

The floorboards creak when you walk on them, but they don't creak when you're underneath.

Not that you should be underneath – not in here at all. No entry, it says on the front door. Keep out. That's why it's the best place to hide.

You wait and wait for your eyes to adjust 'cos surely they will, surely you'll see the skinny gaps between each board, where light'll shine through even if only dimly.

And yes now, thankgod, you see lines of light, smoky yellow, stretching from left to right. Doesn't help much, though. Still darker than pitch. Is your hand still there? You lift your palm forward. Closer, closer, closer still and then your hand is on your face. You can smell chips and vinegar – even though you haven't had chips and vinegar. Sweat too 'cos you ran to hide here and it's awful hot.

You think of Sky and how she said to find a place of your own to hide. She said you can't share the place she was going to hide in 'cos her hiding place isn't big enough for three.

*I can make myself really small*, you said. *And Jennie could sit on my lap. Please can I share yours?* 'Cos you always share everything, like the stick of gum you found tucked in the rubber case of the phone you stole from Charlie.

*No*, she said.

*Why*, you said.

*'Cos you have to find your own hiding place*, she said, kind of cross. *We don't want Charlie to find both of us. And it was you who stole his phone.*

Her cheeks went all red like they did when Jennie bit half her sausage roll. Jennie didn't mean nothing by her thieving. She was just hungry. Like you.

Least Jennie's down here. Don't think you could've come into the empty house and then into the dark underneath if she weren't coming with you too.

*Jennie*, you say, and she nuzzles her nose in your palm and gives it a lick like she can smell chips and vinegar too. You ask her, *can you see anything?* Jennie whines a little whine which you're guessing means no. Maybe dogs can't see in the dark. Not like cats.

Back sweating. Dribbles of it run down your spine like tears. Bare skin – left your T-shirt behind for when you climb back up. *Don't give me no more washing than you have to*, Mam said. You thought about taking your jeans off too, before you came down, but then you didn't want to be that bare, not underneath.

There's nothing except the skinny yellow stripes of light and the dark starts to make your tummy hurt. Punching you the way Sam Clifton punched Ethan out on the field, punched him for nothing he did. Just, wham, in his tummy with his dirty fist. You thought Ethan was going to run. Disappear like Pa. But Ethan folded in half from the punch like you folded over when you watched Pa go. You were water over Pa leaving. But with Sam Clifton, you were fire.

*Leave my brother alone, you fricking nut*, you yelled. And you really yelled. Then Ethan pulled you away before Sam Clifton's wild eyes turned on you. *Don't you go near him*, Ethan spat as he dragged you home, holding his tummy all the time. *Sam Clifton sets fire to things for fun. He's trouble.*

Trouble. Worse than Charlie. Worse than anyone you know. You wish you could stand straight but you're half-crouched like Sam Clifton just hit your tummy. It's all right for Jennie. She's small and she has you and she's a dog and dogs are brave.

The dark keeps punching and it hurts and maybe you'll start yelling soon for someone to help you out. But Sky'll be cross if you get found by Charlie. Lungs start closing up like you're drowning in the darkness. You haven't seen nobody drown before but that's how Sam Clifton's brother died. Fell from a broken bridge into the river. Ethan said he got tangled in the weeds and it pulled him under and wouldn't let him go. You can't go up the bridge now. It's barbed off with a keep out sign same as on the front door.

Few more seconds of this blackness is going to drown *you*. Have to get out.

*I have to get out*, Jennie and Jennie whines, and starts to lick your hand and then she barks, ruff-ruff, and there's the scratch of her claws, like she's trying to dig to freedom. You find her head and rub her soft fur 'til she settles lower, flat, like she lies when she's scared.

Then you realise, it isn't you who's settled her, she's lying down 'cos she *is* scared, hearing something you haven't heard yet. You swear, 'cos you're fricking scared – and Ethan's not here to tell you off for cussing.

And then you hear him: *Come out, come out, wherever you are!*

*He sounds far away*, you tell yourself, tell Jennie, but you both crouch lower anyway – in the darker darkness underneath the floorboards. Jennie whines little, sorry whines 'cos she's afraid and worse of it is, you know Sky's out there being brave in her own hiding place.

*But, Sky*, you'd said again, 'cos you knew you didn't ever want to be hiding in a place that didn't have her there. *We'll all fit under them floorboards in Mrs Whitmore's old place. You, me and Jennie. You don't need to hide someplace different.*

Sky said it was just how she wanted it to be and then she crossed her arms and that meant the conversation was over.

*But*, you began and her arms knotted tighter and her jaw twitched so you left the word hanging, blowing in the wind like the plastic bag that stayed snagged in the park's crooked oak tree from summer to spring. And so now you're here alone with Jennie and you're both scared and-

'Darla!'

*Was that Charlie, Jennie? How far away was he calling?* Jennie sighs. *Maybe he's already found Sky.*

'Darla!'

