



The car drew away, leaving the little girl on the verge. Shaking with cold in her thin cotton T-shirt and shorts, she sat down, arms locked around her knees, her light blonde hair blowing messily in the wind, pale as a dandelion seed head.

*Be quiet, freak, or we'll come back and get you,* they'd said.

She didn't want them to come back for her. She knew that for a fact, even if she couldn't remember her name or where she lived.

A family walked by on their way to their vehicle, the mum in a headscarf, carrying a baby, the dad holding the hand of a toddler. The girl stared at the worn grass, counting the daisies. *What's that like,* she wondered, *being carried?* It was so long since anyone had cuddled her, she found it hard to watch. She could see the glimmer of gold that shone round the family—the colour of love. She didn't trust that colour; it led to hurt.

Then the woman spotted her. The girl hugged her knees tightly, trying to make herself so small no one would notice. But it was no use. The woman said something to her husband, handed over the baby, and came closer until she could crouch beside the girl. 'Are you lost, sweetie?'

*Be quiet or we'll come back and get you.*

The girl shook her head.

'Mummy and Daddy gone inside?' The woman frowned, her colours tinged an angry red.

The girl didn't know if she should nod. Mummy and Daddy had gone away but that was a long time ago. They'd never come for her in the hospital but stayed in the fire with each other. She decided to say nothing. The woman's colours flared a deeper crimson. The girl cringed: she'd upset her. So the ones who had just driven away had told her the truth. She was bad. Always making everyone unhappy. The girl put her head on her knees. Perhaps if she pretended she wasn't there, the woman would feel happy again and go away. That sometimes worked.

'Poor little thing,' the woman sighed, standing up. 'Jamal, will you go back inside and tell the manager there's a lost child out here? I'll stay with her.'

The girl heard the man murmur reassurances to the toddler and then footsteps as they went back towards the restaurant.

'You mustn't worry: I'm sure your family will be looking for you.' The woman sat beside her, crushing daisies five and six.

The girl started trembling violently and shaking her head. She didn't want them looking—not now, not ever.

'It's OK. Really. I know you must be frightened but you'll be back with them in a minute.'

She whimpered, then clapped a hand over her mouth. *I mustn't make a sound, I mustn't make a fuss. I'm bad. Bad.*

But it wasn't her making all the noise. Not her fault. Now there were lots of people around her. Police wearing yellow jackets like the ones that had surrounded her house that day. Voices talking at her. Asking her name.

But it was a secret—and she'd forgotten the answer long ago.