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Opening extract from
Captive

Written by
A.J. Grainger

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JANUARY

Paris. The coldest winter in thirty years. The shivering limbs of trees pierce the deadened sky in the Jardin du Luxembourg. Ice clings to the abdomen of the Eiffel Tower. My father's blood is a vivid stain on the white-laced pavement outside the hotel. In the distance, the sirens scream, but they are too far away.

Dad is already losing consciousness, his eyes rolling back to milky white, his mouth drooping as the bright red blood spills out across the bright white snow. All around me people are shouting. Nearby, one of Dad's bodyguards is yelling into a radio: 'Request urgent back-up. The Prime Minister has been shot. Repeat: The Prime Minister has been shot.'

And someone is screaming.

It is a long time before I realize it is me.

ONE

April

My little sister, Addy, is playing with her Baby Betty doll on the stairs of Number 10. Her collection of dolls is pushed up against the wooden panelling of the fourteenth step, the one that takes the stairs around the first bend. She shouldn't be here. She should be up in our flat, getting ready to leave. She is so intent on her game that for a while she doesn't notice me sit down behind her. When she does look up, her face becomes one big open smile.

'Byn, cuddle,' she says, sitting down in my lap.

'Why aren't you dressed yet?' I ask, blowing a raspberry on her baby pot belly. She squeals, slapping me around the head. I let her go and she slides off my lap, taking a doll with her, its head bumping on the step as she reaches for another of her toys: a fluffy giraffe that the Kenyan President's wife gave her on a state visit last year. A wisp of white-blond hair twists like a curly tail on the nape of my sister's neck. I tug it gently, watching it straighten and curl, straighten and curl, as a voice rises from the hallway below. I shift Addy so I can peer through the banister.

‘Thanks for seeing me at such short notice, Stephen. I appreciate it,’ a tall man with round wire-framed glasses is saying. It’s Michael Bell, the head of Bell-Barkov and one of Dad’s oldest friends. He is ridiculously dressed as usual, a canary-yellow tie matched with a pale pink shirt. If looking like a boiled sweet were in this season, Michael would be right on trend.

‘Hello, Robyn,’ Michael says, looking up and cutting off my train of thought. Addy appears next to me, waving her doll at him through the banister. ‘How are you, girls?’ he asks. ‘Annabelle was asking after you—’

Dad cuts him short. ‘I’m due at Westminster shortly and I’ve got back-to-backs all day. I can only give you five minutes, tops.’

Michael gives a brief wave and then the two of them disappear from view down one of the corridors.

Shadow, my cat, brushes my arm. He is creeping up the stairs, his eyes on Addy. Addy’s love for Shadow is unconditional and frequently painful, for the cat. She looks up at the wrong moment (for Shadow) and launches herself at him. With a cry of ‘Hug kitty’, she squeezes him tight and the inevitable happens. Shadow lashes out and catches Addy on her cheek. It is a minuscule scratch, but baby-howls join cat-yowls. Thankfully Dad and Michael have passed through the interconnecting door into Number 11, so they won’t be disturbed.

I scoop Addy up with one hand and pat Shadow soothingly with the other.

‘Kitty scratch! Bad kitty.’ She thumps Shadow on the back.

‘Hey, hey,’ I say, acting as peace ambassador. ‘Shadow was

scared. He didn't mean to scratch you. You have to be gentle, Ads. Remember, like I showed you.' I scoot back to sit against the wall, with Addy curled in on one side and Shadow on the other. Shadow lets out a resentful purr as I tickle him under the ears. He can never resist, though, and his second purr is calmer as the hair on his haunches settles down.

Addy sniffs again. 'Stroke kitty?' she asks, wiping her eyes.

