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In Another Life

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CHAPTER 1

Your text is where this story starts, Jenny.

I need you. Please come.

And so here I am: coming.

The plane touches down. I swallow and my ears pop. Dad and I unclip our seat belts and we shuffle down the aisle to the steps. When my feet touch the tarmac, I'm on English soil for the first time, just like you were six months ago. I remember you said to me once, as we travelled from Massachusetts to St Louis to visit Grandpa, that all airports look the same. I've seen enough of them now to say I guess that's true. But there's one thing that strikes me now, Jenny, as Dad and I walk through these night-time lobbies with all the stores shuttered down – and it's that all airports smell different. Especially when you

land after midnight. I can scent the difference now. There's a smell of airplane fuel mixed with *here*.

So this is how England smells. We asked Mom so often what it was like. But she'd never tell us.

'Hannah?'

Dad's waiting for me with our cases on a cart. He's looking at me hard and I know I've been far away.

'Coming.' I breathe in again. England. It doesn't smell how I thought it would. Did you find that too?

There's a man coming towards us and he's exactly how I picture English people – he's wearing an expression as shuttered as the stores. Mom wears that self-same expression whenever we talk to her about home.

'Mr Tooley, the car is this way.'

He's a cop – a cop in a suit. Dad said they would send one to meet us when we got here. We get into the car and it takes us to a hotel. They'll brief us in the morning, the cop says. For now, we should rest.

I try. I get into a bed with stiff white sheets that don't smell of home. There's no Hobie to curl up at the bottom of the bed and wag his tail before he falls asleep. There's no kiss goodnight from Mom and Brandon. Dad's next door, as alone with his thoughts as I am.

And I know that the one thought circling round and round his brain is: *Jenny, where are you?*

I read that cellphone message from you again. It came the day after the cops told us you were missing.

I know you're out there, Jenny. What I don't know is where or why. You asked me to come so I'm here and I will find you.

CHAPTER 2

USA TWO DAYS EARLIER

'Mom, have you seen my running shoes?'

I came down the stairs in socks. In about two seconds I was going to be late. OK, it's hard to be late for a date with yourself, but running wasn't my favourite thing, especially on a wet day, and I needed all the motivation I could get. And that included sticking to my schedule. Any excuse could stop me from getting out there today and I didn't plan on lost shoes being the deal-breaker.

And that's the exact thing I was thinking about, Jenny, when we got the news.

Brandon was running up the hall from the yard, tossing a baseball in his glove.

'Not in the house.' Mom did that half-yell she only uses on

Brandon. She's never yelled at him properly since he got sick. She's worried about him, but we haven't told you about that. She's scared his remission is failing – he's got to go back into hospital for more tests. The crease between her eyebrows has got deeper and her clothes are hanging looser. She only picks at dinner when we sit down at the table to eat.

The house phone rang as she came towards me with the running shoes and an impatient expression. She answered it and our world exploded.

ENGLAND

I wake to a dark room with heavy drapes at the windows. It takes me a moment to figure out where I am.

The hotel room. You're still missing.

There it is: that sudden sick feeling in my stomach every time I think of you now. It's always there beneath everything.

I get up and shower mechanically. I'm going through the motions because what else can I do? Stand in a corner and scream? How would that help?

Get up, get dressed, be ready for the cops. That's my priority right now.

Dad and I chew our way through breakfast in silence. Toast and coffee – we can't manage more. The cops arrive and take us off to what they call an incident room. A guy comes in with

close-cropped hair and a face that says he gets things done. Dad relaxes a little bit as soon as they shake hands.

'Mr Tooley, I'm DI Coombs. I'm leading the investigation into Jenny's disappearance.'

Dad nods and sits down.

'I don't know how much they told you on the phone so I'm going to run through events for you now.' He smiles at me. 'You must be Jenny's younger sister.'

'Yes. Hannah.' I shake hands with him too.

'We're glad you came. I've been told you two are close. We're hoping she may get in touch again if she knows you're here.' He turns back to Dad. 'Jenny's mother couldn't make it?'

