

Hold My Hand, by Serena Mackesy

Chapter Thirty-two

The TV has been on the blink for nearly a year. The only way to turn it on and off has been to crawl round the back and switch it off at the wall. But tonight, when she has emerged on her hands and knees from turning it on, nothing has happened at all. She's tried taking the fuse out of the kettle and using that in its plug, but it's made no difference: there's no sound, no picture, and the red light on the front which shows that the set is connected remains obdurately dark. She's tried all the usual tricks which are so effective with delicate technology: banging it hard on its top; tipping it forward and rocking it back and forth on its stand; shouting at it. But nothing has happened. The machine has died.

It squats in the corner, laughing at her, reminding her that everything she owns is on its last legs, one way or another. You can only make do and mend for so long in a world where built-in obsolescence is the key to manufacturing growth. All the stuff, the accoutrements of modern adult life, will need replacing, bit by bit, as her money situation steadies. That's one of the miserable, crushing things about poverty: once you've been in it for a while, the distance between you and what other people would call a civilised level of existence gets greater and greater.

Never mind, she thinks. I saw a second-hand TV shop in Bodmin, in one of those pikey three-for-two, everything for a pound, discount streets the tourists never see. I'll buy one – just a small one, it doesn't have to be anything grand – when next month's money comes in, and that will tide us over until we have some money. And in the meantime, I'll use all that stuff down in the drawing room. It would be stupid not to. I can't spend every night alone here with nothing to keep me company. I'm not the embroidering type.

As she's going downstairs, baby alarm and copy of the *Mirror* tucked into her armpit, mug of tea in her hand, blanket thrown over her shoulder, she glances out of the window and sees that it has begun to snow. Eddies of white circle beyond the pane, lit up by the security light, which she keeps on permanently at night since the scare. She pauses in the dining room and climbs onto the window seat, leans her elbows on the sill and presses her nose and forehead on the cold glass. I do hope it lies, she thinks. Yasmin's never actually seen snow lying on the ground, except in pictures. They do say you hardly ever get snow lying around here, but we're an island on the edge of the Arctic Circle, for heaven's sake. It's got to happen some time.

She feels like a burglar. Feels strangely guilty, though she's never been told she can't use the house. The equipment is there, after all, sitting unused, and it's not as if she's having a wild party or anything. No-one could begrudge her a night in front of the telly when her own has broken down. And yet – she feels like an interloper. Feels that Tom Gordhavo will somehow *know*. Is careful to put a coaster under the mug as though he'd be able to tell the difference between servants' stains and tenants'.

The big sofa is more comfortable than she had expected. It looks hard and austere with its leather frame and kelim cushions, but feels like the firmest, most welcoming of beds when she lies on it. It's cold in here – she doesn't feel confident to run the boiler above its defrost level when there are no tenants because a house this size will eat heating oil – and she's glad of her blanket. She doubles it over and lies with her head on a cushion, only her head and the hand that holds the remote control protruding. Hits the power switch and begins to flick through the channels.

He's got the full gamut of satellite. She feels a small surge of resentment. He's paying for this, no doubt advertising it as part of the attraction of the house, but there's no aerial outlet in the flat. People like me, she thinks, get five channels only. Even Freeview doesn't work down here without a proper aerial

to feed the box. And all this time, there's been forty channels just sitting there waiting for people who are here on holiday and the least likely of all to need it.

QVC has a diamonique sale on. BBC4 has a documentary on Sam Johnson. BBC3 is rerunning *Four Pints of Lager and a Packet of Crisps*. UKTV is showing *Are You Being Served*. The History Channel is doing something on the Nazis. ITV3 is showing *Police Academy 4: Citizens on Patrol* again. E4 is doing a *Friends* all-nighter. FilmFour is in Czech.

Ok, she thinks. Forty channels and it's still all crap. She tries the movie channels. *Lord of the Rings*. Great. If I wanted to see what it was like to climb a mountain in real time I'd go and climb it myself. Kirsten Dunst, smirking. She doesn't even wait to see what the film is. *Twenty-eight Days Later*. Zombies with their faces hanging off, running howling at the camera. She used to love zombie movies. Always cherished a secret ambition to be an extra in a Romero film. To sit around eating bacon sandwiches with half her head falling off.

Yeah, but. I'm so suggestible these days I'd never sleep again if I watched that. I'm seeing ghosts as it is.

Yasmin stirs in her sleep, mutters, goes quiet again. Beyond the window, a singing quietness tells her that the snow is still falling. She tucks herself further in, mesmerises herself with an auction for a waterproof watch and a Star Wars fabric patch kit. Finds something with Shirley MacLaine in. Settles.

She's surprisingly tired, she realises. All I need now, she thinks, is a nice warm cat on my lap and I'd be off to sleep in seconds. Shirley is wearing clashing fabrics and saying outrageous things while a younger woman rolls her eyes. This is fine. Good background. She unfurls her arms, opens the paper. Someone from last year's *Big Brother* has got drunk in a nightclub. A group of footballers have got drunk in a nightclub. Two young men have been shot in their car two roads over from the Streatham flat. Tom Cruise is barking mad. Madonna's got the builders in again. Nikola, 23, from Purley thinks the government should be doing more about law and order and has taken her top off

to prove it. Some actors from *EastEnders* have got drunk in a nightclub. There's been a dust-up at the first day of the Harrods sale between three people all after the same plasma TV. The TV was broken and all three were arrested. Ken Livingstone wants to knock down Admiralty Arch to make room for bendy buses.

