

Helping you choose books for children



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1

Dream for you

A phone had started ringing in Adam's dream. An insistent, annoying, faraway noise that made his dream-self tense and aggravated, edgy because there was something he knew he should be doing but couldn't. The sound was out of place, worrying, in a low-grade kind of way . . . and then he woke up, dragged out of his stupor by the silence which followed the phone in his parents' room being picked up. Night-time hearing, which seemed to amplify every tiny noise, picked up muffled voices, and under his door he saw lights being turned on. Adam peered at his alarm clock, saw it was approaching 2:00 a.m., and sat up. There was no such thing as a good-news phone call at this time of night.

He figured it must have been something to do with his Grannie Angie, his mum's mum, who was losing it big time, like old people do when bits, fairly important bits that we all take pretty much for granted, start going wrong. She was on the way out and he knew she was going to peg it, and probably sooner rather than later. The other worry was what would happen to Granpa Eddy when she did eventually go. Adam had heard his parents discussing that he couldn't look after himself, that there was no way he'd go into a home, but where would he live?

Lying back down in bed, eyes closed, he'd hoped, in the way that people prayed cos they believed it really made a difference, that Grangie, like they'd always called her, was all right. That nothing bad had happened, at least not yet. He knew it would eventually, bound to, but please, please, please, not right now.

Later Adam realised he must've fallen back to sleep, the way you can do sometimes, like a switch being turned off, because the next thing he knew his room was ablaze with harsh electric light and he could hear his name being growled.

Forcing his eyes open he saw his dad was standing at the door. He looked grey and dishevelled, his hair sticking out at odd angles and his chin dark with stubble. It was something about his father's expression that really woke Adam up, a steely anger in his eyes that he'd only ever seen once before, that time, back in Year 11, when he'd been caught truanting.

Adam scratched his head, yawning. 'What's up, Dad?'

'How long have you known, Adam?'

'Known what?'

'That Charlie was working in some bar in Tokyo.'

Ah, that . . .

Charlie. The house seemed so empty – even with three people and a dog rattling round in it – since she'd gone. Adam's sister, twenty-one, only three years older than him, but one of those annoyingly bright people who breeze through school and uni, hardly seeming to break into a sweat, had been away since early January. She was now nearly five months into her round-the-world-trip-of-a-

lifetime, and Adam missed her.

There were a lot of things he didn't miss, like the needling comments his parents made about why couldn't he be more like her academically, and the way she borrowed whatever she wanted – clothes, CDs, Walkman – without asking. But life without Charlie around was, well, dull. It hadn't always been like that. They'd hated each other for years, fighting like mortal enemies until, quite suddenly, around the time his face had stopped erupting like Mount Vesuvius, peace had broken out instead and they'd become best friends. Weird, but there you go.

Plus, with his sister not around, Adam was now the sole focus of his parents' attention, the target for all their angst, the next project to be completed. He felt like a lab rat, part of an experiment to see if it was possible to create failure out of a passion for success – could you make someone bomb their A levels by caring way too much about them passing? He wanted to sit them down and explain what they were doing to him, but he knew they'd never listen. Charlie usually acted as his Defence Minister, able to intervene when things got bad, deflecting sniper fire and opening conciliation talks, but she wasn't here.

And now the heavy artillery was going off big time.

2

Be genteel

Thing was, Charlie wasn't supposed to be in Japan. The last postcard she'd sent had been from Vietnam, from where she and Alice – best friend from school, also doing the year-off travel thing, usual story – were planning on going to China and from there make their way down to Australia and then New Zealand. That had been maybe two months ago, but Charlie was crap at keeping in touch and no one had been at all surprised by the lack of post or email. Except Adam had been getting emails. But he hadn't said anything because he'd been sworn to secrecy about the girls' change of plans.

When you're travelling, Adam knew, things get fluid, circumstances can dictate a move other than had previously been on the cards. You could meet someone you like who's going somewhere else; you could lose all your money and have to re-route to where you can earn some quick bucks; maybe you simply get bored and fancy going to a different place. Charlie and Alice had ended up in Tokyo through a combination of all these events.