'My wife had to stay behind. Our eight-year-old son is sick. He's been in remission from cancer, but for the last couple of months he's not been so well. The hospital are doing tests.'

'Sorry to hear that,' Coombs says swiftly. 'Did Jenny know?'

'Not all of it. We didn't want to worry her. She loves Brandon very much.'

Coombs nods. 'OK, here's where we are with the case.'

You've become a case, Jenny. I don't know how I bear hearing that, but somehow I don't speak, just clasp my hands together hard.

'At 8 p.m. on Wednesday evening, we got a call from the manager at Wolfscott Castle Hotel to say that Jenny hadn't been seen since the afternoon. We dispatched an officer to

Wolfscott. John Cadwallader, Jenny's employer, told him that this disappearance was totally out of character. Both he and Mrs Cadwallader said that in the time she's been working for them as an au pair, she's never caused them a moment's concern, so when she didn't return from her afternoon break, they were extremely alarmed. They and some staff went out to look for her. Mrs Cadwallader was worried that she'd fallen and hurt herself while out walking.'

Dad nods. 'She does like walking. Back home, Jenny is the kind of girl to pull on some boots and go off for a couple of hours in the mountains, but she goes with friends, not alone.' His hands are knotted in his lap as he tries to hold it together. I get that. Hearing these details of how you disappeared . . . left . . . were taken . . . is making me feel like throwing up. His voice comes out kind of uneven as he says, 'I don't see Jenny doing that without some company. Was she meeting someone you don't know about? When did you start looking for her?'

'With a girl of Jenny's age, we don't always start a search straight away as the suspected missing person will often turn up a few hours later of their own accord – a lost phone so they couldn't call or they just forgot to leave a message perhaps – but the Cadwalladers were adamant they wanted us to look for Jenny immediately. We talked to Wolfscott staff first to ascertain her movements. It was too dark to begin a ground search so we started that in the morning when she still hadn't

turned up. In the intervening time, we put out a call to patrol officers in the area to look out for her.'

It makes sense, I know, but this makes Dad's jaw clench in anger. If they'd looked sooner, maybe you wouldn't be missing now.

'So what have you found out?' Dad asks.

Coombs sighs, an exasperated sound. 'Nothing, Mr Tooley. We've found absolutely nothing so far. Nobody saw her leave the grounds of the hotel. We've searched her room and nothing seems to be missing. There's no sign she was planning to go away and there've been no sightings.' He rubs his forehead. 'If it wasn't for that text message Hannah received, I'd be significantly concerned that we're dealing with more than a missing persons inquiry.' He turns to me. 'Do you have the phone with you?'

I hand it to him. They've already told me they'll need to examine it.

'Thanks,' he says, taking it from me. 'I want to run a few basic checks. It could be useful if Jenny contacts you again.'

'What I find hard to take is that there have been no sightings of her,' Dad says, swallowing his emotions as a cop comes and takes my phone away.

'That's not all bad. Often we get a lot of time-wasters calling up with false sightings. There is something I need to discuss with you though. We want to do a TV appeal. So far

we've had officers asking locally door to door, but Jenny may have left the area and the best way to get information out to the public is via the news. I think we're at a point now where we need to do that and we'd like you to be involved. There's always a better response when the family speak in the appeal. But you should be aware that we will probably have a number of false sightings as a result and that can be hard to deal with.'

'But you do follow up all leads?' The question explodes out of me.

'Yes, we do. We always follow up.'

Dad sighs, long and painful. It's the same sound I'm making silently inside. 'So Jenny has disappeared,' he says, 'and nobody has any idea why, or where she's gone, and there are no leads.'

And that's the sum of it. As stark as that.

CHAPTER 3

USA, THE DAY WE HEARD YOU WERE MISSING

When I saw Mom's face as she answered the phone, I thought they must be calling about Dad. Then she said, 'Oh my God . . . no . . . my baby . . .' And I thought it was the hospital about Brandon.

He stood there watching, bracing his little body for news . . . news that they couldn't treat him . . . news that the cancer was back . . .

