

## Extract 2 Chapter 5

The staircase is opposite the front door on the left side of the hall. At the top it sweeps right to a dingy, galleried landing. I've forgotten to buy batteries for Mark's torch. Mrs Cooper's leaves are correct about the weather. Clouds scud past beyond the tall casement windows either side of the front door. Light and shadow flicker across the floor tiles, wind puffs and whistles into the fireplace beneath the stairs. My breath is short and shallow. I'm being absurd. At this rate I'll be like Mrs Cooper, never going upstairs in my own home.

My fingers tighten around the cool, polished bannister. The tiles drain the warmth from my stockinged feet as I listen. No creaking floorboards. No unexplained noises. No doors slamming. Only the occasional tick and gurgle in the ancient radiators. The landing, the entire house, is silent. I have to get used to this place, being alone here. I head up the stairs.

The doors to the spare bedroom and office remain closed, the peculiar odour, faint. We need to strip out all the upstairs carpets, get rid of the smell. I don't try the light. Our final bulb blew last night. Even Mark's running out of motivation to replace them. The torch from his box of essential stuff stands at the top of the stairs, useless without fresh batteries. I'll shop in Weldon before I collect the twins tonight.

I head in the half-light past our room, past the twins' rooms, the bathroom and stop just before the office. To my left is the narrow attic door. I'd assumed it was a cupboard when we first looked around Haverscroft. Set flush with the wall, the paint, yellowed and chipped, it blends into the grimy paper and is close to invisible.

My hands fumble with the tiny metal key. It rattles in the lock. There isn't absolute silence in London like there is here. Always the murmur of traffic, a siren or the bustle and voices of neighbours through partition walls. I'd failed to understand how comforting sounds of life are until there are none. I jiggle the key, it lodges into place, turns effortlessly. The door swings open towards me.

A narrow space, no more than a shoulder's width. Deep wooden stairs rise and curve to the left, a black metal handrail spirals upward out of sight. My feet slither into hollows worn in the centre of each tread as I climb. Mrs Havers' knees wouldn't have managed these in years if Mrs Cooper's to be believed. Narrow, steep and twisting, they must be a nightmare to descend. A short stretch of handrail and half a dozen spindles guard the room against the drop to the stairs. I stop on the third from top step, peep between the spindles at a long, low room.

A narrow section of ceiling runs centrally between two sides of steeply sloping roof, striped green and cream blinds sag at four dormer windows. Two single beds, tucked under the eaves, tumbles of covers and sheets on them as if their occupants had just left. A washstand, a low chest of drawers between the narrow beds.

I clear the stairs and duck my head as I step into the room.