

DOOR-TO-DOOR SALLY

In which an exasperated girl can suddenly
use doors to go literally anywhere.



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LOOK HERE PRODUCTIONS



Prologue

A NIGHT VISIT

On the upstairs landing of a medium-sized house somewhere in a North London suburb, a small, nimble figure emerged from the door to the linen cupboard and crept cat-like across the hall. The time was just after three in the morning. The kind of time when everyone should be asleep. And if they're not asleep, then they're probably up to no good.

The figure was a young girl, dressed all in black from her roll-neck top down to her baseball sneakers. Her long, dark hair was pulled back into a tight ponytail except for her fringe, which was so sharp you could probably slice

lemons with it. If it had been light enough, you would have been able to see that her face was tanned with pointy features, arched eyebrows and green eyes.

She tiptoed over the carpet to the second door on her left and paused outside, tilting her head slightly as she listened for sounds. The rooms around her remained silent. Slowly, she gripped the door handle and started to turn. There is a trick to opening a door without making any noise and the girl did it perfectly. She slipped into the room and closed the door behind her with only the softest click.

The bedroom was darker than the hallway, but light from the street outside glowed around the edges of the thick curtains. The girl could make out a chair, a desk and the bed, where her target made a mound under the duvet. The only sound was that of slow, light breathing, the way people breathe when they are fast asleep but still have their mouth open a little. So far, so good.

The girl crept over to the bed and reached inside a pouch on her belt. She brought out a small metal object that looked like a smooth, rounded thimble with a plastic cover on the end and slipped it onto her right index finger. She then removed the cover to reveal a short, sharp metal point. It was thin and slightly curved, like a thorn.

The girl leaned over the bed, squinting at the tangled locks of mousey brown hair that tumbled across the

pillow. With her free hand, she gently shifted a few strands to reveal a small patch of pale, smooth skin on the sleeper's neck.

The girl straightened up, felt inside the pouch again and produced a tiny bottle, no bigger than her thumb. If it had been light enough in the room, you would have seen that the bottle was green, and the liquid inside was dark brown and moved like syrup. She used her teeth to pull out the stopper and dipped the tip of the metal thorn into the liquid. It emerged covered with a brownish smear. Carefully, she replaced the stopper and stashed the bottle back in the pouch before leaning over the sleeping figure once more.

The next stage was going to be delicate. She watched the sleeper's neck moving ever so slightly with each breath and let her hand hover over it, waiting for exactly the right moment. The sleeper's shoulder rose and fell... rose and fell... rose and –

With a precise movement, faster than most eyes would be able to follow, the girl made a jab with the thorn. The prick left a tiny dot on the skin, like an insect bite, with the smallest residue of the syrup from the bottle. The sleeper breathed in sharply, gave a slight grunt and turned onto her back.

The girl in black froze. The sleeper mumbled something meaningless, raised a hand up onto the pillow

and then resumed her calm, drowsy breathing, as if nothing had happened.

If the girl in black had been any less in control of herself, she would have let out a long, loud sigh of relief. But now was not the time nor the place. She stepped back, put the cover on the thimble-thorn and returned it to the pouch. With one last look at the sleeping figure, she turned to go.

At the door, she paused and smiled as she looked around the room. It was a lot tidier than you would expect. The floor was clear of clothes, books and gadgets. There was only a hairbrush and an alarm clock on the table, and all the shelves were surprisingly empty. Two bulging suitcases sat against the wall next to her.

“Moving out,” the girl muttered under her breath. “Perfect timing. This is so going to annoy the Minister.”

Still smiling, the girl rested her hand on the door handle for a second, took a breath, opened it and stepped through. The scent of sweet spices wafted briefly through the air and then the door closed shut behind her with a soft thud.

The house was completely silent. No gentle footsteps padding down the hall, no tap of tiptoes on the stairs and no quiet click of a lock turning. It was as if no one had ever been there. And as far as the girl or anyone else was concerned, no one ever had.



CHAPTER ONE

Moving To Nowhere

Sally Portman hadn't wanted her parents to move house, but they had gone and done it anyway.

Mum had packed her cases. Dad had packed her books and bits and pieces. And finally this morning some men had packed away her furniture. HER furniture. It was a disaster.

