

# **THE CHILD IN MY HOME**

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*A twisty psychological thriller short story you won't want to put down*

Ruth Harrow

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# ONE

The stinky old bus rattles down the potholed street. Another jolt shudders through me. I'm exhausted. I've now been awake for over twenty-four hours, but I dare not close my eyes even for a second.

We are running again. It seems we have spent my son's whole life fleeing. For almost five long years, we have done this. This time is no different. We were hiding in plain sight in the city. Until I started seeing recognition in the eyes of our neighbours in the flat we called home. One neighbour in particular was the nosiest: Mrs Taylor.

Her withered eyes lingered too long on my little Leo more than once in the last week. So that was it, and here we are, winding our way away from everything my sweet little guy has known for years. After eight months, that flat in the city was the longest we have stayed anywhere.

I had thought us safe, hidden in the floods of people that mill around Coventry each day.

Hiding in plain sight seemed like a great idea. It turns out it doesn't work—not for me anyway, and not for my precious son, Leo.

Sweat beads on my forehead, making me shiver against the oppressive muggyness of the bus. The groaning engine is welcome white noise against the erratic rhythm of my heart. My grip tightens on the strap of my backpack.

The contents are the only thing I have to show for my life: some beaten-down clothes for the pair of us, powdered milk, Walker's cheese and onion crisps, a small amount of cash (which is all the money I have in the world) and some of Leo's toys and his favourite blanket.

That's it.

But that's all we need. Our safety is most important. If we had to leave behind the trappings of a more civilised life to escape, then so be it. Furniture and homeware can be replaced. My precious little boy cannot.

The bus stops, jostling the many bodies around me, and another passenger gets on. I take in every detail of him before he even decides on his seat. He is in his early twenties, wearing skinny jeans, and is so absorbed in his phone that he doesn't glance at me and my son. He is not a threat—not this time.

My eyes dart from passenger to passenger again, searching for a flicker of recognition, any ghost from my past. Let's face it, there are many. No one can ever find out what I have done.

We had to get away from people. This place we pull up at now certainly checks that box. It's a tiny village spread sparsely across overgrown countryside.

A child's voice, innocent and bright, cuts through my dark thoughts. 'Look, Mummy! There's a horsey! Look!'

I smile wearily. 'Oh yes. So there is, Leo.'

'Can we ride him?'

'Not today, honey. We have somewhere else to be.'

Leo's big blue eyes follow the horse and rider as they trot around the village square. Then he remembers the purpose of our trip. 'Our new house!'

Leo's excited exclamation attracts the attention of a woman a few seats in front of us. She twists in her seat to take in my little boy. She smiles at us indulgently before turning back again.

As always, the familiar predator of panic flutters in my gut.

If she recognises Leo, we are done for. Our new life will be over before we have even started.

## TWO

Somehow, we make it off the bus. The older woman was kindly and smiling fondly, obviously reminiscing about when she was in charge of a sweet little boy, too.

My little one is a mop of blonde hair bouncing down the street at the end of my hand, pointing a chubby finger at everything we see. He chatters excitedly.

‘Leo,’ I say. ‘Indoor voice here, please, angel.’

‘Why, Mummy?’ he squeaks loudly as we walk along a cracked pavement.

‘This is a village. It’s not like the city.’

‘But we’re outside.’

‘I know. But we must be quiet and stay safe until we get to our new home, right?’

‘Okay, Mummy.’

His trust is so absolute. I force a smile, my heart clenching. This small boy is my reason for existing these days. Leo is the reason for my constant vigilance. He is my burden, my anchor, my everything. He is my life—I won’t let anyone take him away.

I check the time on my phone. I’ve misjudged the journey on the bumpy old bus. According to my calculations, we should have been here half an hour ago.

We need to pick up the pace to reach the hillside cottage in time.

At the end of the village square, I decide to pick up my son and carry him the rest of the way. He has always been chunky and big for his age, but lately, his growth seems to have slowed. Or am I getting stronger?

I hope the latter is true. However, my baby seems noticeably more slender around the ribs and thighs as I lift him and his weight presses against me now. That can’t be my imagination, can it?

I hold him tightly to me as my burning thighs make it through the dense grass of one field and then another.

Eventually, we find our way snaking up the sparse row of old mining cottages that overlook the rest of the village. If I weren’t sweating and panting, I would enjoy the view. Leo has never seen anything like it, of course.

He has only known endless streams of traffic, grey concrete, and the insides of various grim flats.

This move might be good for him, even if it was forced and the choice was practically made for me. Leo’s little lungs can take in the fresh air. Maybe he will start gaining weight again and regain some much-needed colour in his cheeks.

Who knows.

When I knock on the door of number seven, the landlord, the greying Mr Jackson, is already there. He barely smiles as we exchange greetings.

Jackson’s puffy eyes narrow upon the sight of Leo as he stares around at everything, wide-eyed and curious. ‘The advert didn’t mention children were allowed.’

My heart sinks. Don't tell me I bounced around on bus after bus for days for nothing, not to mention the exorbitant fares. Money is beyond tight. 'I thought it would be okay? The ad didn't say kids *weren't* allowed. And I only have this one. He's very good—quiet too.'

Leo chooses this moment to point at some stained wallpaper in the hall and pipe up in his highest-pitched voice. 'Why is the paper not stuck on the wall properly, Mummy?'

Jackson sighs as though I'm wasting his time and gestures vaguely for me to look around the property.

Is that so I can check it is to my liking, or is he just going through the motions only to ghost me later? Maybe he will tell me he will be in touch as I go out the door.

As if I had a choice right now? I've run from our lives in the big city for somewhere discreet, off the grid. When I looked online, this village looked as dull as it gets. Leo and I should be safe here.

So, unless the roof of this cottage is missing, this will be our new home—if Mr Jackson will accept us. I hadn't considered the possibility of being turned down for a property.

The place is what I expected for the low price. This guy seems like a hands-free landlord. Everything is shabby or in a state of disrepair. As long as this guy gets his monthly money, he looks the other way. That's perfect for what I need—a safe place to keep my son away from outside interference. The place is rustic, but it comes fully furnished with everything for basic living.

