

WHEN OBSESSION TAKES OVER

SLEEP TIGHT

Rachel Abbott

NUMBER ONE BESTSELLING AUTHOR

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Prologue

The girl was smiling as she left the noisy, packed pub, and shouts of laughter were ringing in her ears as she wrestled the heavy door open letting in an icy blast of cold air. She turned and shouted 'Night' to anyone who might be looking her way and a few arms were raised in a farewell salute, but most were otherwise occupied with pint glasses, or were gesticulating wildly to emphasise some part of the latest funny story being shared with anybody who was prepared to listen.

The door slammed shut behind her, cutting out the warm yellow light and the happy sounds of young people enjoying themselves. The dark night settled around her and the sudden silence hit her like a physical blow. For a moment she stood still.

Shivering in the early winter chill, she wrapped her scarf tighter around her neck and folded her arms, hugging herself to keep warm. She really was going to have to find a coat that she liked enough to wear on a night out. She smiled at her own vanity, and reminded herself that it was only a fifteen minute walk back to their flat, so if she walked quickly she would soon warm up.

The silence was momentarily shattered as the door to the pub swung open again, the light from inside spilling its amber glow across the wet pavements. Above a burst of loud music from inside the warm bar she thought she heard somebody shout her name, but the door swung closed with a bang, and all was silent again.

The few folk who were out on the streets of this part of Manchester were hurrying along, disappearing down side roads that led to their homes. The miserable weather and the early cold bite appeared to have kept people indoors tonight, and who could blame them?

A few yards ahead of her a couple stopped to kiss, the girl wrapping her arms round the boy's neck, standing on tiptoe to press the whole length of her body against his, and the night felt warmer for it. She smiled again as she looked at them, thinking how wonderful it felt to be in love. She and her boyfriend had only recently moved in together, and she had never been so happy.

She reached the junction with the main road, and waited at the crossing. There wasn't much traffic, but being one of the main roads into and out of Manchester, it was never completely quiet.

She hurried across when the road was clear and made her way to the quieter streets on the other side, away from the halls of residence and the modern housing. She had been thrilled when they had found a flat in an old Victorian house – the whole of the ground floor was theirs, and although it was still a bit scruffy, they were working on it. Best of all, it was on a lovely peaceful tree-lined road, which gave each house a sense of privacy.

She turned into the first road. The small park on her right was usually full of children playing, but at this time of the night it was deserted, the only movement

coming from a single swing that was swaying gently, silently.

Her flat shoes made little sound on the pavement, and she had a strange feeling of being cut off from the rest of the world. She glanced towards the windows of houses as she passed, but most were protected from view by high hedges and those she could see were black, with just the lifeless reflection of the street lights making the rooms beyond seem eerily deserted.

The feeling that she wasn't alone sneaked up on her. There wasn't a single moment – the scuffing of a shoe, the glimpse of a dark shadow – that persuaded her. It was something else entirely. It was the feeling that somebody's eyes were boring into her back. She just knew.

Her body grew rigid, and every nerve ending tingled. Should she run? Or would that be a signal to him to chase and catch her? Should she turn into somebody's drive? But he could be on her before she reached the door.

Was it better if he knew that she was aware of him? If she turned round to look, would that precipitate a reaction? She didn't know.

But he was there. She just didn't know how close he was.

Without thinking, she turned her head quickly. The street was empty. Wasn't he behind her? He was *somewhere*, she was certain. She glanced across at the park and thought about the swaying swing. He could be walking alongside her now, hidden amongst the shrubs that lined the dark, unlit pathway.

A flash of recollection from earlier in the night pierced her mind. Amongst all the laughter and fun in the pub, there had been just a moment when she had felt uncomfortable. She had quickly spun around on her bar stool, almost expecting to find the invasive presence of an unknown man standing inches from her back. But nobody was there; nobody was even looking. She had brushed the feeling aside, allowing the pleasure of the evening to envelope the frisson of discomfort and squeeze the life out of it. But it was the same. It was exactly the way she felt now.

Just ahead was an entrance to the park. If he was in there and he was coming to get her, this is where he would do it. She had seconds to make a plan. She was going to act as if there was nothing to worry about, and then the moment she drew level with the gate, she would run. And if she had to, she would scream.

Two steps, and she would be there. She unfolded her arms and dropped them to her sides. She could see the corner of her road just ahead, but it was even darker down there, the thick trunks of the trees she loved so much casting deep shadows on the narrow pavement, their stark black branches blending into the night sky.

