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By the time he is himself again dusk has fallen and it is snowing. The temperature has plummeted and his legs are almost too numb to get up. Reeling about the little clearing, he punches himself in the arms and torso, forcing the blood that has rushed to enfold his shattered heart to flow back into his muscles. He has a job to do.

His nails tear away as he thrusts through the first layers of frost-hardened soil, but the deeper earth yields more easily, retaining even now some of the warmth of autumn. He pauses to stare at the blood welling in the nail beds, like crimson varnish. For a moment he can almost smell it, the intoxicating, secret scent of it. Her fingers draped over his wrist as he strokes the brush along her nails. And then the burning chemical smell of the stripper: the fleeting moment of forbidden glamour over.

In the distance, church bells are calling people for midnight Mass.

This will be his Christmas gift to her.

He glances over to where she lies, unable to extinguish the childish hope that she might yet stir. But the first flakes of snow have settled on a cheek no longer warm enough to melt them, and





frost has crept over her amber eyes. Their opaque gaze is focused on something far away, too far for him to reach.

He talks to her as he digs, bestowing upon her the grave goods of their memories. But they run out too soon – there should have been so many more – and then he toils in silence.

Sometime later he climbs out of the sunken bed he has made for her. The full moon has covered it with a silver sheet.

As he lifts her into his arms she seems to sigh into his chest and for a moment he stands there, breathing, as the snow drifts like confetti down through the bare branches of the trees.

On shaking legs he carries her across to the slot in the dark Welsh earth, grunting as he lays her down. She is a weight now. He smiles to think of how he will tease her. Afterwards, when they are together again. When he has done what he needs to do.

It's so cold and she's wearing nothing but a T-shirt and jeans. The T-shirt is baggy, to swamp the body she made for herself: the jeans are tight, leaving cruel marks on her soft flesh. There are other marks too, ugly black stains on the parts of her that lay on the hard ground. The blood is no longer flowing into the atriums of her heart or out of the ventricles. They learned that together, breath mingling, heads touching over the textbook. He smiles at the memory and his frozen skin crackles like wax.

He wants to wrap her up in his jacket, keep her warm in that frigid earth, but then when they find her they will know. And he doesn't want them to know. Not straight away. Because there are things he must do first.

For a long time he sits on the edge of her bed. She is asleep. That's all. A slumbering seed, waiting for spring.





Finally he takes up a fistful of soil. His bloody hand is numb so he doesn't feel the grains slipping between his fingers to dust her cheek. He takes another, and another, watching her features soften and disappear. A handful of earth disturbs the neck of her T-shirt and something catches in the moonlight. Her necklace. He reaches forward. On it is her ring and the key. He unfastens the chain, slips both off into his palm, then refastens it.

When he is done there is a slight rise in the land that might betray her resting place to anyone venturing off the dog walkers' path. He cannot bring himself to stamp it down so he lies on his stomach and lets the earth subside beneath him. With his ear pressed to the soil, he thinks he can hear her whispering. He answers her, making promises.

He's surprised to see the shadow of his profile on the dead leaves. It's morning. Getting to his feet, he vomits until his stomach is empty, even of bile, until he can't breathe, until the blood vessels burst in his eyes and the rising sun becomes a disc of blood, until he thinks, thank you, God, that he will die too.

But he doesn't die.

As he staggers back through the woods to where his mother's car is parked, he can hear the church bells ringing out for Christmas Day.





Wednesday December 1

The school lockers are about as far from the 11S form room as it's possible to get, so Eleri only ever goes there first and last thing. Most people do the same, and at 8.25 the corridor is rammed and noisy as hell, but somehow she manages to squeeze her way through and feed the combination into her padlock.

The gaggle of popular girls are squealing as slips of red and white striped paper tumble from their open locker doors. These are the invitations for the upper school Christmas Party, or “dance cards”, as the head of year insists on calling them. They read:

Dear...

*Will you be my juggling partner at the Cirque De
Elsinore House on December 15?*

From...





Then beneath a dotted line a new section reads:

Dear...

I would love to clown around with you!

Or

It's not trap-easy to say this, but no thanks!

From...