She sat stony-faced in the car while they drove out of the city and onto the grey motorway. All Sally could see were blank faces behind windscreens and blue signs pointing to places she didn't care about, so she stared at the back of her parents' heads as they ignored her in the

front seats. Dad was wearing the old denim shirt he always wore at weekends, while his fair hair and beard were as neatly trimmed as ever. Mum had new red highlights in her short, spiky, dark hair. Her mischievous eyes glinted behind the round glasses perched on her small, pointed nose.

She glanced at Sally in the rear view mirror and smiled. "Just eight more miles, darling." Sally rolled her eyes, flicked her wavy brown hair over her face and said nothing.

Dad came off the motorway at the next junction and they drove along a drab A-road that curved lazily past fields of ploughed mud and bored sheep. "Nearly there!" he said as the car turned left into a narrow country road lined with brutally trimmed hedges. "You're going to love this place, Sally."

Sally sighed. "Am I really..."

The road twisted through a series of turns that took them between hills, through woods, past lonely dirt tracks leading to dead ends. When Sally thought they couldn't possibly get any further from what she called civilisation, the car passed a sign she couldn't read, turned a tight corner and braked hard.

The road ahead continued downhill into the village, but on their right a large, white gate stood open, as if waiting for them. "We're here!" said Dad with a grin. He

turned into the gate and let the car coast down the broad, sloping driveway. The tyres crunched satisfyingly on the gravel.

Sally stared out of her window up at the house as they approached it. The name 'Green Nook' had been on the gatepost, which was interesting because while the house was certainly green in a lot of places, it was definitely not a nook. The frontage loomed over the driveway, all ivy and dark windows with the roof stretching high up into two twin points above the front bedrooms. Behind them, the sun stabbed through a gap between three twisted chimneys.

A garage sat next to the house like a moody little brother. The lawns were all overgrown and the whole place was surrounded by a tall, thick hedge. Sally wasn't sure if it was there to hide the house from the outside world, or the other way round. The drive curved up to a circle by the front door, where it was almost entirely blocked by a large, blue lorry with its back doors wide open.

"Isn't it awesome!" said Dad.

"It's certainly something," mumbled Sally.

Sally's mum was the first to hop out and beamed a smile back in through the window. "Cheer up," she said. "It's going to be great here. New life, new friends, new school, new town, new everything!"

“But there wasn’t anything wrong with the old friends and old school and everything,” growled Sally through gritted teeth.

“I know, and they gave you a lovely leaving party in the Sundae Shop. But this is a new chapter. For all of us.”

“I just want to go back to London. I didn’t think this would really happen.”

Mum sighed. “Well, it’s happening. We’re here. Are you coming in?”

“Not yet.”

“Suit yourself.” Mum strode off into the house to see what the removal men were getting up to. Dad shook his head and followed.

If it hadn’t been such a hot day, Sally would have stayed in the car for the rest of the afternoon, maybe even the rest of the week. As it was, she lasted an hour and ten minutes before getting out and scowling in the shade.

Mum and Dad emerged from the front porch for about the twentieth time, followed by three stocky men. Mrs Portman stopped by Sally while the others carried on towards the lorry. “Well, you’ve made it onto the driveway, at least. That’s a start.” She smiled and stroked Sally’s head.

Sally made a face and ducked away. “I don’t like this house. Why couldn’t we just have stayed where we were?”

Mum crouched down next to her. “Things change,”

she said. "It's just the way it is."

Mr Portman grabbed a cardboard box from the back of the lorry and balanced a table lamp on top. "Come on, Sally," he said. "We've been over all this. People don't stay in one place forever all the time."

Sally pouted. "Grandma has."

"Only for as long as you've known her," said Mum. "She moved around plenty of times over the years before that."

"Humph," Sally snorted. "But I bet she never ruined anyone's life in the process."

"No, darling," said Mum, "but then she never got offered an amazing new job either, or had a house that was worth four times as much as when she bought it."

Mum smiled and Dad chuckled as he went by. Sally couldn't believe they actually thought this was funny. Two removal men followed him inside, carrying a sofa between them, trying not to scrape it on the doorframe.