It was Alice, Adam remembered, who met someone in Hanoi – Steve, from Brighton . . . all that way to hook up with some bloke from Brighton – and it was in Shanghai

where the plans had gone tits up when Charlie had all her money stolen, although Alice was pretty broke by then too. Steve-from-Brighton was the one who'd come up with the bright idea of going to Japan. According to Charlie, he'd been to Australia and was really up for Tokyo; Alice, who was apparently stuck to the guy like gaffer tape, thought Tokyo sounded *brilliant*, especially as this Steve person maintained it'd be dead easy for the girls to earn enough cash there for the rest of the trip. Businessmen just loved to sit in bars and talk to pretty English hostesses, he'd said. Yeah, right.

Adam hadn't liked the sound of Steve, or his ideas for how Alice and Charlie could get some more cash. Which was exactly how Charlie knew their parents would feel, but times it by a hundred, so she'd made Adam swear not to say anything. She wasn't so keen on the idea either, but she didn't want to carry on travelling by herself and she wasn't ready to come home; they'd get the money, move on and no one would be any the wiser. Yeah, right.

Adam felt totally spaced. It was now something like 2:35 a.m., as stated by the digital display on the oven, he was downstairs in the kitchen being given the third degree by his parents and he hadn't even been allowed to get himself a drink or anything. It also didn't help that he hadn't quite got his head round the fact that Charlie had disappeared.

'What did Alice actually say, Mum?'

'I told you.' His mother, sitting opposite Adam at the table, looked older yet somehow frail and childlike at the same time; she turned away and Adam saw a tear run down her face. In the corner of the room, sitting and watching,

Badger, their black and white mongrel, got out of his basket and walked over to sit next to her.

'She said that she hasn't seen Charlie since Saturday night.' Adam's dad, circling the perimeter of the kitchen like a nervous guard, stopped and stared at him. 'She was hysterical, hard to make sense of, but the gist of it was that the last time she'd seen Charlie she was going off with some Japanese businessman – how long have you known she was working as a . . . as a bloody bar girl, Adam?'

Adam saw his mother look at him, waiting to hear what he said, the expression on her face making him feel like whatever had happened was all his fault.

'Look, Mum, she asked me not to say anything, cos you'd just get worried.'

'Why were they doing it?'

'They needed the money. Charlie'd had most of hers stolen in Shanghai, but she didn't want to come home yet so they went to Tokyo. Her and Alice and Alice's boyfriend.'

'Why didn't she just ask us to send some money out to her?' Adam's dad began pacing again. 'She could've paid us back later, she didn't have to go *prostituting* herself, for God's sake!'

'Tony!' Shocked, Adam's mum wiped tears from her cheek with the back of her hand. 'I'm sure she wasn't . . .'

'She was only doing hostess work, Dad . . . she just wanted to do this trip by herself, asking you for money would've been, I dunno, cheating. She said she wanted to do it her way.'

'And look where it bloody got her!'

'Dad, we don't know . . .'

'Exactly, Adam, exactly – we don't *know* anything, we can't *do* anything . . .'

‘Dad, I’m sorry . . .’ Adam glanced across the table at his mum, who seemed to be frozen in a state of panic. ‘Have you called the police? At least we can do that.’

3

Keep off the pond

Adam was knackered. Since just after three he'd been unable to sleep; they'd all gone back to bed after his dad had first called the police, but all he'd done was wait for them to arrive. By the looks of his parents, that's exactly what they'd done as well. And even though he had the perfect excuse not to go into college today, the thought of hanging round the house, trying to dodge the cloud of blame that was following him around, was too much.

The police were now downstairs in the lounge with his parents, presumably going over the details of what Alice had said when she'd called. They'd arrived almost an hour ago, but, as Adam hadn't actually heard what she'd said, there was little else he could do once he'd handed over a print-out of Charlie's last email, so he'd disappeared back up to his room, followed by Badger.

