

CHAPTER 1

The room was not dark, just dusky. Claire could see clearly, but what she saw around her was not at all familiar. She was in an empty bed, surrounded by dark blue curtains of thin fabric held up by four posts.

She pulled herself up onto her elbows and glanced around. The room was enormous. The ceiling, elaborately decorated and painted white, was several metres above her. On her left were several small, wooden doors of a wardrobe. On her other side was a gigantic fireplace set in the middle of a long wall, and that was a good distance from her, further than the length of her bed. The room appeared square, and it would easily have taken another king-size bed like the one she was in. She had never slept in a four-poster bed before. The curtains hanging above her head and at each wooden post had a golden pattern decorating the fabric and similarly coloured tassels at the bottom of each one.

She reached her hand out to the bedside locker on her left. It grabbed nothing, but her fingertips touched the leg of a lamp. She sat up and peered at the nightstand. The only item on it was the lamp. She looked over to the other side, and there was nothing there either apart from an identical locker and a matching lamp. She crawled crab-like further down the bed and glanced all around the room, including the bottom of the bed. There was no sign of her mobile phone or her handbag. Where could she possibly have gone without them?

Clutching the white duvet to her chest, Claire tried to think. She had no memory of arriving in this room. She had no idea what this place was. It looked like a room in one of those posh country hotels, but lamps aside, the room lacked all modern comforts. There was no television, no telephone and no minibar, she could not even see any heating or air conditioning devices – apart from the fireplace and windows. There was probably no Wi-Fi either, but without her phone, she couldn't check.

After another moment of admiring the partially wood-panelled walls otherwise painted in blue and the almost floor-to-ceiling windows behind the bed, she got up. Claire discovered that she was dressed in a white, full-length nightgown of the old-fashioned type. She didn't recognise the garment either. Her feet were bare, but the floor wasn't as cold as she had feared.

How could she have no memory of this place? Had something happened? Perhaps there had been an accident and she was suffering from memory loss. Maybe her possessions had not survived and that was why she was in an unfamiliar nightie in a strange place without the lifeline that was her phone. On the other hand, someone could have drugged her and abducted her.

Claire shook her head and took a brave step forward. She should keep her head clear and investigate her surroundings. She had noticed something in the corner that interested her. It was

one of those folding screens that people used for privacy in the lack of a dressing room. She realised that behind the screen was the only part of the room she couldn't see, and that was a frightening thought. She could move quietly on her bare feet, but if anyone was hiding behind the portable wall, they had the advantage over her in knowing that she was in the room.

Claire steeled herself and moved swiftly to the corner, deciding that her best chance was to surprise the potential attacker by rapid movements.

There was nobody behind the screen.

All that was there was a full-length mirror, a simple wooden chair and a pile of clothes on it. She bent down to inspect them. There was a black and white plaid dress, thigh-length, and a black pair of leggings. On the floor under the chair was a pair of black ankle boots with a pair of white socks sticking out of them. She picked up each item at a time and realised that they were all in her size. She didn't recognise these clothes either.

Behind her, in the corner of the wall with the wardrobe in it, was a wooden door. She walked over to it and pushed it open. It was a bathroom.

Unlike the bedroom, the bathroom was modern. There was a light that came on automatically as soon as she entered. There was a toilet, a sink with a cabinet with mirror doors above it and an old-fashioned bath tub standing on claw feet. There was even a shower above the bath along with one of those shower curtains on a circular rail.

Claire locked the bathroom door behind her, just in case. The lock was a standard model too, a twistable knob, although in an old style to go with the decoration. She heard a relief-inducing click as the latch inside popped into place.

She grabbed the hem of her nightgown and pulled it over her head, letting the garment fall on the floor at her feet.

She recognised the face in the mirror. Long, straight nose, long blonde hair with faint waves running through it, thin lips and small blue eyes. There was a concerned look on the face, but it was hers all right.

