

HIDE & SEEK

EXCERPT

Chapter one

The grown-ups held an inquiry into how a child came to disappear, but they didn't name names like they do when children let grown-ups down. They talked about a catalogue of errors as if mistakes were something that turned up in the post and got paid for later.

I had my own ideas. I blamed the driver, and, in different orders depending on how I was feeling:

Mr Pratt – really, that was his name – the larkiest teacher in our school, who was so free and easy he didn't bother to take a register on the bus.

My brother, Daniel Pickles, who was going on five, though the way he acted sometimes you'd never believe he was so old.

Dan's invisible friend, Biffo.

And me, Harry Pickles, that summer aged nine and a bit.

Now that enough time has gone by and I can talk about those days it feels right to begin, not with the coach trip and the day things went wrong, but the day before, when my Auntie Joan married Otis, which people kept saying was the start of something wonderful.

I think of my mum pounding down the stairs in her slinky silver dress.

'And what do you think you are doing?'

I was sitting on Daniel's face. It was obvious what I was doing. I pretended Mo wasn't there, let rip another one.

'Phwoagh,' said Daniel.

‘Harry! That’s disgusting!’ When she was cross she got more Irish. ‘Will you stop it. What’s this about?’

Mo never thought to break us up before the interrogation. I counted eight lumps of cotton wool between her toes, admired the way her purple toenails gleamed and took my time about it while Dan puffed and wriggled between my legs. When I’d used up all my ammo I said,

‘Dan’s bugging me again.’

‘Daniel, what have you to say for yourself?’

A muffled whine came out of him.

‘Will I spank the pair of you?’

She never did. I decided it was time to hop off.

‘Harry won’t help me find Bang Bang,’ Daniel whined.

‘We’ve no time to worry about Bang Bang today. Harry, I don’t know why you feel obliged to torture your brother and Daniel I don’t know why you put up with it.’

She had the answer right there if she thought about it.

‘Will you look at your clothes!’

They were crumpled.

‘We’ll have those shirts off and ironed again.’

She clucked us into the laundry room and we pulled off our horrible pink shirts.

‘I want to be a fireman,’ Daniel said.

I agreed with him on that. We had real fire-fighters’ uniforms that whispered as you walked, with cool silver bands that shimmered in the dark and proper helmets, not plastic ones. We weren’t allowed to wear them to the wedding. Oh, no. We had to wear pancy pink shirts to match the bridesmaids.

Barechested, we sat on the tumble-dryer. I tried not to kick my heels against it. Mo pressed under the buttons. Her nearly black eyebrows snuggled closer together. I could see right down her bazongers.

‘Absolutely no more fighting today,’ she said.
‘You know exactly what’s required of you.’

No way was I going to do that.

She said, ‘We’re all Joan’s got.’

She meant on account of Mo and Joan had no parents.

‘You don’t want to spoil Joan’s big day, do you?’

We didn’t. We really didn’t. So we shook on it.

‘Sorry, Harry.’

‘Sorry, Daniel.’

Daniel smiled at me. I didn’t smile back.

Mo put the iron down, said, ‘I’ve one little favour to ask you,’ and helped Daniel on with his shirt.

Dan shrieked. Then I smiled.

Mo whisked off the shirt and shook it cool. Typical Dan, didn’t complain or anything. She helped him on with it again.

‘Not everyone is aware, as you are, that Joan and Otis live together, and there is no need today of all days for any unexpected announcements from you. Understood?’

‘Understood, Mo,’ I said. It sounded like secrets. We weren’t supposed to have those. Dan fumbled with his buttons and said in that dreamy way of his, ‘I liked it when Joan lived here, when Otis got the girlfriend.’

Mo shot us both a how-did-you-know-that look. I didn’t know that’s why Joan had come to stay that time, couldn’t believe it, that Otis would leave us for another woman.

Mo bit her lip, gently – she had her wedding face on.

‘Today is the beginning of something wonderful for Joan and Otis. Let’s forget about the past.’

I wouldn’t go on about it but I wouldn’t forget.

Dan jumped off the dryer – ‘Da-Daaah!’ – showed off his buttons.

Mo said, ‘Good boy, yourself!’

I don't know why. It wasn't rocket science.