I have the deposit and upfront rent money ready in an envelope. I hand it over when I come downstairs. It turns out there is a roof, after all—of course.

Honestly, even if there wasn't, I might still find a way to work around it after the long journey and my lack of options.

The landlord seems satisfied with this gesture. When his greedy gaze falls upon the cash, he is happy to hand over the keys and zoom off in his dated Porsche.

'This is our new home now, Leo,' I smile once we are alone.

'Will we be safe now, Mummy?'

'I hope so, angel.'

I can't make a pinky promise on this one. I turn away from my son and stare at the hideous floral curtains, worn carpet and the ancient-looking sofa. No, I can't promise that innocent little face anything right now.

I don't even know for myself what might happen next.

## THREE

There's nothing like a bowl of cornflakes in the morning, served alongside a panic attack and a hefty dose of reality.

I manage to put together some cereal for Leo even though there is virtually no water pressure. It's a problem when washing a dusty bowl from the cupboard.

Everything is grimy in this place. I need to clean all the tableware before we use the rest of it. I use the torch on my phone to look at the pipes in the cupboard beneath the sink. As a single mother, I've become pretty handy over the years.

I was only twenty when Leo unexpectedly entered my life. At the grand old age of twenty-four, I now feel jaded by all I have had to do and learn for the two of us to survive.

Yes, this little boy is a burden. A cute, headstrong, spirited little burden with chubby mitts that I wouldn't ever change for the world.

Not after everything we have been through. Would I do it all over again if I had the choice? Yes, I would.

Urgh. I must have lost my mind. Being a mother will do that to you.

The plumbing in this house looks like it has been done by someone on work experience. Or maybe by Mr Jackson himself. Perhaps even one of his friends or family members. Mates rates. No expense spared.

Great. This is more work for me on behalf of my greedy landlord. Somehow, I have the feeling our tenancy rests on a knife edge. I don't want to jeopardise it with a stream of repairs.

I sigh as I get back up. Leo hasn't touched his cornflakes at the dining table behind me. Granted, I had to make up some milk using the powdered stuff I brought from our flat, but it doesn't taste that bad. Leo is used to it.

'Aren't you eating your breakfast, angel?'

'My tummy hurts,' he pouts.

'Again?' My insides feel numb. Leo has made this complaint too many times lately. I know my little boy. He doesn't make things like this up.

What can I do? I haven't registered with anything here in the village yet, certainly not the doctor's surgery. I was hoping to avoid it, actually. Staying below the radar is vital to our survival.

I go through the same motions. I check Leo's forehead with my hand. It feels normal. It always feels normal. Leo has only run a temperature once in his life—for flu when he was a toddler. He pulled through that one without any need for medical intervention.

There is nothing for that bug but to wait it out. Leo came through the other side and returned to his bubbly, happy self within days. Was I so lucky when I inevitably contracted it too? No, but I somehow managed to care for my little one's many needs whilst feverish and delirious myself.



I don't have a name for the condition that is gripping my little boy today. Worse still, I don't think there is a simple cure. I shake this thought away. The notion makes me feel helpless. Or like the worst mother in the world.

Leo pushes away his bowl and crosses the room to curl up on the sofa. He bundles himself in the comfort blanket that took up a large part of our escape backpack.

I make him some cooled boiled water after thoroughly cleaning a faded Cadbury mug I found in the cupboard. He sips it down gratefully as I stroke his hair.

'Better?' I ask him. I can feel the stress on my face. I hope Leo doesn't pick up on it.

'A little bit.'

He drains the rest of the mug and I take it from him as he pulls the fleecy blanket up to his little nose. Guilt stabs at my heart. Leo deserves so much better. He needs normality, stability, a life free from hiding, maybe even a father. If I were a better person, maybe he would have all these things.

A knock at the door makes me gasp. There is the sound of smashing crockery nearby—I've dropped the mug on the floor.

I move to pick up the sharp white pieces, but a figure appears in the doorway.

Instinctively, I move forward, placing a barrier between Leo and this intruder.

It's a middle-aged woman. She holds up her hands and eyes the china shards behind me. 'Sorry to startle you!' she says brightly. 'I'm Mary from next door. Henry Jackson said he had let out the cottage to a mother and her son.'

'Oh, I'm...Julie.' Am I? I think so. It's hard to keep track when you have to keep changing your name.

So, my landlord, the foghorn, has made an announcement, has he? What else has he told the village? So much for a quiet life.

Maybe this village was a mistake. I should have picked another city to blend into. Hiding in plain sight wasn't good enough, though—not for me and not for my little boy.

'It's all right,' Mary says. She must read something on my face. 'I just wanted to say hello really. Here, let me help you with that.'

'No, it's okay,' I say as she swoops over to the kitchen roll and starts collecting broken shards of mug. 'I can manage.'

'Yes, you could, but I want to help you. I think that breakage was my fault if we are honest.'

She drops the broken pieces in the bin and opens some cupboards to peer inside. 'You could do with some better things in this place. Old Henry is a cheapskate if ever I saw one. He has a cheek to call this furnished if you ask me too. I'll bring some decent cups and plates over later.'

'That's very kind, but you don't have to.'

'I know I don't have to, but I want to. My youngest, Jenny, went off to University last year, and I overbought. Turns out her Auntie Grace had gifted her some fancy tableware, and my Jenny didn't need what I'd chosen. So it's going spare.'

‘Right,’ I smile. ‘Well, thanks.’

I’m not sure what to make of this woman. She reminds me of my previous nosy neighbour. Mrs Taylor had swooped in on me uninvited in full mother-hen mode too. It was nice in a way until she started asking questions I couldn’t answer. Then, I could see some dots being joined, especially in the last week. Then we had to leave.

I don’t want a repeat of that here. No way. I can’t afford another move. I’m down to the emergency part of my rainy day fund.

I need to start working again. Mrs Taylor was good for babysitting whilst I was at my cleaning job, but here I have no one.

Mary seems useful in this respect, but she seems just a tad too intrusive. I might be eligible for some kind of free childcare for Leo here, not that I’m any good at organising form filling.

My ex, Nick, was always good at that. Sometimes, I wish he was still around to help me out. Then again, it was his fault my life got ruined, and I landed with Leo.

