

Prologue

It happened when I was on my way to work. It was an ordinary day, I was walking down the street and everything was completely normal. I wasn't really thinking about anything in particular, just meetings and decisions and what I ought to do first, when I suddenly heard a woman's voice. 'I love you, Dodie.' And I thought, that's my mother. Quite matter of fact. That's my mother, telling me she loves me.

I stopped. I don't know whether I physically turned round or not, but I saw – no, not saw, I sort of sensed... It's no good, I can't describe it exactly, but I had this very strong feeling – more than that, I *knew*. She was beside me. A beautiful young woman, standing there, smiling. 'Oh, Dodie,' she said, 'I do love you.' I felt so wonderful. Happy, proud, elated... I said, 'I love you, too.'

Then everything sort of clicked back into place. I thought, that cannot have happened. I don't believe in ghosts, and my mother doesn't exist any more. She's been dead for twenty years. She was kidnapped when I was eight, and they never found her body.

Chapter One

My name is Dodie Blackstock. Well, it's supposed to be Dorothy, but I hate it. And yes, it's *those* Blackstocks. Wolf Blackstock was my father. I'm the one who inherited all the money. My mother was his third wife. The one who was kidnapped.

I hate telling people. Sometimes – no, often – I lie. Because when they ask if I'm related, they expect me to say something like, 'No, but I wish I had his money,' and then we can talk about the kidnap and how weird that they never found her body, and that leads us on to the summer of 1976 and how hot it was. If you're about my age – I'm twenty-nine – I already know it was your best school holiday ever and that you went to the open-air pool every day and came back in the evening feeling as if the sun was inside you.

If I do tell the truth, I usually regret it. Because if you tell someone that your father was Wolf Blackstock and your mother was murdered by her kidnappers, you might just as well add, 'And by the way, I'm seriously screwed up,' because that'll be what they're thinking. I've had every sort of reaction, from total disbelief to a level of sympathy where they're almost ready to commit suicide on my behalf and they've only known me five minutes. But the worst thing is the nice people, the ones who just say, 'God, that must have been terrible.' I just say, 'Yeah, well...' and talk about something else. But it's always uncomfortable. It's as if people feel guilty because they asked or they'd made a joke about it or something. And because they're fascinated by the money, of course.

People used to ask all the time. I used to think about handing out flyers with my life story printed on them to save time. Father rich; mother kidnapped, body never found; university; the reason I actually work for a living instead of designing my own range of swimwear or prancing about in art galleries or whatever rich girls are supposed to do that passes for a job. Anyway, the life-story thing dropped off a bit because people were getting younger – well, they weren't, but you know what I mean. But last year, when my father died, it was all raked up in the obituaries and magazine articles and one of those TV programmes, so now everyone knows all about it all over again.

I was eight when Mum was kidnapped. January 1976. The kidnappers wanted ten million pounds, but my father wouldn't pay. They dropped it to nine million, and then to eight million three months later, then seven, then two months after that they dropped it to six, before he agreed to part with a penny. You know the Pathe News videos they sell, one tape for each year? Well, if you get the one for 1976 you can see what happened. You'll find it in June, after the bit about the end of the Cod War. There's a man with fuzzy sideburns and a drip-dry shirt with a long, pointy collar, crouching in some grass in front of a bush. The camera's a bit wobbly, and sometimes you catch sight of a bit of thatched roof poking up behind him.

'At ten o'clock this morning, armed police stormed the cottage where kidnappers are said to be holding Susan Blackstock, wife of multi-millionaire property tycoon Wolf Blackstock, who was

snatched from her car in January this year. Mr Blackstock, one of the richest men in Britain, was asked for ten million pounds in exchange for the safe return of his wife. The kidnappers, who are thought to be politically motivated, have not yet received any money. In a covert operation, police marksmen surrounded this quiet Suffolk cottage but when they approached the house, the kidnappers fired on them. The police responded, and in the crossfire two policemen were injured and one man, thought to be the leader of the group, was killed. One of the officers, PC Timothy Corrigan, has subsequently died in hospital. Susan Blackstock was not in the house, and no traces of her have so far been found.'