Mrs Portman stood up and trudged over to the lorry. "You're going to love it here," she said. "The school is amazing. Got such a good report. Either way, it can't be any worse than that place back in London."

"Back in London can't be any worse than being stranded out here," said Sally, scraping her heel through the gravel. "What's this poxy village called again, anyway?"

Mum lifted another box out of the truck. "Great Boring," she said.

Sally moaned from the bottom of her stomach. "I couldn't have named it better myself! I don't have ANYTHING here!"

Mrs Portman tried to sound cheerful as she hefted the box towards the porch. "Don't be silly, darling," she said in a singsong voice. "Home is wherever you are. This is an opportunity. When one door closes, another one opens."

Sally growled at the back of her mum's head. "That sounds like the kind of stupid thing a stupid teacher in this stupid new school would say."

"Yes, it does." Sally's dad had just emerged again from the front door with the two workmen just behind him. "And you're going to be starting there in three days' time. So you'd better make the most of it, or you'll look just as stupid as they do."

Sally scratched at an itchy bug bite on her neck and scowled again, just to make sure everyone knew she was really annoyed. In the distance, a church clock struck the hour in a series of long, slow bongs, like a funeral procession. Sally felt as if her own had just started.

Mum's voice echoed up the stairs. "Just get it on, will you,

and stop complaining!”

“It’s OK! I’ve done it!” Sally finally emerged from her room. She’d grown to like it a little now it was full of her things and everything placed where she wanted it. And it was bigger than her last room, which was a bonus. But it was still in this creaky old house in the middle of nowhere. She plodded downstairs wearing her brand new plain grey uniform trousers and forest green blazer, carrying a bulging backpack.

Two steps from the bottom, she stopped. Mum was leaning against the bannister by the front door, fluffy slippers on, coffee in one hand, phone in the other. She stopped scrolling, looked up and smiled.

“Nice one. You’re looking ready.”

Sally blinked a couple of times. “Aren’t you coming? Giving me a lift?”

Mum laughed. “Take you to school on your first day? You’d never live it down. Anyway, I’ve got work to do.”

“Work?”

“Yes, work. Now the broadband’s all sorted, I’ve got meetings to have and deadlines to meet. You’d better get your shoes on.”

Sally slumped down the last two stairs and reached for the shiny black school shoes by the door. “I’d really like it if you could, you know, come with me.”

Mum slipped her phone into her back pocket. “You

don't need me to do that now. You're a big girl."

"But would you? Please?"

Mum smiled. "I'm sorry, Sally, but I've got to get ready for a call. And, like I said, I don't want to get you teased by any countryside kids."

Sally looked at the floor as she slipped the shoes on. "Suppose not. All right then."

"You'll be fine. You know where the school is. That's why we walked up there yesterday."

"Yeah, yeah. No problem." Sally stood up, slung her backpack over her shoulder and opened the front door.

"And you've got your phone?"

"Yes!"

"OK, good. Don't lose it. Text me if you need anything."

As if she'd come running if I did, thought Sally. But she kept quiet, except to murmur a quick "Goodbye" as she went out and closed the door behind her.

If there was one word that Sally would use to describe her first few hours at Great Boring Free Academy, it would be 'tolerable'. Kids were brought in by special buses from all the villages for miles around, and while whole groups already knew each other, the school made sure they mixed

everyone up for tutorials. Unfamiliar faces eyed each other suspiciously. I might not have any friends here, Sally thought, but at least I don't stand out.

Lessons came and went. Sally exchanged a few words here and there with people she sat next to, but otherwise let others talk amongst themselves. There were a few stares from people who turned away whenever she looked around, but nothing threatening. Except maybe for one girl. A girl with dark hair cut in a bob that had grown long enough to hide her eyes behind. She kept looking Sally's way but then ducking back down into her book. Sally sighed and did the same.

At final break, she followed the pack as everyone streamed down the corridor towards the sunshine. Ahead of her, a group of four kids took positions against the handrail at the top of the steps outside the lower school block. With a start, Sally realised it was the girl with the bob with a group of three friends. One was a thin girl with fair hair that fell lazily over her shoulders. The other two were boys – one Sally's height with a thatch of blonde hair and frowning eyes, while the other was tall and skinny with straight brown hair and a long nose.

