Sophie McKenzie



HIDE AND SECRETS



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1

Until the message arrived, there was no doubt in my mind: my dad was dead.

This wasn't the only thing I was certain about.

Back then, on that sunny morning in late July, I was also sure that the summer would end without me having a single friend, and that nothing exciting was ever going to happen to me while I lived in boring Brockledore.

As it turned out, on all those counts I was wrong . . .

Bess and I are sitting on a rug in the back garden, under the shade of the oak tree. I'm about to stroll over to the Barn. My head is already there, imagining the dress I've just pinned out, ready to cut. But Bess is just finishing a drawing, and I know she'll want to show it to me when she's done. Her tongue peeks out from between her lips as she concentrates on the last few strokes of her colouring pen. We don't look anything alike, Bess and I. She's got Dad's brown eyes and a heart-shaped face, framed by

long, fine blonde hair that's always escaping the bands Mum plaits it into.

I'm fairer-skinned with blue eyes. And my hair is short and spiky – like me.

'Cat! *Cat!*' Mum is calling from the house. I can just see her pink rope sandals out of the corner of my eye. I don't look up. Everything about her is Just. So. Irritating.

'What does she want now?' I mutter.

'*Cat!*' The pink sandals stomp across the grass.

Bess stiffens. She hates it when Mum and I get mad with each other.

'Why didn't you answer?' Mum demands, arriving at the edge of the rug. She waves her arms in the air so violently that her bangles collide in a clash of tinkles. 'I was calling for ages.'

'Sorry,' I say, trying to keep the fact that I'm not at all sorry out of my voice. 'I was *miles* away.' I'm deliberately using one of Mum's favourite phrases. She tends to flutter her hands when she uses it, presumably to indicate how easily distracted she gets by alternate spiritual planes.

Mum glares at me, clearly picking up on my sarcastic undertones. She has clients today, so she's wearing one of her waftier outfits: a crimson sundress with rainbow chiffon frills under a fringed pink shawl that's pinned to the straps of her dress with several of her astrological sign brooches.

Mum's a celebrity astrologer who used to be famous. Not movie-star-level famous, but well-known enough that people would stare when she took me to primary school. I *loved* that when I was little. Back then she had a weekly slot on a morning TV show to run through 'what the stars have in store this weekend'. She denies it if anyone asks, but I reckon she'd give anything to be back there on the nation's screens every week. She certainly laps it up when anyone recognises her now.

'There's something I need you to do this morning, Cat,' she says, brushing a stray red curl off her face. I know for a fact Mum's hair is really as straight and dark as my own, but she seems to think her clients prefer wild red curls washed through with hot-pink streaks.

'What?' I gaze up at her warily.

'Darling, don't look at me like that.' She sighs. 'You need to clear all your . . . your *scraps* out of the barn this morning.'

My jaw drops. '*What?*'

'And once you've done that, a quick dust and vacuum. Right now, Cat, please?'

'But that's so unfair!' I blurt out, my voice rising to a shout.

I can't believe it. The Barn is a cottage on the other side of our back garden. Mum has plans to use it next

year as a guest house for her wealthy clients, but right now it's empty. The attic room there, with its wall of glass windows, is the perfect place for me to spread out my designs and store all the fabrics I've accumulated since I started dress-making earlier this year.

'Why do I have to clear my stuff out?' I protest. Beside me, Bess tenses with anxiety. I try to swallow down my temper. 'I've pinned a dress with a skirt I'm going to cut on the bias. It's all laid out like I want it.'

Mum frowns. 'Mrs Trimble's already picked your bits and pieces off the floor. They're in boxes by the Barn front door.'

'What?' I leap to my feet, my fury surging uncontrollably. 'But I'm in the middle of making my dress. Why did she do that?'

'Because I asked her to,' Mum snaps. 'But it left her short on time, which is why you need to run the vacuum cleaner round to make the place—'

'No! *Please*, Mum, I *need* the Barn. I'm *using* it.'

Mum glares at me. 'Well, you can't use it anymore,' she snaps. 'Now hurry up – the Tuesdays will be here in a couple of hours.'

What is she talking about?

'Who are the Tuesdays?' I demand.

Mum rolls her eyes. 'The mosaic specialist who's going

to renovate the courtyard, and his son. They'll be staying in the Barn for a few weeks. I'm sure I told you about them the other day, Cat.'

My jaw drops. This is typical Mum, ruining my life in order to spend money on stuff we don't need. It's ironic: she's always making out how spiritual she is, but the truth is she's been super-materialistic ever since Dad died.