You're supposed to collect one from reception, fill it in and slip it inside the locker of the person you want to invite, then they're supposed to tear off the strip at the bottom, cross out the response that doesn't apply and post it back in your locker. By the look of things the popular girls will be having to send quite a few *trap-easy* replies.

"I'd love to see your big top, Tamara!" guffaws a jock as he tramps past on the way to the hall.

"And I'd love to see your head bitten off by a tiger," the girl retorts and the slim blonde herd sashays off.

Two lockers down, Eleri's best friend is gathering her books.

"Hey, Cal," Eleri calls. "How many invites did you get this year?"

Cal gives a lobotomized grin, "Oh, about a million! How about you, El?"

"Same as last year." She swings the locker open to reveal its cavernous interior, empty but for books and a postcard from her aunt Lynne.

"Don't worry," Cal says with faux brightness. "When





they get their rejections from that lot” – she nods after the popular girls, their long brown legs disappearing through the hall doors – “they’ll move to the next level down. And then the next and the next, and the class pets, and then us!”

The crowd is starting to disperse as everyone makes their way to the hall, but Eleri and Calista have promised to wait for Beni, who’s always late out of morning drama club, because he has a crush on the teacher. Feeling eyes on her Eleri turns, expecting to see him walking up the corridor. But instead finds herself staring into the glinting blue eyes of Ras Mandip.

She’s so amazed that for a moment she just stares back at him.

Though their lockers are only two columns apart, Eleri might have been invisible for all the attention Ras has paid her over the past year. But now he’s actually looking at her. And not just looking. The corners of his lips are bent in a faint smile.

Eleri jumps as hands descend on her shoulders. “Ready to pick our Secret Santas then, people? I swear if I don’t get someone half decent-looking this year there will be a *rampage*.”

The Father Christmas hat balanced on Beni’s Afro looks like it came from the pound shop, but he carries it off with his usual panache. “And if I get *anything* pink or sparkly, I’m going straight to pastoral care.”

They join the herd moving in the direction of the sports hall.





“It shouldn’t be compulsory,” Calista grumbles. “I’ve got way too many things to be worrying about than what crappy gift to buy some total stranger.”

“Christmas socks,” Beni suggests, linking her arm. “You can’t go wrong, especially if they light up and play ‘Jingle Bells.’”

“Whoever I pick this year, they’re getting Quality Street,” Eleri says.

They emerge into the chill of the playground and she folds her arms against the cold. Ras is in the queue to get through the doors of the gym, leaning his elbow on the head of his annoying friend Teddy P.

After a whole year of barely speaking to me, why would he suddenly catch my eye? Eleri wonders. It probably wasn’t deliberate.

The gym smells of feet and BO and old rubber. The morning sunlight pouring through the high, narrow windows makes the parquet glimmer and throws out long shadows behind the students gathered in their various cabals. The jocks scuff the line marks, chatting in gruff voices and occasionally uttering *her her her* laughs. The bad kids (Ras Mandip front and centre) lean against the crash mats looking bored. The popular girls sit on the floor with their knees pulled up, playing with their hair. The hockey team is gathered on the other side of the room and Eleri smiles as the centre back glances in her direction, but her team member’s eyes just skim over her.

You would never know someone was missing. There





isn't even a gap where she should have been because the school has filled her space with a new kid.

"It's freezing in here," Calista complains. "I hope this doesn't take too long."

"Who do you want, then?" Beni raises an eyebrow.

"I couldn't care less," Cal grumbles.

"I want Daniel or James C, or that new boy. If I get Daniel I'll get him a new cricket box."

Calista wrinkles her nose. "Yuck."

"Not at all. I care about the integrity of his testicles." Beni sticks out his lower lip and blows the Santa hat pom-pom away from his forehead. It gives an elven tinkle. "What about you, El? Who do you want?" He winks at her over Calista's head.

Eleri shrugs, but her eyes automatically flit to the crash mats.

"Right!" Miss Merrion yells over the hubbub. "Are we all ready for some festive fun?"

There are equal numbers of groans and cheers.

"Who wants to go first?" Miss Merrion gives a wry smile as she shakes the plastic bin on the trestle table in front of her, knowing she will have to start summoning people by name.