Dan said, 'If we had a television we could plug it in and switch it on and -'

I mouthed, 'Not now, Daniel,' in perfect time as Mo said it out loud.

Me and Dan were fed, brushed, ironed, combed and fighting to stand on the tile where the sun shone when Pa swept into the kitchen, drop-dead handsome and smelling of lime. No pink on him.

He held out his arms to us. 'My beauties!'

My Auntie Joan used to say we had big brown come-to-bed-with-me eyes with extra long lashes like Pa's.

'Boys aren't beautiful, boys are smart,' Daniel said.

'You boys are beautiful and smart,' said Pa. 'And very nearly late. Come on. Of all people we have to be on time.'

The wedding was smack bang in the middle of Notting Hill, just like us. We only had to walk out of our house, across the garden square, around the corner and up the church steps. Forty-five seconds, it took, if you got a move on. I timed it.

'A tent!' Dan gasped the minute he got out of the house. You'd think the Martians had landed.

'It's a marquee, Daniel,' I said. 'For after the wedding,' in case he still didn't get it.

In next door's garden Shy Geoffrey popped his head out from behind The Times to tell us something. Something nice, most likely, Good Luck, or Have a Nice Wedding, something like that. You never could tell exactly on account of how he mumbled.

Out in the square Mrs Gomez was throwing a wobbly because someone, and They'd Better Not Think She Didn't Know Who They Were, had left the hosepipe running. She broke off to do a wolf-whistle for us.

‘Nice dress, Mo,’ said Sebastiano’s mum as we strolled by. Then she turned and bellowed at the bushes, ‘You’ll have it cold or not at all!’

Leaves moved, but there was no sight of Sebastiano, who was a master of camouflage and allergic to houses.

We passed the den. Cal blew a salute on the conch shell. Pa waved.

Mo said, ‘I see you’ve got it back then, Callum.’

Me, Cal and the other big boys had been playing Lord of the Flies til Milly’s dad had his sense of humour failure and confiscated the shell. Milly was a pig we were hunting with spears. She was two. She didn’t mind. She’d helped us gather firewood for the spit.

Seb’s mum shouted, ‘Callum, have you seen Sebastiano?’

Cal selected stones for his catapult, pretended not to hear. We had a code of honour, you see.

When we got to the corner Mo dropped her keys and bent down to pick them up. Pa gave her a whack on the behind. She slapped his arm.

‘Will you stop that, Dominic!’

I could tell she liked it, though. Luckily Cal was taking aim at the one-eyed cat and didn’t see.

I don’t need to tell you much about the wedding. They’re all the same, aren’t they? Everyone whispered about whether Joan would turn up on time. She did, though. I wasn’t nervous until the pastor asked if any of us knew a reason why Otis and Joan shouldn’t get married. Pa knew some reasons. I hoped he wouldn’t say them. The pastor left a huge long silence as if he knew one too. I held my breath for luck, closed my eyes and tried to figure out that row I’d heard Mo and Pa at in the bathroom.

‘Not that again,’ said Pa.

‘’Twas you brought it up.’ Mo’s voice strained.

‘I only said.’

'I heard you.'

I didn't hear the next bit. Pa had the taps running. When he turned them off I caught,

'You know how intelligent women can be blinded by that sort of man.'

'What sort, exactly?'

He shook his shaving foam. 'Handsome. Charming. Stylish.'

Then he squirted. 'And the boxing.'

'What about the boxing?'

'It's so . . . It's all blockheads and brutes, Mo.'

'Dom! What is your problem?'

'Let's leave it.'

'You're the one keeps bringing it up.'

I heard the scrape of Pa's razor, the killer one he got off his dad.

'All right, Mo.' He said it softly, like something dangerous was coming. 'Ever seen him reading a book?'

Nothing from Mo. Must be tick-ticking towards one of her explosions.

'Oh and we're such a cultured pair.' Her voice had laughter in it, actually. 'Mo Tully, Me and My Boys.'

'Your column's very good, hun.'

He was stretching his face, shaving round his mouth, most likely.

'It's hardly Dostoyevsky, Dom. And as for you.'

'What about me? Bugger! Ouch!'

