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UNLEASHED

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‘For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms.’

Ephesians 6:12



PART ONE

APOPHENIA



PROLOGUE

*The rabbit crawls out of its grave again.
Soil and stone crumbling in its paws.
Twitching, sniffing, seeing light.
Sees more than you ever could.*

*Rabbit moves from grass to road.
Looking up, and hearing rain.
Mud and wet things on its fur.
Sliding through the waving wood.*

*People see and hide their smiles.
Some try hard to scratch its belly.
Stays away the best it can.
Makes its way from stone to sand.*

*Past the grass, and through the trunks.
Rabbit hears her giggling.*

*Whispers weave, ears prick up.
Rabbit sniffs the air for blood.*

*Through the tree it settles, staring.
Swinging, swinging she looks out.
She can't see the shadow smiling.
Meant to crawl . . . it's learnt to walk.*

*Even though the night's way off,
Rabbit waits, and likes the sound.
That she makes upon the ground.
Hind legs slowing, turning round.*

Pretty.

CHAPTER ONE

Jo Finch sat in her old primary school, chewing her nails, surrounded by twenty-one other parents. Each of them was painfully folded into a midget school chair with their legs forced under impossibly low desks. The other parents looked sharp and important. Many had taken time off work for this, so a lot wore suits. Jo noticed a lot of the women wore knee-length leather boots that had really decent stitching. They were absolutely *not* from Primark, put it that way. While Jo, on the other hand, sat there glowing in the brightest yellow fleece that ever fell from the sun. With matching leggings too.

God.

She felt like a naked Homer Simpson. A walking buttercup, lighting up chins. Her boss at the Merry Poppins Cleaning Company may well have been one of her best mates, but Kassy West was never the type to confuse friendship with favours. She'd given Jo exactly ninety minutes off work for this school tour. There had been no time to change.

It occurred to her that perhaps she didn't need a tour of this school anyway, since she knew every inch of it. Each turn of the corridor, each crack in the concrete playground. A couple of decades ago *she* was the little pigtailed firework running around here, in cheap clothes even then. But while the shape of the place hadn't changed, the vibe of it *really* had. Even the big green radiators were gone. The ones that looked like they'd fallen from an Industrial Revolution steam train. They'd been replaced by some sleek-looking white boxes with a constant red light, blinking on the corner. Good luck melting Crayola on *them*, Jo thought. Then she shivered. Come September next year her daughter Seren would be five, which meant the government had their legal claim on her each weekday. She'd be all by herself in this familiar, unfamiliar place.

The only thing that looked the same colour as the old days was the floor. She rubbed the tip of her trainers against it. Yeah, the hexagonal wood *was* the same. The light caught the historic scratches and scrapes. Maybe there were even a few scuffs from her own little buckled shoes when she sat in this exact part of the classroom, back in 1993. It should have felt like a million years ago. Only it didn't. It didn't at all.

Something throbbed in her gut so she pressed her hand against the yellow.

Her boyfriend Lee sat next to her, smelling of engine oil. She winked at him but he didn't wink back. He was too busy scrolling through his phone, checking to see if the job lot of premium golf tees he'd invested in were selling. They'd met on Tinder three months ago, where he'd described himself as 'an entrepreneur trapped in a mechanic's body'. As he thumbed through the listing, he had his usual business face on. The panicky bite of the lip, his skin white enough to vomit. The *constant* sniffing. Turns out it takes aeons to shift ten thousand of those tees, even if they *were* made of top-grade African Blackwood from Senegal.

She glanced at the huge windows which were covered in crepe paper pumpkins and black cats cut from card. She looked through the skinny legs of a badly scissored witch and gazed across the school field. The roof of the preschool was just about visible over the hedges. Seren was in there *right* now. Four and a half and already living her own life, for one morning a week. Doing stuff Jo couldn't see – which felt great and horrible, all at the same time. Mostly horrible, though. Her hands were probably covered in orange and black paint; her shoes would be filling with sand. Prepping her princess outfit for Halloween, maybe. She'd be doing what kids ought to be doing, *playing* with stuff, because Seren *loved* to play. Jo looked back at the walls of the classroom. Unlike the windows, they had hardly any pictures up at all. They'd stuck maths problems up instead. One of them said 24 minus 16.

24 minus 16? Sheesh.

Even *she* had to work that out on her fingers. She felt that flutter again. Seren could barely count how many feet were stuck on the end of her legs, which brought a quick little thought, like a needle prick to the heart. Perhaps this would be the place her daughter's life would start to fail. Her first step into the loser camp, like her mother.