She looked at herself in the mirror in more detail. She was looking for bruises or scratches, cuts, anything that would tell her she had been hurt somehow. There was nothing out of the ordinary, even when she turned around and looked at her backside over her shoulder.

Claire turned the tap on, splashed cold water on her face and rubbed it dry with a soft, white towel from a pile on a wicker organiser. When she looked up into the mirror afterwards, there was nobody behind her in the reflection. The same startled face looked back at her, but there was more colour to the cheeks now.

She wrapped herself up in the towel and stepped back into the bedroom. It was still empty.

She hung the nightgown over the partition and got into the dress and leggings that were left on the chair. They fitted her slim frame perfectly. She pulled the socks and boots on and glanced at herself in the mirror. Despite herself and the circumstances, she ran her hands through her hair, wondering if there was a hairbrush or a comb in the bathroom. It was hardly important.

There was only one thing she could do.

The door opened without a sound or any resistance. She pulled it open and peered outside. A moment later, she had to step out of the room for a better look.

Directly outside the door was an enormous chandelier. It was practically level with the floor she was standing on. The door of her room led onto a landing, and all that separated her from the chandelier was a couple of metres of timber floor and a wooden railing. Everything was stained in the same reddish, dark colour as the panels in her room.

On the other side of the chandelier was a wall. Looking across, she saw that the stretch of wall ran down three floors; that's how high the ceiling was, although Claire could only see to the floor below her, not the one above her. At the top of the wall, directly below the decorative ceiling that seemed to mirror the chandelier, was a row of stained-glass windows. They were exquisite displays of country scenery – mountains, lakes, sunsets and forests.

Claire stepped further onto the landing and pulled the door closed behind her. She glanced at the door. It was unmarked. There was no name or number on the door or next to it on the wall. As she glanced in both directions down the landing, she realised that it stretched into a corridor along which were several doors identical to hers. Her only hope of finding her way back into the room – should she decide to do so – was to navigate based on the chandelier.

She walked to the railing and peered over it. On her right was a brick wall, but on her left was a large mahogany staircase. Mahogany, that's what it was called. Everything matched that colour. The staircase wound its way down to the snug at the bottom of the steps. 'Snug' was the only way she could think of describing it. The brick wall ended in a huge brick fireplace. There were a couple of armchairs and a small round coffee table in the area. There was a bookcase too. From what she could see, the contents didn't consist of cheap paperbacks. They looked like good, old-fashioned hardbacks with knitted spines, although it was hard to tell for sure from a distance.

She glanced in both directions once again. There was no one in sight, and everything was stock still. It was a very strange hotel, if that's what it was, with no room numbers, no guests and no staff.

She walked over to the top of the staircase, glancing around once again. She counted three doors on either side of the corridor at that end. The house seemed old, and Claire had learned from

visits to museums and mansions that old country houses were usually symmetrical. Did that mean that there were thirteen rooms on the first floor? Had people not been superstitious back then?

She took her first step down, expecting the old timber to creak below her, but it was silent. She held onto the railing anyway as if afraid to lose her footing or to disturb someone. Despite herself, she kept looking around her to admire the beauty of the building. Although the house seemed in immaculate condition, it hadn't been overly modernised like so many period houses. The original features were still there.

She reached the bottom of the steps and established that her impression was correct; all the books on the shelf were old and had sewn spines. The fireplace was unlit, just like the one in her room, but it was not cold in the space. Glancing up at the chandelier and stained-glass windows, they were metres and metres above her head.

The floor was covered by a red rug. In other circumstances, Claire would have felt like a celebrity, but it was too eerily quiet in the house. A quick glance in either direction down the corridor confirmed that there were several rooms on the ground floor too. For now, she was more interested in finding someone to tell her where she was, so she headed straight across the corridor through large, open double doors into what surely must be a reception.