Adam showered, first cold then hot, to help clear his fuzzed-up head, got dressed, and went down to the kitchen, where he made himself a very strong cup of black coffee to kick his brain into action. As he drank it he kind of wished he hadn't given up smoking, but he had, cos Suzy, his still-quite-new girlfriend, had made it a compulsory proviso to him going out with her. Right now, though, lighting one up

would, along with the coffee and sugar hit, be the booster rocket that'd get him out of the gravity pull of the house; it was the perfect morning chemistry equation – caffeine, plus glucose, with an added dash of nicotine to balance everything out.

As he was about to make good his escape, one of the two plain-clothes officers who'd come to the house snared him by the front door. He looked like any of the policemen you see on the TV news, giving interviews to a forest of microphones: a vaguely nondescript bloke in a dark grey suit, a scattering of dandruff on his shoulders, smelling of after-shave and tobacco and with a slightly quizzical expression.

'Going?'

'Yeah,' Adam looked down at his watch. 'Late for college . . .'

'So you knew your sister was in Tokyo, working at that bar, the one she mentioned in her email?' Adam nodded, looking back at the kitchen door where Badger now sat, watching. 'And you didn't say anything?' The officer let the question hang, accusingly, in the air.

'I already explained to the other guy, she asked me not to.' Adam turned and held the man's gaze. 'It wasn't a big deal.'

'Well, it is now, sunshine, and from now on, you let us know the moment you hear anything from anyone. OK?'

'You think I'm hiding something?'

'You have, you might again.' The officer shrugged, smiling, and moved out of Adam's way so he could get to the front door. 'Just wanted to make sure you understood that the rules have changed.'

'Rules?'

'Until we can ascertain what's happened to Charlotte, this

is a police investigation and withholding information is against the rules.'

Adam felt himself redden. 'Why would I withhold information? You think I don't want Charlie to be found?'

The police officer looked over his shoulder, back at the lounge where his colleague was still talking to Adam's parents. He lowered his voice.

'At the moment I don't know what to think. I'm just asking, politely, that you don't do anything out of a misplaced sense of loyalty to your sister that would hinder us in doing our job. That's all.'

Normally Adam would have waited at the stop for a bus, but he felt like he needed a walk to sort out some of the shit that was cluttering up his head. In such a short time – it was only eight hours or so since Alice had called – his whole world seemed to have been picked up, shaken and spun round till he didn't know which way was up.

Charlie was missing, she was somewhere, thousands of miles away, and they had no idea where or with whom. And the police were involved, covering everything you thought or did with an aura of suspicion, as if guilt was something you carried with you like a disease. Thing was, he did feel guilty for not telling his parents about Charlie and Alice's change of plans, even though logic dictated that it probably wouldn't have changed anything. Still . . .

Walking past a small newsagent's, Adam almost veered left and went in. A siren whisper in his head was saying, 'Just one cigarette . . .', but he knew if he turned up at college smelling of fags, Suzy would go ape-shit and that would simply add to his already dismal mood. Right now he needed TLC, not telling off.

4

Parody market

Adam woke up the next morning, slowly coming to with a song playing in his head. This wasn't unusual, he quite often had a soundtrack to accompany the start of his day, but this song was different. It was a blues song which he'd originally heard as a sample on a tune by some hip-hop artist. Only available as a white label, no details, it'd taken him weeks to track down who had done the original version. Finally he'd discovered it was called 'Everyday I Have the Blues', sung by a bloke called Lowell Fulson.

This wasn't something you could just walk into Woolworth's and find on the shelf with the Top 40 and the repackaged collections of 60s, 70s and 80s stuff – all that any high-street shop seemed to carry nowadays. It did make you wonder when the charity shops had the most interesting selection of vinyl, tapes and CDs. He'd eventually found the track, through a site on the web, on a CD called *Juke Box Shuffle*.

Adam got up, wandered over to his veteran, sticker-covered mini-system, flicked through a pile of CDs until he found what he wanted – Lowell smiling at him on the cover, all cool dude, pencil moustache, smoking a cigarette – and put it on. The sound of a piano picking out a jazzy, 12-bar

blues filled the room, followed by the drummer's brushes, a soulful clarinet and then the voice, singing about loss and how bad it felt. How terminally shitty it was to be alone.