'Stroke him gently. That's it.' Addy runs her hand along Shadow's back, the wrong way, and her tap on his head has more in common with a punch. Shadow looks at me as if to say, 'Yeah right,' and makes a break for it. Addy's mouth opens again, but before she can form a yell, Mum calls my name from further down the corridor. She comes out of one of the offices on this floor, dressed in a neat blue knee-length dress and matching two-inch heels. She looks like she's going to a wedding or a fashion shoot. When the nation's press camp out on your front door with their long-angled camera lenses, even the school run can feel like the runway at Paris Fashion Week. Ever since a hideous moment last year, at the prince's christening at Westminster Abbey, when Mum wore a pleated skirt on a windy day and the entire country saw her Spanx, she's worn tunic dresses in heavy material to the knee that even a tornado couldn't blow skywards.

Mum keeps out of Dad's work as much as possible. In politics, her motto is 'See no evil, hear no evil'. She thinks you can't be responsible for what you don't know. She's wrong. Dad says the only way to thrive here, in these cramped and fusty old rooms, full of too many files, boxes, aides, press assistants and researchers, is to either know

everything, or to appear to. Ultimately it is not what you know, or even who you know – it's what people say you know that is important. People think my dad knows everything. Other people's secrets are his currency.

'Adriana isn't even dressed, Robyn,' Mum says, as if I'm the nanny. 'Where is Karen?' – the actual nanny – 'Come here, Addy, darling.'

I carry my sister up to Mum. Addy cries out for her toys, her legs kicking out. One catches the picture of an ex-prime minister hanging at the top of the stairs, nearly knocking it to the floor. Mum lunges for Addy and I lunge for the photo.

Addy settles as soon as she's in Mum's arms, clamping herself to Mum's body like a baby koala. Mum scoots her on to one hip. 'Are you packed? I'd like you to show me which school books you are planning on bringing with you, Robyn. It'll be very quiet in Cheshire and you can make a start on some of the reading you have to do for next term.'

Addy is curved into Mum's body, head on one side, peering up at me. I make a funny face at her and she does her shy thing, pulling Mum's long brown hair over her face.

'Are you listening to me?' Mum asks.

'Yes. School books. Quiet. Start reading.'

Mum's face registers hurt and I feel bad and grumpy in equal measure. 'I'll do some work, but I'm taking my camera as well.'

'If you must – but schoolwork first. I know these last few months have been hard, but you can't afford to let your grades slip. You've got exams coming up.'

I tickle Addy under the chin, making her squeal, and then change the subject. 'Will Dad be all right without us?'

‘I expect so. It’s only for a week.’ Mum’s lips pinch, the way they always do when someone brings up Dad. ‘Although goodness knows when he’ll ever remember to take his pills. I’ll speak to one of the Garden Room Girls about reminding him.’ The Garden Room Girls are the bank of secretaries that work here round the clock, so called because they are based in the room off the garden. Super-unoriginal and super-sexist. It’s a hangover from years ago. They’re not even all women these days.

‘He’ll never get full use of his shoulder back, will he?’ I say.

‘I think it’s safe to say he won’t be playing tennis again anytime soon. Mind you, after that humiliating performance against the US President at Chequers last year, it’s probably no bad thing. Talk about toys out of the pram . . .’ She stops as she sees my eyes mist with tears that have nothing to do with Dad losing six–two to the US President and then hurling his tennis racket at the net. ‘Oh, Robyn, sweetheart.’ She tucks a strand of my hair behind my ear before I can duck out of reach. ‘We’re safe. No one will hurt you or your father again.’

People think the British Prime Minister must live in some really palatial pad, with state-of-the-art everything, but our flat here is actually much smaller than our real home in West Kensington, and the whole thing would probably fit in the ballroom at Groundings, Granny and Grandpa’s estate in Cheshire. Mum says the PM’s flat is dusty and dirty and needs a ‘jolly good refit’, and she hates not having all our furniture here. Most of it had to go into storage when Dad became PM four years ago. Mum says she can’t

remember what half of it looks like now. To which Dad always replies, ‘How can you miss it, then?’

