

# CHAPTER 1

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I watch as Jaymey systematically arranges treasured teddies, dogs, rabbits and monkeys along the gap between his bed and the wall. It takes time; every gap must be filled, checked and if necessary refilled more securely. He is frightened of dark, unknowable spaces, where the terrifying might be lurking.

We have endured another traumatic day of struggle, shouting and upset and we are both worn out. Any attempts I make to hurry him will only delay the process so I try to remain calm and cheerful.

‘Your animals look very comfortable. Are they all in the right places now?’

He continues rearranging and doesn’t answer. I stifle the half-sigh half-yawn that rises up from my lungs and pass him the last few soft toys.

‘All ready now,’ he says and curls down on to his pillow with his little collection of silent protectors. I lean over to stroke his soft hair and as I kiss his cheek, his eyes suddenly snap open.

‘Mummy, Mummy, I want sit up, now, sit up.’ It is as though he has been switched on, electrified. He is agitated, urgent.

‘Jaymey, what’s the matter?’

He looks straight into my eyes. He never looks straight into anyone’s eyes. It stops me still.

‘In the bad house, Ellie, him had long pole with sharp bits on the end. Him push it into my mouth, hard like this.’

His speech is rushed and jagged. He jabs into his duvet with a little balled up fist.

‘And my tooth it did come out.’ He pulls down his lower lip and points to the gap in his milk teeth.

His eyes do not veer from mine but drill into them and I hope I do not betray the wave of cold panic that flushes through me. My beautiful son, four years old, who has been mine for such a short time, is entrusting me with a precious secret. I want him to trust me, to have no doubt that I am on his side.

‘Jaymey? How long was the pole?’

Such a stupid question but I am all at sea and don’t know where to begin. He stretches his little arms out as wide as he can. His Bob the Builder pyjama top rises up.

‘Was it done on purpose, or by accident?’ I ask, mindful that Jaymey, given two options of anything, will nearly always choose the last.

‘It was done by purpose and Ellie and the people are in prison now and Ellie was my friend and now him isn’t anymore.’

The names and the information are unfamiliar but he is animated with certainty in a way I have never seen him before – reaching into his memory, desperate to explain, to make me understand.

‘There was blood, a lot of lot of blood and it hurt very, very much so I couldn’t eat anymore. I could not even eat biscuits, for long, long time.’

He goes over the events again and again, with the ever-present, saucer-like eyes, reaching into mine, asking me to believe him. This is a test of me; a brave test of whether I am going to have the mettle to last the course with him.

‘It must have been very scary and very frightening for you,’ I venture.

‘And and Ellie and the people, they are in prison now?’ he asks.

Ellie is not a name I recognise from the information we have been given, so I have no idea. But I sense that what Jaymey needs from me is to feel reassured and safe. So I lie to him. 'Yes, they are in prison, because what they did to you was a very bad thing.' He agrees with me, so emphatically.

'Will I have to see them again?'

'No, you will never have to see them again. You are with me and Daddy and Harlee forever and nothing like that is ever going to happen to you again.' His face changes. Relief washes over it.

'I want play bin lorries with you tomorrow.'

We chat about bin lorries; the grinding change of gear troubles me but soothes him. I tuck him in amongst his teddies again and kiss him goodnight.

'I love you, Jaymey.'

I check that the night light is on, leave his bedroom door open the required amount and creep downstairs.

He sleeps all night. I lie awake for most of it, sick and numb. I think of the force needed to knock out a tooth, the blood and the pain. He would have been not quite two years old. A baby. My shock mixes with anger. How could someone inflict that on my baby? My beautiful boy. And no one was punished for this crime, carried out in the dark cocoon of violence and neglect created by his birth family. Evidence not robust enough, witnesses too young and too scared to speak out, the benefit of the doubt, second chances, third chances. And the act was no doubt covered up. Jaymey was never taken to the doctor or to the dentist. The event was recorded in the paperwork as another 'unexplained incident'. And he was left in their care for a further six months.

The following morning, over breakfast, I refer to our conversation of the previous evening, anxious that Jaymey knows his act of bravery has been remembered and valued. I try to get some more detail from him.

'Is Ellie a lady or a man?'

‘A lady.’

‘Is Ellie a girl or a lady?’

‘A lady.’

‘Is Ellie a big lady or a small lady?’

‘A big fat lady.’

‘Does Ellie have blonde or dark hair?’

‘Dark hair. Him wear grey tracksuit t-shirts and grey tracksuit trousers.’

The previous weekend, I had been choosing some new pyjamas for myself in M&S. Jaymey was naturally uninterested until I briefly considered a pair made from a grey, stretchy, cotton fabric. He grabbed my arm and shook it. He said he really did not like them and that I was not to buy them, that they were horrible and I would look horrible in them.

I will never know for sure who Ellie is. She could be Trudy, Jaymey’s birth mother, another relative or a friend. Whoever she is, he is frightened of her still, of having to go back to her, of me becoming like her. I tell Jaymey that I love him and that I appreciate him telling me about his tooth. I dash upstairs to get changed – something bright today, I think.