'I hardly think a lifetime's subscription to the Lancet counts as culture.'

'All I meant was -'

'Dom. Please don't let me think the father of my babies is a snob.'

Pa let out a sigh.

'Maybe I am. Yes. Probably it's me. You know how much I care about Joanie.'

'Honey,' she said, 'you're dripping blood on the floor.'

Plop! Plop! Big Plop! Only Mo could win an argument and poo all at once.

Daniel sneezed. Flowers did that to him. But it was all right. He used the handkerchief like Mo had told him.

Whatever Pa was thinking he didn't say it and the pastor got right on with the vows.

Joan, it turned out, was actually called Meredith Joan. That was news to some people. Not me and Dan. We'd found out in rehearsals.

I thought we were home and dry but then came 'To Have and To Hold,' and Otis, well, how can I tell you? Otis, who could skip non-stop for a whole entire hour, do thirty pressups with Daniel clinging to his back, Otis cried. I mean really cried, sobbed out loud. I nearly died of embarrassment.

Daniel, like an idiot, stepped between Otis and Joan, grabbed Otis's thumb and gave it a squeeze. Otis stopped crying and ruffled Dan's hair. Then I wished I had thought of it.

After that everything went according to plan. No-one fainted. The ring wasn't lost. Me and Dan were brilliant pageboys. We didn't fight, fart or upset the bridesmaids.

I had a bit of trouble when Otis and Joan got to the stuff about honouring each other's bodies. My lips twitched. I felt the giggles coming on. But I was ready. I clenched my teeth and in my head I listed my all-time favourite Spurs team, including substitutes.

I expect you know about wedding receptions - chicken salad, Christmas cake and speeches that make your neck ache. It wasn't like that at Otis and Joan's wedding. The grown-ups had crawly things that would tap-dance off the plates if you didn't stick your fork in quick. I had my own special plantains mashed up by Otis's mum with her secret ingredient. And Dan had one jacket potato with Lurpak, his favourite meal in the world.

For pudding there was black chocolate mousse. Otis and Joan stood up, thanked everyone, said how much they loved each other, and – this bit made me puke – Otis thanked Daniel, for ‘bringing us together in the first place.’

It was true, though.

I could just see Dan Dan, fat, stupid and two, trying to squeeze between the café railings in Holland Park. He got his head through all right, but his shoulders wouldn't pass and when he tried to back out he was stuck. He didn't cry, not straightaway. He grasped the railings either side and slid his head up and down, trying to find a bigger gap. There wasn't one. He moved his head round as far as it would go, lifted one foot off the ground. That didn't work, so he stopped and stood, thinking. I crept up behind him, gave him a shove. He yelped. Still he didn't cry.

I looked around for someone to help us. With a bit of luck I'd sort it and Mo would never know. Just the other side of the railings a pregnant woman and a toddler had a picnic on a rug. No use at all. Beyond them, some lanky boys played football. One snatched up the ball and jabbed his finger at the others. They seemed like tough boys to me. At the far end of the park, people played noiseless tennis. Daniel made a sort of gurgling sound.

I ran up the café steps to fetch Mo and Joan. They would have seen us if they hadn't been eating ice-cream and laughing. I told them what Daniel was doing, got the gurgling off perfect. They stopped laughing and dashed for the railings. I hung back to rescue their chocolate flakes. They'd dropped their cornets, you see.

When I caught up, Mo was saying, ‘It's all right, Dan Dan, it's all right,’ in a way that told him it was not all right at all. I wiped chocolate from my mouth. Dan's bottom lip quivered.

Joan said in a put-on cheery voice, 'This is a job for Dangermouse.'

The sky darkened. I saw leaves vibrate. Dan cried.

Joan said, 'Harry, fetch my bag please would you, darling?'

She probably carried important life saving equipment about on account of she was a nurse at the hospital. I raced for the bag, held it out while she fumbled in it and came up with a bottle. It said Body Shop on it and something about carrots. She smeared orangey stuff over Daniel's ears.

'Steeeenks!' Daniel blubbed. His neck grew fatter. Mo gripped him by the arms and wailed, 'Try to relax!'