I don't miss London at all, she thinks. All that argy-bargy and elbowing and thinking you are your consumer goods. She yawns, sips her tea. The young woman has stormed out of the house and Shirley is pulling "so-what" faces and polishing a vase.

Her horoscope says that someone from the past is thinking about her. And that Love will be found where friends share spicy food.

The newsprint begins to swim. I'm tireder than I thought, she thinks. Maybe I should've gone to bed rather than coming down here. I'd go back up now, but I can't be arsed. I'll wait a bit, rest up til I've got the energy.

She drops the paper onto the floor. Stares up at the ceiling. The rooms are low here, in comparison with their size. She can make every detail of the knotting in the beams, illuminated in relief by the lamp on the side table. There are faces in the wood; long, despairing faces: the spirits of the trees, mourning the lives they once had. Bridget blinks away a batch of sleep-tears. Tries to watch the movie. Realises that the actors might as well be speaking Martian for all she's taking in. She hits the mute on the remote for some peace and quiet. Closes her eyes, just for a second.

"I'm cold... I'm so cold..."

Bridget feels as though she is swimming underwater, as though she has fallen into a deep, dark lake, that the current is trying to suck her down. Who was that? Who just said that?

"Where is she? She's downstairs... don't worry... we have time..."

Whispering. Not speaking. I'm asleep. I've fallen asleep.

She kicks upward, struggles, breaks free. Something was holding me. I must

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She wakes with a start, all limbs jumping. Hears a croak break from her throat, looks around. Panics because she doesn't know where she is. Somewhere large and dark and... Rospetroc. I'm in the drawing room at Rospetroc. I was dreaming. I must have gone right off to sleep.

Her limbs are dead-weighted beneath the blanket, her body temperature down from lying open-bodied under such inadequate covers. She lifts her head and looks at the screen. It is black: white lettering scrolling up the centre. Gosh, I must have been asleep a while. The film's finished. What time is it?

Nearly eleven. Damn. I've been out for well over an hour. I'll be awake all night, now.

The baby alarm crackles, comes alive.

"It's all right... go on... take it..."

Bridget frowns.

"She'll never know. She's downstairs, I told you."

Yasmin sounds – different. But people do when they're whispering. What is she up to?

There's an urgency to the next one. *"Hurry up! Hurry up! I can hear her! She's coming!"*

Eleven at night. How long has she been awake? Bridget sits up, kills the TV.

"I'm cold. I'm so cold. Oh, don't... I want my Mum."

God. Is she looking for me? I'd better...

A harsh giggle. Spiteful. What's going on? What is she doing?

The voice speaks out loud. It doesn't sound like Yasmin at all. "Stop it! Stop it! Oh, don't! Stop it!"

Bridget is on her feet in an instant. It's OK, baby, I'm on my way. She leaves the mug, the blanket, takes only the alarm. Runs through the house, his the beat of urgency. I'm coming, darling. I'm coming.

Another laugh. "she won't know... don't you see? She won't know. She'll

say it was your fault. It's always your fault..."

She reaches the flat stairs. Calls up them. "Yasmin?"

She's running up the staircase, bouncing off the close, tight walls. It's so cold in here. How could I leave her when it's so cold? It feels as though the air is freezing.

The corridor is quiet, empty. Bridget glances into the rooms as she passes them, the silent kitchen, the dark sitting room. My baby. I'm coming. G. belts down the sisal carpet, puts her hand on Yasmin's bedroom door handle. It's almost frozen, like a block of ice. "It's all right," she says as she enters. "I'm here."

No movement. No noise. The night light burns on, in the corner, its thick mobile shade casting moons and stars and comets on the walls, the sloped eaves ceiling. She stands in the doorway, and her breath mists the air. It's as cold as a tomb in here.

"Yasmin?" she says, uncertainly.

The child sleeps on. Bundled up beneath the covers, only her forehead showing, a lock of dark hair curled across of the pillow. The spare bed is rumpled again, blankets trailing like a mudslide to the floor.

Bridget looks down at the alarm in her hand. The monitor light, she notices, is off. She puts her thumb on the on-off-volume dial, feels the click and sees it light up. I must have turned it off while I was running.

She kneels by the bed. Peels the covers back from her daughter's face, to check. Asleep. Definitely. Not faking it. Her mouth is slack and her skin slightly damp.

"It's all right, darling."

Yasmin screws her eyes tighter, unwilling to be disturbed, then opens them. Stares at her mother as though she doesn't recognize her. "Wh-" she says.

"it's OK. Go back to sleep. You were having a dream."

Yasmin stares at her, sightless, drugged by sleep. I'll get her another blanket.

The heating must be shot in here. I've got to face up to telling Tom Gordhavo about all the things that are wrong with this place. It's no good letting it all go to rack and ruin because I'm scared of seeming troublesome. "Sleep," she orders.

Yasmin turns back on to her side, buries her face in her pillow. Bridget gets up, takes a blanket from the tumble on the spare bed, spreads it over her. Tucks her in. "Night night," She whispers.

In the corridor, as she makes her way to her own weary bed, the alarm crackles to life once more. "Night night," it replies. "Nunnight."