

A photograph of a wooden staircase leading upwards. At the top of the stairs, a bright light source creates a strong glow and lens flare. A small, worn teddy bear is sitting on one of the lower steps. The walls on either side of the stairs are dark and textured.

**KEEP
IT IN
THE
FAMILY**

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When You Disappeared

The Vacation

The Good Samaritan

Her Last Move

The Passengers

What Lies Between Us

The Minders

**KEEP
IT IN
THE
FAMILY**

JOHN MARRS

 **THOMAS & MERCER**

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**KEEP
IT IN
THE
FAMILY**

PROLOGUE

THIRTY-NINE YEARS EARLIER

I pluck up the courage to make my move and begin my ascent of the staircase. I know this route well so I avoid every creaky floorboard.

Keeping an arm's length from the door I've been approaching, I lower myself to my knees and freeze when they crack like the snapping of dry twigs. If I've been heard and the handle turns, I'm done for. Such a violation of the rules could place me inside the room next time.

Even knowing the stakes, I can't stop myself from wanting to be out here, close to the action.

When I've convinced myself it's safe, I lie my whole body down before the door. My warm cheek presses against the cold floorboards until eventually I hear him. His voice is more muffled and muted than it was this morning. Then, he was banging on the floor with his fists and feet, his screams and pleas to be set free bouncing off the walls and ceiling. This didn't last for long, as he rapidly fell silent when they stormed up the stairs to confront him.

Now I'm squinting so hard at the gap under the door that my eyes burn. It's daylight outside but shadowy in there, so the curtains must be drawn. A pointless precaution, as no other structures look down upon this one. Outside lies only a private, walled garden and a modest orchard of cooking-apple trees. A disused farmyard separates us from the nearest neighbour a quarter of a mile up the road.

Eventually, I make out a pair of bare feet. His soles are arched but they're not connecting with the floor, so he must be standing on his tiptoes. He is likely being held upright by the rope attached to the ceiling hook. They must've loosened his gag, as I can just about make out words such as 'home' and 'let me go'. His desperation will delight them.

He isn't the first to be caught in their web and he won't be the last. Most of them beg for mercy but they are all wasting their time. There will be no change of heart because there never is. No one under this roof believes in compassion. Empathy is an alien emotion here.

My thoughts drift from him to them. Theirs is a mismatched partnership, yet they're made for one another. Only together can they be their true selves. Outside in the real world, where they have no control over their environment, they are forced to adapt and perform. They are quiet and unassuming and I expect most people forget who they are soon after crossing paths with them. They get away with what they do by hiding in plain sight and by being ordinary. Nobody sees in them what I see because they have no reason to look. Only I notice the hollowness of their eyes.

A dry cough within the room jolts me back to attention, swiftly followed by desperate, choking gasps for air. Then a shaft of light appears inside and my previously splintered view coheres: he's balancing on the tips of his toenails. But even in the face of certainty, he doesn't give up. 'Please,' he pants. 'Don't do this.' He is more persistent than I gave him credit for.

Like those before him, he holds on to the hope of a miracle. He doesn't realise that, to them, he is not human. He is an everyday, ten-a-penny object. And it doesn't really matter how carelessly you treat an everyday object, because if it breaks, it is easily replaced. That's what will happen to him. It might take them weeks or months, but eventually, another one just like him will come along. One always does.

The rustling of a plastic bag tells me they have all but finished playing with him. Then in one swift manoeuvre, his feet leave the floor and vanish upwards, as if the angels have carried him away to heaven. They haven't, of course. This is a place even angels avoid. A violent thrashing sound follows, accompanied by more rustling and muffled cries, before the room falls silent.

Now all that remains is a thin veil of cigarette smoke seeping under the door.

It's my cue to leave. I rise as slowly and silently as I arrived, pad along the corridor until I reach my room, and close the door behind me. I'm lying on my bed with an open book in my hands when, soon after, they approach my door.

She is the first to speak, a sing-song inflection in her voice. 'You can come out now,' she chirps. She is only ever this upbeat in the aftermath.

When I don't reply, the footsteps stop. My door slowly opens and both

are standing in the doorway. His hair is ruffled and there's a deep-red lipstick mark on his neck. She wears the same satisfied expression as when she has taken the first puff from a cigarette. 'Did you hear me?' she asks.

'Yes,' I reply and muster a disingenuous smile. 'Sorry.'

She regards me for a moment before they move on, leaving the door ajar, and I return to the book I'm not reading.

Once I am sure they have returned to the ground floor, my morbid curiosity urges me to return to the room. It wants me to look under the door again and locate his body because I've never seen what they do when they have no more use for them. I've imagined it though. Frequently. However, I talk myself out of going. No, I think, I've pushed my luck enough today and the reward isn't worth the risk or retribution.