Bess tugs at the hem of my shorts. I glance down at her. She stamps her foot; it's her signal that I should stop arguing.

I ignore it.

'So you're saying that not only do I have to give up all my plans to make dresses in the Barn, but a random man and his random son are moving into it? For the whole summer?'

'Stop making such a ridiculous fuss.' Mum's bangles clink loudly again as she points in the direction of the barn. 'Fetch your boxes so the poor Tuesdays don't trip over them, then dust and vacuum. *Now*.'

She stomps off, leaving me open-mouthed. Bess tugs at my shorts again. I glance down. She makes a goofy face, sticking out her tongue and crossing her eyes. She can see I'm upset and is trying to make me laugh.

Something twists in my stomach. 'I'm fine,' I say.

Bess raises her eyebrows as if to ask: *really?*

I nod. 'Really.'

She goes back to her drawing: a puppy with dark splotches on its white fur and a dark brown patch over one eye. Bess has been obsessed with puppies ever since our dog, Pirate, was run over the week before Dad died. Because she's mean, Mum refuses to let us have another pet, so Bess draws one new 'Pirate' after another. Her pictures are amazing. Way better than you'd expect from an average almost-seven-year-old. We both get our creative talent from Dad. He worked in a fancy jewellery shop, but he always said he was really a frustrated designer.

He died on his boat, in a storm out at sea almost eighteen months ago. I still miss him every day: the way he let me put golden syrup on my toast when Mum wasn't looking; how he took me and Bess out sailing every weekend, always happy, even when it poured with rain. And his huge goodnight hugs that smelled of soap and sawdust, that made me feel like I was totally safe and that nothing bad could ever happen.

'I'd better go to the Barn.' I force a smile for Bess's sake. Before we lost Dad, she used to irritate me. I was mean to her, always telling her off for following me around or teasing her for playing with stupid dolls even though she was only little. She used to say stuff like, 'please let me play, Cat, please'. And I'd always run off too fast for her to follow, her wails echoing in my ears.

I hate how I acted then.

She's almost seven now, and I'd give anything to have her ask me to let her play.

But she doesn't ask. In fact, she doesn't say anything at all.

Bess hasn't said a word – to anyone – since Dad died. For the first few months, Mum kept saying we just needed to give her time. But it's been well over a year now and Bess has got into the habit of not saying anything at all.

Worse, we've all got into the habit of not expecting her to.

The cardboard boxes full of my sewing stuff are just inside the front door of the Barn. The fabric for the dress I've been pinning is in a jumbled heap in the top box, the pattern fluttering loose and to the side. Pinning anything cut on the bias is really tricky. It took me ages to get the pattern in exactly the right place and now I'll have to start all over again.

The vacuum cleaner stands expectantly next to the stack of boxes. I glare at it. This is so unfair. There's nowhere in the house with enough space and light for me to do my dressmaking and Mum knows it. My bedroom is small and gloomy. I've been wanting to move into the spare room for ages – it's huge with lots of space and big windows that

let in loads of natural light, perfect for dressmaking. But Mum keeps it cluttered to bursting point with crystals and astrological ornaments and all the old designer outfits she doesn't have room for in her wardrobe.

I pick up the boxes, anger still hot in my chest. No way am I doing the stupid dusting and vacuum-cleaning. I stomp off, across the courtyard then around the side of our house. I dump the boxes in the front porch. I'll pick them up later; right now I have to get away from Mum. From all of it.

I hurry along the drive and into the woods. I pick my way along the winding path down through the trees to the road, then stroll the fifty yards or so into the village. Brockledore is tiny: there's a pub, a grocery store with a post office, a cafe that sells chips and sandwiches and an antique showroom, as well as a handful of pottery shops and boutiques selling old-fashioned clothes.

I stand at the war memorial, opposite the bus stop and gaze along the familiar high street, resentment burning inside me. I used to walk down here with Dad sometimes. He'd always give me some cash to spend on sweets in the grocery store and everyone we passed on the way would say 'hello'. Dad would never have let Mum take the Barn attic away from me. He'd understand why I needed it. Yes, if he was still here, he wouldn't let Mum be so greedy, basing all her decisions on how much money she

can either spend or make. He'd let Bess have another dog and he *definitely* wouldn't allow a couple of strangers to live in the Barn over the summer to make a stupid mosaic in the stupid courtyard.

But Dad is gone.

And Mum is determined to make my life miserable.