*Was that nearer, Jennie? If he's found Sky, I'm going up. I don't care about being found. I don't care if Charlie punches me as hard as Sam Clifton punched Ethan.*

You peer up at the feeble lines of light. No brighter but no darker, neither. Still daytime. Squint and maybe just see the outline of Jennie's back, fur tufted up. Or maybe you're wishing.

*Let's go home. It's too hot, Jennie. It's too hot down here and Charlie's right to be angry at me for stealing his phone. I'll tell him I only did it to delete them photos he took of Sky.*

Jennie whines.

A creak. Upon the floorboards. Creak. Creak. Creak. You glance up at the skinny stripes of light.

Thud.

And all the dust above falls into your eyes. You can't see 'cos they're watering from the dust or they're watering 'cos you're crying. And then you are crying, crying out for Sky, crying like a baby. Jennie's licking your hand which means she's sitting up and being brave and you should try to be brave for her.

Scrape.

More dust but not in the eyes this time, just falling, sticking to the sweat. The slivers of light disappear. You bet Sky's not crying.

The smell hits first: acrid. Lungs start itching and then coughing, coughing. Jennie scrabbles.

*Fire.* First instinct is to push on them floorboards, push up from underneath and get out – get out, get out! But they're stuck. *Something's fallen on top of them, Jennie.*

The world shudders. Heat on feet. Maybe Jennie is lying on them but then the heat is sour, and you realise she's peed and then you realise you peed too.

Jennie starts scratching to dig out. For a moment between coughs, you think she's going to do it, dig you both out of here. But her whine comes a-wheezing, and she stops scrabbling. Or maybe she's still at it but you're coughing so hard you can't hear her no more.

Eyes watering, snot running, you think of Mam and Ethan and whether they'll ever find your body or whether it'll look like you and Jennie disappeared off the face of the planet same as Pa. But maybe they'll know it, in their hearts, that you Passed On. Hope you can still watch them from heaven the way Sam Clifton's brother watches you. Hold Mam's hand, the way that Sam Clifton's brother's holding yours. You know it's his hand 'cos it's wet from where he drowned. He's here to take you with him. Pulling. Pulling hard.

He's a million miles away even though he's got your hand and you can hear him saying your name, over and over. And then his voice turns into Sky's; Sky's voice calling from miles away, telling you to please wake up, please, please, goddammit, open your eyes!

*S'okay*, you tell her only it comes out in a croak.

*Open your fricking eyes!*

And that is Sky, and you always obey Sky, so you start to open your eyes, only your guts are squirming 'cos deep inside is a question: is Sky in heaven too?

*It's bright*, but your voice is air.

*She's alive! You're alive!* And then Sky is all around, the scent of her hair mixed up in smoke and its normal smell of honey and grass.

Sky has all the cusses and thankgods and tears and tears and coughing, coughing, coughing. Her coughing hurts all the way from your chest to your back, a dull ache and a sharp stabbing back and front, front and back and it's you who's coughing, coughing, coughing.

*Jennie?* you mouth.

Sobbing and snuffling, you can't see nothing except the brightness, but you know the sobbing belongs to Sky even though Sky doesn't cry. Ever. Not even when Charlie took them photos underneath her skirt. And then it's bright and Sky's hair is gone, and she must be gone too. And there's a pause of empty nothing where you hope with every goddamn piece of you that Jennie is safe.

A high-pitched ringing. Screaming. Mam? You reach into the brightness, expecting to touch nothing, but you do reach something. It's hair, not soft but wiry. An outline of a head and hair springing from it and shoulders hunched beneath and all the colours of Mam washed out of her like a bleached photograph.

*That was a stupid, dangerous place to hide!*

And then you realise you've not Passed On. You're on the ground outside a blazing house.

*I got him*, a voice says. A boy's voice. Sam Clifton's voice. Did Sam Clifton just save your life? You try sitting up, to tell Sam Clifton thank you, but you're not a boy.

*She's not a boy*, Sky says.

And then you see her, laid out by the old car. And it's like Sam Clifton punched you in the tummy.

*Jennie*, you say but you don't say it 'cos you have no voice and there's only coughing, coughing, coughing. Mam has her hands on your sticky back and Jennie is dead and please let her be watching, please let her be, please, please, let her be in heaven with Sam Clifton's brother.

*The cops are here*, says Sky. *You better hop it, Sam.*

Then Sam Clifton's face is in yours and you shrink into the ground.

*It wasn't me*, he says. *It wasn't me who lit that fire. I swear it!*

And his wild eyes are full of fire and something else. Fear.

He's pulled away and someone says *you'll go down for this, Samuel Clifton*. Then Charlie's standing a way away beneath a tree, staring, a broken phone in one hand, a box of matches in the other. You open your mouth, but your voice is gone, trapped back there in the underneath, and Charlie scarpers before anyone else sees.