Sally carried on past them down the steps and stopped at the bottom. She had a feeling she was being watched. The kids had stopped talking. Ready for a wave of abuse, Sally turned and looked up at where they were standing.

All four pairs of eyes were staring back at her with curious expressions, but then in unison instantly looked away, suddenly finding something interesting in their shoes, the steps or the bricks. Sally rolled her eyes and turned away too. She took a step in the direction of the next block, but then glanced back quickly.

They were all staring at her again, eyes wide and wondering. Sally almost laughed out loud when they all jerked their eyes away again, looking nervous or embarrassed. All except one...

The girl with the dark bob gave Sally a sideways look from under her lowered eyebrows and they held each other's gaze for a couple of seconds. Sally blinked first. She turned to head off again, but the girl's voice called down before she took a step.

"Is it fun being new here?"

Sally wondered what was going to come next, but the kids had simply stopped looking at their shoes. The dark-haired girl smiled. "Are you Sally?"

Sally felt her insides relax a little. "Yeah. Sorry, I don't remember your names."

The girl took a step down. "I'm Lucy. This is Nikki. That's Jamie and Olly." Sally nodded at each of them and they all nodded back.

"You from London then?" said Olly, who had the brown hair and long nose.

Sally nodded. "Yeah. Well, not any more."

Lucy snorted a quick laugh. "Mrs Barker shouldn't have made such a big deal out of it. That was embarrassing."

"Are you in the village?" said Jamie, who had the thick blonde hair.

For some reason, Sally didn't feel like meeting their stares. "Yeah. A place called Green Nook, on the edge. We moved in last weekend."

"Oh, that place," said Olly. "Where the Goodyears lived. Your mum and dad must be loaded."

Sally twisted a piece of hair between two fingers. "Maybe, I don't know. It didn't feel like we were rich back in London."

Nikki shook her lazy fair hair back over her shoulders. "Must be doing all right now, though."

Sally shrugged. "I suppose. I didn't want to move out, to be honest."

Nikki narrowed her eyes. "Why not? London all right, is it?"

"It's brilliant," said Sally. "Everything is there, whatever you want. But then my mum and dad decided to move to this dump. Gutted."

There was a sudden silence. Olly scowled back at her. "You calling our home a dump, city girl?"

Nikki shook her head. "You townies. You all think we

chew straw or something.” She turned away with a flick of her head.

Jamie picked up his bag. “I said she’d be like this.”

“No, stop.” Sally sighed and looked up at them. “Sorry. I didn’t mean it.”

Nobody replied. For a moment, Sally thought it was over, but then Lucy rolled her eyes and looked around at the others. “Oh, come off it you lot,” she said, laughing. “It isn’t exactly excitement central round here, is it? And anyway, she hasn’t been here long enough. Doesn’t know anything yet!”

Lucy turned back to Sally and slid along the handrail. “We could show you some cool things.”

Sally smiled nervously. “Like what?”

Jamie, Nikki and Olly all looked blank-faced at each other. “The old home?” said Olly.

Lucy nodded slowly. “Yeah, good idea.” She turned back to Sally. “What are you doing after school? Want to come somewhere with us?”

“Er...” Sally’s eyes glanced around at everyone in turn. “I dunno. What’s the old home?”

“It’s a big old house, all overgrown and everything.” Lucy waved in the direction of the trees across the playing field. “Just the other side of the woods. You’ll still be able to walk home afterwards, easy.”

Jamie smiled. “Worried what your mum and dad might

say?”

Sally looked over at the trees, thinking Mum and Dad probably wouldn't care.

Nikki crossed her arms. “She's not up for it,” she said. “We not good enough for you? Or are you chicken?”

Sally replied almost too quickly. “No, I'm not chicken. Sure, I'll come.”

Lucy smiled. “Nice one,” she said, just as the bell rang for the end of break. “Let's go.”

They all trooped back inside, and made sure they sat together for the rest of the afternoon.



CHAPTER TWO

The Old Home

Lucy and Jamie led the way up the narrow lane through the woods. The trees on each side arched over their heads to make a kind of tunnel and the warm light was soft and green. Sally slowed down behind Olly and Nikki, trying to avoid the weeds, moss and potholes in the old tarmac while she fiddled with her phone.