Jo blinked and looked in front of them, where a gorgeous woman, fresh from the Amazon, rested her head on her husband's shoulder. He was wearing a killer suit and a pricey-looking watch. Really James Bond-y. He kissed the woman on the top of her shiny hair, like they were at the opera or something. She'd bet that family could do 24 minus 16 in six different languages. Bet they shot long division and history questions at their kids all the time. Over every dinner (up at the table) instead of on the couch laughing hard at *SpongeBob SquarePants* and eating nuggets. Like her and Seren did most nights.

Lee was picking his nose, as if being in the back row put him in

some sort of invisibility bubble. She nudged him hard and slipped him a tissue under the desk.

‘Ta,’ he smiled.

He had beautiful teeth. She’d thought that the moment they’d ordered their first Meat Feast in Pizza Hut on that first date. When he smiled as they brought it out and slung it in front of him, she’d thought wow. He cleans his teeth *really* well. He’s hygienic.

She jumped when the classroom door suddenly rattled open and swung wide on its hinge.

‘Showtime.’ Lee slipped his phone away.

The head teacher swooped in, riding a whoosh of air, with a hefty mane of permed white hair that bounced as she moved. She sprang up and down on the balls of her bright-red prostitute boots like she might blast off into the ceiling at any moment. She was clapping her hands repeatedly, eyes wide. A seal on ecstasy.

Lee whispered, ‘Someone throw that woman a fish.’

Jo sniggered.

‘Helloooooooooo Class! I’m Mrs Walmsley and I’m delighted to welcome you to Menham Lower School.’ She was wearing a blue knitted shawl over her shoulders, covered in red butterflies. So many bracelets, jangling. ‘Mums and dads! Carers and guardians! It’s a privilege and a pleasure to see you all here at our Open Day. I hope that you’ll feel as much a part of Menham Lower as your children will. Unless you send them to Newker School, of course, in which case . . . good luck . . .’ She pushed her hip out and slapped herself playfully on the hand. ‘Better not say that, or *I’ll* get put on the naughty step.’

Lee’s jaw clicked open.

Jo however, smiled. Because this woman reminded her of a CBeebies’ presenter and despite the eye-rolls and tuts from the other parents, she thought that was a *good* thing.

Walmsley nodded to a young girl in the corner who wheeled a

table over with a sandbox on top. ‘This is Lauren, everybody. One of our teaching assistants. Say hi, Lauren.’

Lauren didn’t speak. She half-smiled. She looked about twelve, but was probably twenty.

Walmsley waved her hand across the sandbox like it was a prize fridge on a gameshow. ‘Here at Menham Lower we understand the function of fun, the energy of education and the unapologetic priority of play.’

Jo felt her breath flow out. *Maybe this is going to be okay.*

‘Your children can *read* about velociraptors in a textbook. Other schools do that. But it’s quite another thing when they become a palaeontologist themselves . . . and feel the past in their precious little hands . . .’ She turned to her assistant Lauren, who was staring up at the skylight, oblivious. She cleared her throat and fed the line again, only louder. ‘And feel it in their *precious little hands!*’

Lauren jerked like she’d been hit by a cattle prod then she plunged her hand into the sand, scrabbling around for a few awkward seconds. She pulled something out. Walmsley leant forward, eyes wide with manic excitement. The look that primary school teachers and serial killers have. ‘Oh my goodness, Lauren, what *do* you have there? Is that what I *think* it is?’

When she finally spoke her voice was stilted. Mechanical and monotone. Like someone had just pulled a cord in her back to make her talk. ‘Mrs Walmsley. It *is* what you think it is. Look . . . an amazing diplodocus.’

‘A diplodocus! Wow!’ Then in a sharp whisper, through teeth, ‘Hold it higher, Lauren.’

Walmsley quickly pushed the sandbox aside and motioned for the adults to stand. ‘And with that . . . let the tour commence.’

Seats scraped back and everyone went to stand. For one jumpy second Jo thought her backside was trapped in the chair. That she’d have to do the entire tour bent double, with a red plastic seat

wedged onto her bright yellow arse. But Lee grabbed her hand and helped her shimmy free. She glanced back through the window, at Seren's preschool one last time.

'Come on, you.' Lee said, sliding an arm around her shoulders. 'Seren's going to love it here.'

She smiled at him, at the way he squeezed her.