Learning to pin and sew designs is basically all I've wanted to do for the past six months. Mum just doesn't understand. I've found something for myself that's a million miles away from the way she uses astrology to manipulate money out of people. Dressmaking is creative, like Dad was – I can lose myself in it. Now I don't know what I'm going to do for the rest of the summer holidays. It's not like I've got any friends I can hang out with.

Feeling sulky and cross, I wander back through the woods that lead home. The sun is shining and the birds are singing, but with every step I feel more depressed. I emerge from the trees onto the lane that leads up to our house. My phone rings and I glance down. I don't recognise the number.

I've been told a million times to be wary of random callers. But that isn't why I reject this call – I just don't feel like talking to anyone. The sun beats down on my head, the only sound the crunch of the gravel under my feet and the soft sway of the trees in the breeze. My phone rings again.

Man, they're persistent.

I close the call again and am just about to block the number, when my phone pings with a text. I gaze down. It's the same caller.

Hello, Cat. I'm Rik. A friend of your dad's. I'd like to talk to you.

My stomach contracts with shock. A creeping anxiety twists through me. Dad's been dead for a year and a half. How would a friend of his have my number? And why would they be calling me and not Mum?

This feels wrong. Another message:

Please call me, Cat. I need to tell you something. It's important.

Why doesn't he text whatever it is? Whoever this Rik is, he's doing all the wrong things to get me to speak to him.

Irritated, I text back:

What's so important?

I wait for a second, my finger hovering over the block icon. And then a third message comes through. An answer to my question that makes so little sense it feels like my brain is crashing.

Your dad is alive.

2

My legs give way.

I sink to the ground, the earth warm and rough against my skin.

Your dad is alive.

I stare at the message, my head spinning. Images from the one-year memorial service we had for Dad back in February flash through my mind: Bess pale, clutching a doll. Mum's eyes hidden behind dark glasses. Everyone watching us. A glimpse of white flowers. Then my shoes, as I look down, only seeing my feet walking over the wooden floor.

That day I ached with the pain of missing Dad, my head full of the crazy fantasy that any second he might somehow walk in and grin at me and say: *Let's get out of here!*

Is it possible he could still be alive? For a split second, a tidal wave of hope surges through me.

Then common sense washes it away.

No. Not after the police investigation and the coroner's report and all the time that has passed. There's *no way.*

Another message pings through.

Please call me. We need to talk.

Who is this Rik? Why is he sending me this lie? Why does he want to talk to me?

The answer shoots into my head: It's a wind-up. *Has* to be.

I gasp, sick to my stomach. Who would do such a mean, horrible thing?

That's easy. There are plenty of girls at school who don't like me.

It wasn't always like that. Up to my second term in Year Eight I got on with almost everyone. And my best friend, Cindy, and I hung out all the time. But, after Dad died that winter, everything changed. Cindy and some of the other girls kept asking if I was all right, and I just kept saying I was fine. Not because I was – obviously – but because I didn't know what else to say. Anyway, eventually everyone except Cindy stopped asking, and by the summer term my status had slid from averagely popular to total outcast. Which was when Delilah Jenkins decided to glue my cardigan to the table in art, then make out it was my fault for leaving the top off the glue pot.

From then on I was an easy target: the year group weirdo who barely said a word outside of lessons. Even Cindy backed off, leaving me, officially, as the friendless freak they'd all decided I was anyway.

But why would any of those girls wind me up during the holidays? It's not like I'm on any of their social media. The clothes I make get some likes on Instagram, but none of those come from people I know. In fact, I've heard from literally nobody since school ended. Why would they contact me now, pretending to be a friend of my Dad's?

Another message from 'Rik' pings onto my phone. I snatch it up.

Cat, are you there? What's the problem? Are you alone?

Fear crawls over me like a spider. Never mind the mean girls at school, maybe this is some weird internet stalker?

Anger rises like bile, overpowering the fear. I'm not going to let some crazy stranger intimidate me.

I stab at the open screen.

How did you know my dad?

I press send and wait. My heart thuds furiously against my ribs, drowning out the birds and the breeze that ruffles the leaves over my head.

A minute later and there's a reply:

We worked together at Ballena Jewellery. Please, Cat. I'm going to try calling you again in one minute. Please answer.

I hesitate, more confused than ever. Dad *did* work at Ballena jewellery. He got a job there a couple of years before he died. Is it possible this Rik person is genuine?

I quickly type another message:

How do I know you were really friends?

A short pause and then an even shorter message.