“What are you doing?” said Olly.

Sally didn’t look up. “Just texting my mum. Letting her know I’m not coming straight back.”

The others all slowed down to peer in at Sally’s hands. Sally paused, glancing around at them. “Come off it. You

must have seen a phone before.”

Nikki’s face twisted into a sneer. “Of course we have! Dirty townie. We’re not bumpkins.”

“What have you got?” said Olly.

“It’s just an old Samsung,” said Sally slipping it into a pocket. “Nothing special. It used to be my mum’s.”

“So, you’re not that rich, then,” said Nikki.

Sally shrugged. “What you got?”

“iPhone 15 all the way.” Nikki patted her jacket pocket.

Jamie hunched his shoulders. “Google Pixel’s just as good.”

“Stop the phone competition,” said Lucy. “What if your mum texts back to come home?”

“She won’t.” Sally started to walk more quickly. “What kind of home is this?” she asked, changing the subject. “For who?”

Lucy skipped ahead and walked backwards in front of Sally. “Nobody. They closed it down ages ago. But, you know, it used to be old people or orphans or something.”

“Or ghosts,” Jamie laughed. The others all smiled.

“Really?” said Sally.

“Oh, yeah,” said Nikki. “People have seen some strange things. Weird noises too. Everyone’s too scared to come here.”

“We should be OK, though,” said Olly. “It’s still daylight.”

Ahead, the lane curved around to the right and ended at a tall iron gate that had been covered in dull grey metal panels. A chain was wrapped several times around the central posts and a sign was bolted on at head height: "No Trespassing - Dog Patrols".

"Yeah, dog patrols, I'm sure," said Lucy with a snort. "There's never anyone around."

"Dogs wouldn't come anywhere near here anyway," said Olly.

Jamie frowned. "Why not?"

"Because of the ghosts."

"Oh, right, yeah."

Lucy marched off through the trees to the left. "Stop trying to wind up Sally," she said and pointed ahead of her. "That gap in the fence is still there. Nice big metal gates don't stop us."

Years of damp and gloom had turned the brown fence green. They reached a section behind a tree where two planks had fallen away and the other side was thick with large, dark rhododendron bushes. Nobody would be able to see them from the house or the lane. Lucy ducked down to squeeze through first, pushing branches aside as she made her way into the dim space inside the dense leaves.

One by one the others followed. Olly next and then Nikki, while Jamie waved Sally to go ahead of him. Each

pushed their way through, following Lucy onwards. The cool leaves slapped against Sally's face and hair as she aimed for the chinks of light ahead, holding up her arms to protect herself, pushing between branches until she suddenly burst out into the sunshine. Blinking, she saw Lucy, Nikki and Olly waiting at the edge of a patch of long grass. With a rustle, Jamie appeared behind her and nodded at the large building looming up in front of them.

"There you go," he said, smiling.

What the gang had called the 'home' was a huge old red brick mansion house, three storeys high. It looked like an ugly, derelict hospital pretending it had once been a stately home. The windows on ground level were all arched, a bit like small church windows, and clustered in groups of three, while those higher up were just ordinary, tall rectangles. All the windows were dark. A few were smashed or boarded up.

A wide area of knee-high dry grass stood between them and the building. Beyond that, a stony concrete track went around the side of the house.

"Which way?" said Olly.

Jamie pointed towards a corner of the building. "Let's use the window around the back like last time."

Lucy nodded. "OK, quick." She started running towards the house, leaping and bounding over the tall

grass. The others were hot on her heels, leaving Sally standing for a second before shooting off after them. They all ran like hurdlers until they reached the track and then followed it around the old house, trying to keep their steps light on the rough ground.

Around the corner, they found a small cobbled courtyard, lined on two sides by low brick buildings that might have once been sheds, stables or even toilets. Large weeds sprouted from cracks in the brickwork everywhere. The back of the big house looked even less inviting than the front – all dark windows and water stains under broken pipes. A small corrugated iron roof had been tacked on at a slanting angle, covering a stone stairway that descended into shadows.