The tour was lengthy but excellent. The school was clean and well looked after. The lottery grant had clearly bought some decent paint. When *she* was a pupil here, back in the day, the place looked more like a concentration camp, with a few RUGRATS posters for emotional balance.

Best of all, though, the pupils looked happy. Really content. They were amazingly polite too. All in uniform. Grey skirts and trousers. Bright-red jumpers with white shirt collars sticking out. She could picture Seren wearing that. The two of them on that first morning next September. The morning that was racing toward her like an out-of-control Tube train. Her in her yellow cleaner's uniform, Seren in her red school uniform and the little lunchbox they'd especially buy for her first day. Which was the first day for both of them, she knew that. The new stage.

Jo had this naive hope that she'd keep her sobbing in until *after* she'd dropped Seren off. She didn't want to freak the kid out. She'd save her implosion for the car, but she'd drive round the block away from the school. Up by the ambulance station. She'd already picked the spot.

Throughout the tour Jo was doing what every other parent was doing. Mentally painting her child into each classroom, into each corridor. In the toilets Walmsley discussed the importance of hygiene, but Jo was too busy seeing Seren standing at those Lilliput taps. Were they too high? They looked it. She imagined Seren washing her tiny hands after the plastic frog on the wall had vomited handwash onto them. In the classrooms she'd see Seren

sitting at a desk, scrawling a picture of Mummy or Peppa Pig, or more often than not, their little rabbit Six. She hoped the kids got plenty of chances to draw here.

Now and again she'd see the other parents catching each other's eye to share a very particular blow of breath. The sort of gear change sound that signalled to them all that the first stage of their kid's life was truly swinging shut. For ever.

The melancholy was multilayered too. Because Jo had no other kids. Doctors said she couldn't have any more, since Seren's arrival nearly killed her. So every time Walmsley opened her mouth and pointed to some wallchart, it gave Jo that prickly panic she sometimes got at night. When she wondered what the hell she was going to do with her life once the State took over the childcare. Merry Poppins Cleaning full time, with *her* back? She'd rather adopt a Brazilian street child.

Could she do that, actually?

It was in the playground that Jo stopped seeing Seren.

Instead, Jo saw her five-year-old self trying to hopscotch across the exact same cement that stood here today. Stumbling like an idiot, because all the Finch family members were about as coordinated as a kite in a tornado. She remembered other kids laughing at her. Calling her 'lanky legs' . . . oh, to be called 'lanky' again when these days she was more globe shaped. But then one clear image came, chiselled into her memory. It swam to the surface and made things so much better.

Of her and the three girls she miraculously fell in with, six months into this primary school. Girls she *still* hung out with, even today. *The gang. Her gang.* The best set of friends you could possibly get. Right now she pictured them all, walking the playground of her memory. Her now boss, Kassy West. Steph Ellis, who was a supply teacher at this school, nowadays. How crazy was that? Steph teaching music in classes she learnt to play the recorder in. Steph was a cool woman. Jo loved Steph a lot. And then there was

good old Rachel Wasson who nobody ever saw any more since she moved away, but who she thought of often.

She pictured herself and those girls, back as kids in uniform here. *Strutting*, even at six and seven. Owning it, like they would own it all the way through their teens. Flipping a finger at the chumps on the side saying, *ha! We're kind of a big thing.*

Then walking alongside them, she suddenly saw little Holly Wasson. Flickering in the background like a projected image from a faulty bulb.

She felt suddenly cold. Had the sensation of small blunt fingers touching the small of her back and reaching up. She blinked the image away.

Lee caught her staring. 'Jo?'

'Do you think Seren will make friends?'

'She'll have to, won't she?'

Wrong answer. She glared at him.

He coughed. 'I mean, of course she'll make friends. *You* did, didn't you?'

'Best ones ever.' She noticed the parents had started heading to the music block. 'Steph's working today. She says her kids are going to play us some Halloween songs on the kazoo.'

He gave an exaggerated gasp, 'You know, I have *always* dreamt I'd hear that in my life. Come on.'

She smiled as he laced his hands into hers. Then they hurried across the playground, laughing.

They were the last ones into the music block.

It was a decent size. Probably three times bigger than the other classrooms. Yamaha keyboards sat in a row by the wall. A huge blue Ikea crate was filled with tambourines, shakers, and that odd, hollow, cylinder thing you scraped with a stick that nobody *ever* sees again once they hit secondary school. The room was filled

with rows of wooden benches in front of a small, temporary stage. A set of curtains was currently closed, splashed with glitter stars and sequins. A murmur came from behind them, which sounded like excited children. One of the parents budged up to let Jo and Lee squeeze on the end.