'I need to call my husband,' Mom said in a voice that was nothing like her own. 'Can I get a number to call you back on?' She grabbed a pen and scribbled on the pad by the phone. 'Sorry, sorry, my head's not working. Is that the international code?'

It was only when she said that I knew it was about you.

Dad was home in fifteen minutes. He floored the gas to get back from work. We sat in the kitchen around the counter as he called England.

There was a lot of 'I see' and 'When?' and 'Why?' on the phone before he said, 'I'm coming over there.' There was a lot more talking, then Dad rang off.

'I need to call the airport,' he said.

'I'm coming too.' I stood up and set my hands on the counter.

Mom was so pale she could have been drained by a vampire. 'No, Hannah, you can't . . .'

'She's my sister and I'm going to find her,' I snapped.

Mom stared and stared at me, and I thought she was going to say something, but she didn't. Her face looked so . . . *wrong* . . . that Dad reached out for her, but she shook his hands off and ran upstairs.

I stepped in front of him as he went to go after her and eyeballed him. 'I'm coming, Dad.'

He locked his gaze with mine and we stared at each other in what you always call 'the battle of the same wills'.

'Fine,' he said in the end. 'You know her better than anyone. Maybe you should come. But right now I need to go check on your mom.'

I don't know what they talked about up there. I guess it's none of my business. All I know is Mom looked dead inside when she came downstairs again. It was that hard a decision

for her not to come over there herself to find you, but she couldn't leave Brandon – we all knew that. We didn't talk any more about me going. Dad avoided mentioning it in front of her, but he told me when we were alone that Mom had agreed in the end.

So you see, Jenny, I was coming before you ever sent that text. You must have known that I would.

CHAPTER 4

Coombs tells us that what will help them now is to know more about you.

'If we understand what kind of girl she is, it may help us to find her.' He calls for coffee for us. 'The family is often the best chance we have of finding a missing person. They know things, little things, that we can't. Jenny may come forward herself after the TV appeal if you decide to go ahead with that. That's what we all hope. But if she doesn't, it could be the smallest thing that leads us to finding her.' He pauses. 'Often it *is* the smallest thing.'

Dad braces himself because talking about you is going to hurt. It makes it so much more real that you're not with us.

'Jenny is a good girl,' he says. 'She loves her family. She

was so great with Brandon after his chemo that I thought she might train to be a nurse. But she decided she wanted to work with kids.'

'My sister's always wanted to travel,' I tell him. 'She's always reading about different countries, especially England. Our mom's English so Jenny always felt like she had a connection here. She's a total Anglophile.'

Coombs nods. 'Is there family over here? Anyone she might have gone to see?'

'No,' Dad says. 'My wife's parents died when she was in her teens, in a boating accident. Serena's an only child and she made a clean break when she left England. That was nearly twenty years ago.'

I sniff. 'Mom hates England. She totally tried to put Jenny off coming.'

Coombs checks his watch. 'Let's take a break. I'll arrange lunch for you. You can take some time to think over what you want to do about the TV appeal too. Maybe talk it over together?'

But I can't help thinking that if only Mom had managed to put you off, Jenny, then we wouldn't be sitting here now.

CHAPTER 5

USA, TEN MONTHS EARLIER

Do you remember that Saturday morning? Mom was making brunch and you came into the kitchen waving a piece of paper.

'Mom, I found a job!'

Mom turned briefly, her eyes still on the eggs so they didn't catch. 'That's great, honey. Where?'

As you passed, I grabbed the letter from you.

'Hannah, no! I'm showing Mom,' you protested. But your protests are like being lashed in the face by a soft summer breeze so I ignored you and held the letter out of reach while I read it.

'England! You're going to England! No way!' I dropped the letter in shock and it fluttered down to your waiting hands.

Mom shoved the eggs off the heat and gave you her full

attention. 'What do you mean, England?'

You sat down next to me at the counter and took a waffle. 'I applied to an au-pair agency and they matched me with a family in England. These people own a country house hotel and they've got two young children. They want someone to play with the kids and watch them for a few hours every day so the mom can go back to working in the business. It sounds like a really cool job – look!' And you passed Mom the letter.