One, two – and *run*.

She didn't risk a glance at the park's open gateway, and couldn't hear if anybody was following her over the thump of her feet and the gasping of breath.

She was ten metres from the corner when it happened. She was almost there, almost home, almost safe.

A dark figure emerged from behind the last of the black trees, and stood still, legs spread wide, waiting to catch her.

1

Olivia

The shrill peal of the doorbell shatters the sombre silence of the house, and I stop pacing. I feel an irrational burst of hope. Could this be Robert? Has he forgotten his keys? But I know it isn't. I know exactly who it is.

It's the police, and they are here because I called them.

I should have known what might happen. I should have understood better what Robert had been telling me in everything but words. It's now three hours since he left with my babies, and every bone and muscle in my body is aching with their loss.

Where are my children?

Has there been an accident? *Please, no.*

The thought hits me like a physical blow and vivid images appear on the blackness of my closed eyelids. I open my eyes, but I can still picture them in the back of Robert's car in a ditch down a dark lane, driven off the road by some maniac driver, lying there waiting to be discovered. I see blood on their foreheads and in my mind I listen for their cries, just to know they are alive. But I hear nothing except the sound of birdsong coming through the open car window. I never see Robert in this vision.

Terrifying and awful as those images are, I can't help believing it could be something else. Something far more sinister.

When I answer the door, a wide-shouldered young PC is standing there looking sturdy and competent in his stab vest and short-sleeved shirt. I know what he is going to ask me; I know the drill. It's just like last time.

I wonder if he knows who I am. Does he know that the Olivia Brookes who called tonight is the same person as the Liv Hunt who called seven years ago because her boyfriend was missing? Will it make a difference?

Even after all these years I still have nightmares about that terrible night, and I wake each time drenched in icy cold sweat. My boyfriend had called to say he was leaving the university lab and he would see me soon. It wasn't a long walk home, but two hours later he still hadn't arrived. I was distraught. I remember clinging to my baby girl, whispering to her 'Daddy will be home soon, sweetheart.' Not that Jasmine would have understood. She was just two months old at the time.

And it was a lie, anyway. Dan never came home, and I never saw him again.

I thought there could be nothing worse than the fear I felt that night, the hours of waiting, wondering what could possibly have happened to my darling Dan.

But I was wrong, because this time it's far worse. This time the terror is like a hard ball, bouncing painfully around my chest, my head, my gut.

The policeman wants details, of course. He wants to understand why I'm so concerned. The children are with their father, so surely there should be nothing to worry about? Have I tried his mobile? I don't think I need to answer that.

Robert left at six o'clock. He said he would like to take the children out for a pizza. I would have gone with them, but he was adamant that he wanted to spend more time alone with them. *God*, I hate to admit this, but I was *pleased*. Knowing how I feel about him, I thought this would be good practice for when we are no longer together. So I let them go.

It was okay for the first hour. I didn't expect them back, and I found things to do to keep myself occupied. I knew Robert wouldn't eat any pizza; he would want dinner alone with me after the children were in bed. So I'd started a chilli - one of his favourites - as a thank you for taking them out.

When I had done everything I could think of, I returned to the living room but it felt so empty. I am *never* without at least one child by my side except when they are in bed. Jasmine is at school, of course, but Freddie is only two so he's with me all day, and Billy is at nursery, but only in the mornings.

The house felt hollow, as if the air had been sucked out of it, leaving a cold, silent void. Looking at the living room with fresh eyes - the eyes of the new, disaffected me - I realised what a sterile space we've created. We've taken the idea of a neutral palette to a whole new level and there isn't a splash of colour to be seen or a single personal item to be found; not a photograph of a child or a random knickknack bought on a whim. Each painting has been chosen not because of the emotion it evokes, but because its sheer neutrality blends seamlessly with its innocuous surroundings. Every ornament has been selected for its size, to create the perfect balance. And of course, Robert doesn't like toys in this room.

Who lives here?

It could be anybody. Maybe, for Robert, the decor was an inevitable outcome of living in my flat for too long, where orange walls and emerald green throws appeared to live happily side by side. But those colours radiated joy. What does this room tell you?

Nothing.

I have answered all the questions the policeman has asked. We have already determined that Robert wouldn't have taken the children to visit family or friends after their meal. Neither Robert nor I have any family. My parents died years ago, when Jaz was a baby, and Robert never knew his father. His mother died when he was a child, and we have no siblings either. These are cold, hard facts, not choices.