Hey, I said sometimes I wished he was here. Besides, I can’t let Nick near me again. Not after the last time we saw each other.

He told me what a terrible mistake Leo was. He wanted to ‘*fix*’ the problem. Yes, ‘*fix*’, he said. He really is as nuts as he sounds.

I knew that meant disaster for our little angel. Nick meant it all right; he even went out to acquire some kind of poison. I shudder when I think of the calm way he left the house that day. He had it all planned out.

That’s why we had to hide from Nick. I ran out the door with Leo when Nick went out to acquire his supplies. Anyway, that was four years ago. I haven’t seen my no-good ex since then. And I hope I never do.

Mary is still talking. I pull myself back to the here and now.

Mary has a hand on Leo’s forehead as he lies on the sofa beside me. ‘He doesn’t have much colour in his cheeks, does he?’

‘No,’ I say slowly. ‘I was hoping the fresh countryside air might perk him up a bit.’

‘Hmmm.’ Mary looks sceptical. ‘A little boy his age shouldn’t have tummy aches regularly, should he?’

I look at her sharply. ‘How do you know he has them often?’

Mary blinks and looks at me askew. ‘He just said so, didn’t he?’

‘Right,’ I say again. I must have zoned out there for a moment whilst I was lost in the past. I’ve hardly slept a wink in the last few days. It’s taking its toll. ‘I think he’ll be okay after a rest.’

‘But he says he hasn’t had breakfast yet,’ Mary simpers. ‘Maybe I could make him some good, old-fashioned porridge. That should be easy on an upset stomach. I notice you don’t have much food in. Tell you what, I’ll bring you a box of oats over and some real milk. The bogof offers always get me in the supermarket! I’ll just be a minute.’

‘No, that’s all right. I’ll get some shopping in later. I just haven’t had the chance yet.’

But Mary is gone. A few minutes later, she returns with a cardboard box laden with food and crockery. It looks like she has rushed around her kitchen and thrown all sorts together for

us—oats, pasta, tins of soup, ham, salad and bread, along with a plain set of ceramic dishes and plates.

‘Thanks so much.’ I can’t help but be touched by her generosity, even if it is being forced upon me and Leo. She tells me I remind her of her daughter as she makes some porridge. Leo only manages a few spoons before clutching at his tummy again, frowning.

Mary looks at him and then starts washing some salad leaves in the sink.

I’m getting weary now. I’m so grateful to Mary for her help, but I need to be alone to take care of Leo properly. A bath or a hot water bottle sometimes helps him feel better when he gets this problem.

She hands Leo a lettuce leaf as though it is an ice lolly. ‘Munch that down, Leo. It’s magic lettuce. You’ll feel right as rain before you know it.’

My little boy looks at me for reassurance, and I can only shrug as he takes a bite.

‘It tastes like snails!’

It can’t do any harm, I think. We will humour Mary. But it’s time our guest left.

‘Listen, Mary, thanks so much for everything. You’ve been too kind but I think Leo is tired. He hasn’t slept much with the move and everything. I’ll let him have a nap now.’

She nods and smiles. ‘I’ll get out your hair for a bit.’

My heart sinks. So much for the quiet life. Mary strikes me as the nosy type. I hope she doesn’t start asking questions I can’t answer.

For everyone’s sake, because running again isn’t an option, I will have to do whatever it takes to make a home here—anything.

## FOUR

For whatever reason, Leo's tummy ache dissipates shortly after Mary leaves. I know the headache that was threatening my temples dissolves too.

'It was the lettuce, Mummy! It helped me. Mary said it was magic.'

'Yes, of course, honey. Just rest now.'

I put the TV on with the hope of finding some kids channels. Luckily there is a signal. Hallelujah. I hadn't had high hopes considering the state of the rest of the property.

As soon as an image fills the screen, my stomach clenches. It's that story again. That couple in Kent are still dominating the headlines. Apparently, one of them has developed a rare genetic condition now on top of their previous woes. I find myself shaking my head in anger as they go over the symptoms again.

Why be so vague? They don't even name the thing. Why even mention the disorder at all if they aren't divulging more about their treatment? All they are doing is stressing out anyone else who has a remotely similar set of indicators.

Symptoms vary from person to person, don't they? It doesn't mean a thing. It doesn't mean Leo has what they have, even if he shows all the signs with increasing frequency. It would be too unlikely. How cruel of the media to worry a mother like this? I only want my little boy to be healthy. Just like any other mother.

I change the channel with more force than I intend, which makes the plastic of the remote creak and force a smile as Peter Rabbit's catchy theme tune plays.

Leo is smiling again. He is happy curled up in his blanket. He looks just like any another boy.

Even if he isn't really mine, there is nothing wrong with this scene. As far as Leo is concerned, I'm his mother. He is mine in all the important senses, whether or not we are related. I've raised him since he was a baby. All he knows is me.

That makes me his mother, doesn't it?

Ever since my ex, Nick, came home one night and pushed Leo into my arms to take care of, I've been all Leo has had. I was a year or two past being just a scared kid myself.

I had to quickly learn on the job how to care for the baby that was suddenly placed in my care.

I'm an only child. It was the first time I had even held an infant, but I learned. I became good at it too. My teachers always said I could turn my hand to anything I chose if I applied myself. Hey, they were right. Thanks Mrs Cox.

I squeeze my eyes shut as I tip away the uneaten cornflakes and porridge and do the dishes. I've made such a mess of my life.

If I ever get caught, that's it for me. My life would be over. I can't let that happen—Leo would be distraught if he were taken away from me.

He wouldn't understand.

He might appear to adjust to a new family, but he wouldn't ever forget me. I don't want him to be upset. I can't stand it.

Then again, what kind of life am I giving him on the run?

I bite back tears again. Why couldn't Nick have left me with nothing more than a broken heart? I never wanted a stolen child.

## FIVE

Stolen or not, Leo is mine.

That beautiful little boy has no idea Nick and his cohorts snatched him from his parents when he was just a baby.

Nick was part of a team (read: gang), he used to say. That ‘team’ took children and babies and sold them on for profit. I guess it’s called child trafficking, officially.