Then a voice-over will tell you that the police arrested the third member of the gang at a house in Cricklewood, where items of women's clothing were discovered, but that despite a nationwide search, my mother's body was never found. Then it goes on to talk about record traffic jams to British coastal resorts and Dennis Howell being the Minister for Drought.

After that, half the journalists in the country must have descended on that village in Suffolk. One of the locals said it was like *Gunfight at the OK Corral* and a woman said she'd rung the police station when she heard the gunfire, and the sergeant said not to worry because the police were the ones doing the shooting. The other half of the journalists were doorstepping us, or that's what it felt like. We were down at Camoys Hall. That was my father's country house, which was where he lived most of the time and where I lived when I wasn't at school. It's got a great circle of gravel in front of it, made when the house was built so that carriages could turn round. I remember looking down at it from a top-floor window and not being able to see one speck of gravel, only the tops of journalists' heads. I spat, but nobody looked up.

Frankly, it would have been child's play to kidnap Mum from Camoys Hall, but she was taken from her car in London. My father wouldn't have dogs or guards or anything because he said he wouldn't be made a prisoner in his own house, so there were ordinary farm gates at the end of the driveway instead of electric ones. There was a notice saying PRIVATE PROPERTY, but the gates were usually open and

anyone could have driven through them. Those journalists must have thought they'd died and gone to heaven, except that my father refused to talk to any of them, and they waited in front of the house every single day for almost three weeks while the search for Mum's body was going on. The reporters had vans, lighting, everything. By the end, there were blankets and even deckchairs. Most of the men had sunhats, and some of the women were lying on the brown grass of the front lawn with their tops rolled up, sunbathing. One of the newspapers ran a picture of them sitting around a picnic, playing cards. When they finally went, Joan, our housekeeper – actually she was a bit more than that but I don't want to go into it now – and I tiptoed out of the front door to have a look and by the state of the grounds you'd have thought there'd been a garden party. Not a Buckingham Palace one, though. The following spring, our cook cut open one of the cabbages from the kitchen garden and found a used condom inside it.

I've got a photograph of the press conference that my father eventually gave. We're all standing on the porch at Camoys Hall. My father's in the front with Angela, his mistress – she had been sort of pensioned off when he married Mum, but she still lived at Camoys Hall – Des, Irene des Voeux, Joan and me. Irene des Voeux was the woman Mum was on her way to spend the weekend with when she was kidnapped. Des is Desmond Haigh-Wood. He's retired now, but he was my father's finance director and probably the closest thing he had to a friend. He had his own suite at Camoys Hall because he stayed with us so often. Des was always nice to me: I used to practise writing *Dodie Haigh-Wood* and wish that he was my father instead of my real one.

I think the photo I've got must have been done just after the official picture was taken. Everyone's turning sideways to talk to each other and I'm obviously not meant to be there at all; they're in suits and I'm wearing shorts and a t-shirt and Joan's holding the top of my arm as if she's trying to hoick me back into the house. You can just about see my squint through my glasses, which are completely lopsided, and my hair is a mess – *plus ça change*. It looks as if Joan's been at my fringe with her nail scissors.

At that time, the police were still searching for my mother. I couldn't believe she was dead. I was sure they'd find her. I thought she'd manage to escape from the kidnappers, and that she was going to come and get me and take me away with her to somewhere lovely where we could live together. I couldn't believe she was just going to leave me with my father. I went on believing that for about three years, and then on and off until I was about fifteen. I couldn't talk about it to anyone. I knew they'd be sympathetic but pitying, because they didn't believe she was going to come back themselves. I never spoke to Angela anyway if I could help it, and the thought of talking to Joan about it was even worse because I liked her. I suppose I could have talked to Des, but I was frightened he'd say the same as the others and then I wouldn't be able to love him any more. And I didn't really talk to my father at all. I mean, I couldn't have gone to his study unless I was summoned. Nobody did that, not even Des.

Mum had to be officially declared dead in the end. They never found her body. Until last night, that is. June 14, 1996. They found it on an estate in Hackney, where they've been pulling down the tower blocks.

She's been dead for less than forty-eight hours.

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