Jamie was the first one down the steps. They finished at a large door covered in flaking black paint, but he knew better than to try it. Next to the door was an old wooden-framed window in the same state of disrepair. He stood on an abandoned plastic crate, wedged his fists against the frame and started pushing upwards, sliding the bottom section of the window up in a series of stiff jolts.

“Right, come on then.” Jamie pulled himself in through the window head-first and Olly jumped up quickly to follow him, his feet being the last thing to disappear over the window-ledge and into the gloom

beyond.

Sally looked at the other two girls. Neither of them was moving.

Lucy nodded at the window. "Go on then, Sally."

Sally looked at how high the window was from the ground. "What about the other side?"

"There's a chair there to climb down on."

"How do you know?"

"Because we left it there, silly!"

Jamie's voice echoed from inside. "What's going on? Get a move on!"

"Oh, all right then," said Sally. "But I'm not diving in head-first." She was glad to be wearing trousers and not a skirt as she stepped onto the crate, got a grip on the window frame and heaved herself up to sit on the ledge. She brought up one leg, then the other, ducked her head under the frame and twisted so she could jump down. Sure enough, the chair was just below.

The other two followed. Nikki was wearing a skirt, but copied what Sally had done anyway. Lucy came through head-first like the boys, balancing herself on the chair while dragging her legs in behind her.

Sally looked around. They were standing in a narrow hallway with dirty white walls and scuffed brown tiles on the floor. Up ahead, a wooden staircase led straight upwards on the right, with a narrow corridor continuing

onwards into darkness on the left. Dusty cobwebs clogged every corner. Everyone grinned at each other.

“I don’t fancy the cellars this time,” said Lucy. “Let’s show Sally the torture rooms.”

“The what?” Sally’s eyes went wide. “Hang on. What did you just –?”

But the others were already clattering their way up the stairs, laughing. Sally chased after them, keeping up with Nikki as the stairs turned a corner by a window near the top and emerged onto a small landing with a pair of red double doors straight ahead. Jamie pushed through them into a long, wide corridor lit only by a large, bright window at the far end. The floor was coated in dark, shiny lino, while the walls were lined at regular intervals on either side by old wooden doorways covered in peeling varnish.

Jamie marched on down the corridor, ignoring the first door on the right but stopping at the second. He twisted the handle and shoved his weight against it. The door squeaked and opened inwards suddenly, sending Jamie stumbling through. Lucy, Olly and Nikki all laughed again and piled in after him. Sally stopped in the doorway.

The floor was just bare wooden boards and the windows opposite were curtain-less. The walls were scarred with pale rectangles where pictures had once been. All that was left was the bed.

It wasn't a normal bed. It stood in the middle of the room on a metal frame, higher and narrower than anything you find at home. Its bare surface was a flat expanse of tarnished padded red leather with no features except for some thick, brown straps where a person's wrists and ankles would be if they were lying down. Sally felt herself shudder.

"Here we are then," said Jamie, as he jumped up onto it. "Welcome to the old home. And this is just the first floor."

Sally dragged her eyes away from the bed towards the wall to her left, where a door looked like it connected to the next room. She walked over, turned the handle and it swung inwards. The other room was identical to the first and empty except for a tall, heavy wooden chair, with straps just like the ones on the bed. She frowned. "What the hell was this place? It's insane."

Nikki tossed her hair to one side. "Is that another one of your posh London words?"

Jamie ignored her and jumped down. "So, come on then. Up you get." He patted the bed gently and smiled.

Sally looked around at the others. Jamie, Nikki, Olly and Lucy all had slight smirks on their faces. "What for?" she said.

Lucy patted the bed as well. "It's a test. If you want to hang around with us, you've got to do a dare. You've got

to let us strap you in and trust we'll let you out again."

"Which we will, obviously," said Jamie.

"I dunno..." Sally eyed each of them nervously.

"I had to do it, too" said Olly. "Just before the summer holiday. You'll only be in for a few minutes."

Lucy made a face. "My brothers did it to me last year. Those bog-heads left me for half an hour while they wandered around. But we won't do that, honest to God!"

"Don't you trust us?" said Jamie.

"She's not up for it," said Olly.