But then a hand shoots up from the kids lolling against the crash mats: "Me, miss!" Those around him laugh, but now the gangly frame straightens and Ras Mandip lopes towards the table. His trousers are too short and his shirt is flapping and the skin fade he got on one side of his head,





the one he was suspended for, is just starting to grow out. You can see his ridiculously gorgeous eyelashes from the back of the room.

On the way past the gaggle of nerds he snatches a pair of glasses from one of the girls and puts them on top of his head.

“He is such a dick,” Calista mutters.

As he nears the trestle table, Miss Merrion’s frown melts: Eleri guesses it’s because he is treating her to one of his beaming smiles. None of the teachers can stay angry at Ras for long, which is a source of constant irritation to the more strident parents who are always marching in to complain about him disrupting classes.

“Be sensible, please, Ras,” Miss Merrion murmurs.

Eleri holds her breath, waiting for him to do something, but instead he just leans over the wrapping-paper-covered bin, biting his lip in exaggerated concentration as he rifles through the slivers of paper inside. Then he gives a subtle flick of his head and the glasses slide off and fall in.

“Oh bother!” he cries, and before Miss Merrion can stop him he has taken the bin from her hands and is delving inside.

“Ras...” the teacher warns, at the clear attempt to sabotage proceedings.

“I have to find them, miss. They’re Jeany’s. Aha!”

He extracts the glasses with a flourish, and with them a slip of paper.

On the way back to the crash mats, the paper hidden





in his closed fist, Ras tucks the glasses gently over Jeany's coarse red curls, and her cheeks turn the same colour as her hair. As he rejoins his friends, Teddy P joshes him, trying to snatch the strip of paper from his hand, but Ras screws it into a ball with his long fingers, then puts it into his mouth, grimaces, and swallows it down.

"Not fair!" one of the rugby boys shouts. "He was looking at the names!"

But Miss Merrion shouts over him, "Next!"

Other students trickle up to the table. Some respond to their chosen name with poker faces, others are obviously pleased or horrified. The nerds slink up and scurry away, then the jocks approach en masse.

"*Oh man,*" sings a voice from the crash mats. "*Look at those cavemen go...*"

Eleri's mouth twitches.

The rest of the crash-mat kids go up then amble out of the hall, laughing and grimacing over their slips of paper. Ras doesn't look at her as he passes.

"Come on," Calista says. "Let's get this over with."

They join the queue, shuffling through the shafts of dusty sunlight. Calista picks. Then Beni. And then it's Eleri's turn.

She walks forward, towards the gaping mouth of the bin.

"Go on, Eleri," Miss Merrion says, and suddenly Eleri is back there, last year, standing at the same table in front of the same plastic bin, picking out a slip of paper inscribed with the name *Nina M.*





“I don’t know who this is,” she had whispered, frowning down at the tiny, neat hand.

“The new girl,” Miss Merrion murmured. “Over by the monkey bars. Black hair, glasses.”

Walking back to her friends, Eleri glanced over. Nina M stood alone, shoulders hunched, head bent as if desperately trying to shrink her oversized frame, to make herself invisible to the sharp eyes of the popular girls and hot boys. Eleri felt an immediate rush of pity. She wouldn’t have it easy here, looking like that. They’d make up names for her: *the Hulk* or *the Blob*, or something similarly cruel and unimaginative.

She resolved then to get Nina M something really nice for her Secret Santa present. Perhaps the new girl was into something, like art or books. Eleri would give it some proper thought, she decided, get to know Nina a little better, and do everything she could to make her first Christmas at Elsinore House a happy one.

But Nina never made it to Christmas. On December 15th of last year the new girl went missing, and despite the coverage on the local news, the posters slapped on every bus stop and lamp post, the flyers handed out by an army of volunteers, she might as well have vanished off the face of the earth.

“Eleri?”

“Sorry. I was miles away.”

Miss Merrion shakes the bin. The slips of paper whisper against her fingertips: *pick me, pick me*. Eleri grasps one and snatches her hand out.





As she walks quickly away to join her friends, she glances at the note and feels a rush of relief. It's Beni.

