

## Prologue

Amelia stood in the bedroom of her prison sure that she had finally found a way out: a way to end it. Having been trapped for what felt like a very long time - and indeed it had been most of Amelia's short life - she couldn't quite believe that she was actually clutching salvation in her small hands. It was heavy, the gun, but she grasped it tightly. The metal of it cold against her palm as she held it steady, shaking only a little, she kept it pointed firmly at his sleeping chest. She watched the slow rise and fall, contrasting with her own quick, shallow breaths as she surveyed the gross sleeping form of the man on the bed. Him with his slack, fat face, and great beer-belly protruding out from beneath his grubby vest: he repulsed her. But she fought the urge to bolt, even though this time he couldn't have stopped her, and she stood summoning the last little bit of courage she needed to actually do it. She took a deep breath, praying that he wouldn't wake up, she squeezed her eyes tight shut and then pulled the trigger, three times, in quick succession, just to be sure.

The force of the gun took her by surprise and her hands were shaking terribly as she lowered it. On opening her eyes saw that there wasn't as much blood as she had expected. What was there was dark, barely red-black ooze pouring slickly from the wounds in his chest and being sucked into the mattress. He hadn't even woken up, but sick gargling noises had escaped his chest as the bullets had ripped through his lungs, allowing blood to pool in them and still his breath for good. He had convulsed briefly and then stilled. Amelia stared at him: dead. She could barely believe it. The scene she had imagined so many times was finally before her eyes.

'Bye dad,' she whispered as she dropped the gun on the floor. It landed with a final clunk, and she did not look back.

In the corridor outside she slouched against the wall pausing, feeling like she was finally able to breathe again. A strange feeling filled up her chest, somewhere between elation and panic. She waited expectantly. But she waited long enough that her breathing had completely returned to normal, what deep down she knew was much too long, and nothing had happened. Grim realisation settled in her stomach and she slid to the floor as great, shaking sobs shook her. Wrapping her arms around herself she rocked, devastated: it had taken everything she had to pull the trigger. Clutching herself she sobbed and sobbed and couldn't believe it hadn't worked. *That's it*, she thought. *It must not have worked*. She pulled herself up with renewed purpose wiping hot tears from her cheeks as she went.

From the doorway he did look dead. He was laid there splayed and still, but she reluctantly went over to check, picking up the gun and using it to prod his face. It elicited no response, and no breathing was evident. He was dead, had to be, but then why was she still here? So she put the gun to his head and fired it, taking no chances this time, the bullet launching out of the gun straight through his frontal bone. Black-red goo erupted from inside and Amelia was splattered with it. She looked at her now undeniably dead father and screamed in horror and frustration. 'I did it!' she screamed to no-one. 'I did it! He's dead!' Amelia wiped her hands on his chest, covering them with blood and goo. 'Look!' she screamed, holding her hands up to the sky. 'He's dead. Look!' she said as her voice broke and the sobs came again, unwelcomed. She sank to the floor, her back against the bed. 'He's dead and I'm still here,' she cried desperately.

Where-ever here was.

## The Stairs

Feeling as if she was falling, like in that odd time between wake and sleep, Tabitha jolted, suddenly awake and completely unsure of where she was.

Shaking herself internally she pushed herself up and found that she was in fact on a small landing: a tiny, non-descript ten foot square of concrete. Marking the edges were two sets of concrete steps: up and down. There was nothing else. The light was strange, so dim things looked blurry. Tabitha rubbed her eyes, but it didn't change a thing, everything was dulled. Instinctively she felt in her trouser pockets for her phone but she found she had nothing but the clothes she stood up in.

'Hello!' she called, her voice echoing in the concrete stairwell for what sounded like a very long way. Looking down she tried to see if she could tell how high up she was but all she could see was the descending flight of stairs giving her no idea of the scale of this strange place.

'Hello!' she called again to no response.

Preferring not to wait on this featureless landing in the semi-darkness she weighed up the two options. Down definitely seemed and felt darker somehow, as if it was deeper and she didn't like the thought of that. Deciding to go up felt easier in her heart, for some reason. Perhaps it was some primordial instinct to get above ground, she wasn't sure, but she felt instantly a little better once she began her ascent. And at least it meant she was doing something, and would hopefully find something. There was a sense of strangeness in the air and Tabitha felt as if she was breathing it in. There was something about the whole place that was like nothing she had ever experienced before, and she couldn't even begin to articulate exactly what it was, even to herself.

It took twenty steps before she reached another landing, which was equally as trim and dreary. Wondering again where she was, still seeing no doors, no signs, no potted plants even. It was quite unlike any other stairwell she had come across. But she continued on up the next staircase: she wouldn't get any answers by standing still.