Everything was there that she had expected. Large doors leading outside, a comfortable-looking couch made of cream-and-gold-striped fabric that had claw feet to match those on the bathtub upstairs. On the other side of the room was a matching pair of armchairs. A console table was resting against the wall nearest the door. There should have been a pile of brochures on it. Instead, there was only a large candelabra. There were three unlit candles in it.

There was no sign of anything resembling a reception desk. There were no signs, no arrows. Public buildings all had a fire exit sign above the door. Glancing up at the ceiling with its elaborate carvings, Claire realised that there were no fire alarms or sprinklers either. What kind of an establishment was this? It couldn't possibly be someone's personal home.

There might not have been anybody around to help her, but at least there was a way out.

Claire moved to the large double doors and pulled. They didn't budge. She tried to push them. Still nothing. She pulled again and pushed again and tugged and eventually rattled them with all her slight might. They wouldn't shift. There was a large keyhole on one of the doors, but there was no key. She bent down to peer at it. There was no key on the other side either as she could see through into the porch. The outer doors had to be partially glass as she could see some light through the keyhole.

She tried the doors again, twisting and turning the handles in the vain hope that they would yield. When they didn't, her fists banged the heavy timber first once, then twice, then several times, followed by angry, frustrated screams with no words.

Exhausted and tearful, Claire retired to one of the armchairs and buried her eyelids into the heels of her hands. She sat there for several minutes, crying silently and trying to push the tears back into her eyes.

When she eventually felt a little better – marginal as the difference was – Claire looked around again. There was still no sign of life within the house. For an old house, it was remarkably quiet. It didn't creak or squeak. All she could hear was her own sniffing. Even that and her banging and screaming had alerted no one.

Turning her attention back to the task at hand, Claire looked out one of the windows. Again, there was a pair of them, one on either side of the double doors. That didn't surprise her, but what froze her in her tracks was what she saw outside.

It was more of a case of what she couldn't see. Right behind the window was a fog so thick that she couldn't see any further than the windowsill. It was clearly daylight. It wasn't dark outside, and even inside, she could see fine although no lights were lit. Beyond the window, the fog was as thick as rice pudding.

She got up and walked to the window. The fog was impenetrable. She walked over to the window on the other side, and it was the same. She hurried to the snug and peered out through the stained-glass windows at the top, but it was impossible to tell. The few clear panes of glass were so high up that what she could see might as well have been grey skies as fog.

One thing was clear; even had she been able to make her way out of the house, she would not have found her way anywhere in such thick mist. It would have been sheer idiocy to even attempt it.

With no escape route, Claire had to come up with a plan of action. She wasn't sure she fancied inspecting the remaining doors. Either there would be other people behind them or there wouldn't. She didn't know which would be worse. She didn't feel like seeing anybody, and she wasn't sure she liked their odds of being sane. After all, it was possible that someone had locked her in, and if that was the case, did she really want to meet that person? On the other hand, she didn't like the idea of being on her own in a house that size either. Whatever her reason for being there, the situation was far from normal and something was amiss.

She considered grabbing a book from the shelf and escaping into the relative safety of her room. *Her room*, as if it belonged to her or she belonged to it.

Despite her discomfort and niggling fear, her bodily functions got the better of her. She was hungry. In fact, she was ravenous. Claire didn't know when she had last eaten something. Had she had something before going to bed? Where had she gone to bed, come to think of it? If she had retired to a large four-poster bed, she should have remembered it.

Claire shook the thought out of her mind. First things first. Although the temperature in the house was not cold, she was shivering. She desperately longed for a hot drink. She wouldn't even have said no to a stiff drink had she found one. As it was, she had seen nothing even resembling food or drink – if the taps in her bathroom didn't count.

She decided that it was unlikely that the kitchen was upstairs. It never was. It would have to be one of the doors along the downstairs corridor. She glanced in both directions and then took a determined step to her right. She would have to start somewhere.