But how could I explain that I couldn't think of a single friend he could have gone to see with the children? How had we become so isolated? So alone?

But I know why. Robert wants me to himself. I am not to be shared.

I should have known something was wrong when he wanted to take the children out on his own. That was something he *never* did. If only I had listened, *really* listened, to what he was saying, I might have been able to stop it all before it was too late.

'Olivia, there is nothing strange about a father taking his children out for a pizza, is there? After all, some dads only *ever* get to see their children on their own.'

Was this Robert trying to tell me something? Had he guessed how I was feeling? If

this were anybody other than Robert, I would think that maybe – just maybe – he had accepted the inevitable and was trying to prove he could cope. But this isn't somebody else. This is Robert, and nothing is straightforward.

In my head I have gone through every possible scenario to explain where they might be, and each of them fills me with dread. I don't know which is worse: the image of my babies lying hurt somewhere, or my other fear. The one I daren't put into words.

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It's gone eleven now. Five hours since I have held Freddie's warm body in my arms and inhaled his sweet smell. I can't bear the thought of him being confused. And Billy. He needs his sleep. He gets grumpy when he's tired. And my lovely Jasmine will want to be home with her mummy by now; she never likes me to be far away and thinks far too much for a seven year old.

If Robert just brings them back safely, I'll forget all my stupid ideas of leaving. I'll learn to live with the constant scrutiny, as long as my children are unharmed.

Bring them home, Robert.

The police have been searching the house just like the last time, as if I might be hiding my children somewhere. They're out knocking on doors and waking up the neighbours. What have they seen? What do they know?

More police are arriving now. Detectives this time.

'Mrs Brookes?' My thoughts are interrupted by a voice. I look up into the kind eyes of a woman who doesn't look much older than me, but she must be because everybody calls her ma'am.

'Do you mind if I call you Olivia? My name's Philippa. I'm afraid we've now called all the local pizza places, and nobody remembers seeing your husband and children.'

'Maybe they changed their minds and went for a burger instead. They could have done that, couldn't they?' I'm clutching at straws, and we all know it.

'Why didn't you go with them, Olivia?'

How can I answer that? I don't *know*. He's never done this before. I feel I have to make something up, although I don't know why.

'Robert thought I looked tired, and could do with a bit of a rest. He was trying to help.'

'Do you have a stressful job? Is that why you were tired? Or have the children been playing you up a bit?'

Christ - does she think I've hurt my children?

'They're good kids - I promise you they are. And I don't work. There's enough to do looking after the children and Robert.'

I've never really worked, other than for a few months before I had Jasmine. By the time my maternity leave was over, Robert had asked me to marry him and he didn't want me to work at all. He wanted me at home, looking after him, and it suited me just fine. But now I don't know why I was content with that decision. Content with being nobody in my own right.

The questions keep coming, but all I want to do is scream at them all. *Stop asking inane questions. Find my children.*

'I'm sorry to have to ask you, Olivia - but would you mind going upstairs with one of my officers? We'd like you to check if anything of the children's is missing. Clothes,

favourite toys, books. You know the sort of thing.'

What? I stare at her wordlessly for a moment. *Why would anything be missing?*

I push myself up from the sofa, feeling like a woman three times my age as my tense limbs struggle to take my weight. I don't know what they are thinking, but this is ridiculous. *Why would anything be missing?* The thought revolves in my head like a ticker tape.

One of the detectives follows me upstairs and I recognise him but I can't think why. Not that it matters. I decide to start with Jasmine's room, which I know will be tidy so it will be easy to see if everything is where it should be.

I walk over to the bed and lift the cover, expecting to see Lottie - Jaz's rag doll - lying on the pillow. She's not there. I whip back the duvet. *Where's Lottie?* Even at seven, Jaz loves to have Lottie in her bed, but there is no sign of her. I look at the policeman in my anguish, but he just watches me and says nothing.

I walk slowly over to the wardrobe. I almost don't want to open it. But he's still watching me. I gently pull on the handle, as if doing it slowly will change the outcome. Jasmine's pink backpack is not on the shelf. Suddenly I'm like a wild thing, pushing coat hangers backwards and forwards, pulling open drawers.

'No.' I am wailing, dragging out the one syllable into twenty. *Where are my daughter's clothes?*

I hear a thundering up the stairs, and Philippa appears at the door. She comes over to me and holds my arm. She doesn't have to ask questions - she can tell from my face what has happened. I've been trying not to admit it to myself, but now I have to face the truth.

He's taken my children.

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