Wednesday is pasta day and Eleri gets a ladleful of flabby spaghetti in a glutinous brown sauce that smells like a laundry basket full of socks. She, Cal and Beni head for their usual spot, a small round table in the far corner of the room, away from the hustle and noise of the long tables. They've been sitting here since the three of them joined the school from the same primary five years ago.

As they pass she doesn't glance at Ras's table, but she can hear his friend Kika nagging him to tell her who he picked.

Beni falls into step beside her. "I reckon he deliberately dropped the glasses so he could choose. Perhaps it was you, El." He waggles his eyebrows.

"Yeah, right. He hasn't spoken to me in a year."

"Maybe he realized the error of his ways."

"He was probably going for Tamara George."

"You're probably right." Beni sighs. "I would totally kill for her lips. And eyes. And hair."

"And money."

They've reached the table. It would seat four but Calista always moves the fourth chair away to give them more room.

"So-o-o..." Beni drawls as they sit down. "Who did we all get?"

"Can't say," Eleri says, poking the greasy tentacles of her meal.

"Er, why?" Calista looks at her suspiciously.





“It’s in the name! *Secret Santa*.”

Cal rolls her eyes.

“So who did *you* get?” Beni says.

Calista’s lip curls. “Matthew H.”

“Ooh, he’s hot!”

“If you like dumb jocks.”

“We *all* like dumb jocks! I got that girl with the eyebrows that join up.”

“Who cares? It’s all cringe,” Cal says, forking up a tangle of spaghetti.

Beni starts talking about football. About how the new boy has signed up for the team and he hopes he’s better than their current striker who couldn’t hit a barn door at five paces. Beni can talk for England and doesn’t require much in the way of a response. Soon his voice merges into the general hubbub around them.

“... and supposedly he’s a Millwall fan. What kind of normal human being supports *Millwall*? I mean, you’d have to be...”

Something makes Eleri look up.

Ras’s eyes are all wrong. How many other Indian boys with jet-black hair and dark skin have aquamarine eyes? They’re so clear as well, like the irises are tinted glass or seawater, and you might see silver fish swimming behind them. She knows all this because, for the few seconds it takes for the thoughts to pop into her mind, those improbable eyes are looking right into hers.

*





The afternoon drags. History is as dull as usual and Eleri spends most of the lesson gazing out of the window. When the bell goes she gathers her books, then waits while Cal explains to Mr Scarf why her homework was late again.

Beni is waiting for them outside.

“We’re going for a milkshake in Maccy Ds. Wanna come?” By *we* he means his new drama friends. Last term he finally plucked up the courage to audition for the school play. “Come on, it’ll be fun!” He waggles his head in exaggerated encouragement, knowing full well what the answer will be.

“I need to check on my dad,” Calista says, then turns to Eleri. “Come on, let’s get our bags.”

“*You* could come,” Beni says casually to Eleri.

Calista clutches her hands together. “Oh my *god*, Eleri, you are *so super blessed* to be asked to join the tits and teeth, jazz hands gang...”

Eleri can’t help laughing. Cal’s right, some of the drama girls are super annoying. Besides, the two of them always take the bus home together, and even on the days Eleri has hockey practice Cal waits for her, so it’s not fair to abandon her when she needs to get back.

“Have fun, Ben. See you later.” She smiles.

They set off for the lockers, passing the evidence of various EHS student endeavours: 3D collages made up of plastic bottles the Year 7s collected, display boards and framed artworks from the kids studying art GCSE. There’s a pastel picture of a forest, the sun breaking through the trees





dissolving into flares like an overexposed photograph. It's so well done that you almost want to squint when you look at it. Half visible behind the floating discs of light is the figure of a girl with her head bent. Something in the line of the shoulders communicates perfectly the girl's solitariness and sadness. The initials underneath are NM. Eleri sometimes wonders whether she should ask the school if she can give the picture to Nina's mum, but she can't quite bring herself to. It would be a kind of acceptance that Nina isn't coming back. Plus it might make Nina's mum sad that her daughter was lonely. *Was that the reason?* Eleri wonders for the millionth time. Was Nina depressed about not having a boyfriend?