Kitterbug.

I gasp, my whole body trembling. Kitterbug was my dad's nickname for me when I was little. Nobody else has ever called me that.

Cat, are you alone yet?

My head spins. I type quickly:

No

It's a lie, of course, but I need time to think. Another short pause, then Rik writes again.

Okay. Call me when you're alone. Tell no one. I'll explain everything.

I can't stay on this number for long. Call me by 1pm.

A shiver snakes down my spine. I check the time: 12.28pm. I set down my phone, trying to let what has just happened sink in.

What if this Rik guy is telling the truth?

What if Dad really is still alive?

My heart hammers against my ribs as I stumble along the lane. Around the corner and our house comes into view. A battered estate laden with cases and bags is parked alongside Mum's gleaming pink car. I don't give it a second thought.

The sky overhead is clear and blue. The air is hot and still. But there's a storm in my head. Rik's words crash against my skull.

Your dad is alive.

It can't be true. I crunch over the gravel of our driveway. Past the cars. I'm at the front door now. I take a deep breath and let it out slowly.

Except . . . what if it *is* true?

Suddenly I know that I need to speak to Rik. Hear what he has to say.

I hurry inside, letting the front door slam shut behind me.

'Cat! Where on earth have you been?' Mum's sharp

voice cuts through my thoughts.

I spin round. She's just emerged from the kitchen, arms spread out so that the pink fringe of her shawl flutters like the wings of an exotic bird.

'Mum, I—'

'At least you're here now.' She cuts me off, glaring as if to indicate I need to watch what I say. A second later I realise why, as a man steps out from behind her. He's tall and black, with closely cropped hair and a warm, kind smile.

'Hi, there,' he says, stepping forward with his hand outstretched.

'This is Mr Tuesday, the mosaic restoration specialist,' Mum says primly. 'My daughter Cat.'

I shake his hand awkwardly, my eyes on the stairs. It's 12.32. I have just half-an-hour to make the call to Rik. I need to get up to the privacy of my room as soon as possible.

'And this is my son, Tyler.' The man steps aside.

I wait, impatiently, expecting a little boy to emerge from the kitchen. But it's a teenager who appears. Fairer than his dad, his skin the colour of almond butter, and tall. Not just tall, I realise, but upright and straight-backed. A faded t-shirt hangs perfectly from his broad shoulders. My stomach drops away inside me. He looks like a model. His

brown eyes fix, unsmiling, on mine.

'Hi,' he says, holding up his hand.

'Hi.' It's like there's sandpaper in my throat.

Mum gazes at me, a slight frown creasing the centre of her forehead. 'Tyler's the same age as you, Cat,' she says. 'Isn't that nice?'

I stare at her, blankly. Mum's eyes flare with exasperation, then she spins towards Tyler, placing her hand on his arm and half closing her eyes. It's a gesture I've seen her make a million times with her clients. Usually they gaze eagerly at her, desperate for her spiritual insights, but Tyler just watches, a wary expression on his face.

'Ah,' Mum breathes softly. 'I sense the pain. The last thief is death and he always leaves a mark.'

How embarrassing. Tyler and his dad are both looking at her like she's mad. I shove my hand in my pocket. My fingertips find the warm plastic of my phone. Another minute has ticked by while I'm standing here, doing nothing.

Your dad is alive.

I take a sideways step towards the stairs.

Mum's hand flicks up, the tiny stars on her nail varnish catching the light. 'I thought so,' she says with a gentle sigh. 'You're radiating a very high empathic frequency, Tyler.'

I wince. It's bad enough her going on about stupid astrology all the time but I really hate it when she gets all 'fake psychic', especially in front of complete strangers. The hall clock is now saying 12.35.

'Am I?' Tyler sounds baffled.

'Um . . .' Mr Tuesday is clearly lost for words.

I turn away and hurry to the stairs.

'Cat!' Mum snaps.

I freeze, then turn to face her. Her eyes flash a warning at me. I grip the bannisters. Surely I'm free to go now?

'Cat, show the Tuesdays around the Barn, please,' Mum orders.

What? My heart thuds against my ribs. *No.* I need to call Rik.

'Me?' I stare at her. 'No . . . Mum, I can't.'

'Of course you can.' Mum insists, steel in her voice.

I glare at her. How dare she order me about?

Ignoring my stare, Mum turns to Mr Tuesday. 'I'm afraid I have a client in a few minutes. Please spend the rest of the day settling in. I'll pop over later when you've had a chance to look at the mosaic. I can't wait to get your expert guidance on the renovations. Just a quick question . . . is it likely to be noisy?'