It seems different when you see it up close. The clinical term seems so...well, clinical. That’s not what it’s like in reality. You see families torn apart and lives ruined. Did I know what Nick was involved in when I met and fell in love with him?

Hell, no.

I would have been out of there like a shot if I had any idea before it was too late. But it’s never so black and white in real life, is it? Nick offered me an escape from my own rubbish life. My parents were addicts and losers that didn’t give a shit about me.

I was so happy when Nick came along. He was my knight in shining armour—no, really, he was. He took me out to nice places and treated me like I was actually worth something. I suddenly had a place to live and a boyfriend who cared for me. I was happy for that first part of our relationship. Then it hit the fan when I found out what Nick did for a living.

A *living*. Huh. Could it even be called that? Nick made good money, but it’s not exactly a profession, is it?

Anyway, Nick had a deal with a couple in Sweden. It was all arranged. They were going to buy baby Leo, or Ethan, as his biological parents named him.

But things went wrong during the deal. Nick came home in a panic, muttering something about undercover police. He panicked and wanted to dispose of the evidence. Namely, little Ethan.

I couldn’t let that happen. I wasn’t cut out to be a criminal. Ever since I found out what Nick did for a living, I hated it. Naturally, I was horrified, but I felt trapped. How could I kiss goodbye to my new life away from my worthless parents and broken home? I couldn’t.

So I was there the day baby Ethan was snatched, waiting in the home Nick and I shared, at least. It was my job to look after the kids.

Granted, I didn’t look after that many. My relationship with Nick lasted less than two years—just long enough to get me in over my head and ruin my life forever with my involvement, albeit small.

In the back of my mind during those years, I was always looking for an escape route. I was in love with Nick, but I wanted to be as far away from that mess as I could.

But no escape opportunity appeared. So I stayed. And then one day, I’m left holding the baby. *Literally*.

Baby Ethan was a hot potato, and we got landed with him when the music stopped. The police were onto the trafficking ring, and the deal was a bust.

Nick wanted to get rid of anything connecting us to any children and move elsewhere. That was a problem when we had someone else's baby in the house, wasn't it?

What could I do? I had limited choices and virtually zero time to think about it.

I decided to run away with the baby.

Yeah, really smart, wasn't it? Instead of being a coerced accomplice—that's ten years in prison, by the way—I added child abduction, solo, if you don't mind, to my list of misdemeanours. That's ten years if you get caught, in case you were wondering.

But run, I did.

I didn't know what I was doing. I felt like Clarice from *Silence of the Lambs*, grabbing one of the infant animals and running out into the cold night.

All I wanted was to save little Ethan. Why didn't I hand him to the police? That seems like the easy option, doesn't it?

I couldn't. Being a mother to this poor stolen baby was the only thing I was ever good at. I looked into those big blue eyes so many times during lonely night feeds and nappy changes, and they looked back lovingly and with such trust. That baby needed me. I had become his world in just a few short months.

I named him Leo because his birthday falls within the dates for the star sign. Yes, my Leo thinks he is a winter baby, but that's not true. He also turned five already, and he doesn't know it. Sorry, little baby.

I had to adjust Leo's age and birthday, so even if people suspected who he really was, that little detail might throw them off. And people have good reason to suspect.

Those age progression images are startlingly accurate. My insides ran cold the first time I saw one. Leo's eyes smiled back out at me from slightly warped features. Those pictures are always freaky, aren't they?

But after seeing the resemblance between my little boy and the images circulating on the news, I can see their value. It's plain to see how children can be recognised that way. It must happen all the time.

I panic every time someone looks too closely at Leo.

But they had better move their gaze on because there is no way I'm ever letting him go.

## SIX

‘Ava!’

Fear grips me as I hear my real name less than a week after moving to the village. Over the last four and a half years, I’ve been called many things: Jess, Jenny, Jas, Janet.

Wait—do I have a thing for J’s? It looks like it. But now the sound of my birth name makes my insides run cold.

Or is it the voice uttering it?

It’s Nick. His warm brown hair is haughtily tousled, and his strong jaw is peppered with stubble. He is just as I remember, walking back into my life like this is a dream.

Or rather, a nightmare.

How the hell did he find me?

I’m usually so resourceful and quick-witted—I’ve had to be these past few years. But the sight of my ex-boyfriend strolling towards me in the small village supermarket has me frozen. I’m rooted to the spot in horror, still clutching my block of Red Leicester.

‘Nick,’ I say breathlessly. ‘What are you doing here?’

He grins at me as though we arranged this meeting all along. ‘Terry told me he caught sight of you on a bus heading this way.’

‘What?’

‘Terry, you remember him? It was a lucky fluke that he happened to see you heading this way. This village is the only thing out this way, isn’t it? I thought I would head over this way, see if we could catch up.’

‘Catch up?’ I repeat blankly. All the while, a voice in the back of my head is screaming. Just screaming.

Not exactly practical advice. Thanks, Brain.

‘Mummy, can we get this box of Jaffa cakes?’ Leo comes running back to me from the biscuit aisle right on cue. ‘The label is more fun than the ones we always get!’

Nick blinks down at the child between us. I can practically see the cogs whirring behind his eyes.

‘That isn’t...? Ava—that isn’t who I think it is, is it?’

I reach out for Leo’s hand. ‘Time to go, honey. Come on!’

‘Ava!’ Nick calls, catching up. He grabs my arm in the bread aisle. ‘I can’t believe you kept him after all this time.’

‘I did.’ I shrug his arm off me. ‘I wouldn’t have had it any other way. I didn’t think much of your suggestion, remember?’

Nick shakes his head. ‘I’m sorry, Ava. I was an idiot.’

He drops his voice as an old dear shuffles past us, squeezing fresh tiger loaves on the shelf. ‘I wasn’t thinking clearly back then. I wanted...I don’t know. I was a goon. I’m so glad you stopped me from doing something stupid. You didn’t just save Ethan’s life that day you ran—you



saved mine, too. I might have gone to prison for life if I had stuck with my plan, but you forced me to stop when you ran off with little Ethan here.'

'Leo,' I correct my ex carefully. I sense my little one watching us closely, open-mouthed, from beside my knees.

