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Opening Extract from...

The Silent Cry

Written by Cathy Glass

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CHAPTER ONE

A FUNNY TURN

Everyone loves a newborn baby and wants a little look. Even those who protest that they are not ‘baby lovers’ can’t resist a peep at the miracle of a new life. I joined the other mothers grouped around the pram in the school playground as we waited with our children for the start of school.

‘Congratulations, he’s gorgeous,’ I said, adding my own best wishes to the many others.

‘Thank you,’ Laura (the new mum) said quietly, a little bemused by all the attention.

‘How old is he now?’ I asked.

‘Two weeks.’

‘Aah, he’s adorable.’

‘Make the most of every moment,’ another mother said. ‘They grow up far too quickly.’

My own daughter, Paula, aged thirteen months, was sitting in the stroller and wanted to have a look too, so I unclipped the safety harness and lifted her out so she could see into the pram.

‘Baby,’ she said cutely, pointing.

‘Yes, that’s baby Liam,’ I said.

‘Baby Liam,’ she repeated with a little chuckle.

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'You were that small once,' I said, and she chuckled again.

'He's my baby brother,' Kim, Laura's daughter, said proudly.

'I know. Aren't you a lucky girl?' I said to her, returning Paula to her stroller.

Kim nodded and touched her baby brother's face protectively, then planted a delicate little kiss on his cheek.

The family had moved into the street where I lived about a year before. Laura and I had got to know each other a little from seeing each other on the way to and from school. My son Adrian, aged five, attended this school but was in a different year to Kim, who was seven. Living quite close to each other I kept meaning to invite Laura in for a coffee and develop our friendship, but I hadn't found the opportunity, what with looking after my own family, fostering and studying for a degree part-time. I guessed Laura had been busy too, especially now she had a baby.

Amid all the oohings and aahings over little Liam the Klaxon sounded the start of school and parents began saying goodbye to their children.

'Bye, love,' I said to Adrian, giving him a kiss on the cheek. 'Have a good day. Make sure you eat your lunch, and have a drink.' He'd only been in school a year and I still fussed over him.

'Bye, Mum. Bye, Paula,' he said, and ran over to join his class who were lining up, ready to go in.

'Bye, little Liam,' Kim said, leaning into the pram again to give her brother one last kiss. She clearly didn't want to leave him. 'See you later. Be a good boy for Mummy.' I smiled.

'Cathy,' Laura said suddenly, clutching my arm. 'I feel a bit hot. I'm going to get a drink of water. Could you stay with the pram, please?'

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She turned and walked quickly towards the water fountain situated in an alcove at the far end of the building. Kim looked at me anxiously.

‘Don’t worry, love. I’ll make sure your mum is all right. You go into school.’

She hesitated, but then ran over to join her class, who were going in. I could see Laura at the fountain, leaning forward and sipping the cool water. I thought I should go over in case she was feeling faint. She’d only given birth two weeks before and I could remember how I’d sometimes suddenly felt hot and dizzy in the first few weeks after having both of my children. Pushing Paula’s stroller with my right hand and Liam’s pram with my left, I steered them across the playground to the water fountain. ‘Are you OK?’ I asked Laura as we approached.

‘Oh, yes, thank you,’ she said, straightening and wiping her mouth on a tissue. ‘I came over a bit funny. I’m all right now.’

I thought she looked pale. ‘Why don’t you sit down for a while? The children are going in.’ There were a couple of benches in the playground that the children used at playtime.

‘No, I’m all right, honestly. I just felt a bit hot and panicky. I think it was all the attention, and it is warm today.’

‘Yes, it is warm for May,’ I agreed. ‘But make sure you don’t overdo it.’

She tucked the tissue into her pocket and shook her hair from her face. ‘My husband and mother-in-law said it was too soon for me to be out and about. I guess they were right. But I was getting cabin fever staying at home all the time. I needed a change of scenery.’ She put her hands onto the pram handle ready for the off.

‘Are you going straight home?’ I asked. ‘I’ll walk with you.’

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‘Yes, but there’s no need. I’ll be fine.’

‘I’d like to,’ I said. ‘I walk by your house on the way to mine.’

‘All right. Thanks.’ She flicked her hair from her face again and we began across the playground to the main gate. Laura was a tall, attractive woman, whom I guessed to be in her mid-thirties, and she was very slim despite recently giving birth. She had naturally wavy, shoulder-length brown hair, which was swept away from her forehead.