She started with the first door on the right, on the same side as the enormous fireplace in the snug and opposite the front door. They were all wooden doors exactly like the one leading to her room. She twisted the handle gently, pushed, and the door opened easily and quietly.

She stepped into another room empty of people. It was silent. It was not a massive room, but plenty big for the purpose she supposed it served. The wallpaper was yellow, and there was another large fireplace on her left, a long, dark dining table in the middle and a serving table on the right. Through the large windows, she could see more of the mass of eerie fog.

She closed the door gently behind her. The room appeared to be a breakfast room. There was a dining table, but neither the table nor the room were big enough for a house that size. It was too modest. There was a serving table, so some sort of meals had to be served in this room. Big houses had breakfast rooms, the way modern people had breakfast bars in their kitchens – which in a similar way were useless wastes of space at any other time of the day.

If it was a breakfast room, she had to be close to the kitchen.

She was just starting to look for another door when her eyes caught something else. She could hear it too. A clock was ticking. There was a pendulum clock above the fireplace. The pendulum was gently swinging. The hands pointed at quarter past eleven.

Claire stood staring at the clock for some time. The pendulum kept moving, and after she had waited long enough, the minute hand moved too. At least time was moving. That was comforting. She didn't know if the time shown was right, but it felt like it was sometime before noon. She hadn't lost all her senses.

There were two doors on her right and two on her left. Claire stepped up to the door closest to her on her right. She put her ear to the door and listened. Nothing. She tried the door handle and went in to the next room.

It wasn't much of a room. The modern-day word for it was kitchenette. There were cupboards everywhere with crockery in them. Opposite her was another open door into a large kitchen. She stepped briskly across the gap and into the kitchen.

It was empty.

She ran across the kitchen to the next door, which was also open. It led to a pantry. There were two doors to all of the rooms – breakfast room, kitchenette, kitchen proper and pantry. Two doors in each, perfectly aligned. It made sense. It was designed for the servants so that they could come and go freely without getting in each other's way. Victorian genius – if that was the style of the house, and Claire was not sure of that. She was no architect.

She pondered that thought for a moment. She wasn't sure what her profession was. In fact, she didn't know much about herself at all. She didn't know where she was, whose clothes she was wearing or where her mobile phone was, but she knew she owned one. She also knew names of things, objects, and she knew a bit about the layout of old country houses. She knew she had visited museums, but where, when and with whom?

It was too much for the moment. The kitchen was too large, and the only cooking facilities she saw were at a large stove she could only presume was at the back of the snug's fireplace. The stove and the fireplace probably shared a chimney.

She moved back to the kitchenette. The pantry was too dark as it had no windows. The kitchen had windows, but the size of the room bothered her. She didn't want to be there. The kitchenette was small and cosy, lit by a row of small windows near the top of the wall like in the kitchen. There was an old-fashioned fridge in there with a small freezer on top. They were the rounded type that she remembered seeing – 1950s, '60s, '70s perhaps? What interested her even more was the modern-looking kettle on the small worktop along with a toaster. They weren't top of the range either, but they were electric. The thought was crazy, but at least she hadn't gone back in time.

Claire grabbed the kettle and shook it gently. It was empty. Below the windows was a Belfast sink. She went over to it, turned the tap on and waited. Water came out. It was clear. No rusty taps. It looked drinkable, and in any case, she was going to boil it. She filled the kettle and set it to boil.

There was a breadbin next to the toaster. She opened it, peered inside and saw a loaf of bread. Now that was old-fashioned. The loaf wasn't wrapped in plastic. It was just sitting there, white and soft, smelling divine.

"I'm sorry," Claire said out loud and pulled the loaf out. There were drawers under the worktop, and one of them was full of cutlery. She took out a knife and cut two thick slices of the loaf. Then she popped them in the toaster.

Above the worktop was a press with a glass door on it. She pulled out a small plate and a mug. It was a mug, not a teacup – a good proper mug, like the one you'd drink your morning coffee out of. Claire wasn't sure she had morning coffee though. She wanted tea for the time being – the drink of comforts, the beverage of the lost and lonely, the potion to cure all ailments, the brew of kings and queens. She found herself smiling at the thought of a cuppa.

