

MAKING FRIENDS

‘Long sleeves, Ellie? On a lovely sunny day like today?’

My new landlady. She’s opened the bathroom window, is beaming down at me, vivid yellow rubber gloves on her hands. My heart sinks. Knowing she was upstairs, I’d slipped out the back door, hoping to avoid her.

‘Sensitive skin, I’m afraid.’ I step back several paces across the grass away from the house and look up at the chimney. And there they are. Two seagulls. Adults, sitting on their nest. And two, no, three chicks.

‘Hope they didn’t keep you awake last night,’ my landlady says.

Hah! The wretched birds started at three or four in the morning, calling to each other or to their chicks, the sound echoing down the chimney to my room. ‘I’m sure I’ll get used to them,’ I say.

‘You are very pale, I must say, my dear. You stay out of the sun as much as you can, I suppose.’

‘I’ve, uh, been in hospital.’ I know at once it’s the wrong thing to say.

‘Oh?’ Her watery old-woman’s eyes are bright with curiosity.

‘The big C, you know.’ My tone is let’s-end-this-conversation dismissive. ‘I prefer not to talk about it.’

‘Of course, dear.’ A pause, then: ‘One of the local hospitals, was it? Here on the south coast?’

‘Er, no, actually. It was up north. A small private clinic. You won’t have heard of it.’

‘Up north, you say.’ She barks a laugh. ‘I knew I could detect a bit of an accent.’

MAKING FRIENDS

I bring a bright smile to my face. ‘Well, if I’m going to go into town, get a few bits of shopping done, I’d better make a move, hadn’t I?’

My thoughts are troubled as I pick up my backpack and set off towards the centre of town.

The fingers of my right hand push under the sleeve of my tee-shirt, rubbing at the scabs on my left wrist. The room I’m renting, with its single bed, microwave oven and mini fridge, is cheap, the only place I can afford, in fact. Even so, I can’t help wondering if I’ve just made a monumental mistake.

There’s a children’s playground on the way into the town centre. I stop a moment in the entrance, the sun warm on my face, and watch the kiddies playing. Eight of them, racing from the swings to the slide, from the climbing frame to the roundabout, all under five. The older children must still be in school. They can’t have broken up for the summer yet.

The mums are standing chatting in twos and threes, all except one who’s sitting by herself on a bench. I go and sit on the bench too, take out my phone and see if I have any messages. I don’t, of course. No surprise there.

A little girl comes running up to the mum beside me. ‘I went down the slide on my tummy, mummy,’ she says.

The mum laughs fondly. ‘I know. I saw you.’

‘What beautiful eyes your daughter’s got,’ I say. ‘What’s her name?’

‘Oh, er, thank you.’ The mum gives me a shy smile. ‘Her name’s Megan. Say hello, Megan.’

‘Hello.’

I smile back. ‘How old is she?’

‘Oh, um –’

MAKING FRIENDS

‘Three and a half. Almost four. My birthday’s on the tenth of November,’ the child says, clearly proud of her knowledge.

‘Wow! What a coincidence. Mine’s on exactly the same day.’ I’m lying of course. ‘Though I’ll be much older than four next birthday.’ I turn with a rueful laugh to the mum. ‘More like thirty-four, worse luck. I’m Ellie by the way.’

‘Sarah.’

The next day I’m drawn again to the playground. Megan and her mum are there.

‘Do you come here every morning?’ I ask Sarah, sitting down on the bench next to her. Her daughter is making her slow way up the climbing frame, her expression one of total concentration. Seagulls glide overhead. Two crows peck at something they’ve found in the grass.

‘Oh, um –’ Then she nods. ‘Not if it’s raining, though. Megan never tires of it. What about you – um –?’

‘I –’ My voice catches. ‘I don’t have any children.’

I go up to the cemetery that afternoon. It’s on the Downs, high above the town, and I’m breathless when I reach it. As I close the wrought iron gate behind me, I look around. I’m all alone. Good.

It takes a while to find the grave. Someone’s put a teddy bear and a small football on it. Little friends of his, I suppose, but I’m annoyed. He was too old for teddy bears and didn’t like football. I replace the dead flowers with some I take from a grave several rows further away. Finally, I sit cross-legged on the grass and read the words on the gravestone:

THOMAS BROADMAIN

MAKING FRIENDS

12 March 2018 – 5 August 2022

Cruelly taken from us

Tommy. That's what I called him. Not Thomas. My eyes fill with tears and, without thinking, I pick at the scabs on my wrist.