Tabitha carried on crossing the sixtieth dull step and the third dreary landing and still seeing no end to all of the dull greyness. In fact, her eyes were starting to become accustomed to it. It was just a shame there was only concrete to see. She sighed, and pushed on up the next flight. There had to be something. Didn't there?

With the perturbing thought that this staircase may actually be never-ending Tabitha paused on the next landing and strained her ears trying to listen for any sign of, well, anything; anything that would break the strange, silent emptiness of this place. But there was nothing.

Somewhere around the seventh landing she paused again willing herself to hear something. The silence was as oppressive as the greyness, if not more so. Tabitha could feel panic rising in her chest, feeling trapped in this place, and scared that she would never find anything. Suddenly terrified she had died and ended up in some sort of limbo, the emptiness more of a torturous thing than any kind of hell she had imagined before. She turned away from this thought as soon as it came; it was too awful to contemplate. Instead with a new determination she stormed up the steps. She would find something. She had to.

Pausing, a few more landings up she listened again. After a few seconds the faintest sound of a voice echoed from not far above. Tabitha wondered if she had imagined it. But she continued on, hopeful that the voice was real and that she would soon have some company in this desolate place. Maybe company who could shed some light on things, both literally and figuratively, she thought surveying the unshifting gloom. She hoped they would be friendly, and wondered why: she had no reason to think she would encounter someone hostile. No reason except for the oddness of the place, the eerie not-quite-rightness. She shook the thought. There was only one way to find out, and she was getting a little sick of her lonely climb. Any company was better than none, surely?

A few steps on she heard the quiet murmur again, and this time she was sure it wasn't just in her head. As she climbed and rounded the next landing she rejoiced that she could hear the voice more clearly now. Her heart felt a little lighter knowing there was another living person here, and that she wasn't doomed to wander the concrete steps alone. Pausing, she listened to it, and in fact it sounded a little angry. *Annoyed*, Tabitha corrected, *definitely annoyed*. She approached the next landing quietly; sure she would find its source there, and hoping her hostile thought had been unfounded.

The horizon line of the eleventh landing came into view, and instead of grey emptiness it was decorated with a woman crouching on the floor. The woman was about Tabitha's age; maybe a year or two older, or she seemed it anyway, perhaps because of the harsh set of her jaw, and the long, lined forehead. She was fiddling with her perfectly straightened black hair, and Tabitha was glad that she looked fairly normal, except that she was whispering angrily at what Tabitha first thought was the floor.

Tabitha approached with caution, the fact she was talking to herself made the woman look a little mad, and despite the pull of another human soul Tabitha wanted to pass on keeping the company of a madwoman. Maybe she was hostile; maybe solitude was preferable to that. She waited, hoping she wasn't as mad as she seemed. Then she heard another voice join the conversation. It was male, and its source was blocked from Tabitha's view, at the other end of the landing or maybe the next set of stairs. Tabitha couldn't hear what they were saying but slightly more satisfied that the woman maybe wasn't mad (at least she wasn't talking to herself), Tabitha ascended the last few steps and stood carefully on the landing. The boy looked younger than the woman, maybe nineteen, but Tabitha couldn't see him clearly. He was curled into himself, and nestled tightly into the corner with his eyes fixed on the next flight of stairs, like an animal caught in a trap, with the stairs as the hunter.

'Dig you really need to get a grip. We're not going to spend the next god-knows how long here just because you think the bogey monster is hiding up the stairs!' said the woman.

'It's not safe,' the boy whispered sheepishly.

'You're mad. This is ridiculous Diggory even for you,' said the woman resolutely, crossing her arms. Yet she didn't make a move for the stairs either.

They were too distracted with each other to notice Tabitha, despite her being only a couple of feet from the woman. Tabitha coughed tentatively, not wanting to stay unannounced. The woman looked at her, doing a double take before scrambling up and putting a few more feet between them.

'Aarghh!' screamed the boy, looking at Tabitha before holding his hands over his face. 'It's not safe. It's not saafe!' he screamed as his last words descended into sobs.

The woman stood to the left of the boy, her back firmly against the wall, staring wide-eyed and wary at Tabitha. 'Be quiet Diggory,' she said, absentmindedly tapping his head. 'Who are you and what are you doing here?'

'I'm Tabitha, and I'm, erm, well, I'm not really sure.'

'Oh.'

'Not safe. Not safe. Not safe. Not safe,' said the boy quietly in time with his rocking.

'What's wrong with him?' asked Tabitha.