Mr Tuesday frowns, clearly confused.

'It's just . . .' Mum laughs. 'Well, as a fellow artist I am

sure you'll understand. I do highly sensitive work with my clients, so my appointments have to take precedence if any of the renovations are likely to *disturb*.'

I grit my teeth, embarrassed now as well as furious. Typical Mum to assume her needs are more important than everyone else's.

'Mosaic work doesn't usually involve too much noise,' Mr Tuesday says with a gentle smile. 'But I'll let you know when I've taken a look.' His voice is deep and dignified. Unlike Mum, fluttering about with her constant hand gestures, he moves slowly and calmly.

'Right, then.' Mum sounds flustered.

I glance at Tyler. Heat creeps up my cheeks as he meets my gaze and raises an eyebrow. He must be able to see how embarrassed Mum makes me, how desperate I am to get away.

Mum turns back to me, lowering her voice so that only I can hear her. 'Now, Cat, please,' she hisses, 'or you'll be grounded for the rest of the week.'

3

I think quickly. So long as there's no more standing about and talking, twenty-five minutes is more than enough time to walk the Tuesdays to the Barn, show them around quickly and get back to my room to call Rik.

'Fine,' I say reluctantly. 'I'll take them to the Barn.'

Mum glares at me, clearly appalled by how sulky she thinks I'm being, then flits away.

'This way.' I lead the Tuesdays outside. As I cross the uneven patio I wonder if I should warn Mr Tuesday to watch his step – Mum always does when clients come out here. But when I look around, he's already striding purposefully onto our lawn, looking around at the trees and flowers round the sides and the high brick wall behind. I sneak a sideways glance at Tyler. He's also gazing around, his jaw hanging open.

'What pretty delphiniums,' Mr Tuesday says approvingly. 'And just look at those roses.'

'It's so big,' Tyler adds. 'Nobody's garden is this big in London.'

I fidget from foot to foot. Inside my pocket, my hand curls around my phone.

'The Barn's this way,' I say, impatiently.

'After you, Cat,' Mr Tuesday says.

I lead the two of them across the grass and around the wall to the courtyard. The Barn stands opposite us, with the apple orchard beyond to the right.

'What a lovely old building,' Mr Tuesday says. He has a soft, calm way of speaking. I can't imagine him ever getting angry. I follow his gaze to the Barn. I guess it is old, though I've never thought about it before. It's made of pale stone and is much smaller than the main house.

'Ah, here's the mosaic . . .' Mr Tuesday gazes down at the courtyard, his eyes gleaming with interest.

I haven't looked at the courtyard mosaic in ages. Set around an old stone sundial, it's supposed to be a horoscope showing the signs of the zodiac, but at least half the tiles are damaged, with weeds poking up all over the place. The inner circle of star-shaped tiles around the sundial is still intact, but the outer rim is almost completely gone, while three of the twelve huge star signs in between are completely missing.

'Oh, dear, this is a mess,' says Mr Tuesday with feeling. He crouches down to take a closer look. 'We'll have our work cut out for us here, Ty.'

Tyler leans against the wall, watching him. My fingers feel sweaty on my phone.

'Er, sorry to rush you,' I say, 'but I really need to show you inside now.'

'Alright, then.' Mr Tuesday straightens up. 'Now who's this?' He smiles, as Bess tiptoes around the corner of the Barn, her drawing book tucked under one arm.

'That's my sister,' I say, immediately feeling defensive. Strangers always expect Bess to speak. I can't bear the look the pity on their faces when you tell them she can't. 'Her name's Bess, but she doesn't like to talk.'

'Well, hello, Bess,' Mr Tuesday says kindly.

Bess gives him a quick wave, glances once at Tyler, then hurries away.

I usher the Tuesdays into the Barn. The front door opens onto an open-plan living area, with sofas and a big TV straight ahead and a kitchen area to the right.

'Very nice,' Mr Tuesday says approvingly. 'From the outside, I wasn't expecting it to be so modern. Eh, Tyler?'

'I guess,' Tyler says with a self-conscious shrug. He pulls out his phone and peers at the screen. A look of disappointment settles over his face. I wonder if he has someone – a girlfriend or boyfriend – back in London.

'Look, your mother's left us a box of groceries,' Mr

Tuesday says, wandering over to the kitchen area. 'That's kind of her.'

