

1

The Journalist

The sign was askew. Rebecca noticed this as soon as she arrived in the new office: the company's name was drooping downhill. Who had hung it up? More importantly, why hadn't they done it properly? She prodded the transparent plastic, trying to nudge it straight, but it was screwed in too tight.

It was all very well for everyone else, she thought, edging past the boxes stacked around her reception desk; they wouldn't have to stare at it all day. From here, though, there was little else to look at, aside from a weeping fig tree, a line of grey tub chairs and the water cooler that had been delivered the previous afternoon. Even the glass front door only offered a view of a gravel courtyard, where, every once in a while, a besuited employee of a neighbouring office strolled in and out of sight, like an actor crossing the stage in the world's most tedious play.

After checking the company's emails, Rebecca resolved to ignore the crooked sign and instead began to restock her desk drawers from a box marked *RECEPTION*. Mostly, it contained stationery, but there were a few personal knickknacks too: her spare running sunglasses, two lip balms, a metal Eye of Horus that had lost its keychain. She was tracing a finger along the lines of this pendant, trying to remember where she'd bought it, when the phone rang.

'Sudworth and Rowe Surveyors.'

‘Yeah, hi – morning.’ The male voice on the other end of the line sounded scratchy from sleep. ‘I was wondering if I could speak to Rebecca Chase?’

She considered the mobile number on the display screen. ‘Who’s calling?’

‘It’s Ellis Bailey, I’m a journalist from SideScoop. I’m following up on an email I sent her last week . . .’

Rebecca’s stomach gave a little lurch, though she kept her voice steady: ‘Just a moment, please.’

With the exactitude of someone setting down a brimming cup of tea, she hung up the phone. As it bleeped, the display screen cleared, but her insides still felt knotted. She needed to find out how to retrieve and block that number.

When she looked up, Gerry Rowe was letting himself into the building. He was a portly man with a short white beard and a seemingly endless collection of novelty ties – today’s was stamped with sailing boats. Tucking his access card back into his shirt pocket, he bade Rebecca good morning, noting, ‘You’re in early.’

‘Lots to do,’ she said, indicating the boxes behind her.

‘Indeed, indeed – sign looks good, at least.’

‘Mm-hmm.’

‘Knew that drill would come in handy . . . I don’t suppose we have internet yet?’

‘We do. New password’s *SudworthRowe2016*. All one word, capital S, capital R,’ she said, her mind still on the journalist. Would he call again? What if he spoke to someone else? The email had been bad enough, but phoning her at *work* . . .

‘Doesn’t seem to be connecting,’ Gerry murmured, frowning down at his phone.

‘Capital S, capital R,’ Rebecca repeated, glancing down at her lengthy to-do list, then adding *block journalist* right at the top.

‘Ah, yes.’ Satisfied, Gerry started towards the main office, but was distracted by the new water cooler. ‘Here we are . . .’ He patted its plastic bulk, as though greeting a dog. ‘Didn’t get a chance to look at it last night – very nice. Now, how do you get a cup out?’

‘There’s a lever on the—’

But Gerry had already stuffed his arm into the top of the adjoining tube and, after a few seconds of straining, he withdrew a paper cup.

‘Not the most practical of contraptions, is it?’ he muttered.

He helped himself to water, then, seemingly unsure what to do with it, raised his cup in a sheepish toast. ‘Well, to the new office – and a new era.’

Rebecca’s attention had returned to the phone – she was half-expecting the journalist to ring back at any moment – but she waved her empty mug in Gerry’s direction.

‘Speaking of new eras . . .’ he continued, inching towards her desk. ‘Have you had a chance to sign that contract yet?’

‘Um – no, not yet,’ she said. The document had been lying on her coffee table for over a fortnight. ‘I will, though.’

‘No rush, of course,’ Gerry assured her. ‘It’s just—’ he chuckled, smoothing down the little boats lining his paunch, ‘—we want to keep you, that’s all.’

She managed a smile. ‘Thanks, Gerry.’

When he eventually departed, Rebecca succeeded in recovering and blocking Ellis Bailey’s number, but banishing him from her mind was proving more difficult. No matter how hard she tried to concentrate on the morning’s tasks – fielding further requests for the Wi-Fi password, restocking the printers with paper, claiming shelves for files and a cupboard for stationery – the journalist kept returning to her thoughts. What if he called again from a different number? Should she respond to

his email, make it clear she couldn't help, or would that just encourage him?

By midday, Rebecca was unpacking a box of ancient ring binders when Chris Fenton, the only member of the surveying team remotely close to her in age, sauntered over to reception, reeking of aftershave.

