about it forever, *just like with the bloody tree!*”

Libby’s never said anything like this to me before and I feel the sting to my heart. I stand there for a moment, numb, as the moon hides back behind the clouds above. Libby pulls away, going to the church door and pushing it open, and I dash after her as she disappears inside. I’m plunged into darkness as the silence of the church turns to face me, a shiver down my spine as my eyes adjust.

Why would anyone tell a kid to go to a tower at midnight on their own?

"Libby! Please! Come on now! This is *stupid*. Come back!" I beg as I reach out in the dark and stumble over a pew, cursing as pain shoots up my shin. Libby laughs and it rings out like a bell, echoing around the stone walls.

"Libby! Don't be daft! *Get back here!*" I cry as I reach for my torch and the beam of light reveals my beloved, infuriating sister by a door on the far side of the church.

There's a shuffling noise behind me, and I spin on my heels, dry-mouthed, as I shine the torch around. *No one*. No sign of anyone except me and Libby in the whole church.

Libby rattles at the door and the sound draws my attention back to her. I walk towards her, silently breathing a sigh of relief that the door is locked, but I'm wrong. It's just stiff with age and she yanks it open triumphantly.

I run after her, moments behind, pushing the same door open as it tries to swing shut on me, its metal handle cold in my palm. In my haste, I hit my torch on the surround, and the beam vanishes. I try the switch but it's no good, I must have knocked the battery out of place. Blinking in the sudden dark, I find myself in a narrow stairwell with only a tiny window to the outside, cobwebbed up and blackened with grime. Steep stone steps curl upwards, worn smooth by generations of feet. I gingerly put my foot on one and blindly feel my way up, counting as I go, grateful for the old rope handrail, rough and prickly in my hand.

"Libby!" I cry, my voice echoing around me. "Please! Just *wait!*"

Forty steps later and I finally emerge onto the gallery.

And there she is. In the ghostly dimness at the far end of a flimsy wooden platform, a small door to the white tower visible in the stone wall beside her. There's a railing to my right, a thin metal pole from another age, reddened with rust.

"We need to go home!" I say firmly. "*Please!*"

"We made it, Kit! We made it!" Libby cries gleefully. "Come on! Just five minutes more and then we can go! And you can laugh at me till the end of time, I promise!"

She's only a handful of metres away. But the moon has been hiding and when it re-emerges, so too does my fear of heights. The empty nave and aisle fall away in front of me where I stand on the gallery. Everything white in the moon's bright beams. Tiny chairs and pews like a doll's house. My legs turn to jelly and bile rises in my throat. I'm frozen, transfixed by the world below. Moonlit tiles on the church floor. Flat grey gravestones of people long gone. I feel light-headed as my thoughts float up towards the rafters.

We should never have come here!

The first chime from the bell tower throws me to my knees, hands over my ears. The sound so painfully loud, it rings around the whole church and transforms me into a bell too as my own yell rings out in return.

Another chime makes two. Ten more until Libby is supposed to be at the top of the tower but I can't let her go, I can't! Who knows what might be waiting for her up there? My head spins. Even if it was just a joke, why would *anyone* tell a kid to venture out in the middle of the night alone?

Out of the corner of my eye, I see Libby's red boots and force myself to look up at her, my hands still clamped over my ears.

“It’s safe.” I see her face lit up by the moon’s beams, a smile of encouragement. “You can do it, Kit! We’ll go together—like always! And you can prove me wrong!”

A third chime, my head like a thousand migraines.

“Come on!” Libby mouths. “It’s safe. Nothing to be scared of!” She jumps up and down on the spot. Red boots in a flicker of moonlight.

I take my hands away from my ears as she glances up at the tower behind her, the bells tolling for the fourth time. I struggle to my feet and grab her, pulling her towards me, wrapping myself around her.

“No!” she cries, trying to wriggle free, but I hold on as tight as I can, counting the bells as the moon disappears again, throwing the church back into the shadows. Libby doesn’t give up easily though. She twists and turns, one last lurch, before escaping. She steps back, glaring at me and rubbing her wrist. She leans on the thin metal railing for a moment and—

It gives way.

That’s when she slips...

That’s when she falls.

She fades into blackness, toppling backwards, headfirst, mouth wide with surprise, red boots tipping up towards me. Her arms splay out as she disappears, swallowed up into the dark...

Libby! My Libby!

She falls. And I can’t stop her.

And I’m running. I don’t know how but I’m running, I’m running down the stairs and I’m running to her and my feet slip and slide as I stumble back down the stone stairs in the

dark stairwell, rope burning my hand. I curse and swear, and nothing matters now, only Libby. Only my brilliant, bonkers, frustrating little sister.

Oh God, please don't... PLEASE!

I reach the bottom of the stairs, hurtling out through the doorway into the nave. A bright golden light blinds me, and I put my hand to my eyes. But then I'm flat on my back, wet with sweat, as the bells chime thirteen. *Thirteen?*

I'm no longer there.

Not in the church at all.

I'm here. In the caravan. In pitch blackness. Blanket wound tightly around me on the sofa, tangled and hot. A faint whoosh of sea in the distance, gulls calling outside.

I pull myself up to sitting, hair wet on the back of my neck, a thin sheen of sweat over me. I breathe slowly, counting to five as I wipe my hands over my face.

I dream a lot; I always have done. Intense dreams, rich in colour, bright and beautiful. Then there are the nightmares too, the "funny dreams" as Mum calls them even though there's nothing funny about them. But I've never had one like this before. Not one that feels *so very real*.

And it's daft, I know it's daft, but I have to check on Libby, just to reassure myself. I stretch as I get up, breathing in the full smell of our borrowed caravan—its history of cooked breakfasts and faint cigarette smoke, a whiff of someone else's damp dog. I tiptoe from my made-up bed on the sofa down the short hallway to Libby's tiny room opposite Mum's double.

It was just a dream, I tell myself as I open the door to Libby's room and switch on the light.

All of my breath is sucked out of me.

She's not there.

There's no one there.

No Libby.

The bed is clean but empty. No lump of daft little sister deep under the warm duvet. No red boots by the side of the bed. No books on the bedside cabinet. No coat on the hanger, no pyjamas, no pencil case or tiger nightlight. No bobbly toy monkey I got for her when she was five which she still insists comes on holiday with us. None of her notepads filled with secret scribbles locked with those crap padlocks I can prise open with my fingernail. My heart empties out.

No Libby.

It's like she's vanished into thin air, vanished off the face of the world, and the scream is out of my mouth like the gulls above. Then the lights are on like a blaze of fireworks and Mum's holding me tight and I'm shaking and hysterical and then I breathe. *I breathe.*

And that's when things get even worse.

"Where's Libby?" I say, as soon as I can form words.
"Mum! Where the hell's Libby?"

There's a look in Mum's eyes and I don't see it for what it is at first.

And then it comes. World turned upside down in an instant.

"Oh, sweetie..." she says, stroking my hair away from my blotchy, tearstained face. Her face full of puzzlement as she says the words that cut so deep.

"Who on earth is Libby?"