Nikki walked over to the window and looked down at the courtyard below. "This is a waste of time," she said. "Let's drop her."

Sally's eyes widened. "No, wait. You don't have to drop me from anything. I'll do it."

Lucy laughed. "We didn't mean drop you like that."

"Or would we?" said Jamie, grinning.

"Oh, leave it out," said Lucy. "Come on, Sal. Up you get. It's just for fun."

Sally glanced around again at everyone and went over to the bed. She brushed the dust away from where her head would go, climbed onto it and lay down. "All right, I'm ready."

"Hooray," said Jamie. He grabbed one ankle strap and Lucy grabbed the other, fumbling with the buckles. Nikki told Sally to move her arm out a bit as she adjusted

the left wrist strap. The sound of them securing and tightening clasps was the only noise in the room. Olly was fumbling with the strap around Sally's right wrist when he froze.

"Hey, did you hear that?"

Jamie stood back. "What?"

They all heard a loud dog's bark echo around the courtyard outside.

"That!"

The dog barked again and was followed by a snarling, shouting voice.

"I know you're in there! Come out you idiot kids!"

Nobody moved. There was silence for a few seconds. Then the voice outside shouted again. "Right! I'm coming in with the dog."

"No way!" breathed Lucy.

"The watchman!" hissed Jamie.

Sally looked up, wide-eyed. "You said there weren't any patrols!"

Nikki ran to the door. "We've got to get out of here – NOW!" Olly and Jamie were just behind her. Lucy stopped halfway, looking back.

"But what about Sal?"

"Yeah! What about me?"

"Don't worry," said Jamie. "Just keep quiet. Sorry about this. We'll be back!"

Nikki's voice came from halfway down the hall. "Come on, quick!"

Sally tried to sit up, but couldn't. "What?! You can't leave me!"

They all ran out before Sally had a chance to shout again. Lucy paused by the door. "Even if they don't come back, I will," she said quickly, and closed the door behind her.

"Oh. Great. Thanks." Sally listened as their footsteps faded away down the corridor. Everything was silent for a minute or two. Sally's heart felt tight and huge at the same time. A tingling sensation filled her arms and legs. Her ears strained for any new sounds. She twisted to look around, from the door to the windows, but there was nothing to see.

She sighed heavily, stared at the ceiling and then wriggled, pulling at the straps around her wrists and ankles. Her legs and left arm were held tight, but the strap around her right wrist slipped away easily. She blinked in surprise as her arm shot out, and realised Olly hadn't had time to do up the buckle.

Almost laughing with relief, she undid the strap around her left wrist and sat up to undo the straps around her ankles. Within a minute, she was swinging her feet down onto the floor, landing as quietly as she could, where she paused and listened again.

The only sound was the soft rush of the breeze through the trees outside. Maybe, Sally thought, the man with the evil voice and the dog was looking for the rest of the gang in another part of the building.

She stepped over to the door and opened it a crack, slowly, trying not to make it squeak. The corridor outside was empty, exactly as it had been earlier. All the other doors were closed. Sally slipped out, left the door open behind her and looked to her right. At the end of the corridor was the bright window, and she could make out stairs leading down to the left.

She took a step towards them, but hesitated. Maybe it would be better to leave the same way she came in. At least she knew where that was. She turned and headed towards the double doors that led to the small landing. She was about to push through them when she heard footsteps behind her. Heavy footsteps.

Coming from the stairs at the other end of the corridor was the sound of hard boots on old wood and the noisy, wet panting of a large dog. Sally looked back, feeling hot blood pumping around her throat and into her head. A pointy-looking hound hopped into view from the top of the stairs at the other end of the corridor and stopped to look around.

Sally stood stock still, staring at the animal. While the dog returned her stare, a skinny old man came up behind

it, wearing a big coat and carrying a long stick.

“There y’are!” he growled in a voice that could reduce rocks to dust. “Right, you’re for it now.”

Sally didn’t stop to think. She bolted through the double doors and leapt for the stairs leading down.

The man shouted, “Get ‘er Pongo!” and the dog sprang to life. It raced down the corridor, each bound longer than the last, pounding and pounding along the dusty linoleum until it reached its full and ferocious top speed. The double doors swung closed just as the dog reached them, but it couldn’t stop. It went crashing into them headfirst, bounced back and skittered around on the floor, letting out a high-pitched whimper.