'All right, Chaser? Oi oi, this looks fancy.' He pushed at the water cooler, like he was trying to provoke it, before groping the cylinder of cups. 'How does it work, then?'

'On the side, there's a—Never mind,' she sighed, as he wrenched at least four cups from the bottom of the tube.

'Not great, is it?' Chris said, examining the crush of cardboard in his fist.

He balled it up and threw it towards the door, missing all three recycling bins, then leaned against the edge of the reception desk, watching her. They had friends in common outside the office, so Rebecca tried to tolerate him, though he tested this resolve on an almost daily basis.

'Coming to The Crown tonight?' he asked.

'Can't,' she murmured, trying to decipher a binder's faded label.

'Go on, everyone'll be there. And there's a pool tournament – you can be on my team.'

'I'd rather be on the *winning* team . . .'

Chris snorted and gave her a smile that was probably meant to be appealing, only it exposed his protruding front teeth, which – along with his dedication to hair gel – gave him the look of a damp rodent. The previous year, after a similar Friday evening at the pub, Rebecca had made the mistake of going home with him, and now always had the impression he was angling for a repeat performance. Dispirited by the thought that nothing remotely romantic had happened to her since, she returned to her binders.

‘You won’t even come out for a bit?’ Chris wheedled.

‘It’s my grandmother’s birthday.’

‘Ooh, wild night for you!’

Rebecca, however, felt slightly cheered by the prospect of seeing Lillian; even if she’d wanted to join Chris at the pub, she never would’ve missed her grandmother’s dinner.

Chris began to kick at a leg of the desk, making the entire tabletop shudder. Rebecca readied herself to send him away, but was distracted by the bleat of the intercom.

‘Oi oi – first visitor!’

As far as Rebecca knew, no external meetings were booked in today – which was just as well, because the office was in no fit state to receive anyone. She turned to the monitor to get a better look at the unexpected guest, but Chris reached over her head.

‘*Don’t*,’ she snapped, too late: he’d already jabbed the button to unlock the door.

The man who wandered into reception a few seconds later had a mop of sandy-coloured hair and horn-rimmed glasses, and was wearing jeans and a wrinkled green T-shirt. A cycle helmet was clipped to the strap of his canvas messenger bag, the underside of which bore a dark blue stain, presumably from a leaky pen. Clearly, he wasn’t a client, and Rebecca might’ve assumed he was a student at the university, only something about his unhurried manner – his self-assurance, maybe – suggested he was closer to 30 than 20.

Chris straightened up, eyeing this newcomer with suspicion. ‘All right, mate?’

The man, who’d paused to study the wonky sign and crumpled cups on the floor, said, ‘Yeah, thanks . . . I’m looking for Rebecca Chase?’

His gaze slid over the desk, and Rebecca tensed as they both realised – perhaps in the same instant – who the other was.

‘Ah – Ellis Bailey,’ he said, offering his hand.

She ignored it and stood up, demanding, ‘What are you doing here?’

He flipped his palm, turning his rejected handshake into a gesture towards her phone. ‘I did try and call to tell you I was passing, but,’ he shrugged, ‘I must’ve got cut off.’ There were faint dimples in his cheeks, as though he were repressing a smile. Rebecca gripped the edge of her desk.

‘Anyway, I’m here now, so maybe I could buy you a coffee?’ the journalist suggested, while Chris made a spluttering noise. ‘I just have a couple of questions about your—’

‘I don’t have anything to tell you,’ Rebecca blurted out. ‘I haven’t . . .’ She checked herself in front of Chris, who was watching them both intently, his arms folded. She wished he’d go away. ‘Look, this isn’t a good time.’

Ellis nodded like he’d expected this and backed towards the tub chairs lining the wall. ‘I can wait until you’re on your lunch,’ he offered. ‘Or we could talk here?’

He flicked at the lever on the side of the water cooler, looking pleasantly surprised when it dispensed him a paper cup. Rebecca glared as he fiddled with the taps, sending plump bubbles swarming through the bottle like jellyfish.

‘All right,’ she snapped, ‘there’s a meeting room – we can go there now.’

‘But—’ began Chris.

‘You can mind things here for five minutes, can’t you?’ she told him, before adding in a chilly undertone, ‘You already know how to work the intercom . . .’