The lockers are crowded with kids collecting their stuff and, as usual, Eleri hangs back waiting for a space while Calista dives straight in. She and Cal have been at school together since they were four years old, and she can't imagine what it will be like when they're not with each other every day. Calista clearly can't either, because she's already planning what unis they'll apply to. They both want to do English. Or at least, they did. Eleri's been thinking she might choose biology and phys ed for A level, so she can do a degree in physiotherapy. Her mum always feels so good when she comes home from her physio sessions: she can move more freely and comfortably, and even sleeps better. To be able to help people like that would be really rewarding. Cal won't be happy about it, but Eleri will have to tell her soon because they have to make their A level choices at the beginning of next term.





Finally there's a gap. Eleri squeezes into it and opens her locker.

She frowns.

Her jacket is hanging on the hook but her backpack isn't there. Pointlessly she moves the jacket aside, as if the bag could have somehow shrunk down enough to be hidden by it. Nothing but paper clips and dust bunnies. She turns round. Calista is leaning against the wall, on her phone, her own bag slung over her shoulder.

"My bag's gone."

Cal helps her look on top of the lockers, in the empty ones and around the floor, but there's no sign of the bag. Finally, at a loss what else to do, they head to reception to tell the secretary.

"What was inside it?" Mrs Banwa asks.

"Books. My laptop and my phone."

"Your laptop? Oh dear."

"It's OK." Eleri shrugs. "It's a piece of crap anyway."

"Do *find my iphone*," Mrs Banwa suggests.

They do this, heads bent over Calista's screen, her straight blonde hair mingling with Eleri's black corkscrews.

"That's weird," Eleri murmurs.

"Got it?" Mrs Banwa says, leaning over the desk, her huge bosom almost knocking off the sign-in book.

"It looks like it's on my bus route home."

"Yeah, look," Calista exclaims. "It's just turned off on to the high street."

They follow the bag's progress all the way back to the Benjamin Estate, where it stops moving.





“That’s where I live,” Eleri says, frowning.

“Well, perhaps whoever took it had second thoughts and decided to return it. The number of times I’ve spoken to Mr Roberts about the security of those lockers.” Mrs Banwa shakes her head.

“But who actually knows where you live?” Cal says. “Apart from me and Beni?”

The answer is no one. Since joining EHS Eleri has kept as low a profile as possible, sticking with Calista and Beni and avoiding any clubs or performances that might tempt her mum to visit school. Cal has done exactly the same: it’s only Beni who has managed to branch out and make new social connections.

They call him, but he’s already in McDonald’s and doesn’t know anything about the bag.

“I’d better get back,” Eleri says. “Before someone takes it.”

Thanking Mrs Banwa, they set off for the bus stop.

Cal’s always quiet on the journey back. It’s different in the mornings when they chat and laugh over TikToks, but having to go back home always seems to diminish her friend, shrinking her, draining her of colour. Normally Eleri would attempt to cheer her up, but she can’t relax until she’s got her bag back. Losing her books and laptop are bad enough, but the feeling of not having her phone is worse. Like she’s lost a limb.

Cal’s stop comes up first.

“Call me when you get in, OK? Let me know if you find it.”





Eleri nods, watching her friend step down on to the pavement and set off in the direction of her street. Eleri used to be envious of the Szajna house: two floors, a back garden, a bathroom with an actual bath, a massive TV and a PlayStation where Cal and her dad Paul had FIFA battles. But not any more. And if Paul doesn't go back to work soon his company will fire him and they'll lose the house.

Ten minutes later the two towers of the Benjamin Estate come into view. One lit up cheerfully, the other a bony finger of darkness pointing up at the sky.

They were only finished five years ago – Shiloh first – and Eleri can remember being so happy when they moved in. Covered in attractive cladding that looks like limestone until you get close, they were really popular. Families like theirs couldn't wait to get out of the cramped Peabody Trust buildings that were in the process of being demolished. Their middle-class neighbours were always protesting that the “classic Victorian architecture” must be preserved, but they should try living in one, with its two-hundred-year-old plumbing, sagging ceilings and rising damp.

