Magpie

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Chapter One

Smells always make me remember.
Whenever I smell freshly cut grass, wet mud or that freshness in the air after rain, I'm taken back to the house we shared with Ross - the big one just outside London, with the long, thin garden and tiny allotment at the end. I loved that old house so much. It was tall and grand, like something from a TV programme. I thought we were lucky to be living in a place with white painted bricks and a bright red door. Even the hallway was grand, with its black and white diamond floor tiles and sweeping staircase.
It was a house I thought we would live in forever. Ross told us it was our home and I believed him. I believed too many things…
But those same smells remind me of what happened there. My stomach clenches and suddenly the nice memories are washed away and I struggle to bring them back. Instead I see Ross's face again – his eyes angry, his mouth moving as he hisses out those horrible, unkind words.
I don't want to remember those things.
Other smells.
When I smell stale tobacco or fried food, I think of the last place we lived, without Ross. By then it was just us – me, Mum, Henry and Alice. All of us squashed together in one room of a shared house, as the smells drifted in from other families. It wasn't bad exactly, but the competing smells reminded us that this home was never really *ours*. Our space belonged to many others, all waiting for something better. If desperation was a smell, then it was the smell of that cramped, stuffy house. . It was hard not to choke on it.
And now we are here, our new house. Something that was ours.
It should be perfect. It's all we ever wanted. We have dreamed of this. Except it's not. It smells funny to me. Mum doesn't believe me when I say that, but it does. The previous tenants lived here for over forty years. The carpets are thin and floral, and the paint choices are…questionable. But none of that matters. It's ours and that's the main thing.
Mum says with a bit of scrubbing and some fresh paint, this will be the home that we always wanted.
It's the *smell* that's the problem. Deep and musky, it's so hard to describe, but it kind of gets down the back of my throat and makes me want to cough. I hate it so much, give me the scent of the sea any day.
I asked her if the last owners died here and she gave me a tired look. It was a genuine question! Henry was fascinated though. He thinks that there might be ghosts. Apparently ghosts are really cool.
But I can't ignore the smell. It smells wrong.
I try to convince myself that a smell means nothing. Just because it makes my stomach tense again, just because my skin prickles – it doesn't mean that that anything is going to happen. We've been told time and time again that we are safe now. Ross can't hurt us anymore. I have to believe everything is ok now.
So why is that so hard?

It's the weekend. I'm lying on my new bed in my new room. At the moment it's all mine, until Amy is a little bigger, when she will be sharing with me.
It's an L-shape, so we've put my bed under the window. I can sit there and look out at the street outside. Not that there's much to see; a bit of communal grass where Henry likes to kick his ball and a tiny, square car-park.
I haven't seen many other kids around here yet. On one side there is an old man with a hearing aid who whistles. Sometimes he waves at us from his back garden.

The house on the other side of us is neat and tidy with pretty flowers in the front garden. I've seen the woman that lives there a few times. She's kind of middle aged looking with bright grey hair and slanted eyes that remind me of cat and every time she sees me, she's wrinkled her nose and turned away.

Perhaps I stink like this house. Maybe I'm absorbing it like some kind of sponge. That'll impress the girls at school. Here comes weirdo Alice again, only this time she's wearing her new scent - 'rotten veg'. At least it would give them something else to fixate on for a change. Even though I've been at the school since we moved back to town, I'm still treated like the new girl. I guess some things are had to change.

My room is pretty empty. We've never had much stuff, partly because of all the moving around we've done. When we left Ross that last time, we snuck out in the night with just a few clothes and what Mum said were "the essentials".. There were so many things that we left behind– books, photos, drawings – all gone. Now I'm just surrounded by space and blank walls. Mum says in time we'll fill it all up again. That it might take time, but in the end our lives will start to feel normal again.

I hope she's right.

My phone vibrates on the bed beside me. A message from Alfie. I swipe it open.

Hey! Game cancelled tomorrow so that means I can FINALLY come and see your new house! Are you around?

