

BABY X



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Chapter one

Alex

Now, Sussex

It's midmorning when we turn off the motorway, taking the road which leads to the sea. Still raining: January rain, shot through with sleet. It's been raining all night, raining since yesterday evening. Raining since –

Enough of that. I don't have the time to think about what I've done.

I keep glancing in the rear view mirror, checking to see who might be tailing us. I have to stay one step ahead. I don't think we're being followed. Not yet, anyway.

The road leads up into the rain-drenched grey-green sweep of the South Downs. As we reach the top, I turn the wipers up to full. Below us the slate-coloured sea is only distinguishable from the grey fields by its unnatural flatness. I know this road. We don't have far to travel now.

Another glance in the rear view mirror. There's an infant car seat, facing forward, plastic and stiff polystyrene, upholstered in faded red tartan. X seems so tiny in it; I have to remind myself he's barely twelve hours old. His eyes are open, wide pools of deep blue, and I could swear he's in on this. The plan, such as it is. Our mad dash for safety and freedom. I could swear he knows exactly what's going on, and wants this as much as I do.

But no, I'm being irrational again. Acting crazy. He's only a baby.

As we follow the road back downhill, we hit a stretch which is partially flooded. A crowd of mournful sheep huddle by the fence. We cut through the grey pool, high arcs of dirty water rise up on either side of the car, splashing the sheep and causing X to startle. In my peripheral vision I catch the flicker as his limbs jerk into life and then relax again.

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It's still raining as we turn onto the gravel path that leads to the house. No one's followed us, have they? No. No one knows we're here.

Grannie's house dates from the nineteen thirties. The white render and original metal windows have seen better days; it takes a lot of work to maintain a place like this on the edge of the sea, and Grannie could never be bothered with it. It's cosy and warm inside though, or at least I can make it cosy and warm. We can hide out here, if only for the night, until I come up with a better plan.

Behind the house is a short, terraced garden, and at the end of that, beyond a low fence, the shingle beach leads steeply to the water, even at low tide. The nearest house is over a mile away, and no one uses this stretch of shingle - neither dog walkers, nor visitors to the pub on the main road - because access is restricted by banks of rocks, segmenting the beach and marshalling the cold, sloshing sea.

It occurs to me to hide the car, just in case. There's a space alongside the house, overhung by trees, and if I drive in far enough the car won't be visible. By four o'clock this afternoon it will be dark, and no one would guess we were here.

I turn the key to kill the engine and squeeze out, grabbing my handbag from the front seat and fumbling inside for the keys. Then I pull our meagre luggage from the boot - my soft sided beach bag, the sports holdall I took from Fiona's, a plastic carrier bag from the service station. The rain drums on my back as I dash for the front door, and the key is as stiff in the lock as I remember it. Holding the handle towards me I nudge the mechanism until the lock slides. I throw the bags through the open door and into the hallway before I go back for X.

For a moment I find myself standing in the rain under the trees, staring at him through the water-spattered window. Under glass.

My heart is filled with so much I can't say. I open his door, lean in and smile.

'We're here, little man. We made it.'

His eyes haven't yet learned to focus, but at the sound of my voice he lifts his chin. I unclip the heavy buckle at his belly, slide my hand under his body, and pull him to my chest. A deep breath and we dash inside, out of the rain.

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The house has a musty smell, the scent of damp, uninhabited spaces. It's also cold. I cross my fingers the gas and electricity are still connected. Still, the house seems pleased to see us. The walls of the hallway are a welcoming pale yellow, my memory of the living room is of two old but comfortable sofas, and beyond that there is Grannie's kitchen.

X lies in the crook of my arm, his head resting on the inside of my elbow, his eyelids starting to droop. I hold him close to my body, enjoying the soft, slight weight of him. I'd like a cup of tea, but I should change his nappy first, make sure he's dry and comfortable before he falls asleep. Once he's down, I'll have a few minutes to get my bearings.

I'm a mother now. That changes a person's priorities.

I grab the beach bag and head upstairs. As I hoped, the master bedroom is still made up with Grannie's things. A satin quilt the colour of dried blood hangs heavily over the dark wooden frame. I place a towel in the centre of the bed and lay X on that, digging into the bag for the changing things. I fill a small plastic bowl with bottled water and set this on the bedside table, then locate a clean nappy, and a thin, plastic bag, sickly sweet-scented, for disposal of the dirty one. I unpop the buttons at X's groin and neck, shuck him out of his

baby-grow and pull open the sticky fastenings on his nappy. His skinny buttocks are caked in green-black tar, *meconium*, and I wipe this off with cotton wool and water. I watched my sister, Fiona, do this, when her babies were newborn. I wash my hands in the bathroom, pleased to find the water running clear and soap in a dispenser bottle on the sink. I refresh the plastic bowl of water and go back into the bedroom to dab more clean water around the crusted stump of X's umbilicus, gently lifting off the dried blood and yellowed gunk.

I'm a mother now. This is what I do.

Then a flash of anxiety, and with it a sudden, violent mental image: a screeching rhesus monkey, teeth bared in aggression or terror, lifted from a lab cage by black gloved hands. I don't know where this image comes from, but it brings to mind those anti-vivisection protesters, the ones who "liberate" animals from labs, not knowing what diseases they might be carrying.

Is that me, then? Have I done something heroic, or reckless?

I look down at the baby lying on the bedspread.

My X. My beloved. His skinny legs flop open froggily from his hips, and his eyes are half closed. A sweeping back, a sucking in, and in a wave my love for him crashes over me, drowning my doubts. I did what I had to do. To keep him safe.

I did what I had to do.