It won't be long until this latest disappearance is made public. It might remain in the newspapers or on the television for a few days, or even a week. Then something fresher and more pressing will replace him. Everyone except their families soon forgets about a missing child. And me. I remember every one of them.

Because I am the bait that lures them here.

PART ONE

TRANSCRIPT OF ANGLIA TV NEWS
INTERVIEW WITH KATE
THURSTON, HIGH STREET,
STEWKBURY, BEDFORDSHIRE

It's the kind of house you don't notice, even when you've been living in the village for years. It's right on the outskirts and is so overgrown you can't see it through the trees and the bushes. The last time anyone lived here was over thirty years ago – an elderly couple who I think were joined later on by a young family. Then a few years later, they all did a moonlight flit. Nobody knows why or where they went. Anyway, I'd never seen anyone come or go from it until that new couple arrived. We were all wondering who'd take on a place like that. We thought they must have deep pockets and a lot of time on their hands.

CHAPTER 1

MIA, 2018

Sitting inside Finn's van, we stare at the property to our left. He turns off the ignition and the silence is palpable. Neither of us knows what to say first.

'So,' he eventually begins, 'this is going to be our home?'

It's as if he wants me to confirm information he already knows. I try to muster up something suitably enthusiastic, like, 'We're going to be so happy here' or 'This is our dream home', but my reply is more succinct than reassuring. 'It is,' I say.

He responds with a slow nod as he tries to comprehend what we have done. Then we fall silent again as the enormity of the task before us sinks in. I feel nauseous.

I catch a glimpse of the rest of the high street in the wing mirror. We walked and drove along these roads a handful of times over the last year agreeing it was exactly the kind of village we wanted to move to. Our criteria were straightforward: the place could be no more than a fifteen-minute drive from the town centre and train station, it must have shops and a pub, it couldn't be too overlooked and had to be surrounded by plenty of long countryside walks for when we get that dog we're always promising ourselves. Stewkbury ticked each box.

The only sticking point – and it was a biggie – was property prices. If you don't want to live in an identikit new build, then be prepared to pay for the privilege. And we didn't have that kind of money.

Neither Finn nor I had noticed this two-storey, five-bedroom, detached Victorian house in our previous recces. It only appeared on our radar when my monster-in-law saw it advertised in an online auction-house brochure. She and my father-in-law were going to put a bid in to renovate it themselves, but it was perfect for Finn and I. And after a fair few arguments, they

eventually – albeit reluctantly – agreed to let us make an offer for it.

And before we knew it, we were sitting in a draughty hall bidding on it against half a dozen strangers.

When the auction began, Finn's knuckles were as white as his face. It was as if he was having a premonition of what lay ahead of us. Tearing apart and rebuilding this house was going to put an end to our Mr & Mrs Smith boutique hotel weekends away, my spa breaks with the girls, his Sunday morning football league with the lads, along with gigs and overpriced gym memberships. Goodbye fun, hello hard graft.

House buying hasn't been an easy process for us. When we married five years ago, we sold my flat in London and moved into Finn's terraced house in Leighton Buzzard. But the two-up two-down wasn't spacious enough to start a family. So we sold it and moved in with his parents, Dave and Debbie, while we waited to find somewhere. Four times we had an offer on a house accepted, but four times we were either gazumped or the owners had a change of heart. So, throwing caution to the wind and without even seeing this house in person or organising a surveyor, we found ourselves the last ones standing at the auction.

Now, I look towards Finn, his gaze fixed on the house like he's a rabbit caught in the headlights. I can't let him know I too have doubts. My next question invites criticism, but I ask it regardless. 'Is it better or worse than you thought?'

'It's hard to say,' he says. He's choosing his words carefully. I can almost hear the cogs in his brain turning as he prioritises the work required. Finn is the pragmatic sort, and possesses a natural talent for solving problems. I suppose that's what makes him a good plumber and all-round handyman. He can look at an object and instinctively know how it works or how to repair it. I'm the opposite. I look at something and it falls apart.

'But you and your dad will do a lot of the work, won't you?'

'I hope so.'

We exit the van. 'Shall we go inside?' I wrap my hands around his arm. He's as tense as a hostage negotiator.

We've always been 100 per cent honest with one another, but today I hold back on sharing what I'm really thinking – that we've made a bloody huge mistake and we are so far out of our comfort zone that we can't even see it from where we're standing now. But this is the only way to get what we wanted – a house in the country for a fraction of the price, and to escape

living with his parents. He may be close to them, but I am most definitely not.

This place could be good for us, I tell myself. It could be just what we need.

My positivity lasts for as long as the thought does. And then I'm back to feeling nauseous again.