Mom wiped her mouth and took it from you. She read it with compressed lips.

'You never said a word about this,' I hissed and you flushed.

'I didn't think there was any point because I didn't think I'd get it,' you said quietly, your eyes resting nervously on Mom while she read.

But I know the real reason, Jenny: you didn't want to admit to me how much you wanted to get away from here and memories of Trey.

'Wolfscott,' Mom said in a flat voice.

'Yeah, I looked it up on the map. It's only fifty miles from where you grew up,' you said. 'I thought that'd be awesome – working near where you lived when you were a kid.'

'It's not near where I grew up. Fifty miles is a long way in England,' Mom said as she handed the letter back. 'I don't want you to go.'

Your lip trembled. 'Mom, this is a great chance. Please?'

'I don't want you to go.' Mom turned back to the eggs and began trying to save them from ruin.

'But Mom, why?'

'It's too far away. You're too young.'

'You didn't say that to Kacey's mom when she went to Australia for a year and that's even further.'

'What Kacey does isn't my business. What you do is.'

'It's a really good opportunity though. I get to travel and find out if this is what I want to do with my life. I thought you understood that's what this year is about for me.'

'Jenny, you have some crazy, romantic ideas about England. It's really not like you think. Yeah, bits of it are pretty, but a lot of it is a dump. Poky, miserable little box houses all crammed together on top of each other. The people never stop whining – it's a national pastime. They're cold and distant and most of the year the weather is wet and miserable too. You won't like it so put this silly idea out of your head. Call your brother, please.'

Mom served up the eggs and you got up to get Brandon. 'I'm going,' you said quickly. 'Whatever anyone says.'

I didn't think you meant it. I thought you'd give in. I guess I had you wrong there.

CHAPTER 6

'So,' Coombs says to Dad as we get back to the interview, 'Jenny's mother didn't want her to come over here. What did you think?'

Dad shrugs. 'I was fine with it. I thought Jenny should make up her own mind. There wasn't a big fight or anything. Once we talked about it, Serena came around.'

I think Mom dropped it rather than came around. She was never happy about the trip. Even when we said goodbye at the airport she was hoping you'd change your mind. You texted me later to ask if she was OK because you could see it in her eyes.

'What about friends?'

Dad smiles. 'Jenny's always been very popular, with lots of

friends. The house is always full of them. She's just a warm, loving kid and people are drawn to that.'

Coombs frowns, but I can't see why. That's how you are – everyone loves you. Everyone, period. You're the only girl I know who transcends high-school cliques.

'Does she have a boyfriend?'

'Not at the moment. At least she didn't back home. She was dating last year, but when Trey left to go to college they broke it off as he's three states away most of the year now. She hasn't been seeing anyone since.'

That's not exactly the way it happened, but that's the line you spun to Mom and Dad. They didn't see how your cheeks were streaked with tears night after night as you talked to me in your room. About how Trey didn't want to be stuck with you now he was in college. How you'd really thought he loved you. How wrong you'd been.

And I tried to tell you I could think of a dozen great guys who wanted to be with you. Probably more. But you didn't want to hear me, just went on talking about him until I wanted to plunge a knife into his guts for hurting you that way. Did you still miss him when you came here, Jenny? I don't like to think of you crying alone.

You could be miserable somewhere now, waiting for us to find you. You could be unable to come back to us. What if someone's got you and you can't get away?

Suddenly I need the bathroom – my lunch is rising in my throat. I dash out of the room.

After a while, a female cop comes to check on me. She gets me a glass of water and brings me back to where Dad's still talking to Coombs.

'They're very close, Jenny and Hannah. As close as two sisters can be. They're very different people and maybe that's why they get on so well. Hannah's the firecracker of the family and Jenny is our peacemaker.'

'Do you think if Jenny knows Hannah is here she'll make contact again if she can?'