I smile. It's probably fair to say Alfie is my best mate, but he's obsessed with football, so the only time I see him is when a game is cancelled. Why can't I have a mate who's into reading or gaming or something? At least he'd be around more. It's been two months in this new house and he's not been round yet. Still, I can't blame him. We're right the other side of town. And there's not much here – just rows of identical looking houses and some scraps of green. There is a cool playpark that Henry likes though which is better than we had before. I look around the room, with its dodgy paintwork and bare walls. I can't decide whether I want him here or not. Alfie has a big house with nice things in it. My fingers hesitate over the keys. *Do I want him here?*

But like a drifting cloud, the thought passes. Of course I want him here. This is *Alfie*. My best and most annoying friend. He totally gets it.

What's more – I've missed him.

Cool! – I type back. *Come over after lunch.*

Then I send him my address.

Number 12, Ryelands.

The address of my actual house. It doesn't matter what it looks like, I think, It's a home.

It's mine.

I glance out of the window and smile. This small piece of land and everything around it is our life now. We have green! An outdoors of our own. I have feel grateful. Things could have been very different.

It's only as I turn away that I see that figure standing by our garden gate. I lean forward, tweaking the curtain a little. The figure turns away from the house, so I can't see their face at all.

Then they walk on. It's just a passer-by, I think. Someone who realised they have the wrong house.

But I stay rooted on the spot for a few minutes more, watching, just to be sure.

I like to be on the move. I don't even like being indoors for too long - . I think I've always felt this way, but it got worse when we lived with Ross. All I could think about was getting outside and away from him. it's like a buzzing inside my legs. I feel like I always need to get up and go out in the fresh air or else I'll go mad. I don't even care if it's raining

It drives Mum mad. She calls me a 'free spirit'. She says that I should have been born a cat, or a wolf, free to roam the land with no-one else bothering me.

Alfie, my friend, always says I'm more like a bird.

“Birds are strong, but they’re fragile too,” he said to me once when we were hanging out, grinning in that easy way of his . “Birds are strong, but they’re fragile too. Like you.”
I scowled at him. “I’m not fragile…”
Alfie just shrugged, still smiling in that annoying way. “If you say so..”
“I’m not a bird.” I told him. “Birds are weak and vulnerable. They soon get eaten up.”
“Not if they’re quick….” Alfie said. “And you’re quick.” I didn’t say anything else after that. I didn’t want to admit it to him, but part of me quite liked being compared to a bird. I’d love to be able to fly. I’d be truly free. I could go wherever I wanted. I’d never feel trapped again.
Also, I knew how much Alfie loved birds. Maybe he was complimenting me, in his weird way. .
At least, I like to think he was.

Downstairs, Mum is cooking dinner. She’s humming happily as she chops an onion and throws it into a pan along with some vegetables. The smell that soon fills the room is warm and comforting.
Out of our entire new house, she loves our kitchen the most. I swear she actually started crying when she first saw the oven. I understand, I guess. In the shared house we just had a microwave and the kitchen was always packed, so we would eat our meals sitting on our beds, balancing plates on our laps.
Mum looks up as I walk in and smiles. She looks tired and her eyes are red, but I think that’s Amy’s doing – she was up in the night again teething. “This won’t be long,” She says, gesturing at the saucepan. “I’m making a spag bol. Your favourite.” “Nice,” I say, trying to sound cheerful. I keep thinking of that figure by our front gate. I wish I’d seen their face, just to be sure.
I drop into the chair opposite Amy. She’s in a highchair, stacking bricks with one hand and sucking on a biscuit with the other. “Where’s Henry?” I ask.
“Out in the garden.” Mum says, grinning and pushing back her long hair behind her ears. “Exploring apparently..”
“Cool.” I nick a bit of chopped pepper from the chopping board and pop it into my mouth. “Alfie is coming over tomorrow.”
Mum turns to me. I swear her whole face lights up. “Is he? Great! I’ve not seen him for ages.”
Alfie and my Mum get on really well. Mum always says Alfie reminds her a bit of someone she knew a long time ago. They were best friends too apparently. Mum used to live in this town when she was teenager. It must be strange for her to come back. This was the town where she finished her education, where she met my Dad and where she finally moved away to London when that didn’t work out. Mum doesn’t like talking about her childhood much. I know she grew up in care homes and I know that she was happiest in this place. Whenever I ask anything else, she just gets cross with me and tells me not to talk about it.
“He’s had football tournaments and stuff,” I say.
My fingers trace across the rough wood of our wooden table. Alfie’s dad gave it to us. I love the feel of it against my skin. “He has another trial coming up.”
“Really?” Mum says, turning back and stirring the sauce. “He’s so good isn’t he? Which team is it for?” I snort. Like Mum would know *any* football team. She calls it the ‘dullest game on earth’ (not that she’d tell Alfie that).
“Hey, I like football,” Mum says. “Go on, who are they?”
“I can’t remember,” I say. “But they’re good. Premiership I think…”
Mum laughs softly. “You’re no more interested in football than I am.”
I frown, my fingers digging into the wood a little harder. It’s not that I don’t like football. Actually it can be quite fun watching Alfie play. But sometimes it feels like it’s all Alfie cares about these days. He’s too busy to hang out.
I give myself a little shake. I’m being selfish. I was so lucky to meet Alfie when we moved here. He was the only one who seemed to understand me, who bothered to get to know me. It’s not like he’s had an easy ride of it either. After his Mum died he struggled with to cope, he even he stopped