She and her mum had been on the waiting list for years, and when a flat in Shiloh came up it was a dream come true. When they finally moved in, Eleri would sit by her window watching them finish work on the tower next door, wondering who would have the window opposite hers. She hoped it would be a kid so they could flash messages to one another, like they were in a fairy tale or a spy film. But then the Grenfell fire happened and no one ever moved into Gibea.





The construction company went bust shortly afterwards, presumably to avoid having to pay to get the flammable cladding removed, but it was too late for the residents of Shiloh. There was nowhere for them to move back to. Ever since, there have been endless arguments between the council, the government and the residents' association about who's responsible for removing it, but Eleri's mum says it'll never get sorted: they just need to make their fortune and move out. Which isn't likely now.

The bus pulls in and Eleri disembarks, stepping off the pavement on to the broad expanse of scrubby grass. The plan was to build more blocks here, but now everything's on hold, they haven't even put street lights in. There are just a few lamps along the gravel path that leads to the towers, and they flicker and buzz as if there's something wrong with the electricity supply. As she moves further away from the high road, the only sound is the wind racing around the base of the towers.

And something else.

Eleri stops dead, fingers of wind lifting the ends of her hair.

Her phone is ringing.

Someone really did bring the bag home for her. But hurrying towards the door of her block, her steps falter. The ringtone is getting quieter, not louder.

She stops and slowly turns around. The black windows of Gibea Tower stare back at her.

But the tower is not entirely dark. A thin yellow





rectangle falls on the grass on the far side of the building. It is coming from one of the empty flats on the first floor. But how could that be? The double doors of the main entrance are chained and padlocked and the electricity was never turned on.

The ringing stops. Was she imagining it? She stands in the semi darkness breathing heavily, then jumps as it begins again, shrill and insistent. She takes a few tentative steps towards Gibea. The ringtone gets louder. Swallowing hard, Eleri sets off towards the building. Out of the shelter of Shiloh the wind picks up, snatching at her jacket. On this side of the estate there is nothing but darkness, stretching all the way to the railway embankment – and that one sliver of light trickling down from the first floor window. She walks up to the building, feeling the hugeness of Gibea leaning in on her, and looks up. Her heart is in her mouth as she waits for the jump-scare of a leering face: someone setting her up for a laugh.

The phone stops ringing. Eleri listens for muffled giggles, but all is silent. *In and out*, she thinks. Get the phone and go. But how will she even get in? Taking a step back, she looks left and right. Then she sees the fire exit. The door is ajar.

She crosses the dark grass. *Deep breaths. Get this over with. You'll be home soon.*

The exit has been levered open, leaving a splintered gash in the frame. The door is several centimetres thick, so whoever did it must have used a crowbar or other tool. It's this more than anything that makes her properly uneasy.





The thought and planning and purpose required to hide her bag in this abandoned building. The door swings open and shut again in the wind, as if the tower they all thought was dead is still breathing. Far away, across the ocean of grass, the high road is strung with the red and white fairy lights of the traffic, the phone shops and takeaways blaring their neon welcomes. Eleri can hear music, the low rumble that is the beating heart of the city. But she is alone here in the hushed dark. The door swings open again and she grasps it and steps inside.

It takes a moment for her eyes to adjust to this deeper level of darkness, but there's still enough ambient light to enable her to see where she's going as she walks down the corridor that leads away from the door. If Gibea is modelled on Shiloh there is nothing on this ground floor but the entrance hall and utility rooms accessed by the maintenance teams, but if she turns left at the end of this corridor she should reach the entrance hall that leads through to the stairwell.

There's a chance that the lift still works, but she doesn't fancy getting trapped in it. Besides, it's only a couple of flights.

The corridor can only be twenty metres long but it seems to take an eternity to reach the end of it and step out into the entrance hall.

It's eerie, she might be in Shiloh – but a post-apocalyptic Shiloh: like the pictures she's seen of the Chernobyl apartment buildings. The floor is littered with rodent





droppings, and drifts of dust and detritus have collected in the corners. There's a smell, astringent and metallic. Against the far wall, the mailboxes glimmer, their number stickers still pristine white, but other than that the darkness is total, thanks to the metal grilles across the entrance. A sudden claustrophobia accelerates her heart and makes her muscles twitch.

