

Chapter 1

Delilah's left eye squeezes shut, right eye widening. Through the apartment door's spyhole, Grant's nose is a beak. Delilah can almost hear the hiss of his cigarette-laced breath. His eye looms an inch from hers. She scoots back, fluffy socks slipping over the laminate floor.

'Bugger.'

Grant hammers on the door again. 'Open up,' he says. 'I know you're in there.'

A murmur from another voice; Joe, must be with him. Delilah hasn't seen Joe since she walked out of Biology three months ago. She lifts her gaze to the ceiling, follows the trail of hair-thin cracks that criss-cross like shadowy cobwebs. Has school finished for the day? Or is it the weekend?

'Mum's not here,' Delilah shouts, shoulders hunched like an old woman's rather than a sixteen-year-old girl's. 'She'll see you later.'

'No can do. Payments are already behind.' Another murmur. 'Alright, Joe. I know what I'm doing. – Just open the door, Lila, and we can talk about it. You know, face to face.'

What's she supposed to do now? She glares at the laptop, open on the clutter of junk mail by the sofa. The website *Poker Demons* flashes on the screen in tasteful gold and green like the home page of a respectable high-class hotel. How much has Mum borrowed this time? How much has she lost?

Delilah zips up her grey hoodie to hide the canned soup stain from yesterday's lunch and slides the door chain open. It jangles like a handful of coins.

Grant fills the doorway with his legs spread, one hand pressed against the doorjamb, the rest of his wiry body glued to the opposite side like a spider poised. His sharp eyes flash to Delilah's pyjama trousers.

'Still not in school? Aren't you going to mess up your exams at this rate?'

'I've been given permission.' Delilah squeezes out each word. 'I'm allowed to revise at home.'

'That right?' Grant's eyes are devoid of smile, but they glitter. 'What do you think of that, Joe?'

Joe clears his throat. 'I like your hair.'

Delilah tucks a lock of dyed blue hair behind her ear. She doesn't even glance at Joe; he flickers like a migraine aura on the edge of her vision.

‘Anyway,’ Grant coughs. ‘What are you going to give me?’

Delilah shivers and wraps her arms around her. ‘I don’t know how much my mother’s borrowed, but I’m sure she’ll pay you back. You don’t have to come hammering on our door.’

‘Lila, don’t worry. Look at how worried she is, Joe!’

Joe clears his throat again. ‘Let’s just leave it, Dad.’

Grant turns a fraction. ‘Leave it?’ His voice is high, filled with incredulity. ‘What are you made of, son? There’s no leaving it where money’s concerned.’

He leans in closer to Delilah. She can’t stop herself from flinching. ‘I could take something.’ His ash-breath heats her cheeks. ‘Like security. Maybe that’ll quicken your mother up, eh?’

He places a heavy hand on her shoulder. Delilah emits a half-choked gasp. Her startled gaze lands on Joe – who grabs Grant’s pinstriped sleeve.

‘Dad!’

‘I don’t mean *her*. I’m not taking her as security!’ Grant shrugs Joe off and straightens his suit jacket, adjusts his tie. ‘Jeez. Kids today. Such imaginations!’

He firmly moves Delilah aside and strides into the apartment. ‘What would your mother come running for, hmm?’ He scans the room, a sneer wrinkling his nose. ‘Blimey, you and your mum aren’t much good at house-keeping.’

Heat floods Delilah. That scum is actually in their apartment! She moves to grab him, but Joe’s hand on her wrist stops her. He shakes his head once, grey eyes drilling to the back of her skull. A small sigh that smells of menthol escapes his lips, as though he’s full of sorrow. Like she is dead and he’s unfortunate enough to have discovered her skeleton.

‘Let go of me,’ she whispers.

He lets go.

‘Right,’ Grant says, slapping the laptop lid closed. ‘This’ll do. Reckon your mum will miss it enough to give me what she owes me.’ He winks at Delilah. ‘Be sure to remind her when she gets in: Grant Ballast always gets what’s due.’

His laugh follows him out the door. Joe shrugs narrow shoulders, gaze flickering from Delilah’s fluffy socks to the hole in the knee of her pyjama trousers.

‘Good to see you,’ he says, like they’re old friends parting after a pleasant afternoon together.

Beneath her feet, a soft vibration from the apartment below tickles her toes. Albert must be at Sinjin's; he likes the ceiling fan on even when it's freezing cold. Delilah's stomach growls.

'Hungry?'

'I was just about to go out.' The skin on her back prickles, throat dry. 'To Sinjin's – for supper.'

'Uh-huh. That's good. I heard you'd become a bit of a recluse. Exam stress and that. But you should still, you know, see the outside world. The more you stay in, the more scared you are to go out.'

'I'm not scared.'

'No? That's good.' Pause. 'You coming now then?'

Delilah's trainers are by the front door, the soles bright white. When was the last time she put them on? Five weeks ago? Six? Just the thought of tying up the laces makes her dizzy.