'Yeah, and there's some cleaning stuff in the cupboards, and that –' I point to a door under the stairs – 'that's a downstairs loo. Let's go up now.'

'Sure.' If Mr Tuesday is feeling rushed he doesn't show it. He and Tyler follow me up to the first-floor landing.

'Two bedrooms and a bathroom,' I say, pointing to each door in turn.

I check the time. 12.42. I still have eighteen minutes to get to my room and make my call. I tap my fingers against the landing wall while Mr Tuesday and Tyler explore the rooms. I don't know what they're looking at. The bedrooms are plain and empty – apart from the beds, wardrobes and curtains. It couldn't be more different from our house, with its crazy prints and ornaments everywhere.

'Look, Ty,' Mr Tuesday says, peering out of the back bedroom window. 'It's an apple orchard. What varieties do you grow here?'

I stare at him blankly. 'Er, sorry, I don't know.'

'I bet you'll know this . . .' Tyler says. It's the first time he's spoken directly to me.

'What?' I ask, feeling self-conscious.

'Where can I get Wi-Fi?'

‘There isn’t any in the Barn,’ I explain. ‘It’s not great in the house either. Patchy.’

Tyler’s face falls.

‘I know, it sucks. Maybe if you ask Mum she’ll fix it up for you.’ I fidget from foot to foot. 12.47. Thirteen minutes.

‘Well, I think there’s a lot to be said for a little less internet.’ Mr Tuesday chuckles. ‘Eh, Tyler?’

Tyler makes a face. He doesn’t seem wound up though. I’m getting the impression that he and his dad actually get on really well.

‘Just the attic left to see,’ I say, hurrying across the landing. ‘There’s another bedroom up there.’

‘You go on, Tyler, I’m happy with this one.’ Mr Tuesday turns back to the window.

I race up the second set of stairs to the top floor. Tyler lollops after me.

I’m itching to tell him to hurry up.

The Barn’s attic is a big room, though the roof slopes dramatically on either side, meaning the portion you can stand up in isn’t huge. There’s a double bed in the middle of the room and a window seat that runs the length of the huge window. I gaze at the expanse of floor between the window and the bed which, just yesterday, was covered in the fabric for the dress I was making.

‘Wow,’ Tyler says.

I check the time on my phone again. 12.50. Time to leave.

'There's a shower room too,' I gabble, pointing to a door on the left.

I take a step back, towards the landing.

'Three bathrooms in a house for two people,' Tyler drawls. 'We're not going to smell while we're here, are we?'

He smiles. It transforms his face, all the intensity falling away and his eyes lighting up with warmth. For a second, I'm transfixed. His eyes are beautiful: a hint of gold shining through the brown.

'I have to go,' I say, backing away and hoping he can't see that I'm blushing.

Tyler stares at me. Feeling overwhelmed, I turn and fly out of the room, down the stairs and out of the Barn. Across the shade of the courtyard and onto the lawn, where the sun beats down on my face.

As I enter the house, I can hear Mum greeting her client. 'Welcome, *such* a wonderful day for a reading. Jupiter is in retrograde, the perfect time to reflect on visions, ideals and beliefs. This way.'

I race up to my room and shut the door firmly behind me. It's 12.54. I still have six minutes.

My fingers fumble as I find Rik's number. I hesitate for a moment, then press video call. I need to see his face.

It'll be easier to tell if he's lying that way.

I keep my own video off.

The top of the screen fills with a fuzzy picture: the edge of a table, a door opening. It's someone moving. A blur, then a man's face appears. He's younger than Mum and Dad, but still lots older than me. Beads of sweat glint on his forehead.

'Cat? Is that you?' he asks. 'Are you there?'

'Yes,' I say. 'It's me.'

A look of relief fills his face. 'Oh, thank goodness. Cat, I'm Rik Adamski.' The hint of a smile lifts the corners of his mouth. 'I know this is a shock, but it's true. Your dad is alive.'

Hearing the words said out loud whips the ground out from underneath me. I sink onto my bed.

'Cat?' Rik peers more closely at the screen. 'Did you realise your video is off?'

I take a deep breath, trying to focus.

Rik blinks, anxiously, intent on my face. 'Cat? Are you okay?'

'But Dad drowned in a boating accident,' I blurt out. 'The police said so. I . . . I went to his funeral. His boat was so battered from the storm he got caught out in, it couldn't be repaired.' Emotion swells inside me. 'How can he possibly be alive?'

There's a pause. 'Your dad made the boat look like that. He didn't drown,' Rik says. 'Your dad faked his own death.'