# TRUE SISTERS

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# TRUE SISTERS

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Barrington Stoke

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*For Jesse and Geni*

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# PROLOGUE / Clara

This is how it feels when they raid your house.

It's so early that you're still asleep, and the bang, bang, bang invades your dreams. That's how you hear it first – you're deep in an imaginary forest, hearing the stamping of a giant, the roaring of a bear.

Then you wake up, shocked into the cold room, and the noise doesn't stop. Mama is crying in her room. A long, high wailing cry. You've never heard her cry like that before.

And you don't know if you should run to comfort her or run towards the deafening noise at the door. You make for Mama, but she just screams even louder.

"The door ..." you say, and you hear men's voices just outside. There's so much fear bubbling up inside you that you think you're going to be sick. You get halfway down the stairs

and then your legs are trembling too much to hold you up, so you sit down. You're hot and cold, and sweat pricks under your armpits and around your hairline. You realise your hair is still loose and you are still wearing your nightdress.

And all the time you hear those voices. Men's voices.

They could be knights or soldiers or giants or goblins. They could be good wizards or bad, bad, bad. They might be the Forces of Darkness. They shouldn't be shouting. But they are.

"Open up!" they shout.

"Police!" they shout.

"Open up!"

And then they all fall silent, and you breathe in and out, and all you can hear is Mama's wails.

Then you look at the door and you can see the piece of wood that Mama nailed over the hole. The hole where papers used to come. Mama said they were bad papers, evil papers.

Anna used to collect those papers. She showed me once. They had pictures of food, with "Take Away" written on them. Then she left.

Mama said Anna had been taken away herself, by the bad spirits in the night.

Then Mama nailed the wood over the hole in the door, and since then the house is quiet and cold and dark. Anna never came back. She said she would, but she didn't.

Now the wood jiggles and jiggles and the men's voices are whispers. Mama's crying turns into a long string of words. One word. "No-no-no-no-no-no-no." And on and on and on. She doesn't stop, even when the piece of wood clatters onto the floor.

You're so scared that you feel the sour acid taste of bile in your mouth. You swallow it back. You have to be strong for Mama.

And then a woman speaks into the hole in the door.

"Clara?" she says. "Clara? Can you hear me?"

You are quieter than a tiny mouse all alone in its dark house after midnight. A mouse with no family and no friends and no town and no country. A lone mouse. A silent mouse.

After Mama stopped talking, Anna was the only one who called you Clara. But that's not Anna's voice.

"We're not going to hurt you," the woman says. "We just want to talk to you. Will you open the door?"

You nearly do. The woman sounds kind. Her voice is soft and gentle, like Mama's voice.

And to tell the truth, you are very curious to see what is on the other side of the door. "Very" isn't the right word, but there probably isn't a word to describe how much you want to know about the world. That desire eats you up, like a worm in the brain. It's such a strong feeling, creeping and eating, intense and over-powering and bad.

So very bad.

Then the woman says, "Anna's talked to us, Clara. We're here to help you. Please open the door."

And you know what to do.

You shuffle forward, one step at a time. Slowly, slowly does it. All the time the woman is

talking to you: "That's it. Don't be scared. You can do it. Good girl."

At the bottom of the stairs, you start creeping towards the door. You've imagined it so many times. In your dreams and out of your dreams. Inch by inch. Step by step. Every monster you've ever thought of is waiting for you.

"All you have to do is open the door," says the woman with the gentle voice.

She's watching you. Her eyes are right by the hole. Big brown eyes with lines painted around the lids. You've never seen eyes like that.

You look right into those eyes. You hear her start to talk again. "Anna told us," the woman starts.

But then you grab the piece of wood from the floor where it fell and you shove it into the hole at her. You're so fast that the woman cries out in pain. And when you look again, those eyes are gone.

And you're looking outside at a big tangle of things. Men and cars and trees and people. And you hear the words "Stand back!"

But you stay right where you are.

So when the door crashes in, it hits you in the face. All you can see is blood on your hands and blood pouring down your white nightdress. And there's a man in your house, and he's talking, talking, talking.

You can't hear a word.

You can see men coming in the house, and Mama is screaming and so are you. The men are everywhere with their dirty feet and their dirty hands and their smell and their noise.

Then the woman with the big brown eyes puts her arm around you. She tries to put a cloth to your nose, but you bite her hand.

"Clara," the woman says, "Clara, stop that. You have to come with us."

"I can't," you say. "I can't!"

Then the woman says "Anna" again, and you try to bite again. But she's ready for you this time, and somehow you're held by two of them, your arms gripped tight. However much you struggle, they won't let you go.

Then you step outside.

And there's a small part of you that's seeing everything. Trees – tall and proud and shimmering in the breeze. Flowers – white and purple, and a soft, drooping pink rose that you think must smell like perfume.

But most of you isn't smelling the roses or looking at the trees. Most of you is fighting and crying and screaming for Mama, and hiding under your hair so that you won't see anyone looking at you.

Not the men in dark clothes.

Not the women in trousers, like a man's clothes.

Not the group of five people on the road, some of whom are holding up rectangular bits of metal and pointing them at you. Magical instruments, you think. They are casting spells to take you away.

Then the two women pull you along, and you're right outside the house. You're cold all over, and the ground is hard under your feet. Your heart is pounding so hard it's like a bass drum that's leading soldiers to war.

And then you hear Mama screaming inside the house.

"Mama!" you shout. The people watching make gasping noises, and the two women get you to a car. Anna told you about cars – she told you they were like small houses on wheels that took you away faster than anyone could run after you. One of the car doors is open, and you're panicking, you can't breathe. Then someone pushes your head, pushes your back, and you go from outside to inside.

Inside the car.

And there's part of you that wants to know what it's like to go in a car, wants it so much. You have thought about it so often and now it's happening. And it was Anna, bad Anna, who put this thought in your head.

But you didn't think it would be like this, with a noise that is high and shrill, and a flickering blue light. You're going faster and faster, and you close your eyes tight, because surely no one can travel this fast and survive it.

"It's OK, Clara," one of the women next to you says. "It's OK, darling. Everything's going to be OK."

But you're feeling sick, so sick, moving so fast. This time you can't hold it, so you cough up a bit of yesterday's supper, and it lands on the seat and on her trousers.

"What was that for?" she says.

You gasp, "So fast!"

And the woman in the front says, "We're only doing twenty."

"Clara, listen to me," the woman with the brown eyes says, once she's finished wiping her clothes. "My name is Priti, and I am your social worker.

"We're taking you to a safe place. Somewhere where you can stay for a bit. And then the police will want to talk to you, and so will I. You'll be able to see your mother in a while. And your sister Anna as well. I don't know what the future will bring, but don't be scared. We are here to look after you."

You don't reply. You look out of the window. You spent all those years wondering what the world outside looks like, and it turns out that it's grey and ugly and full of rain.

And that's what it's like when they raid your house.