'I need to get changed first.'

Joe's gaze flickers over her. 'Right. See you around then.'

She stares at the empty space left behind.

'I'm not scared,' she repeats – though her head feels like a tightening cage trying to contain the flapping wings of a panicked bird.

Behind her, the pile of junk mail, without its laptop crown, has collapsed, sprawled across the floor. Carpet sales and takeaway menus and the freebie local paper shout up at her: *Mum'll be mad when she finds out her laptop's gone.*

Delilah's tummy gurgles. Step over the threshold. Just one step.

Ready... The muscles in her legs are like over-chewed gum.

Steady... Her body rocks forward, her feet stay put.

'Go,' she hisses. '*Go.*'

Her body is motionless. Within, it's sinking. Organs slither through the floor. Liver, stomach, heart. Her brain is last, sliding past a startled Sinjin and Albert. Sliding to the foyer, and down to the creepy basement.

She pants, sweat dribbling down her spine. But she hasn't moved. Not one inch.

There must be something to eat around here, she tells herself, closing the apartment door with a snap.

In the kitchen, she opens the fridge, shuts it, opens the cupboard: A box of dried yeast and a can of pineapple. She takes out the can and wrestles the lid off with a blunt knife and a screwdriver.

The juice is so sweet, it makes her jaw ache. She picks out bits of pineapple from her teeth then checks her mobile. Nothing from Mum.

‘You better be at the store getting food.’

Delilah bites the inside of her cheek and wilts onto the sofa. Outside, it’s starting to get dark. The top branches of the old oak tree crack the sky into pieces. She shuts her eyes. Sleepy thoughts of Mum, of Grant and Joe, squirm together and then wriggle apart.

The more you stay in, the more scared you are to go out.

I should try harder, she thinks, blearily curling into the sofa. Half-hearted promises give way to the whispering dream of a trapdoor nestled within a concrete floor. The handle on the door is bone. A circle. An eye-socket.

You want to touch the handle. You want to open the door.

Just as her fingertips reach the handle, she sinks

sinks

sinks

into hollow sleep.

*

‘Where is it?’ Delilah’s eyes spring open. A mess of jet hair swoops. ‘Was it Grant who took it? Was it?’ Delilah nods, scooting back along the sofa. Mum’s back arches, her arms sweeping the air. ‘That’s just bloody typical!’

‘He wanted security – on the money you borrowed.’

Mum narrows her eyes. The skin underneath looks frail, purplish, translucent as a sliver of red onion. ‘I’ll get it back.’ Her eyes water. ‘Don’t worry, love. I’ll get it back.’

Delilah’s bitten nails leave little crescents on her palms. ‘Mum! Forget about the laptop. How about I make you something to eat? I bet you haven’t had supper yet. Did you get...’ Delilah scans the worktop, the little dining table, the floor. Her chest concaves. ‘Food?’

Mum fishes out a cardigan from the laundry bin. It smells of peaches.

‘Delilah, I’ve come straight from a long shift at the hospital. What makes you think I’ve had time? If you would just go out to the shop for me.’ Mum tucks in the frayed sleeve edge, but a pale green thread hangs loose. ‘I left a fiver by the kettle.’

‘I didn’t see it.’

The purple under Mum’s eyes seems to grow more bruise-like. ‘I get it’s hard for you to think about anything except exams and revision but being cooped up like this – it’s getting ridiculous. You should get out, even to the shop. It’s like you’re busy just getting in your own way.’

‘My own way?’

‘Right. Now, you coming with me? I’m going to get my laptop back.’

Delilah shakes her head. ‘I need to wash my hair.’

Mum’s watery eyes glint and she suddenly whirls Delilah in a circle. ‘I just felt all day – do you feel it? Like our luck is going to change. One more game, Delilah, love. One more poker game and I just know I can win back all the money – plus some.’

Delilah’s mouth shrivels on all the sour things she wants to say. ‘One more game,’ she manages.

Mum pats her head. ‘One *winning* game! I can treat you then. A holiday! We can go wherever you want. That’ll make you feel better. You name the place.’

‘Place? I just want...’

I just want to stay inside this apartment for ever – but telling Mum that will only make her more determined to use Poker Demons to turn their fortunes around.

‘I won’t be long.’ Mum grabs the fiver from the worktop. ‘And then I’ll get us a bag of chips to share from the chippy, yeah?’

Delilah puts on a smile. ‘That’d be great.’

Mum swishes out the door.

You know she’ll not be able to buy chips.

Delilah steps forward.

Grant won’t let her take the laptop and she’ll need to pay him something.

Her stomach squeezes, wringing out every last bit of pineapple-y goodness. Mum said your luck is going to change. Delilah holds her breath and steps over the threshold.

‘Your luck is going to change.’

On a flash of impulse, hot and hungry, Delilah shuts the apartment door behind her. It clicks like releasing the safety on a gun – go!