

THE PRESENCE BETWEEN US

SOMETHING WAS
TAKING JAMES
UPSTAIRS.

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Chapter One

It knew my name before I spoke.

The sound of my sister's voice woke me in the middle of the night. Alice's bedroom was directly opposite mine, and an air passage above the landing linked the vents in our two rooms. During the day, we sometimes shouted insults through it. At night, it carried every creak, cough and whispered secret from one bedroom to the other. A smaller grille above the stairs opened into the same passage, carrying our voices into the hall.

At first, I assumed Alice was talking in her sleep. She often mumbled during the night, especially when she was upset. But this was different. Her voice was low and deliberate, as though she didn't want anyone else in the house to hear.

I lay still and listened.

"Tell me more," she whispered. "How can you make that happen?"

A second voice answered, but it was too faint for me to understand. It sounded rough and strained, like someone speaking through a throat filled with gravel.

It was late summer, and our bedrooms were usually uncomfortably warm. That night, cold air crept beneath my blanket.

I pulled the covers around my shoulders.

Alice spoke again, and this time I heard a name.

Natalie Jenkins.

Alice hated Natalie. They had argued several times at school, but I had never discovered what had happened between them. Whenever Mum asked, Alice refused to discuss it.

Then Alice said, "If I give myself up to you, you'll make sure Natalie has an accident?"

The other voice answered in a slow, rasping whisper.

"One she won't survive."

Alice laughed quietly.

It wasn't her usual laugh. There was no humour in it. It sounded cold and satisfied, as though she had just been promised something she had wanted for a very long time.

I pushed back my blanket and placed my feet on the floor.

The carpet was bitterly cold.

I crept towards my bedroom door and eased it open. The landing was dark apart from a narrow strip of moonlight falling through the window above the stairs. Everyone else appeared to be asleep.

Alice was still talking, but I couldn't make out her words from the hallway.

I moved closer to her room.

Her door was closed. A thin line of light shone beneath it, although I was certain Mum had made us turn everything off before bed.

I leaned towards the door, careful not to touch it.

The talking stopped.

Something scraped gently across the floorboards on the other side.

The rough voice spoke again.

“Someone is listening.”

Alice replied, “Who?”

There was a pause.

“Stephanie.”

I stepped backwards, ready to run to my room, but something appeared to be standing at the far end of the landing. It was darker than the shadows surrounding it and roughly the height and shape of a person.

I stared at it, trying to understand what I was seeing.

Perhaps it was Alice’s dressing gown hanging over the banister. Perhaps the darkness was playing tricks on me.

Then the shape moved.

One slow step forward.

Alice’s bedroom door opened.

Light spilled across the landing, and the shadow disappeared.

Alice stood in the doorway. Her hair hung loosely around her face, and her eyes looked darker than usual. She held the door close against her body, leaving only a narrow gap through which she could see me.

“What are you doing?” she asked.

I couldn’t answer.

Her expression hardened.

“It’s two in the morning, Stephanie. It’s not a good time to go sneaking around.”

Alice kept her body pressed against the door, preventing me from seeing inside. Behind her, the bedroom was dimly lit by a small lamp on the floor.

I tried to look past her.

For one brief moment, I saw the corner of her bed, the open wardrobe and something dark beside the wall. It looked like a person sitting on the floor with its knees pulled against its chest.

Alice shifted sideways and blocked my view.

Normally, I would have told her to shut up and mind her own business. We argued about everything. But that night, something in her face warned me not to challenge her.

"I'm going to the bathroom," I said.

She stared straight through me.

"You're lying."

"No, I'm not. I'm on my—"

Alice leaned closer and interrupted me with a deadly whisper.

"The bathroom isn't here. It's downstairs."

My mouth went dry. I had forgotten.

Her eyes remained fixed on mine. She looked like my sister, but something about her expression was wrong. Alice enjoyed frightening me, yet there was usually a spark of amusement behind it. That night, there was nothing.

"Go back to bed," she said. "If you know what's good for you."

I turned and walked towards my room. Every instinct told me to run, but I knew that would show her how frightened I was.

I reached my doorway and placed one hand against the frame.

“Stephanie?”

I stopped but didn’t turn around.

“If Mum and Dad ask, you didn’t see me tonight.”

Her bedroom door closed.

I hurried into my room and locked the door behind me, even though we weren’t allowed to. Then I climbed beneath the blanket and pulled it tightly around me.

From the other side of the wall came the faint sound of Alice laughing again.

The vent above my bed creaked.

I stared up at it.

Something shuffled inside the narrow passage, moving slowly from Alice’s room towards mine. Dust fell through the opening and scattered across my pillow.

Then the rough voice whispered through the vent, so close that it sounded as though its mouth were pressed against the metal grille.

“You should have listened to your sister.”

Some secrets should
never be whispered.

Continue the story

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