The garden here is nice, though – an L-shaped stretch of grass and trees. Addy and I planted a rose tree when we first moved in. It was from a cutting of one of Granny’s trees. ‘A little piece of the countryside in that smelly city,’ she said. I used to love going out to the garden, even in winter, but since the shooting in January, it seems too exposed. The walls don’t seem high enough, and the windows of Numbers 10, 11 and 12 stare down like lidless eyes on three of its sides. Anyone could be hiding inside them with a gun. Logic and the security services tell me that nothing like that will ever happen again. The man responsible for the shooting has been arrested, and security has been stepped up like crazy over the last three months. Four more police officers at the gates, two extra armed guards patrol the walls and loads more plain-clothed detectives in the surrounding areas, keeping an eye on things. But sometimes your brain doesn’t want to listen to logic. It just wants to have a little freak-out anyway.

I turn away from the window in my room. There’s a mass of stuff on my bed waiting to be packed. T-shirts, jeans, jumpers, thick socks and wellies. It’s cold at Granny and Grandpa’s, even in spring. On top of the pile of clothes is the digital SLR camera I got for Christmas. I don’t really know why I got into photography. Actually, I do. His name is Ed Taylor. He’s in the year above me and during lunch breaks last year he taught me how to use a camera. He taught me a couple of other things too, like the fact that just because you have gorgeous floppy hair, are artistic and know the exact settings on a digital camera to capture the

perfect cityscape at night doesn't mean you aren't also a massive jerk. Our fledging relationship ended when I caught him kissing Cassandra Fulgate at a Christmas party.

Still, he taught me a bit about photography, so not all bad.

Addy's princess doll is lying on the floor by my bed. I pick her up and put her on the table, bending her legs so she can sit on the edge. She smiles her smug smile at me. This is the kind of daughter the PM should have – a plastic one with neat blonde hair and a designer outfit for every occasion. The public think they know me because some fashion magazine is able to determine that I buy my clothes from TopShop rather than Prada, and because some person we met once for a few minutes on a crowded beach in Morocco two years ago wrote a piece for the FeMail about 'The Real Knollys-Greens'. They called me the 'shy and thoughtful elder daughter', with a 'stubborn streak'. 'She knows her own mind', the author wrote, 'and she doesn't always agree with her father's policies'. I reckon the latter was because I was reading *Animal Farm*. It was for a school project, but the journalist wouldn't know that from the very short conversation she had with me.

I take the shutter off my camera and snap a few shots of the doll, zooming in really tight to her face. There's a potted plant on my dressing table and I position it in front of her, poking my camera through the leaves to take a couple of 'pap shots'. When I first started taking pictures, it amused me to photograph the paparazzi who were snapping photos of us. They did not like it. After one photographer got particularly nasty, Dad suggested I stick to taking photos of

inanimate objects like trees and flowers. He said they tend to be 'less sensitive'.

The door to my bedroom opens and Dad comes in, a tie in each hand, a magazine tucked under one arm. He looks tired, but then he always does these days, especially after meetings with Michael. 'Ah, here you are,' he says. 'I need your advice. Red or yellow?'

The red, a near-crimson, against his white shirt, is too much like blood on snow. 'Yellow,' I say quickly.

'Jolly good.' He drops the red tie and the magazine on my desk chair so he can wrap the yellow one around his neck. His jaw sets in pain as he rotates his shoulder. I wince and Dad immediately smiles reassuringly. 'Just a twinge.'

'Did you take your painkillers this morning?'

'Yes, Nurse Robyn.' He pushes the end of the tie through its knot. 'Straight?'

I nod, glancing down at the magazine. *Science Today*. One of the headlines reads 'Bell-Barkov's landmark kidney drug Amabim-F given international go-ahead.'

'Did Michael bring you that?'

'Oh. Yes.' He can see I'm lining up for another question, so he quickly changes the subject. 'Are you nearly ready for the off? Your mum wants to be there by lunchtime. Gordon informed me that two armed police officers on motorcycles will escort you.'