In and out.

Crossing the atrium, Eleri pushes the swing door. Sure enough it leads to the stairwell, flooded with moonlight from the tall windows running up the side of the building. With its grey lino floor and white metal railings, it's just like Shiloh, except there are no scorch marks from cigarettes, no names carved into the paintwork, no crayon scribbles up the walls. Her mum complains about the casual vandalism by the younger residents of their block, but there's something comforting about the signs of humanity. This place is lifeless.

Setting her foot on the first step, she takes a deep breath and begins to climb.

The first flight rises towards the window and the moon's round face gazing down on her, but then it turns back on itself and she is climbing into the dark. At the top is a door. As she reaches for the handle, she notices how the moonlight has leached all the colour from her hand, turning it corpse-white.

The hallway beyond is much darker. Closed doors stretch away to a tiny window at the end, through which she can





make out a slot of night sky, clouds scudding against the moon. Yellow light spills from beneath the door beside it. Her heart sets up a painful banging. Is someone going to leap out at her?

The image of laughing idiots filming her with their phones has gone: they used a crowbar to get in here. To lure her in here. Mum is always telling her not to go anywhere alone after dark. To keep her phone with her, the location on, not to make any bad decisions. Well, isn't this the worst decision she's made in a long time? Why didn't she wait for Mum to get back? Or even call the police? They could have escorted her to retrieve the bag. But to have taken it in the first place, it has to be someone from school. And while there are certainly some weird kids at EHS, there's no one particularly creepy, apart from maybe Ray the groundskeeper, and he doesn't venture much inside the school building. Still, Eleri wishes she had her hockey stick.

She sets off towards the illuminated door, her steps unflinching, despite the pounding of her heart. She learned this from her mother: it doesn't matter how much it hurts, you keep going.

She passes silent door after silent door, until she reaches the end. The brass number on the door gleams. *One*. She pushes it open.

The room is empty: no furniture, no carpet, just bare plastered walls and a concrete floor, and a single item lying on the floor, starkly outlined by a light on a tripod in the





corner of the room. Her backpack is bathed in the harsh glare from the bare bulb. The sort of light you have in building sites where there's no power. That sense of unease again: this whole endeavour took thought and planning. Crossing the room, Eleri snatches it up, then runs back the way she came – down the stairs, through the entrance hall, out of the splintered door – and doesn't stop until the lift doors of Shiloh Tower close behind her.

The text message comes through as she's chopping bacon for the carbonara sauce.

It's her night to cook again. Usually they take it in turns, but Mum's taking extra shifts at Sainsbury's to try and make more money for Christmas and she's working late tonight.

Eleri's already texted Calista and Beni to tell them what happened, so she's expecting the message to be from them.

But it's not. It's from the unknown number that guided her to her bag through that insistent phone call.

She opens it, leaning on the counter with the sauce bubbling behind her. It's brief, just two emojis: the shush face and the Father Christmas.

Who is this? she types, but when she tries to send the message it bounces straight back.

Her mum gets home at just gone nine. She takes a long time opening the door and Eleri's heart sinks. This means her muscles have stiffened up again and she'll need to do her





stretching exercises later, which take ages to do properly, especially when she's already exhausted.

Though the supermarket has done everything they can to accommodate Mum's cerebral palsy, some strenuous tasks are unavoidable. There's no getting away from the fact that she would be better off in an office, but the whole experience with AWP, where she used to work, has knocked her confidence.

A year ago Mum's nice old boss retired and was replaced with a new guy who had pledged to "trim the fat" from the company. Within a few weeks Mum had been relocated to an office at the top of the building, only accessible by stairs. Because it took her so long to get down to the sales team and back up again her work rate decreased. She started getting verbal and then written warnings. In the end she resigned before she was fired.

Her mum looks so tired when she comes into the kitchen that Eleri decides not to mention what happened with the bag.

They eat in front of the TV, but she can't focus on the drama playing out on-screen. Her backpack is hanging on a peg by the front door and her eyes keep flicking to it. It feels strange that someone else has been handling it, looking inside, touching her stuff. As intimate as eyes moving across her body.

That night it takes her a long time to fall asleep.