'Look, I have to go now.'

'No, Ava. I want to come with you.'

'Excuse me?'

'I want us to be together again. We never should have split up. I should be taking care of you like I used to. I promised you I would, and I let you down.'

My mouth opens in horror. Or shock. Or both. 'You must be joking!'

'I'm not. You can't tell me you haven't thought about me over the last few years. I'm so sorry for how we left things. I've been looking for you for ages. I love you, Ava. I've missed you so much, you know.'

I open my mouth. I want to say I haven't missed Nick one bit, but somehow, I can't utter a lie now, even though I've spewed countless untruths over the last few years: Lies about who I am and my life with my son.

It's all lies, and it's all Nick's fault.

I bite my lip. I'm torn between falling into his arms and repeatedly slapping him in the face. I realise I still have the hefty block of cheese in my hands. Either one is a possibility.

Yet I don't do either.

'You shouldn't have come here, Nick. Leave us alone.' I grab Leo's hand and move around the rest of the supermarket in a daze, going through the motions of a thousand shopping trips before. I don't turn around to look for Nick again. I just pray he is gone and I can move on with my life.

At the checkout, however, I'm financially embarrassed.

The total is more than twenty pounds. I brought a tenner with me for some bread, fruit, baked beans, and cheese and biscuits—it's all I can afford to spend.

It wasn't just the branded jaffa cakes that pushed it over, either. I'm used to a large store, not an overpriced mini supermarket, where prices seem to have a premium whacked on the top.

'I'm sorry,' I say to the huffy cashier, my face reddening. 'I'll have to leave some of it.'

I frantically try to work out which items I can jettison when an arm comes from behind me with some crisp notes.

The shop assistant takes them with an impatient smile, and I'm being handed a receipt and shuffled along before I can even say a word.

It's Nick. My face burns worse when I realise.

'You didn't have to do that,' I mumble, trying to get out of the store as quickly as I can.

But it's too late. Something has broken between us. Nick is carrying the shopping home and fist-bumping with Leo before my eyes. The pair talk and laugh on the way back up to the cottage, and I find myself allowing it.

Nick turns to look at me with a comforting smile a few times on the way home, a look of reassurance and apology in his warm hazel eyes.

Those were the eyes I fell in love with.

Those were the eyes that got me into a lot of trouble.

## SEVEN

I'd like to say I came to my senses on the way home, just before I unlocked the door. I could have told Nick it was nice seeing him, but he had better be off. Better yet, the end of the street might have been better, just so I'm confident he doesn't know which cottage is ours.

But I don't, of course. Nick did a real number on me when I first met him as a teenager. Somehow, the threads of that are still working on me, and Nick takes full advantage of these strings to pull me back to him again—heart strings, puppet strings, whatever.

Nick cooks us all dinner later that evening, and one thing leads to another. Once we have tucked Leo in, Nick ends up staying the night.

It's not entirely my fault. It's been a long time since I've been with a man. Nick was the last one—the only one, actually. So doesn't it make sense that we get back together again?

Nick is so far removed from the man I remember. He is more like how he was when we first met. Kind, gentle, and considerate. He cooks for us, buys more shopping, and, most importantly, is wonderful with Leo.

Maybe I did save Nick's life after all? You don't have to go to prison to achieve redemption.

I think I even spot some tears in Nick's eyes after he tucks Leo in on the fourth night and he returns to the living room.

Nick has paid for some gas in the meter, and we snuggle together under the blanket Nick got us just because it's cosy. Not because we are desperately trying to conserve body heat. This is what I wanted for Leo. A real family unit. A father figure.

Nick makes such a great dad. I've never been more attracted to him. I make my feelings clear when he slips back beneath the blanket on the sofa.

We undress slowly, every touch filled with anticipation and tenderness. As we come together, our movements are both passionate and gentle. We are still enjoying rediscovering our connection. The one I thought was gone forever.

Afterwards, we lie intertwined, breathless and content.

'I love you,' Nick murmurs into my ear.

'I love you too,' I reply instinctively. Okay, so I'm taken aback, but I'm feeling hopeful for the future as we drift to sleep, so the words don't seem like such a big deal.

There was a time when I definitely meant them.

The next morning, I oversleep. This hasn't happened the whole time I've had Leo.

I've always been on guard and alert. When he was a baby, I was ready to give him milk and a nappy change. Later, I was ready to get up and watch kid's TV at six am. Every. Single. Morning. Leo has always been up with the larks.

This lie-in is so unusual that I don't think I can actually enjoy it. I jump straight out of bed and get dressed despite how groggy I am.

I haven't slept so well for years. After spending the last few nights with Nick, contentment is my middle name. We certainly have been making the most of each other after our lengthy abstinence.

The sun pours in against the cottage's grimy window.

Nick said he was going to clean the windows at the weekend. He wanted to give the whole place a good clean and coat of paint. He even said he wanted to get Leo involved as his little helper. That melted my heart, I have to admit.

Downstairs, the house is eerily silent. I expect Leo to have parked himself in front of the TV in my absence, but one glance at the tiny living quarters downstairs tells me he isn't there.

Nor is he in his room when I race upstairs in a panic.

I breathlessly pull back the duvet for good measure, but he definitely isn't here.

Leo has gone. So has Nick.

I shriek into the silence of the house.

## EIGHT

I pull on my shoes and coat and run outside.

I hear someone call as I race down the street. 'Julie!'

The name is only vaguely familiar. I've had so many pseudonyms it's hard to keep track of which one to respond to.

But, yes, I am Julie now. I remember. Besides, I'm the only one around on this quiet autumnal morning, so I stop and spin around anyway.

It's Mary, smiling and nodding in her fussy way. She waves and gestures for me to come over to her.

It's a long shot, but I ask her before she launches into conversation. 'Have you seen Leo?'

'Yes, I saw him earlier. His dad took him out to give you a rest.'

'His dad?' Reasoning hasn't caught up with my thoughts yet, and I am gripped with panic. *Leo's father was here? His biological father?*

'Leo doesn't have a dad,' I blurt out stupidly.