'Just try and ignore him. That's my usual tack,' said the woman, relaxing a little.

'Who are you two? You're the first people I've seen in this *place*,' the woman just stared at Tabitha, and for an awful moment Tabitha thought she wasn't going to say anything.

'I'm Rin,' she said with a small hint of a smile. 'And this unfortunately is Diggory, but call him what you like for all I care. Digging lunatic at the moment,' she said tutting.

'Right. Well hello. Do you know where we are?'

Rin stepped into the middle of the landing and spread her arms out, letting out a small laugh. 'No idea. None at all. You?'

'Well aside from some sort of staircase I'm none the wiser either.'

'Well here we are,' said Rin sitting down again.

Tabitha sat down too, opposite the still-rocking Diggory. 'How long have you and Diggory been here?'

'Well here as in this landing, about I don't know, an hour maybe. Brave Diggory won't budge. And here as in this grey, never-ending staircase of nothing: what feels like forever. Probably about half a day,' she looked up, thinking. 'I want to say all morning, but who knows if it actually is.'

'So you've been up there?' Tabitha asked, pointing to the next flight of stairs.

'Oh no we came from further down.'

'Oh, same as me. How far down were you?'

'Not sure but we walked a long way up, I lost count at the twelfth flight. I reckon that one there would've been at least our fifteenth, if Mr Scardey-Cat here hadn't flipped out on me.'

'You came from further down than me,' Tabitha said. 'This is the eleventh landing I've seen.'

Rin continued fiddling with her hair, whilst Diggory rocked and murmured quietly to himself.

‘Why does he think it’s not safe?’ said Tabitha.

‘God knows, on some sort of come down I think.’

‘Oh right,’ said Tabitha, surveying the boy again, but not gleaning anything, except that he was wearing fairly normal, wide-legged jeans with frayed edges. Poking out from the bottom were scuffed Nike trainers, and she could see a silver chain hanging from the jeans waistband on one side. That was some sort of teenage fashion, Tabitha recalled, those that liked heavy rock used to wear chains like that. From what she could see he didn’t look like your typical user, but then again appearances could be deceptive. ‘Drugs?’ asked Tabitha cautiously.

‘Not like you mean, no,’ said Rin.

They sat there for a few minutes of awkward silence, listening to Diggory’s chanting, before Tabitha broke it by asking, ‘Are you together?’

‘Ha!’ Rin laughed. ‘No. that would be wrong.’

‘Oh, I didn’t mean it in that way, sorry. I just meant do you know each other, you know normally?’

‘Always. Unfortunately,’ said Rin.

‘And you being together would be wrong because he’s turned into some sort of, what did you say, digging lunatic?’

‘No it would be wrong because I don’t practice incest,’ said Rin.

‘Ah, I see,’ she looked over at Diggory with his head still buried in his hands. ‘I couldn’t really see to see the family resemblance.’

‘It’s weak anyway. And you can’t see a bloody thing in this light,’ said Rin.

‘I know it’s like being in an old movie, all black and white.’

‘Tell me about it, it’s depressing, I feel like I’ve travelled back in time.’

‘You don’t think we have do you?’ said Tabitha. ‘I don’t see how but-’

‘That’d be some sick joke wouldn’t it? Surprise! You’ve travelled back to the 1930s, and just to prove it you’re stuck in a black and white movie, excellent. And with a demented brother to boot.’

‘I don’t think they had so much concrete in the 1930s,’ said Tabitha unconvinced.

‘Well I don’t think we’ve really travelled back in time to some weird 1930s movie either have we.’

'No, I know,' said Tabitha, pausing. 'But still the light's weird, well, it's not the light is it, it's like everything's changed colour. I'm sure these trousers used to be navy, but look at them, they're dark grey.'

'Yeh it is weird,' said Rin looking down at herself. 'I'm sure this top was red.'

'And look at our skin, it has a greyish tinge, like we're half-dead,' said Tabitha, shuddering a little.

'Not a reassuring thought,' said Rin, looking purposefully at Diggory.

'You don't think we are dead do you?' asked Tabitha, oblivious.

'No I don't.'

'Not safe, not safe, not safe,' came Diggory's voice.

Rin ignored him. 'Do I look dead to you?' she said to Tabitha. 'I'm breathing, I can feel my heart beating. I feel alive. Don't you?'

'Kind of.'

'Kind of? So you feel dead then?'

'No,' said Tabitha, pausing. 'I just don't feel, quite, I don't know, right. Don't you feel like that?'