The meeting room only made her more irritable. It was gloomy, but when Rebecca adjusted the metal blinds by their knotty cords, the space looked even worse: daylight illuminated the dust suspended in the air, the rectangular shadows on the walls where

posters had once hung and the stains on the carpet, which was grey and speckled like ash. Eyeing the table, chairs and floor, which were cluttered with a miscellany of objects that hadn't yet found a home – a stack of measuring wheels, a tangle of extension cords and old phone chargers – Rebecca couldn't imagine a less welcoming space. Although perhaps, in this instance, that was no bad thing.

The journalist seemed unfazed by the mess and pushed aside a plastic clock and a pile of rolled-up site plans to make space at the table. Rebecca resented this, just as she'd resented him playing with the water cooler; she was still finding everything its place in the new office, yet this thoroughly unwelcome visitor had already made himself at home.

'Do you mind if I record us?' asked Ellis, when they'd sat down.

'Actually, yes.'

'Fair enough.'

Unperturbed by her sharp tone, Ellis tugged his grubby bag onto his lap and searched its depths until he'd located a spiral-bound notebook and biro. Rebecca eyed these objects with scorn: what did he think he was going to write about?

'Well,' he said, flicking through several pages of notes, 'as I said in my email, I'm a staff writer at SideScoop – you know SideScoop?'

She nodded. 'So you write those online lists and quizzes?' she asked, hoping to embarrass him. '*Twelve Cats That Look Like Household Appliances? Can We Guess Your Age Based on Your Favourite Pizza Toppings?*'

'I have done,' he said, with a smile.

'That's some pretty highbrow journalism.'

'You know, most people are quite excited by the name SideScoop,' he remarked, although her derision seemed to

interest him. 'And to be fair, we've been branching out into serious news stories lately: investigative stuff, big think-pieces . . . You know, to complement the quizzes and pictures of baby animals.'

Rebecca said nothing. She was already familiar with SideScoop's content, given she often scrolled its pages at her desk, but wasn't about to admit that to one of its so-called journalists.

'Anyway, we also like nostalgia,' he continued, 'and that's why I've been working on this feature about children's TV stars from the 90s, which I'm hoping will turn into a bit more than just a fluff piece. I've already interviewed Arnie Hooper from *Can you Capture the Castle?*, a couple of the guys who were in *The After School Club* and most of the cast of *The Wishing Well*. But the person I want to talk to most of all – the person I can't imagine this article without – is the Stowaway himself, Leo Sampson. Only, I'm having trouble tracking him down . . .'

Having read and deleted Ellis's email the previous week, Rebecca was prepared for this and able to keep her expression blank. But it was harder than she'd anticipated, especially as that name had prompted a tingling between her shoulder blades; it'd been so long since she'd heard it, *Leo Sampson* sounded unreal, even mythical. The journalist might've been searching for Robin Hood or Merlin.

'I'm guessing *you* might know where he is, though?' asked Ellis.

'I'm afraid you guessed wrong.'

He scanned her impassive face for a few seconds, his eyes narrowed behind his glasses: he didn't believe her. 'You don't ever see him or speak to him?' he persisted.

'No.'

'You've no idea where your dad is?'

'None at all.'

Her spine still felt shivery, but she was using her work voice, which was light and brisk.

‘Huh.’ Ellis rolled his pen over the blank page of his notebook, re-evaluating.

‘I said I didn’t have anything to tell you,’ she reminded him, pleased he now seemed stumped. ‘Unfortunately, you’ve had a wasted journey.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘I assume you came from London?’

‘Oh – yeah. But I’m heading to Cornwall anyway, to see a cousin.’ The dimples reappeared in his cheeks. ‘I didn’t come all this way for you, you know.’

To her annoyance, Rebecca felt herself blush. Of course he hadn’t journeyed all the way to Exeter on the off-chance she would answer his questions.

‘Well, good,’ she decided, ‘because I can’t help you.’

Growing serious again, Ellis asked, ‘When was the last time you saw him?’

‘I don’t know.’

‘Ten years ago?’

‘More like twenty,’ she admitted, with an unexpected sting of humiliation. ‘He left when I was little.’

If this surprised the journalist, he didn’t let on, but scribbled a note down on his pad. ‘Was that before or after *The Stowaway*?’

‘I’ve no idea.’

Ellis started to ask another question, but Rebecca cut across him.

‘Really, that’s it: he left when I was little, end of story.’ She made a show of checking the clock beside them – which had stopped – and, trying to conclude the conversation, added, ‘But I’m sure that if you can track *me* down, you’ll have no problem finding him.’