But that doesn't make sense, I realise. How could any of Leo's biological relatives get into the house? Leo knows not to answer the door. And why aren't I being escorted to jail right now?

Mary's eyes widen in horror. 'Oh...it was a tall man that Leo went off with. Hazel eyes, nice hair, handsome fella. He said they were going to buy a football and go down to the park. Should I have not let them go? Leo seemed happy as a clam...'

My shoulders slump. Mary is describing Nick. He had been talking to Leo about football all yesterday evening.

'Football,' I repeat with relief. 'Right. I remember. That's my boyfriend you're describing. I forgot they were going out. Sorry to scare you.'

Mary clutches at her necklace and nods, trying to calm herself. 'Well, that's okay. I didn't realise your boyfriend wasn't Leo's father. I don't like to pry.'

'Right,' I say, suppressing an eye roll. 'I'd better go and catch up with them and make sure they aren't getting too carried away.'

I could almost laugh at my foolish panic as I'm walking down to the village park, but it resurfaces when I can't find my boys anywhere in sight.

My trainers pound the grass as I run from one side of the grass to the other, but it's no use. I'm clearly the only person here besides a dog walker on the far side.

*What do I do?* I can't exactly call the police, can I? I don't have Nick's number either. He has changed it since we were together.

An hour later, I have run around the village at least a dozen times, checking that I haven't missed the pair by mistake. What has Nick done? Has he gone through with his original plan from years ago? Was this new Nick a lie?

My stomach contracts at the thought.

Tears blur my vision. I'm hardly able to see where I am going by the time I get back to the cottage.

'Hello?' I call out.

No answer. The cottage is horribly still and worse than silent. It's dead. I'm all alone now.

I realise there is only one thing I can do as I slump down onto the sofa and pull out my phone.

I'm desperate to have Leo back, but if that isn't an option, he should at least be safe.

I stare at the number input on my screen, the one I should have dialled years ago.

Deep breath. It's time to talk to the police.

## NINE

I am still staring at the phone in my hand and tears in my eyes as the front door of the cottage swings open. Through it, a flurry of activity bustles along the narrow hallway.

The squeak of Leo's voice has me jumping up from the sofa faster than I thought I could move.

Leo's toothy grin comes into view in the doorway, and I snatch him up and pull him close before he can even register my tear-stained face.

Nick clocks it, though. His face falls when he sees me.

He looks from my crumpling expression to the phone in my hand. 'What's up, Ava?'

I shake my head. 'I just didn't know where you were, that's all. I was worried.'

'Who did you call?'

'I was trying to call you but couldn't get through.'

Nick pulls his phone from his pocket and looks at it confusedly. 'I can't remember giving you my new number.'

I shake my head with more determination. 'I know. It was the old one I was trying, getting myself worked up into a state,' I lie.

Of course, I know Nick's old number was disconnected years ago. I have tried it once or twice over the years, wondering how far away he was. 'Forget it. Where were you, anyway? I couldn't find you anywhere.'

Nick reaches out and ruffles Leo's mop of floppy hair. 'I took this little guy out for a kickabout, didn't I? Remember, we talked about it yesterday.'

'You talked about football. You didn't say you were actually going to take Leo out without me.'

'I did. You must not have listened.'

'That's not what happened.' That sinking feeling is coming upon me again. Nick always did this. I have a name for this technique of his now. Gaslighting. Nick always verbally rewrote history to suit his narrative.

Nick shrugs. 'I guess it was a misunderstanding then. I didn't mean to worry you. I thought you were going to come along too this morning, but you seemed pretty zonked after last night.' He winks. 'So I thought I would leave you be. You deserve a rest, Ava.'

I turn away from Nick, not wanting to waste time engaging in his lies. Time is precious.

'Leo needs breakfast. Unless he has eaten already?'

'Not yet.'

I shake my head. 'Leo has been losing weight recently. He can't afford to miss a meal, Nick.'

He nods and looks over to Leo as my little boy switches the TV on and climbs onto the sofa.

'He's a bit pale too. I had to take him to the public toilets in the supermarket after we played football. That's probably why you couldn't find us. Leo was sick.'

I turn sharply from the pan of porridge I'm making. 'What? Why didn't you tell me before?'

'He's fine now. Much better. Leave him watching his cartoons.'

Nick grabs my hand and pulls me back to the kitchen. 'I don't think you believe there is much you can do for him, anyway,' he adds in an undertone.

I take a step back from Nick. 'I don't know what you mean.'

He nods. 'I think you do, Ava. You might have run to the middle of nowhere, but you know exactly what is wrong with Leo.'

My face crumples again as I'm trying to measure out some oats into a saucepan. The tears make seeing the numbers on the scales difficult.

I drop my voice so it's barely more than a whisper, almost inaudible above the sound of Peppa Pig coming from the other room. 'His parents haven't named it—the condition that the father has developed. Why don't they tell everyone what the problem is exactly? How can anyone get medical help when they don't know what to tell the doctors?'

Nick nods. 'It's *supposedly* a really rare condition. Your average clinician wouldn't expect it in a million years—if you believe the news.'

'That's because the chances of getting the disease is something like one in every ten million,' I whisper. 'I can't take Leo to a doctor,' I sob. 'I'll lose him.'

'That's right,' Nick says, his eyes fierce. 'You would lose your freedom. I would lose mine, too. It's not worth it, Ava.'

I bury my face in my sleeve, not wanting Leo to realise Mummy is crying. He seems absorbed in his cartoons, however.

Nick pulls me close to him, and I sob onto his shoulder. He has no idea.

I pull back after a few minutes. 'Why did you say "if you believe the news" anyway?'

Nick shakes his head furiously and continues making the porridge I started. 'That condition is bullshit if you ask me. My guess is the media are putting fake information out.'

'What? Why?'

'To try and flush out anyone who has Ethan, of course. After watching the news, they want you to take him to get medical help. Then they would pounce on you and say *gotcha*.'

Nick looks over his shoulder and fixes me with an intense stare. 'But you aren't going to do that, are you, Ava?'

I stare at my boyfriend for a second. 'Is that a question or a statement?' *Or a threat?*

Nick shrugs and smiles, but the smile doesn't quite reach his eyes. 'I just wondered where your head is at. That's all. Can I trust you to behave yourself these days?'