Dad's chewing his lip. 'Yes, and we've talked about it. We decided it's important we do the TV appeal so she knows we're here. That's if she's somewhere she can even get to see the TV, because I don't understand why she hasn't contacted us again already. We've all tried calling her cellphone, over and over, but there's never any answer. We sent her texts . . . but nothing, other than that one message to Hannah. None of this makes sense other than she's in some bad trouble.' He turns and buries his face in his hands.

The text, Jenny – that's what we're all clinging to. Without it, Coombs might be looking for a body. One little text and so much hanging on it. One attempt to make contact and only one.

What if we're already too late?

CHAPTER 7

We're taking a break again and I wonder if this thing will ever be over. My head's starting to hurt. They've given me my phone back and I read your text again to make sure it's still there, to make sure it's real.

You're alive. You have to be. The words on my phone represent hope.

I'm thinking about the last time we were together. We were at the airport saying goodbye. You were crying, but you weren't sad. Yeah, you were going to miss us, but you were happy too. Excited to finally see England. You used to watch every English show that came on TV, read all those books by English writers. I was a little jealous you were getting to go and I wasn't.

Mom hugged you so hard I thought she'd never let you go.

I remember thinking how much you looked like her, that last time I saw you. Your long blonde hair was exactly the same shade as hers, your porcelain skin and big blue eyes inherited from her. Twins separated by time.

Mom told you a thousand times to be careful before you left through the boarding gate. You turned to wave, smiling through tears. Then you wiped the tears from your cheeks with the back of your hand. Brandon jumped up and down, waving both arms at you, and you blew kisses back. My eyes welled up. I never cry in front of people, but I could feel the salt sting and I turned away so no one saw.

I never said 'I love you' before you left.

I wish I had.

CHAPTER 8

The last set of questions, Coombs promises, but they're all for me and my head's throbbing.

'So you two were close. Did Jenny keep in touch while she was here?'

'Yeah, she texted me all the time and we Skyped.'

'Did she talk about what she was doing here?'

'Sure. She said lots about her new job, the kids, how awesome Wolfscott is.'

'Did she talk to you about any friends she'd made?'

'She mentioned a name or two occasionally. Cassie, I think, was one. She's one of the maids. Jenny talked more about the kids she was taking care of.'

'So you didn't get a sense that she was particularly close to anyone?'

'Not really. She was so into her job. I think she hung out with some of the college students when they were working at Wolfscott on weekends and holidays.'

'Didn't that seem unusual to you, given she's such a friendly girl at home?'

I shake my head. 'No, she may be really popular, but she likes to keep some stuff private too. She doesn't get close to people straight off, not about important things.'

Coombs nods. 'OK, so it was nothing unusual. Let's move on. What about boyfriends? Is she seeing anyone here?'

'No.' I glance at Dad. 'She was still kind of destroyed about Trey when she left. She wasn't over him.'

Dad snaps his head round to stare at me.

I shrug. 'She was more upset than she let you know. She didn't want to stress you guys out so she pretended she was OK.'

Coombs sits forwards, leaning his arms on the table. 'Do you have any reason to suspect Jenny may be depressed? Did you notice any difference in the way she was responding to you? Could being upset have spiralled into something more?'

I've been thinking about that, of course – I've been thinking about nothing else – but I still don't have an answer.

'This is important, Hannah. I want you to think very

carefully. Could Jenny be depressed and might that be why she's gone missing?'

They're both staring at me . . . staring . . . hoping I know . . .

I shrug and shake my head. 'I don't know,' I say finally.

Because, Jenny, I really don't.

CHAPTER 9

The car turns off a narrow road on to a track leading to Wolfscott Castle Hotel. A sign points the way. The family you've been working for have offered us rooms here for as long as we need. Coombs told us they'd said it was the least they could do in the circumstances.

Like you said, the castle takes my breath away when I see it for the first time. As the car turns the corner out of the woods, there's Wolfscott gleaming in the sun with its mullioned windows, turreted towers and warm golden stone walls. It's like nothing I've ever seen before. I gasp as I catch sight of the moat, a silver ribbon of water threaded around the castle in a protective embrace. The car sweeps over a drawbridge into a cobbled courtyard with a large central lawn, perfectly green

like we always imagined England to be. We pull up in front of the biggest doors I've ever seen in my life. English oak, I guess – thick and heavy and studded with iron bolts. They're propped open and Wolfscott's given them a modern twist because just inside are automatic glass doors.