Sally heard the old man cursing at the top of his voice as she jumped down the last three stairs into the dark, small hallway they had arrived in. The dog started barking very loudly. Sally looked at the small window by the door and realised two things.

Firstly, she wouldn’t have time to climb through the window before the dog came down the stairs and went for her legs. And, secondly, the chair was no longer there. Someone had taken it. She couldn’t get out this way.

Above her, the doors clattered open and the dog’s soggy breath echoed down the stairwell.

Lucy had mentioned a basement. Sally sprinted into the dark corridor, pumping her legs as fast as she could,

straining her eyes in the gloom to see any door leading downward to a place she could hide.

She heard the dog pound its way down the stairs and land at the bottom, its paws skidding and scratching on the tiles as it hurriedly turned to follow her.

Sally saw a flat, dark rectangle on the wall just ahead to the right. A door. She wrenched at the handle and it turned. The dog sped down the corridor towards her, its paws beating a rhythm in time with its breathing. Sally darted through the door and slammed it shut behind her as fast as she could, pressing herself against it. Outside, the dog skidded to a stop and started barking.

Sally looked around. She was in a short passage that ended at an open doorway into a bright room, with a smaller door in the wall on her left. She raced towards the daylight, bursting into a room that was empty, dusty and covered with cobwebs across the ceiling. The light spilled in through a line of narrow windows high up along the opposite wall.

“Got to get out, got to get out,” she muttered under her breath. The dog was still barking outside. Her eyes scanned the windows from left to right, but they were all closed and barred. No way out. Sally made a noise like an electric drill. The old man shouted outside in the corridor.

“OK, all right boy, I’m here now. We’ve got ‘em.” The

dog barked again, louder.

Sally rushed back to the passage, to the small door halfway along. Her breathing was hissy and ragged as she grabbed at the handle and pulled. It didn't budge.

The door to the corridor rattled and the brass doorknob turned.

Sally pulled again at the small door, jerking at it, willing its chipped and flaked surface to open, all the time muttering under her breath: "Don't wanna be here. Don't wanna be here. Don't wanna be here."

In those few tiny moments, time seemed to slow down. Sally felt a sickness in her stomach and a tugging at her heart.

The door to the corridor started to open.

Sally stopped pulling at the door in front of her and pushed instead. With a jolt, it swung inwards. Behind it was pitch black darkness.

The dog's pointy nose poked its way eagerly around the door from the corridor. Sally didn't look. She jumped through the small door, slammed it shut, screwed up her eyes and waited for the worst.

Only there was nothing. No barking, no banging and no scratching on the door behind her. Just quiet. Except... she could hear music. And children's voices.

Sally opened her eyes. She wasn't standing in a dark, mouldy, spider-infested old room. In fact, she was

somewhere completely and utterly different.

Meanwhile, in the dim side passage, the skinny old caretaker and his dog looked disappointedly into the damp, dirty storeroom behind the small door. It was empty.

The man flicked a hand at the dog's ears. It whimpered slightly. "You daft animal. Chasin' mice was yer? We gone and lost 'em now."

He shook his head, slammed the door and dragged the dog away.

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About the author

Over time, **Douglas Caleb** has been a copywriter, music industry agent, photographer, playscheme leader, artist and dad. But, all the while, he was filling up notebooks with curious ideas, watering the seeds of stories and starting to write the tales he really wanted to tell.

Growing up on a steady diet of Doctor Who, C.S. Lewis, Enid Blyton, Susan Cooper, Tintin, 2000AD, Neil Gaiman and The X Files, he started writing his first children's book before his own kids were born. Now, he's on a mission to write books that young readers (and their parents, because he's had experience with bedtimes) will love to read.

Douglas lives with his wife and two sons in Colchester,

where life can be as weird as you want it to be. He listens to soundtrack music when he writes (and Radio 6 Music when he doesn't), loves cooking and generally needs more shelves for his ever-growing collection of books.

Peek behind the curtain of his world on Facebook and Instagram – both as DouglasCaleb5678

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