We stare at each other for a few moments. I have Nick's number, that's for sure. Did I really think I had saved him by stopping him from committing murder and clearing away the evidence of his crimes? That evidence consists of Leo, or baby Ethan as he was then.

Whatever his name is, the child is a person—a human being. I can tell from the hard stare in Nick's eyes that he hasn't changed.



And where is all his money coming from these days anyway? He has been vague every time I have asked him about work. Yet, he seems to have pocketfuls of cash. I suspect he didn't leave behind the trafficking game, as he said, after all.

He lied to me. Somehow, I manage to smile. 'You can trust me.'

## TEN

Nick's face softens at this. A switch is flicked, and he seems to return to fun, charming Nick in a second. 'I knew I could depend on you, Ava. Why don't you go and sit with Leo? I'll bring you both a bowl of this over in a minute. Are you hungry?'

'Ravenous,' I lie. Adrenaline is swirling around my system. 'I missed breakfast too. I'm just going to make myself a coffee first.'

'I'll do it,' he insists.

'No, that's okay. I know just how I like it.'

'I think I remember how you like it. Didn't I show you last night?' Nick smirks in the way that would always make my insides squirm pleasantly.

Now they just squirm.

'I'll just be a sec,' I say, picking up the kettle. 'You want one?'

'Sure. Thanks.'

I busy myself making a drink. Or so it appears. I take my time. Nick is quiet, which always means he is up to something.

There was already a jar of coffee in the cupboards from whoever lived in the cottage before, and I pretend to compare it to the cheap, nasty stuff I bought from the small village supermarket the other day.

It happens when I'm rummaging around at length for a teaspoon in my corner of the kitchen. Nick's silhouette in the reflection of the microwave is up to something.

I can see the scene behind me, plain as day. Nick's hand slips into his pocket. Then, the contents of said pocket are crushed between his thick fingers and dropped into one of the bowls of porridge. Fury bubbles inside me as I realise who that bowl is destined for.

There is no way I'm allowing that.

Nick glances at me shiftily as he stirs, unaware I am surreptitiously watching him back. It takes all my might to pretend I haven't noticed what he has done. I know exactly why, too. He is here to tie up loose ends.

He wants to dispose of the evidence. Leo is still something to be ticked off his to-do list.

I thought Nick had changed.

I was so wrong.

Well, Nick is in for a shock. He might not have changed, but I have.

'Hey, Nick?' I say over my shoulder, not wanting him to see my angry tears. 'Could you go and get some mint from the garden? There is some in the front flower bed.'

Nick blinks at me. 'Mint?'

'Yes, you know, the herb. There is some growing in the front garden. Just grab some for me, will you? The woman next door is into natural remedies. She recommended it. We should give it a try. I'm busy with the drinks. I'll clean a mug for Leo and put some warm water in it for the mint leaves to go into.'

‘Really? Sounds like more BS to me.’

‘It’s what Mary suggested next door,’ I lie.

‘Um, okay, I guess.’ Nick glances at the spiked bowl of porridge as he leaves the room.

I swear I can read his mind as he leaves. He is noting the spoon he put into Leo’s bowl. He chose it from the drawer of mismatched cutlery. Nick has given Leo a blue-handled spoon with teddy bears on it.

This act is so perverse that I cannot put it into words how I feel about it. Nick smiles and blinks through the most calculated things. It chills me. How did I ever stay with him for two years?

My hands shake with fury, and I will myself to stay level-headed for just a few more minutes. I need to take a leaf from Nick’s book and learn how to smile as I watch my boyfriend eat his own poisoned meal.

As soon as Nick is clear of the house, I implement my plan.

This has to work. Plan B is me racing outside to the mossy old pickaxe in the overgrown backyard.

I shudder.

I’m hoping it won’t come down to that. That’s why this has to work.

Nick is initially thrown off when he returns because I carried the bowls of warm porridge to the dining table whilst he was outside. He is instantly reassured, though, when he sees that the teddy bear spoon is firmly in Leo’s hand.

Of course, that’s not all I did with the bowls, but Nick will have the fun of that realization later.

‘Eat up, champ,’ Nick grins at my little boy with more front than Brighton. ‘I hope you have an appetite.’

That’s the comment that does it. The knuckles that grip my own spoon are so tight that they are white. I fight so hard to resist the urge to ram my own spoon into Nick’s eye socket right here and now.

Somehow, I force a laugh. It’s much easier to smile when I see Nick shovelling his own food into his mouth with gusto. His eyes flick up now and then to Leo as he clears his bowl.

To be fair to my little boy, it’s the best he has eaten for a while. At least it will do him some good.

Luckily for my little angel, I switched the bowls. Of course, I did. Nick is eating his own poison for once—literally.

I’m almost tempted to ask my boyfriend what exactly he slipped into Leo’s porridge. But then, I don’t want to give the game away before the substance has taken effect in Nick’s system. He might try and bring it back up again. I guess it’s just a waiting game now.

My boyfriend gets up and clears away the bowls at the end of our last breakfast together. I watch him closely. He seems lively enough.

Very animated.

Doubt starts to creep in. I did switch the bowls properly, didn't I? I was rushed and in a panic. Leo is chipper, however, going back to the sofa for his cartoons.

I thoroughly cleaned that teddy bear spoon after I removed it from the bowl. Judging by the state of the cutlery in this place, it was the cleanest it had been for a while.

Did Nick know I was watching him in the kitchen?

I suddenly feel very sick. He can't have.

Can he?

## ELEVEN

I think I have given Nick too much credit. Did he set up a double bluff trap for me to fall into? No, I don't think so. He doesn't have the brains.

I'm still alive four hours later in police custody. So I guess I'll be fine. The officer across the table assures me that little Leo is fine, too. I must have asked a hundred times just to be on the safe side.

Nick must have had a dose of his own medicine after all. This thought is reaffirmed when I see paramedics rush past the door of my consultation room a little while later. Nick is being questioned down the hall at the police station. Or he *was*.

I guess his porridge has kicked in now. What a start to the day. I still don't know what it was exactly Nick slipped into that bowl. Maybe we will only find out once the autopsy is done.