‘Fab school, isn’t it?’ a mother said. She smelt very rich.

Jo nodded, but she didn’t smile. Because she had just noticed that something was wrong.

Lauren, the teaching assistant, was struggling with a cupboard door, while Mrs Walmsley hurried around the class, looking like she’d lost something, or rather lost *someone*.

‘Where’s Steph?’ Lee leaned into Jo. ‘Thought you said she was the MC for this?’

Jo looked around, fingers tapping. ‘She’s supposed to be.’

Just then, she noticed Walmsley’s face shift. She’d stopped looking for Steph and was now looking puzzled at the wall behind them. Jo twisted to see what the big deal was. It was a wall filled with a kids picture display. Creatures that had featured in classical music, it seemed. ‘Flight of the Bumblebee’, ‘Peter and the Wolf’, that sort of stuff. Only they were all upside down. Every one of them. Even the banner above them had been flipped. Jo turned her head on its side to read it.

Music of the Animals.

She ran her eyes across the manic hand-drawn streaks of foxes, cows, goats then she saw a scrawl of an angry black crayon animal.

A hare.

She stiffened and looked away. Thought of Holly again.

Relax. Breathe.

‘What’s wrong?’ Lee’s voice.

‘Nothing,’ she shook her head and turned back. ‘Nervous about Seren.’

Walmsley was back now, pulling at the cupboard door and

shaking her head. Then she whispered into Lauren's ear, who nodded and hurried out of the classroom.

'Alright, folks. There'll be just a teeny-tiny delay. We can't seem to get into the music cupboard to grab the kazoos.' She turned to the curtain. 'And you can't play "Monster Mash" on a kazoo without . . . a kazoo. Can you kids?'

Voices spoke in unison from behind the curtain. 'No, Mrs Walmsley.' It was either cute or creepy, depending on what mood you were in. The latter, Jo decided.

'Lauren's just gone to find our music teacher, Mrs Ellis. So please, make yourself comfortable. And in just a few moments we'll hear some wonderful music from some wonderful children.'

'Your mate is so in the shit,' Lee whispered.

'Shhhh.' She looked over at the corridor, hoping to see Steph trotting toward the door. But Lauren was already coming back. Alone. She pushed through the doors, panting, and held up the key.

Walmsley beamed, 'Stop the clock! Kazoo's are coming.'

The invisible kids cheered into the curtain.

Where the hell is she? Jo checked her phone for a message. Nothing.

'Maybe she's ill?' Lee said. 'Or her *kid's* ill, maybe?'

Jo didn't speak. She was too busy watching Lauren walk to the store cupboard door. Then even before the key was fully in the lock, Jo stood up because something was prickling her skin and telling her to move.

'Er . . . what are you doing?' Lee whispered.

She took a step forward. A few of the parents looked up at her, frowning. *Where's the bright fat yellow one off to? Is she doing the clown dance at this show? Is that why she's dressed like a moron?*

'Jo?' Lee grabbed the corner of her fleece. Embarrassed. 'Sit down.'

'Something's wrong.'

Another step.

Then another, pushing herself through the confused parents. She moved toward the two teachers who now had their backs to the crowd. They were reaching for the cupboard handle. She wasn't exactly sure why she was moving, only that she was and that she ought to. She also knew not to look at the wall behind her, where all those upturned animal eyes were watching her.

Could she hear them? Snuffling, snarling, sniffing?

Especially the hare.

She had a sudden flicker of memory. Her and the girls again. Teenagers now and as tight a gang as ever. Laughing by Kelsey Pond in the park. Rating the boys in their class out of ten and chucking pebbles in the water. Counting the ripples while Holly stood looking at them through the branches of the big tree. Wanting to play. Always wanting that.

Then the memory vanished because an animal was growling loudly. And this time it was real.

It was just as the door swung open. The parents behind her had probably assumed the sound was just a creaky hinge. But she knew straight away that it was a living, breathing creature.

Then there was another noise that drowned the growl out.

Mrs Walmsley screamed.

Jo's first thought was, *Wow. That's really high-pitched.* How crazy that sounded, given where they were. You go into a primary school and you kind of expect to hear kids screaming now and again. But not the teachers. Never the teachers. Walmsley sounded like a mad woman in a tower, wailing at the sea. But then it didn't really matter any more, because lots of people were screaming now, scrambling over each other in a bundle of floundering limbs. Benches scraped and toppled over. Some flew for the exit. Selfish gits.