A porter comes to meet us as we get out of the car. He stops dead when he realises it's a police vehicle and then he sees me – recognition dawning on his face. I might have Dad's dark hair, but I look enough like you for it to be obvious who we are.

'Mr Tooley, Miss Tooley,' he says and that kind of freaks me out. *Miss Tooley?* Does he call you that, Jenny? 'Mr Cadwallader is expecting you. Please come through. I'll have your luggage taken to your rooms.' He beckons to a minion hovering inside the doors and the man scuttles out to get our cases from the trunk.

We follow the porter inside. It's so weird – a long corridor of stone walls and floor with those automatic glass doors at intervals. Crazy, like techno-medieval or something. I totally get how blown away you were by it all now I see it for myself.

The porter leads us to an arched wooden door that he unlocks. 'The family's private quarters,' he says as he ushers us through. We go down another long stone corridor with a thick carpet runner down the middle. He shows us into a large room with armchairs dotted haphazardly around well-worn couches. There's a small fire burning in a stone grate that seems to take up half the wall.

'Please take a seat. I'll send someone through with refreshments. Mr Cadwallader will be with you in a moment.'

Dad and I stare at each other as he leaves, both kind of stunned by our surroundings.

'Honey, I guess this is proper old England.'

'Yeah. Jenny told me how much she loves it here. Like she feels connected and totally out-there-amazed all at the same time.'

You were so completely buzzed by this place and you knew I would be too. That's how it is with us, both into stuff with history to it. But if you love it so much, Jenny, why did you leave?

A man hovers in the doorway, waiting for us to notice him. As we do, he walks forwards, holding out his hand to my dad. 'John Cadwallader. I would normally say welcome to England, but that's so terribly inappropriate at a time like this.'

Dad introduces himself too. 'David Tooley.'

I'm inclined to like your boss on sight, in that way you laugh at me for. He's tall with dark hair and eyes, tanned skin and a worried face, so I guess he reminds me a bit of Dad.

'I'm so terribly sorry. We'll do anything we can to help you to find Jenny. She's a lovely girl and she's taken fantastic care of the children. My wife's distraught about this. She's had the staff out looking every day, searching the estate. We feel so helpless.'

A maid, presumably from the hotel, comes in with a tray.

Tea and sandwiches, and I have to shake myself because it's all so different to home. That scares me. I can't help feeling that if you'd gone missing back home I'd be surer of finding you. It's like we've lost you in another world.

Dad and your boss exchange details about what the police have said and done, while I sit and eat some sandwiches and sip afternoon tea. They're very good sandwiches, but they should be ashes in my mouth. I feel so guilty for even noticing how good they taste. The tea's different to any I've had before – much stronger and actually a whole lot nicer. It came in a pot and Mr Cadwallader poured it out with a little metal sieve thing to catch the loose leaves.

The couch is squashy and I'm so tired from everything that I could fall asleep right here. I interrupt their talking. 'Can I get some air?'

'Of course,' your boss says and I scramble up.

I remember the way out, I tell him when he asks, and he says it'd probably be better if I stay in the courtyard so Dad can find me easily.

I bite back my words, that I'm not going to disappear like you, because I don't know who that would hurt more: me, Dad or him. All of us, I guess. So I hold my tongue and make my escape.

I go out into the 'courtyard'. The thing is the size of a soccer pitch and the castle is built around it. There's a central grass

square with a huge spreading tree in the middle. I know this tree from your descriptions. I walk towards it because my fingers itch to touch the bark, to feel something you've touched.