‘Tracking you down was easy,’ Ellis said. ‘Two minutes online threw up all sorts of stuff: your old school, your profile on the Sudworth and Rowe website, your social media – which you should make more private, by the way. It’s not difficult to find people these days. That’s what makes this so strange . . .’ He stared at his largely blank page, murmuring, ‘*Where is Leo Sampson?*’

This almost sounded like a headline, and though Rebecca’s body tensed, like a runner poised on starting blocks, she remained in her seat.

‘If you search for him online, there’s tons of stuff about *The Stowaway*, as you’d expect,’ Ellis continued, ‘and a few bits and pieces about some of his other acting jobs. But after ’97 there’s nothing. It’s like he vanished.’

‘Maybe he’s dead?’

The journalist looked taken aback and Rebecca, too, felt a prickle of unease at the flippancy and finality of her own suggestion. Then she shrugged: what difference would it make to her now, whether or not Leo Sampson was alive?

‘But then you’d have heard about it, surely? And there’d be a record of his death, and an obituary – he was the *Stowaway*!’ Ellis frowned at the windows, apparently seeing something far beyond their grimy blinds. ‘It’s almost like the show itself, isn’t it? When he used to disappear?’

Something about this comment caused Rebecca’s heart to twitch. Trying to ignore the feeling, she reached out to neaten the rubber band securing the nearest roll of site plans. The snapping noise returned Ellis to the room.

‘You don’t agree?’ he said.

‘I don’t know what you’re talking about, I never watched it.’

‘You never—*Really?*’ He seemed more thrown by this than anything she’d said so far. ‘Leo Sampson’s daughter never watched *The Stowaway*?’

‘Like I said, he left when I was little.’

Ellis either missed or ignored the edge in her voice. ‘They’re all online now, if you’re interested. I’ve been watching a few episodes here and there – purely for research, of course. It stands the test of time, when not many of those old shows do. And Leo Sampson, he was something else . . . You don’t look like him, by the way.’

Good, thought Rebecca.

‘You’re more . . .’ Ellis straightened his shoulders and clasped his hands together, mimicking her rigid posture. ‘I never would’ve known you were related. Although, I suppose there’s *something* . . . Maybe it’s your eyes.’

He leaned back, tilting his head as he studied her. Rebecca felt her insides writhe with discomfort, although whether this was because she was being scrutinised by this stranger or compared to her father she didn’t know.

‘Do you remember him?’

She shook her head, not in answer to the question, but because he’d fired it at her so suddenly, as though to catch her unawares. When Ellis’s expression turned sceptical again, she wanted to clarify this – but then, there was no need to explain herself; not to him, not to anyone.

‘I should be getting back to work,’ she said, standing up.

‘Yeah,’ said Ellis, unsurprised. ‘Sure.’

They walked back to reception in silence, and it felt to Rebecca like they’d been away much longer than a few minutes. Not that anything had changed in the interim: the sign was still squint, the paper cups were still lying on the floor, the boxes were still towering around her desk. Among them, Chris was slumped in her swivel chair, so engrossed in a noisy game on his phone he didn’t notice them return.

Rebecca accompanied Ellis all the way to the entrance, pressing the door’s release button on his behalf. Sunlight flared against

the glass as it swung open, and a slight breeze plucked at the wisps of hair around her face. She glanced up at the sky; it was endlessly blue.

‘If you remember anything that might help me find him, perhaps you could drop me an email?’ said the journalist. ‘Or maybe someone in your family has an idea where he is . . . ?’

He still doesn’t believe me, thought Rebecca, frustrated; she’d been almost completely honest with him.

Ellis threw his empty cup into the recycling bin and offered her his hand again. This time – because it was goodbye – Rebecca shook it, but as soon as he’d stepped out into the courtyard something compelled her to call him back. ‘Hey?’

As Ellis turned, the automated door began to close between them, so she jabbed at the button again. What was she doing? He was finally leaving, and she didn’t care about any of this, not really. But maybe, after all his questions, she wanted to ask one of her own.

‘What did you mean before, that he used to disappear?’

‘On the show?’ The journalist had unfastened his cycle helmet from his bag; he bounced it from hand to hand a few times, like a basketball. ‘At the end of each episode, after the Stowaway had finished the week’s adventure, he’d crawl into a rabbit hole or a serving hatch and then the credits would roll. But the next episode he’d spring out from somewhere completely different, like a tree house or – I don’t know – a ship’s cabin.’ Smiling, Ellis began to back away across the gravel. ‘As a child I always used to wonder where he went, how he got from one to the other . . .’ He shrugged. ‘I guess I’m still wondering.’

Again, something tugged in Rebecca’s chest, even stronger than before. But when the door started to shut for a second time, she pushed at the edge of the glass, striving to close it quicker than it wanted to go.