She turned around to the fridge. She opened the door and found only one item inside – a bottle of milk. She took it out and let her eyes wander around the room. There, next to the fridge on the worktop, was a plate with a lid on top of it. She lifted the lid and, sure enough, there was the butter. Who in their right minds kept butter at room temperature these days? That probably was exactly the point. Not in their right minds. She sniffed at the butter, but it seemed fine.

She found teabags, brewed her tea and buttered her toast. Then she picked up the bottle of milk. It was a glass bottle with one of those odd bottle tops on it that twisted to one side. There were no labels on it. It was as if a milkman had brought it – in that fog! Surely not. She put her nose to the top of the bottle and got the disgusting scent of milk. Milk always smelled rank to her, but it hadn't gone off.

The bread was delicious. It was proper country bread with a crispy crust, and the butter melted into the slice, running down her fingers and her chin as she ate, oblivious to the mess she was making. She sipped her tea in between. It was hot and dreamy – like something else completely, but it was such a pleasure to eat and drink. It was an ordinary thing to do, something that people the world over did every day, several times a day, sometimes for pleasure but mostly for the nutritional benefit. It was a wonderful thing to do.

Claire enjoyed her brunch so much that she made herself another cup of tea and another two slices of toast. Once she was done with that, she washed her plate and cup and the cutlery she had used and put them away. Then she boiled the kettle once more, made herself a fresh cup of tea and headed back out.

She stopped in the snug at the bottom of the stairs. If she was going to head back up to her room, she would need something to do. She could grab a book. At the end of the day, she had already taken liberties helping herself to several slices of toast and mugs of tea.

She stepped closer to the shelf and eyed the spines of the books. *Wuthering Heights*, *A Tale of Two Cities*, *Jane Eyre*, *The Woman in White*. All classics. She had already read most of them, but the Charles Dickens was a new acquaintance to her in all but name. She grabbed the book and headed back up the steps.

Upstairs, she glanced in both directions down the hallway, and it was silent. The hallway was dark except outside her room. There were no windows as there were rooms on both sides.

Claire resisted the temptation to investigate the rooms. She was curious, but she was also frightened of what she might find – and what she might not find. Discovering that she was indeed the only person in the whole house would be too unnerving.

She turned left towards her room. She stopped at the door and stared at it.

There was a key in the door. Right enough, a little silver key, old-fashioned with a circular top that you could slip a chain or a bit of ribbon through. Having a key was great. The only thing was, it had not been there when she left the room.

Or had it? She knew the door had not been locked and there had been no key on the door on the inside, but had she actually checked for a key once she had been outside the room? She had been preoccupied with the chandelier – still breathtaking – and the quietness of the outside. She could not be sure if there had been a key or not.

With another look up and down the passage, she tucked the book carefully under her arm and twisted the door handle. It was open. She took the key, put it in a tiny pocket at the front of her dress and stepped inside, teacup stretched out ready to be thrown at any intruder. What she would do beyond that, she didn't know.

The room was empty. From the door, she could even see behind the screen, but all that was there was the chair, the mirror and her nightclothes.

She stepped in quietly and put her book and mug down on the chest of drawers. She slinked towards the large wardrobe and pulled all the doors open. It was empty. Metres and metres of hanging space, and there were no clothes inside.

The bathroom door was ajar. Claire couldn't remember how she had left it. The door was open, but when she stepped in and the light came on, she stared at another empty room.

She stared at her pale, bewildered face in the mirror for a few seconds and took deep breaths. Was this what it felt like to lose one's mind?

Claire returned to the bedroom, fished out the key from her pocket and locked the door securely, putting the key back into her pocket. She was too familiar with that newspaper-under-the-door trick to leave the key in the lock.