You wrote me about this tree. You told me about it when we Skyped. It's really old, you said, and the bark is so beautiful. 'When I stand under the branches, Hannah, I feel part of something that has existed for hundreds of years.' And as I stand there myself, I feel that too. This tree is over five hundred years old, you said. It was here before they built the original house and probably here since the first ever building. That was a real castle, you told me. Yeah, I guess it would have been back then. You found out that it's an oak tree. And that's a symbol of England and you knew I'd understand why they picked this tree to represent the country when I saw one for myself. Right again, Jenny.

I run my fingers along the bark. Deep, old fissures. Reassuring. Just touching this tree makes me breathe slower. I stand with the trunk to my back, holding me up as I lean against centuries of sturdy safeness.

Over on the far side of the courtyard, a figure's going into a set of cages with mesh fronts. There are some weird little wooden posts on the grass in front of the cages and the whole lot is surrounded by a low fence. The figure comes out again with a bird on his arm. I squint so I can see clearer and confirm, yes, it's a him. Carrying some kind of big bird of prey.

He stoops and puts it on one of the posts.

A car swoops in over the drawbridge and pulls up outside the main door, just as we did not so long ago. A couple get out and the porter hurries to help them. Someone comes to drive their car away for them.

When I turn back to the enclosure, Bird Guy is putting another bird out. This time I see he's tying it on to the post. It flutters and flaps a bit, rising up as far as the strings will let it, and then it settles back on to its perch.

You told me about this too, that there are falconry displays at Wolfscott and that people hire the birds for weddings and parties. They even have owls trained to fly the wedding rings to the groom.

If you were here now, what would you be doing? Because I want to do what you'd do; that way I can *feel* you. Would you be with the Cadwallader kids in the fields behind the castle where you take them to run around and play on their little bikes? Would you be having a break? Would you be standing here watching Bird Guy, like me?

If you were here, right here, right now, I feel certain you'd be doing what I do now. Pushing away from this wonderful old oak tree, stepping across springy grass towards the birdcages, head tilted to one side on the approach, anticipating a welcome. You'd be smiling that smile that makes everyone love you and your welcome assured.

I follow in your footsteps, but I'm not you and I don't have your smile or ways. I find myself standing on the other side of the low palisade fence separating me from the birds. The falconer is in the process of securing a huge white owl to a perch. It takes me by surprise when he turns round – he's not much older than me, maybe seventeen.

He's more shocked than me though. He halts in his tracks and his mouth falls open.

'Who –?'

I know what he sees – you but with dark hair and eyes.

So Bird Guy knows you. How stupid of me. Of course he does. He works here so he must know you, even if just a little. This castle's not so big that he wouldn't have come across you.

His eyebrows snap down in a frown – thick, dark, straight eyebrows. Uncompromising, that's the word that springs into my head. He has buzz-cut hair and his skin is baked brown from the sun. His nails are chewed down, so maybe he's not as tough as his haircut suggests. Perhaps he's just the kind of guy who can't be bothered with his hair.

'I'm her sister.'

That's all that needs to be said. 'I'm sorry,' he says in a gruff voice as he looks at the ground. 'I hope she's OK.'

When people say that, Jenny, I realise again, all fresh and new, just how not OK you might be. I'm so afraid for you.

'Are you friends?'

He shakes his head. 'No. She liked to come and look at the birds sometimes. Used to ask about them. Mostly she'd talk to Steve, the guy who flies the birds in the displays. I didn't know her well.'

He uses the past tense and that tears a hole in me. He sees the change in my expression and turns away.

'I should get on,' he says and disappears back into the block of cages, leaving me standing there feeling stupid. I get the impression he's going to wait inside until I've gone.

What a weird boy. Did . . . do you know him, Jenny? Was that the truth he told me?

I walk back slowly to the hotel entrance. There's something about the last few minutes that's made me uncomfortable. I can't put my finger on it, but –

Dad comes out of the door and breaks my train of thought. 'Come on, honey. We're both feeling jet-lagged. We should probably try to nap. They've got rooms ready for us.'

I follow him in, but just as I go inside the door, I turn to look back. Bird Guy has come out of the cages and is staring after me – until he sees me looking and then he ducks back inside.

Then I know why I feel weirded out. It's like he knows something he's not telling.