My heart thumps in my throat. I am worried about travelling down to Cheshire. It'll be the longest trip I've taken since we came back from Paris.

Dad reads my expression. 'You'll be fine, Robyn. You need to be brave, my darling.'

I wish everyone would stop telling me that everything is

going to be okay and that I need to trust the security services. The truth is I *am* scared. I can't stop thinking about what happened in Paris. Dad nearly died that day. *I* nearly died that day. The world is not a safe place. I know that now and I can't *unknow* it, however much people might tell me to.

'You'll take the car to Whitehall again today, won't you?' I ask. Before the assassination attempt, Dad used to walk to Parliament. I dread the thought of anything happening to him again. He doesn't look after himself the way he should. He's too busy worrying about other things, like running the country.

'Of course. "Keep bugging on",' he says, quoting Winston Churchill. He always quotes other people when he wants to avoid talking about something. Familiar worry lines spring up on his face, and I know I'm right. He's worried too, but he'll never admit it. There's anxiety in his eyes. They are the exact same shade and colour as mine. Everything else about me is my mum's: long dark hair, pointy chin and freckles, lopsided nose. But my eyes are my dad's. 'Chameleon eyes,' Mum calls them – sometimes green, sometimes brown and sometimes almost golden. They change with the seasons and our moods.

'Have you said goodbye to Poppy?' Dad asks, smiling more broadly than the question warrants.

'No,' I snap, irritated that Dad is pretending everything is okay, just like everyone else is. Then I instantly adjust my tone. Dad has enough worries. He doesn't need me adding to them. 'I'm going to see her now.'

'Well, best get a move on. You'll be leaving in twenty minutes.'

*

Number 10 and Number 11, where the Chancellor of the Exchequer lives with his wife and daughter, Poppy, are joined by interconnecting doors. Poppy is nearly seventeen like me. We didn't know each other much before we both moved here four years ago, but we've got really close since then. She is the only one who gets what it is like to live in this place, protected, guarded and constantly watched. It's odd to be so important and yet so utterly ignored. My safety is everyone's priority, but no one is really interested in me. Unless I do something wrong, of course. Then a lot of people are very interested.

Poppy is reading a book on her bed when I come into her room, her legs propped up. (Someone told her this would prevent varicose veins. I told her she didn't need to worry about that for at least another fifty years, but Poppy said she didn't care. Her legs are her best feature and she intends to keep them that way.) She puts the book down as soon as she sees me.

I take my camera out of my shoulder bag and Poppy immediately shrieks and covers her face. 'Don't take any photos of me! You always give me a big nose.' She fingers her perfect little button nose.

'It's a camera, Poppy. It just records what it sees.'

'No. It's the angles you use. All odd and distorted.'

'Is that the technical term?'

'Shut up. You know what I mean.'

I sit next to her on the bed.

'Are you going to be back for Millie's party on Saturday?' she asks.

'Probably not. Mum wants to come back late Sunday evening.'

‘Ed might be there.’

‘Yeah and so will Cassandra.’

‘She’s a cow, isn’t she? I mean, she knew you two were . . . Wait, what were you two doing? I mean, aside from taking pretentious arty photos.’ She grins.

‘Art is my life, Poppy. There is nothing for me beyond that.’

She laughs, as I meant her to. ‘You could get the train back. I’m sure Mummy would pick you up from the station. Unless you don’t want to go?’

‘I hate those parties. There will be people we don’t know there.’

‘Oooh, scary.’

‘And they always stare at me, or think it’s hysterical to give me double shots so the PM’s daughter ends up more hammered than anyone else.’

‘I’ll be there. I promise to guard your drink and not let anyone else touch it.’

‘I just don’t fancy it. Besides, Dad’s really fussy about where I go now.’ That’s not true. Dad wants me to move on and stop worrying. It’s me who doesn’t want to go out so much.