playing football and he's only just got back into it again. I shouldn't be jealous that he has something he cares about. I know how good it is for him.
The back door crashes open and into my thoughts, and Henry runs in. He looks a complete state. There are streaks of mud across his red cheeks and he has a couple of twigs sticking out of his hair, like tiny bent up horns. He always look like such a mucky little thing with his sticky up hair and bright red cheeks, but it only makes me love him even more.
"Alice!" he cries when he sees me, his eyes bright. "I've made such a cool den. Come and see."
I let him lead me back into the garden, picking our way over the broken paving and ducking under the sagging washing line. Despite it being a mess still, full of bags of rubbish and piles of leaves, we love it out here. We had a garden before, but that was Ross's and he kept it immaculate. In Ross's garden the walls felt too high and everything was too 'pretty' so we could never properly relax or run wild. So for Henry especially, this garden is the most exciting thing ever.
It's his new playground.
Right by the fence there is a small, spindly tree and Henry has hooked one of his huge old blankets over the lower branches to make a makeshift tent.
"Look," he says pointing. "It's a camp. We can sleep out here at night."
"It could get chilly." I say. "Muddy, too." "So? It's an adventure!" His eyes sparkle. "I could stay out all night and look at the stars."
Henry loves the stars, or anything to do with space. It's his latest obsession. He says when he's older he wants to fly to moon. Or Uranus (which makes him giggle every time he says it because it sounds rude). I guess he's a bit like me in that way, he thrives on being outside.
"I want Alfie to see my camp," Henry says. "He'll like it. He went camping didn't he?"
"He did. A few weeks ago."
He went with his Dad. Their first holiday since his Mum had died. I had told him that he would love it, that it would do him good. And I was right – he *had* loved it. He had come back buzzing talking about all the fishing they had done together and the long chats they had had late at night.
Mum isn't the only member of your family who adores Alfie. I look at Henry's hopeful little face.
"Is that why you've made this?" I say gently. "So you can be like Alfie?"
"Noooo…" Henry's protest is too loud. I grin. "Well, he's coming to visit tomorrow. So you can show him your tent then and see what he thinks."
Henry beams. Then he nestles himself inside his den. I squeeze in beside him, pulling the blanket over us. I take in a big gulp of clear, crisp air and I love the feeling of my lungs being full of fresh goodness.
"I like it here. It's really nice." He whispers.
"What, in your tent?"
"No…" He shakes his head and the tree moves slightly with him. "I like it here, in our new house."
"I do too." I reply softly.
Except for the smell inside. I shiver.
"We're safe here, aren't we Alice?" He says. His voice is so quiet, I can barely hear him. "No-one bad can find us here."
"We're safe, Henry. We're totally safe."
And, right there under the trees, I almost believe it.