Dan's face turned purple. Then the rain came. We didn't have anoraks. That toddler screamed and kicked at picnic things its mother tried to gather up. Tennis players ran for cover. Footballers bickered and pulled on their anoraks. I licked chocolaty rain from my lips.

Joan said, 'Let's call the fire brigade.'

Fantastic! I'd never seen anyone do that in my life before.

Joan dived into her bag, came up with a mobile phone and dropped it, on account of the rain and the moisturiser. She picked it up, punched 999.

Rain dripped off my nose and I shivered. I needed a pee. It was ages before anyone answered. Daniel was only whimpering by the time I saw a dot moving towards us from way beyond the tennis courts. The dot turned into a fire-fighter - he had his helmet on and everything. He sprinted like a god or Linford Christie. Before it seemed possible he appeared, handsome and black, towering over us the other side of the railings. He'd brought a crowbar and a calm that worked instant magic on all of us.

I wanted him to notice me. He was looking at Daniel. He dropped to his haunches alongside my

brother, put his face close and smiled. They might have been the only two people in the park.

'I'm very good at this,' he said and I believed him.

He pulled off the helmet, passed it to me. Heat came up out of it. He put the crowbar on the ground, took hold of one railing, got his heavy boot against the other. Dan's soft baby hair stroked the boot's muddy ridges. The fireman tensed, closed his eyes, breathed out through his nose. Mo raised a weak hand. The railings bent like Curly Wurlies. Daniel fell forward. Before his face could hit the ground the fireman caught him one-handed, passed him through the gap and into Mo's arms. It all happened in a moment and that moment I fell in love with Otis.

Auntie Joan took a lot longer about it.

Otis's family was bonkers. It spread like nits and I caught it. Me and Dan actually danced with the bridesmaids. Mine could speak Spanish, play violin and football. She said 'see y'around', when we'd finished. Otis's mum said I was an excellent dancer and it was nice for Otis to have boys in the family. He had two little brothers, but they were men, so didn't count. I told her I couldn't see Daniel turning into a man and she laughed. I began to know how adults felt when they were tipsy.

We were the last children up at the party. Dan lay across some chairs under Otis's jacket, his arms flung out. I could easily drop a grape into his wide open mouth, watched the dancing instead. Couples stuck together swayed to mushy music. Coloured lights skittered the floor.

To keep myself from sleeping I tried counting fire-fighters. It would have been easier if they'd brought their axes or something.

I held a competition in my head for the best-looking couple. Mo and Pa had to be contenders. Pa's hand covered the small of Mo's back, pressed her

close, seemed he was sniffing her hair. Joan had blue laughing eyes and shiny black hair just like Mo's, only Joan looked like she might float off the floor, up, up through the top of the tent, that's how happy she was. Luckily Otis had his strong arms around her. Really they should have won. I mean, it was their wedding. I gave it to Mo and Pa anyway, by a whisker.

Daniel startled like a baby. I put my hand on his chest, said, 'It's all right. You can stay sleeping,' and he did.

Next thing I knew Pa had me propped against our front door while he went through all his pockets for the keys. Mo had them. Pa carried me in and up the stairs. Behind us Mo knocked Daniel's head against the banister.

From inside his sleep Dan groaned, 'Everyone's got a television.'

Mo laughed, 'Not now, Daniel.'

Pa dumped me on my bed in the dark. He was trying to be gentle. It wasn't working. He had difficulty with my shoes.

'Velcro,' I said, then he managed it.

He undid my trousers, pulled them off by the ends, unbuttoned my shirt, left it on. He was rough and I liked it. He didn't bother with my boxers or my socks.

'Teeth, Pa.'

'Not tonight, sweet boy.'

Pa pulled the duvet up to my chin, pressed it round me. He leaned down to kiss me, jabbed his nose in my eye. He kissed my forehead, stroked my hair, murmured something mushy. I couldn't make out the words. His breath smelled of wine. He had smoked a cigar. He felt bristly.

A tube train trundled by and then another one. They sounded tired, like they were heading home to bed.

D'dee D'dee, said the trains. *D'dee D'dee*.

I heard Mo tiptoe down the stairs from Dan's room. She met Pa on the landing. I heard low, teasing voices. They seemed to be wrestling. There was giggling and shushing. It must have been the last night I went to sleep feeling safe.