As usual, Poppy reads me so well. ‘You can’t hide forever,’ she says.

I lift the camera to my face and take a snap of the corner of her room, where the shadow of the curtains creeps across the floor like a huge hand. I switch to black-and-white. If I get the shot right, the picture should look like a still straight out of a Hitchcock movie. ‘Watch me.’

‘I’m the Chancellor’s daughter and you don’t hear me complaining.’

‘Only because no one actually knows what the Chancellor does, including half the Cabinet. Dad’s always saying, ‘What does that chap next door do again?’

‘Oh, funny!’

I take the picture and then let the camera fall back into my lap. ‘I hate it here, Poppy.’

‘Only one more year to go.’

‘And then five more, when he runs again.’

‘He might not.’

‘Can you imagine my dad doing anything else?’

‘He must have. He’s only been PM four years.’

‘And he spent the eighteen years before that preparing to be PM. Let’s face it, I’m stuck here.’ I glance across the Downing Street garden and over its high walls at Horse Guards Parade. The early-bird tourists are already lining up for the first changing of the guard. A shadow moves at the corner of my eye and I jump, but it’s just Poppy.

‘He’s locked up,’ she says gently. ‘He can’t come after your father again.’

‘But if not him, then someone else—’

There’s a knock on the door and Poppy’s mum sticks her head around it to tell me that the car is here.

‘Have fun in Cheshire and stop worrying about everything. It’s all going to be fine,’ Poppy says. ‘And come back for the party on Saturday night. You’re in danger of becoming a total loser.’

I give one last nervous look out across the grounds and into the world beyond, then force a smile. ‘I’ll try. And, Poppy,’ I say at the door, ‘say cheese!’ I snap a picture and dash down the corridor to the sound of her yelling. ‘I hate

you, Robyn Knollys-Green! You better not post that online anywhere! I haven't got mascara on.'

Ben is the police officer on duty out front today. He steps aside to let me out of the front door. 'All ready for the trip, Miss?' he asks. The door opens again before I can answer, and Addy dashes out, barrelling into my legs. I catch her around the waist and swing her upwards. Mum and Dad are right behind her. 'You'll take your pills, won't you?' Mum is saying. 'Every day, Stephen.'

'How is it, Eliza, that you trust me to run the country but not my own life?'

'You care about the country,' Mum says.

Dad turns to Ben. 'Do you hear this? I bet you don't get this at home.'

Ben smiles politely but Mum's jaw tightens as she grits her teeth. 'So I suppose you'll survive without us for a few days?' she says.

"Liberty is one of the most precious gifts that heaven has bestowed on mankind." Dad grins. 'But I shall miss you, my love.'

Mum steps back from his kiss, screwing her face up. 'Stephen, darling, I've just done my lipstick.'

Dad kisses Addy instead, taking her out of my arms and lifting her above his head, making her giggle. After giving her to Mum, who makes a big fuss of smoothing out the imaginary wrinkles in her dress, he turns to me. 'You're a bit big to fling in the air. Be safe,' he whispers, hugging me. It's brief but for a sudden I'm caught up in the familiar smell of his aftershave and I'm protected, in a world where the shooting never happened. When he steps back, the April

breeze whips up my spine. Dad and I haven't spoken much about what happened in Paris. Mum says this is unhealthy, but she wasn't there. Remembering is bad enough. I don't want to give words to the memories as well.

'Look after my family,' Dad says to John, the Special Ops driver, who nods and replies, 'Like they were my own.' I want to make Dad promise me again that he will take a car to Parliament, but there's no time and I know he won't want me making a fuss with all these people around.

Addy is whimpering by the time I get in the car, straining against her seatbelt and kicking her little legs up and down. She's going to be restless the whole way to Cheshire. Dad pats the car door like it's a horse's flank. 'Send my love to Granny and Grandpa. Bye, my darlings,' he yells as we drive towards the gate. I turn to wave, but he's moved back to stand on the step and all I can see is his headless torso.