‘Is Liam sleeping and feeding well?’ I asked, making conversation as we walked.

‘Baby,’ Paula repeated, pointing to his pram travelling along beside her.

‘Yes, that’s right,’ I said to her. ‘Baby Liam.’

‘I’m up every three hours at night feeding him,’ Laura said. ‘But you expect that with a newborn, don’t you?’

I nodded. ‘It’s very tiring. I remember craving sleep in the first few months. If someone had offered me a night out at a top-class restaurant or seven hours unbroken sleep, I would have gone for the latter without a doubt.’

‘Agreed,’ Laura said with a small smile.

We were silent for a few moments as we concentrated on crossing the road, and then we turned the corner and began up our street. ‘How do you like living here?’ I asked, resuming conversation.

‘Fine. It’s nearer Andy’s – my husband’s – job, and his family. My mother-in-law only lives five streets away.’

‘Is that the lady I’ve seen in the playground, collecting Kim from school?’ I asked out of interest.

‘Yes. Geraldine. She’s very helpful. I don’t know what I’d do without her.’

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‘It’s good to have help,’ I said. ‘My parents help me out when they can, but they live an hour’s drive away, and my husband’s family are even further away.’

‘Yes,’ Laura said, looking thoughtful. ‘My mother lives over a hundred miles away. You foster, don’t you?’

‘I do, although I’m taking a few months off at present to finish my degree. After our last foster child left my husband accepted a contract to work abroad for three months, so it seemed a good opportunity to study. The social services know I’m available for an emergency or for respite care, but I’m hoping I won’t be disturbed too often.’

‘What’s respite?’ Laura asked, interested.

‘It’s when a foster carer looks after a child for a short period to give the parents or another foster carer a break. It might just be for a weekend or a week or two, but then the child returns home or to their permanent carer.’

‘I see. It’s good of you to foster.’

‘Not really. I enjoy it. But I must admit I’ve been struggling recently to study and foster, with Paula being so little. Hopefully I’ll now have the chance to complete my dissertation.’

‘What are you studying?’

‘Education and psychology.’

She nodded. We’d now arrived outside her house, number 53, and Laura pushed open the gate. ‘Well, it’s been nice talking to you. Cathy, isn’t it?’

‘Yes – sorry, I should have said.’

‘Thanks again for helping me out in the playground. I hope I haven’t kept you.’

‘Not at all. If ever you want me to collect Kim from school or take her, do let me know. I’m there every day with Adrian.’

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'Thanks, that's kind of you, but Geraldine, my mother-in-law, always does it if I can't.'

'OK. But if she can't at any time you know where I am. And perhaps you'd like to pop in for a coffee one day when you're free.'

She looked slightly surprised. 'Oh, I see. That's nice, but I expect you're very busy.'

'Never too busy for a coffee and a chat,' I said with a smile. 'I'll give you my telephone number.' I began delving into my bag for a pen and paper.

'Can you give it to me another time?' Laura said, appearing rather anxious. She began up her garden path, clearly eager to be away. 'Sorry, but I'm dying to go to the bathroom!' she called.

'Yes, of course. I'll see you later in the playground. I can give it to you then.'

'Geraldine will probably be there,' she returned, with her back to me, and quickly unlocking the door. 'Push it through my letterbox.'

'OK. Bye then.'

'Bye!' she called, and going in closed the front door.

'Baby Liam,' Paula said, pointing to the house.

'Yes, that's where he lives,' I said.

'Out!' Paula now demanded, raising her arms to be lifted out of the stroller.

'Yes, you can walk, but remember you always hold my hand.'

I undid the safety harness, helped her out and took her little hand in mine. 'We always hold hands by the road,' I reminded her. I didn't use walking reins but insisted she held my hand.

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'Baby Liam,' Paula said again, looking at his house.

'Yes, that's right.' I glanced over. A woman, whom I now knew to be Laura's mother-in-law, Geraldine, was looking out of the downstairs window. I smiled and gave a little wave, but she couldn't have seen me for she turned and disappeared into the room.

'Home,' Paula said.

'Yes, we're going home now.'

We continued haltingly up the street with Paula stopping every few steps to examine something that caught her interest, including most garden gates, walls, fences, lampposts, fallen leaves, every tree in the street and most of the paving slabs. But I knew that the exercise would tire her out and that once home, after she'd had a drink and a snack, she'd have at least an hour's sleep, which would give me the chance to continue researching and writing my dissertation: 'The psychological impact being in care has on a child and how it affects their educational outcome.'