It was simple, no technology, no studio tricks. Music and nothing else. He imagined a group of friends, sitting on old wooden chairs in some bar room, just jamming together, making music because that's how they dealt with life. As he listened to the song Adam could see it all in his mind's eye; in the corner of a room, the bluesmen were sitting playing in shafts of sunlight, motes of dust falling upwards, driven by the heat of the day.

As the final note was blown and the voice died away, Adam came back to his room, his reality, his own personal loneliness. He quickly switched CDs and put on the last Foo Fighters album. Loud, driven, mindless, with a beat like a heart about to explode. You couldn't feel sad listening to it, you just felt numbed by the sonic punch. Aural painkiller.

'Adam!'

He turned and saw Suzy waving at him from across the road as he got off the bus. He waved back, feeling better the moment he saw her. Suzy'd never met Charlie, as she was already off on her travels when they became an item, but yesterday, as Adam had told her everything that had happened, she'd listened and at the end convinced him it wasn't in any way his fault, that it would all be OK. She'd managed his panic and calmed him down.

'Adam, have you seen the paper?' Suzy was waving one of the tabloids at him as he crossed the road.

'No, what about it?'

'They've got the story.'

'Story?'

'About Charlie, there's a thing about Charlie going missing . . .'

Adam grabbed the paper. 'Where?'

'A couple of pages in . . . on a right-hand page.'

'How could they know . . . ?' Adam hurriedly scanned the pages as he turned them, and then he saw the headline: BRIT BAR GIRL MISSING. It was a small news piece, only a couple of very short columns and no picture; Adam stood and read it quickly, then read it again, not quite believing what he was seeing on the page.

In an eerie echo of what happened to Lucie Blackman in 2000, another Brit bar girl, Charlotte Grey, 25, has gone missing from a club in the Roppongi district of Tokyo where she worked as a hostess earning £100 an hour. Last seen in the company of an unidentified Japanese man on Saturday night, Charlotte, who is on a gap-year trip, was reported missing by her travelling companion after she failed to return to the flat they were sharing. Like Lucie Blackman, who was murdered by businessman Joji Obara, 48, Charlotte did not have a visa and was working illegally. Police are investigating.

'How on earth could they have got to know so quickly, Adam?'

'No idea, but it's a load of crap . . .'

Adam closed the newspaper and gave it back to Suzy. 'All they got right was

the fact she's missing. Her age is wrong, she's not on a gap year and there's no way she was earning £100 an hour, that's just crap. Makes her sound like a complete tart, too, and they're assuming she's been murdered like that other girl. God, I hope my parents don't see the story – how did you know about it? You never buy a paper.'

'Andy showed it me, on the bus.'

'Shit, that means the whole bloody school'll know in two seconds flat.'

'I asked him to keep quiet . . . he might.'

'Jeez . . .' It had to be Andy. Nice guy, best mate and everything, but a mouth that flapped like a duck landing on a pond. There was no way he'd keep this quiet. Adam felt like turning round and going straight home.

'Come on, we'll be late.' Suzy tugged his arm and nodded towards the school entrance.

They hadn't got more than fifty metres into the grounds when Adam heard his name being called and saw Steve Apperly, the kind of ego-heavy smartarse every year seemed to have to have at least one of.

Steve-bloody-Apperly.

Now Adam knew why he'd had a negative reaction to the news that Alice's boyfriend was called Steve. This one was with a couple of his mates and they had a paper which they were making a big thing of reading. Adam felt his stomach knot. It had started already.

'Hey, Adam, your sister must be quite something, right?' Steve Apperly was pointing at the page he and his mates were reading. 'What the hell does £100 an hour get you, ferchrissake!'

'Some froth on your coffee!' One of the other boys smirked and dug his elbow into Steve's ribs.

Adam felt Suzy's grip tighten on his arm. 'Ignore them,' she whispered.

'Yeah, OK, but who's gonna tell them to ignore me, Suze?' Adam walked on. This, he knew, could only get worse.