

Honey

Rachel Abbott

It's dark in here, but I don't mind. I wish I had a cushion though. The floor is hard, and I have pulled my knees close to my chest, arms around them, to try to keep warm. It's a strange place to hide, but I find the familiar scents of my family comforting.

I lift one hand and feel for my hair. Its silky smoothness has always soothed me. But it's not there. I had forgotten.

'Jake!' I hear a shout from the kitchen. 'Come and get your breakfast.'

There's a clatter of feet on wooden stairs, and then the low murmur of voices. I hear footsteps and I think they're coming towards me, but I'm wrong.

'Lily!'

There is no answer.

'Jake, go and find your sister for me will you. She's hiding again.'

Jake moans quietly. 'Aw, Dad, she'll turn up when she's ready.'

'Just do it, Jake. You'll miss the school bus if she's not down here soon.'

Feet stomp back up the stairs, much more slowly this time. I can hear Jake shouting 'Lily!' with a note of irritation in his young voice. Finally, there's another rush of feet on the stairs.

'She's coming, Dad. What's for breakfast?'

'Toast and honey.'

Honey. The sound of the word makes me think of a pool of warm, amber gel, but in my mind I'm standing in it, my feet stuck to the ground, rooting me to the spot. I know I should move on, but I can't.

And honey means more than that to me.

I hear the softer tread of feet coming down the stairs. Lily: beautiful seven-year-old Lily with her blonde curls and her angelic smile.

The burble of conversation goes on in the kitchen, with the occasional burst of laughter.

Then I hear movement again. 'Get your coats, kids.'

Footsteps start to move along the hallway. They're coming towards me. The small door is yanked open, and a hand reaches in.

'There you are, Honey. I was wondering where you'd got to. How did you get in there? The kids are off, now. Come and say goodbye.' As I crawl out, I hear the bolt being pushed back into position.

I follow my husband towards the door where my children are waiting. They don't raise their eyes to look at me – they don't see me. I lift my hand to my hair again and feel the bare patches.

I look at my wonderful children and know that they don't understand, and I don't want them to.

My husband's calm expression belies what I know are his true feelings. 'Say goodbye to the children, Honey.'

He's still smiling, but I can see how forced it is. His hand reaches out and I think for a moment that he's reaching for me, that he wants to stroke my hair - forgetting that it's no longer there. But after a moment his hand drops back down to his side and his expression changes. He is gritting his teeth, just waiting for the moment when the children are out of sight and he can let go.

I smile at my children, but they're not looking at me. They're looking at their father. One after the other they walk towards him and hug him. 'Love you, Dad,' they say in turn. Their eyes never meet mine.

As they walk away down the drive I want to run after them and tell them how much I love them, but it would make no sense to them at all.

He waits until they are out of sight, then closes the door. He leans against it and stares at me, through me. He's not seeing me, or at least not as I am now. He's seeing that other me – the slightly chubby, happy person with the long auburn hair. I ache with sadness, and know that it's time to leave – to desert my beautiful children.

He falls to his knees. 'Come here, Honey,' he whispers.

Honey trots towards him, knowing – as I do – what is coming. She lies down and rests her chin on his thighs, looking up devotedly into his face. He strokes her gently and she lifts her head and starts to lick the tears from his face.

'She's here, isn't she Honey?' he asks. Honey has only started using her nose to push the under stairs cupboard door open since I've been gone. She never used to do that. But she knows that I like being in there, listening to my family and inhaling their unique perfumes. It's because of Honey that he knows when I'm here, and I know how much it's hurting him.

It's time for me to go. And I mustn't come back again. If Honey can sense me here, then somewhere, deep in their subconscious minds, my husband and children might feel me too. I need to let go of them. It's time.

As I pass the mirror in the hall I look in it, but all I see is the wall behind me. I don't see my own red-rimmed eyes and the thin, pale face with patches of wispy hair. I see nothing other than an empty room.