It's just a relief to know that Leo is safe.

I'm sad that my life with Leo has come to an end. He has to go and live with his real family now, I'm told. They will be delighted.

I suppose I knew our time was limited when he started seeming unwell. Then, the press was circulating the news that Leo's biological father had a rare genetic disorder. I put two and two together and made five. Just as the press and police had planned.

Okay, so Nick isn't (oops, wasn't) the smartest cookie in the world, but even he clocked that one was fake.

Leo's real dad doesn't have a rare genetic disorder. He just has a problem with gluten. Which, okay, can and was passed on genetically to Leo, too. But it's not life-threatening, thank goodness.

To be fair, my financial woes meant I was feeding little Leo bread and pasta more often than I should. *I'm sorry, baby*. I only wanted us to be together.

Nick was right, the whole thing was a ruse to get Leo's abductors to hand him in or get him help. It was a trap, after all. I can't tell you how many times I almost fell into it. My conscience would have eaten at me eventually, and I would have handed him in either way. It was better this way, though. I called the police when I thought Nick had abducted my little boy. They walked in through the door five minutes later. But I wasn't to know that.

I'd been backed into a corner, or so I thought. At least now, there is one less Nick on the streets. Call it my one good deed.

At least Leo is getting the care he deserves now. I'll just never get to see him again. It's a small price to pay. I just hope he is happy.

I can't say the same for myself.

## TWELVE

### SIX MONTHS LATER

There is light at the end of the tunnel, it seems. I have been given a suspended sentence. I'm told I am unlikely to go to prison at all.

My age, the fact that Nick was a coercive shit, my limited involvement in the actual abductions, and the fact I protected Leo from harm have all worked in my favour. I can't quite believe it.

The future doesn't look as bleak as I thought it did.

Of course, I've been hurting without Leo all this time. There is a little boy-shaped hole in my heart. There always will be.

Does he miss me? No one will say. Of course, I'm being kept well away from him. That is one of the rules of my probation. There are a load of things I can't do, but at least I'm not in prison, and Leo is safe with his real family now.

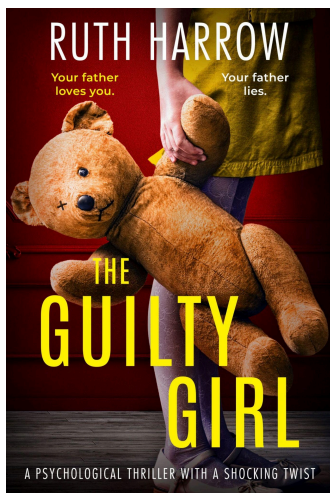
Besides, things won't be quite so lonely soon. Even as I think this, I get another series of little kicks.

Once again, Nick has left me with more than a broken heart. He has a habit of doing that, doesn't he? Except that this one is less of a culture shock. I've had five months so far to get used to the idea of welcoming my own baby into the world.

Nick was nothing more than a sperm donor in my eyes. We were together for just a few days in act two of our doomed relationship. But that's okay. Our baby can take his daddy's gorgeous looks and leave behind his personality. That would be perfect.

I'll have another child in my home before long.

It's a little boy, I've just found out. He will be legitimately mine. And this time, I'm never letting him go.



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**If *The Child in My Home* had you hooked, then you will love [The Guilty Girl](#), a psychological thriller with a shocking twist!**

**Blurb:**

*Chloe is serving a life sentence. In her own home.*

Ever since the horrific day her mother died, Chloe's life has been anything but normal - more like a carefully constructed prison. Her father hasn't let her go to school, have friends or leave the house alone.

As she grows up, Chloe begins to question the motives behind her dad's obsessive control. What would happen if she broke one of his many rules? And what exactly is he hiding under the overgrown grass in the back garden?

When new neighbours arrive next door, they trigger a chain of events that causes Chloe to suspect her father's motives are far darker than she knew.

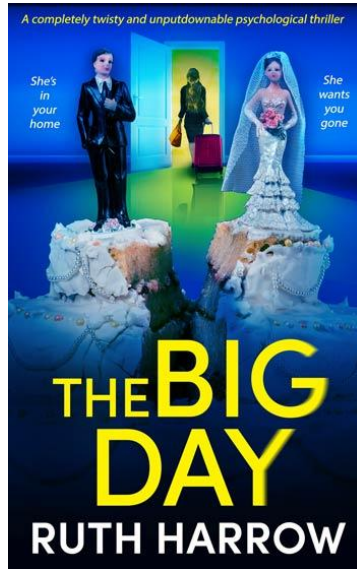
Now, she faces the terrifying consequences of defying the man who controls her every waking moment. Will she risk everything to win her freedom or will her father's dark secrets keep her captive forever?

*The Guilty Girl – the shocking psychological thriller perfect for fans of Freida McFadden, Kiersten Modglin and Daniel Hurst.*

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If 'The Child In My Home' had you hooked, then you will love '[The Big Day](#)', a psychological thriller you won't be able to put down!



***Blurb:***

***Two weeks until our dream wedding in the sun, his wife shows up on our doorstep.***

I've finally met the man of my dreams. He is successful, generous and popped the perfect proposal. Our gorgeous wedding in Greece is all set. There's just one problem - his wife arrives in our home and won't budge.

**Scott told me he had never been married. That was a lie.**

Dawn has nowhere else to go and a legal right to the beautiful house. It's awkward beyond belief, but it's just for a day or two. Scott's ex is all smiles and apologies. But when he leaves the room, she whispers to me that she won't leave until the wedding is off.

Now, the days are ticking down to the big day. It's like I have a shadow everywhere I go, eating my food and wearing my clothes. My possessions are going missing, too. And I fear Dawn is nearing the dark secret I've kept hidden all my life.

It is a disaster. But what Dawn and Scott don't know is that I'm not who I say I am. And I will have my perfect wedding. No matter what.



The Big Day is a gripping psychological thriller that will leave page-turning readers unable to put it down until the final breathtaking twist. Fans of K.L Slater, Shalini Boland, Freida McFadden and Daniel Hurst will love the addictive twists and turns that will have them racing through the pages long into the night.

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