'Well I think a little unease is acceptable given the circumstances, stuck on a never-ending staircase in some black and white version of Neverland for Christ sake. We're bound to feel a little out of kilter, but it doesn't mean we're dead,' said Rin. Then she continued in slightly hushed tones, gesturing over to Diggory who was still rocking. 'And the last thing Diggory needs to hear is that we're in some messed up version of hell. *That* will be anything but helpful.'

'Sorry,' said Tabitha.

They sat there for some time again, rather awkwardly, listening to Diggory quietly chanting and rocking. Rin had started playing with her hair again, and was now sucking on a strand of it, staring off into the distance. Tabitha felt her adrenaline rising as she looked up the staircase, and despite it being just the same as all of the many stairs she had already encountered she couldn't help feeling maybe Diggory had a point, there was a sense of foreboding about it. It was a niggling, nagging feeling in her gut, telling her that there was something not quite right. Something dangerous maybe. She tried to shake the thought away, preferring to think that it was just Diggory's fear that had morphed into a monster in his head.

Tabitha told herself not to be stupid, at least she wasn't alone. It was just her mind playing tricks. *It's a happy place*, she thought to herself. *Everything is ok*. Even though she was fairly sure it wasn't.

'So were you just planning to wait here until he calmed down or something?' Tabitha asked, breaking the long silence.

‘Something like that,’ said Rin. ‘Maybe it’s been long enough.’ She went over to his crumpled form and stroked his arm. ‘Dig, come on now, have you calmed down?’

‘But it’s not safe Rin,’ he whispered meekly. He did seem calmer though and at least the rocking and chanting had abated. Tabitha thought he seemed rather depleted: spent from the exhausting effort of maintaining his fear.

‘I’m sure it’s fine, come on now, why down you have a stand up for me?’

He peeled his hands away from his face and his eyes darted towards the staircase, then to Tabitha. Tabitha looked into his pupils which were ringed with a colour more greyscale than the normal human eye, but by the light tone of it she guessed his eyes were ordinarily blue or green. Whatever the colour, they were haunted, deep, scared looking eyes and they were staring right at her. The bags under them aged him far past his years, and he was much paler than her or Rin. He looked ill. She wondered again if he was an addict, thinking that the eyes fit the bill if nothing else.

‘Who’s that?’ he asked looking back towards Rin, clinging to her arm like a scared babe.

‘That’s Tabitha Dig, she’s lost here just like us.’

‘Hello.’

‘Tabitha,’ he said, his mouth forming the word slowly.

‘That’s it. And I’m Rin, remember?’ Rin smiled sarcastically. ‘Now how about we stand up?’

Slowly with Rin helping him Diggory rose to his feet, he was looking quick in all directions, like he could see things on the bare floor, and indeed maybe he could. He did seem more than a little crazy, Tabitha reflected, he could probably see ghosts, or indeed monsters. She looked again at the next set of stairs and shook her head. *Happy place*, she thought.

‘Right now let’s get a move on, see if we can find anything in this goddam place. Come on Dig, one foot in front of the other. Follow Tabitha,’ she said looking at Tabitha and smiling a plastic smile.

Tabitha took a look at the stairs, her gut tugging at her to go back the other way, but she already knew what lay down for at least fifteen floors if Rin was right. At least up presented a new possibility, so she started, shaking the thought of monsters firmly from her mind. Monsters didn’t exist. They were just in your head.

‘It’s not hers though,’ said Diggory, momentarily more aware, as he and Rin started to follow.

‘That’s it Diggory, follow Tabitha huh, up the stairs we go. There are no monsters I’m sure, now come on, you’re too big to be dragged up.’

*Onwards and upwards in the happy place* sighed Tabitha mirthlessly.

When they were about to start the third flight, even though Diggory had been whimpering all the way, being coaxed a little less than gently by Rin, Tabitha did think it felt a bit lighter. Lighter or warmer, she wasn't sure. Just more alive somehow, things didn't seem quite the same dull-dead grey of the lower levels. It almost felt electric. The uneasy feeling still nagged at her but now there was something more like a kind of magnetism that was drawing her in. Looking up she could see something on the wall of the landing ahead: a solid dark grey line protruding just above the horizon line of the last step. It was still grey, but at least it was something and as Tabitha approached she could see it was a sign. Finally, there might be some clue about where they were. Bolting up the last few steps she saw it was a typical directional sign that would have been at home in any hotel stairwell. It was small, dark grey with white numbers and an arrow pointing up. It was not a particularly interesting sign, but it was the most exciting thing they had seen here. The only thing in fact. It read:

7039320

She stared at it. No idea what it meant, but thankful that there was some clue at last.