The squawk of metal on metal from the entrance gate rouses me. An elderly couple is coming into the cemetery. I stand up, brushing grass cuttings from my jeans.

Below me are the roofs of houses and the green of gardens and parks. Further away, the deep blue sea sparkles in the sunlight. Between the two I follow the curve of the coastline, with Brighton and the Seven Sisters hazy in the distance. But, even if I stand on tiptoe, I can't see Lewes where the prison is. I've emailed to tell them I'm back on the south coast. As soon as they send me the visitor order, I'll book a visit.

'That accent of yours –' It's a couple of days later and my landlady's sounding pleased with herself. She's waylaid me as I'm coming down the stairs. 'That crime series on telly's started up again. *Shetland*. That's where you're from, isn't it?'

I give her a pale smile. The seagulls nesting on the chimney woke me in the early hours. I won't be staying here much longer, I think, but I don't tell her that.

I get a part-time job in the local supermarket. Afternoons and evenings. That way, I can spend the mornings in the park with Megan and her mum.

We're great friends now. I bring healthy no-added-sugar snacks to the playground, ostensibly for the two of them but really for Megan. I give her a fun Alice band, orange plastic with flashing bug-eyes on top. I've bought other presents for her – my favourite's a soft, cuddly

MAKING FRIENDS

pink hippo – but I keep them in the cupboard in my room. I won't give them to her yet. Not just yet.

'Are you married?' Megan asks me one day. It rained overnight, and the air is fresh and tangy with the salt from the sea.

I shake my head and make my lower lip wobble sadly in a way that always makes her laugh.

'I've never met the right man.' Not true of course. 'What about your daddy? Is he nice?'

She shrugs, and I look at Sarah.

'He cleared off as soon as he knew I was pregnant.'

'Oh. That must have been so hard for you.' My voice is full of sympathy. Inside, though, I'm dancing: I've definitely made the right choice. 'If you ever want any babysitting – I'm free most evenings.' The supermarket won't care if I take time off. 'During the day. Whenever,' I add.

The Wednesday I've booked for my prison visit arrives. I catch the train, then walk from the station. It's raining, a persistent, blustery drizzle that darkens the prison's high flint walls.

Inside, I hand over paperwork and get a pat-down search. I know I've got nothing to fear.

Even so, I puff out a long breath when the dog checking for drugs walks straight past me and the metal detector doesn't ping. Along with the others – there are about a dozen of us – I'm led along a corridor and up a flight of stairs to the visits hall.

And there he is. He's sitting at a table but gets to his feet when he sees me come in. And I quicken my pace, my heart is singing, I'm almost running. He wraps me in his arms and his mouth comes down on mine in a hard, demanding kiss. I feel the hunger grow in me. I want to curl myself around him.

MAKING FRIENDS

‘All right, Johnson,’ one of the prison officers says. ‘Save some for tea.’

We sit down, just look at each other for a moment. My breathing is fast and shallow, the skin of my face is warm. Flushed with desire, I think. It’s been two years. And I still love him.

No. That’s not right. It’s not love. I’m in thrall to him. I know he’s not good for me, but I can’t help myself. My hand goes to the scabs on my wrist. Is it worth the risk? The answer’s simple: yes. I’d risk anything for him.

‘I’ll be out soon,’ he says. ‘We’ll be free to do all the things we used to.’

I’m rubbing at one of the scabs with the side of my thumb. My mind goes back to those newspaper headlines from 2023:

Tommy – we won’t give up, say police

Link to other kiddie murders?

Killer has woman accomplice, say police

I’ve pulled a scab off, I realise. A long, thin one. My blood wells, liquid warmth. It hurts, and I savour the moment. It proves I do still feel pain.

But I close my hand round my wrist, stemming the flow of blood. I don’t want another spell in the psychiatric unit.

The police never caught him for the murder of Tommy Broadmain. Or for any of the others. He’s in prison here for drunk driving.

‘Made any nice little friends?’ he asks.

‘Yes,’ I say. ‘Her name’s Megan.’

END

MAKING FRIENDS

1656 words