That afternoon, before I set off to collect Adrian from school, I wrote my telephone number on a piece of paper and tucked it into my pocket ready to give to Laura. She wasn't in the playground and for a while it appeared that no one had come to collect Kim, for I couldn't see Geraldine either. The Klaxon sounded for the end of school and the children began to file out, and then Geraldine rushed into the playground at the last minute and went over to Kim. Adrian arrived at my side very excited because his class was going on an outing. He handed me a printed sheet with the details of the outing and a consent form, and I carefully tucked it into my bag. I looked around for Geraldine, but she'd already gone. We joined the other

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parents and children filing out of the main gate and then crossed the road. As we turned the corner into our street I could see Kim and her grandmother a little way ahead. Kim turned and gave a small wave. We waved back. I was half-expecting Geraldine to turn and acknowledge us, or maybe even wait for us to catch up and fall into conversation, but she didn't. She kept on walking until they arrived at number 53, where she opened the garden gate and began up the path. As we drew level she was opening the front door.

'Excuse me!' I called. She turned. 'Could you give this to Laura, please?' I held out the piece of paper. 'It's my telephone number. I said I'd let her have it. Is she all right now?'

Geraldine nodded, straight-faced, and tapped Kim on the shoulder as a signal for her to collect the paper.

Kim ran down the path and smiled at me as she took the paper. 'Thank you,' she said politely.

'Say hi to your mum,' I said.

'I will.'

With another smile she ran back up the path to her grandmother, who'd now opened the front door and was waiting just inside, ready to close it. I smiled at her but she didn't return the gesture, and as soon as Kim was inside she closed the door. With her short grey hair and unsmiling features Geraldine came across as stern. I was slightly surprised by her coldness, and it crossed my mind that she'd very likely seen me that morning through the front-room window and, for whatever reason, had chosen to ignore me.

CHAPTER TWO

VERY CONCERNED

I saw Geraldine in the playground every day for the rest of that week – in the morning when she took Kim to school, and in the afternoon when she collected her – but she didn't acknowledge me or make any attempt to start a conversation. Neither did she have anything to do with any of the other parents waiting in the playground, which was unusual. It was a relatively small school, and friendly, so that eventually most people started chatting to someone as they waited for their children. But Geraldine didn't; she hurried into the playground at the last moment and out again, aloof and stern-looking. By Friday, when Laura still hadn't reappeared, I began to wonder if she was ill. She'd had a funny turn earlier in the week, on her first outing with Liam – perhaps she'd been sickening for something and was really poorly. Although Geraldine apparently didn't want anything to do with me, Laura hadn't been so hostile, and given that we lived in the same street and our children attended the same school I felt it would be neighbourly of me to ask how she was. If you are feeling unwell and someone asks after you it can be a real pick-me-up. So on Friday afternoon when Geraldine collected Kim from school I intercepted her as she hurried out of the playground.

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'I was wondering how Laura was,' I said. 'I'm Cathy. I live in the same street.'

'Yes, I know who you are,' she said stiffly. 'Laura is fine, thank you. Why do you ask?' Which seemed an odd question.

'When I last saw Laura she wasn't feeling so good. She came over a bit hot and wobbly. I wondered if she was all right now.'

'Oh, that. It was nothing,' Geraldine said dismissively. 'It was far too soon for her to be going out and she realizes that now.'

I gave a small nod. 'As long as she's not ill.'

'No, of course not,' she said bluntly.

'Good. Well, if she ever fancies a change of scenery and a coffee, she knows where I live.'

'Oh, she won't be up to that for a long while,' Geraldine said tartly. 'I've told her she's not to go out for at least another four weeks, possibly longer. That's the advice we had after giving birth.' Taking Kim by the arm, she headed off.

Not go out for another four weeks! You could have knocked me down with a feather. Wherever had she got that from? It was nearly three weeks since Laura had given birth and as far as I knew there was no medical advice that said a new mother had to wait seven weeks before going out, unless Geraldine was confusing it with postpartum sex, but even then seven weeks was excessive if the birth had been normal. More likely, I thought, Geraldine was suffering from empty-nest syndrome and she liked being the centre of the family and having Laura rely on her. It would make her feel needed, and if that suited Laura, fine. It was none of my business. I'd been reassured that Laura wasn't ill, and I had my family to look after and work to do.