While the more heroic ones leapt toward the stage to grab the children behind the curtain. The kids were squealing and crying

themselves now, spilling out of the gaps to see what was making the grown-ups roar.

In the commotion it seemed like Jo was the only one in the room who was rushing *toward* the opening cupboard door. The only one who got a good look at poor Lauren, who was now stumbling backwards from it in a mad, skittish dance. Her arms and fingers grasped at the air as she fell backwards from the growling thing.

Jo saw it, just then.

Just as the skinny calf of Lauren's leg slammed into the front bench. Just as Lauren buckled and started to drop to the floor with a gasp. When her head dropped down like a tonne weight and replacing it was a huge black shape that lurched out from the cupboard. It sprang up on Lauren's chest and the stage exploded with kids screaming. *So much noise.*

And there it was, pinning Lauren to the bench.

A huge black animal, that Jo thought might not be an animal at all, but some sort of man who might spring up on its hind legs at any moment. But no, it was an animal. In fact, it was a dog. A dog that she knew. It was Steph Ellis's Labrador, Samson. Growling at first and squinting a lot, like it had only just discovered light. At one point it looked up at the ceiling, and the fluorescent strip lights picked up its muzzle, caked with blood. Blood that looked dry. The side of its stomach was pulsing in and out as it panted frantically. Then it was startled by a scream and it jerked its head down to find the source. It nuzzled into Lauren's neck, digging its teeth in so it could dig the sound out. Jo saw fresh, thin-looking blood squirting across the floor.

Oh, God. That girl.

Jo lurched forward to help, but quickly felt a heavy hand grab her shoulder to yank her back. It was Lee and a few of the other parents. The guy in the suit and his maths whizz wife. They were gripping small metal chairs in their hands, hunched over like

gorillas. Lauren yelled out for help in a muffled, underwater voice and within seconds the growling stopped. Instead the classroom was filled with horrible thuds and wet squelches as Lee and the other parents hammered the crazed dog into oblivion. Lauren cowered and sobbed silently, under them. Her little frame jerked with the blows as the dog finally slid off. Parents frantically tried to close the curtains. Others tried to cover the kids' eyes, but they only had so many hands. Plenty saw. There was lots of future therapy being birthed here.

Jo wanted to help. She really did.

In her head she could vividly see herself dropping to the floor to grab Lauren's hand, which now shook like it was electrified. And with her free hand, Jo would pull out her Samsung and dial for help, and try hard not to slip in Lauren's blood. But she couldn't do any of this noble stuff since she couldn't move. Because there was something in Samson's dying eyes that was flooding Jo's bloodstream with cement. The way he looked at her, even as he crumpled next to Lauren's glistening black shirt. As he heaved out dying gasps as the guy in the suit pummelled his head. She thought she saw Lee put up a hand in front of the man, 'That's enough, mate. Bugger's dead as a doorknob.' Only it came out really slow, in a long, drawn-out drone.

Deeeaaaaaadassssaaaaadoooooooooorrknobbbb.

Jo still couldn't move. Because she kept staring at the way Samson's eyes rolled backward into his head, toward the cupboard behind him, as if he wanted to show her something in his final seconds.

She wondered just then if this entire sixty seconds of insanity was simply to present her with what he had done. You know, like cats do after they've killed a baby pigeon? How they drop it at your feet and say . . . *this is for you*.

She kept thinking the same thought, over and over. You have to

call Kassy. And Rachel. Yes, even Rachel. You have to call Rachel Wasson and get her back home. You have to *make* her come back. You have to gather the girls, and she wondered if that was a message from the dog too.

Gather them.

She followed the dog's insane, dying gaze and looked at the storeroom door, now open. The basket of kazoos lay strewn across the floor, swimming in blood. The light wasn't on, but even from here, Jo could see the dim shape of her friend Steph Ellis in a shadow. The frizz of her blonde, natural curl was obvious. Her head was cocked to the side, wet-looking. She looked like a life-sized puppet with the strings cut. Her legs and arms folded at weird, jaunty angles. And like a puppet, her wide eyes stared out with pupils turned to painted wood. Her throat looked totally black and Jo thought, why would that be?

Why do you think, you idiot? Why do you think?

Then Jo heard another scream, weaving with the rest. Her own.