

LBRIS

We know
books

Also by Emma Stonex

The Lamplighters

The
**SUNSHINE
MAN**

EMMA STONEX

PICADOR

1

The week I shot a man clean through the head began like any other. I woke at the normal time, quarter past six, and it was dark outside. I heard the sound of the heating coming on, a rattling chuckle in the pipes. Tom was still asleep, his bare shoulder pale in the moonlight; I put my nose in his neck to check he smelt the same, which he did, of gently scorched wood and the inside of the biscuit tin.

I dressed in the dark and went downstairs. It was unnaturally quiet. I opened the curtains and saw there'd been snow in the night, unexpectedly; it hadn't been forecast. The fall was piled inches deep on the garden bench and the birdbath was rounded off like a wedding cake. It never snowed in our Wiltshire village. Every other part of the country got it but we never did; the children's sledges hung unused in the shed like bats. I switched on the radio. It was a DJ I didn't like, sitting in for someone else, playing twangy songs from Broadway musicals. I made a cup of tea. The milk was past its best-before; I poured it down the sink then buttered two slices of toast and sat at the table in my slippers. The toast had the consistency of cardboard; I heard my jaw click as I chewed.

The show tunes stopped and the news began. The aftermath of air disasters, falling unemployment. The telephone rang. I reached for it.

'It's today,' she said. 'Sorry for the short notice, the arrangements have changed.' It would be midday, she anticipated, these things usually happened before lunch.

I thought there must be a response from my immediate surroundings. The stove catching fire, a chair tipping over. But nothing changed. The tea had an oily film across its surface, which quivered as a grit lorry rolled by. Here it was. He was getting out.



Tom came down in an ironed shirt and I remembered he had a big meeting today. He'd be away overnight, in Bath. 'Who was that?' he asked. I told him a wrong number.

'You were talking to them,' he said.

'Yes. I was telling them they had the wrong number.'

He looked inside the bread bin. 'How about the snow? That's a turn-up for the books.'

'I know.'

He kissed me. 'The kids'll be beside themselves.'

I turned away to the sink to rinse a glass that was already clean. I thought that in another, ordinary life, I would be wrapping our children in jumpers and mittens, unhooking the sledges, lighting a fire so it would be good and warm when we got home.

'Are the schools open?' said Tom, spading coffee into a Chippenham FC mug.

'They'd better be,' I said. 'I've got things to do today.'

'Like what?'

I twisted the tap off. 'An errand.'

'Ah. Say no more.' My husband's tone changed from concern to conspiracy; I realized he thought it was about his birthday, next month. The notion was so far removed from my intentions, it felt almost like the worst lie of all.

'I thought I'd ask your mother, if school's closed,' I said.

'Good idea.' He filled a pan with boiling water and lowered an egg into it, considerately, like someone releasing a fish. 'Do you want one?' He glanced up. 'Bridget?'

'I'm not hungry.'

He saw the half-eaten toast. 'Are you all right? You seem a million miles away.'

'I'm fine.' I opened the fridge. 'Here. I made you some sandwiches.'

'You're a wonder,' he said, taking them. 'I'd better check the trains are running.'

'They are. Travel's just been on.'

'Well, thank God for that. It'd have to pick today, wouldn't it? The weather.'

My hand shook as I closed the door. 'What do you mean?'

'Greg and this ruddy presentation,' said Tom, not noticing. 'There'll be hell to pay if it gets put back again, I'll never hear the end of it.' He scratched a stain on the nose of his tie. The top of his head was almost totally grey now. We were grown. I hadn't grown.

'I'll ring the school,' I said, as the egg timer went off.

The line in the hall was engaged. On my second attempt the office answered and told me they were open as usual. I felt relief. The next hour arranged itself into slots of twenty

minutes. Twenty minutes to give the children their breakfast. Twenty minutes to stick them in front of the television while I packed a bag that had been waiting eighteen years to be packed, made arrangements with Wilma for collecting them, got their satchels and Philippa's lunch money. Twenty minutes to drive them there. When I had thought of this day in the past, I had imagined myself in a panic. Now it was here, I felt quite calm.

I went upstairs and found Philippa wrestling her tights on under the covers.

'I'm cold!' she complained, when I told her she should get up, it'd be easier.

'It's snowed,' I said, drawing back the curtains. 'Look.'

Her face lit up. 'Do we get the day off?'

'Sorry.'

She climbed out of bed and went to the window, her tights puddled around her ankles, her hair at the back a nest of spun sugar. I loved her so much.

'It's like Narnia,' she said. 'Can we go outside?'

I thought of wet uniforms, hairdryers. 'Later. Nanny's picking you up.'

She turned on me. 'Why?'

'Dad's away tonight. And I have to visit a friend.'

'What friend?' Philippa was a child who was suspicious until reassured.

'Someone old from school,' I said.

'How old?'

'As old as me.'

'You're not old.'

I helped her into her vest, daring a kiss on her shoulder. 'I'm older than you.'

'What's her name?'

'Peggy.' It was a character in a book I was reading.

'Where does she live?'

I zipped up her dress and touched my forehead to hers. Her eyes close up were flecked with gold. I had always wanted eyes like that. Nothing like my own.

'So many questions,' I said.

'You're always telling me to ask questions.'

'She's in hospital,' I said, folding her nightdress.

'Is she dying?'

'Maybe.'

The cat slunk in. Philippa turned her attentions to him as I slid her nightie under her pillow and patted it gently. Joe wouldn't be as challenging, I knew. He was still asleep next door, his cheeks flushed, his eyelashes a line of commas. He was heavy and affectionate, drawn into our morning hug, his arms round my neck, a sweaty rabbit pressed in the warmth between us. I looked at the clock on the wall.

'Come on, sweetheart, let's get you dressed.' I took off his Danger Mouse pyjamas; the top had a smear of Marmite on the sleeve, which worried me disproportionately – that Tom would not notice or know later to put it in the washing machine, and how many days, therefore, it would remain, the same as the number of days it took me to come back.

Joe trailed me downstairs, screaming with delight when he saw the snow. He opened the back door to the kitchen and put his Rabba in the drift to show him how cold it was: 'See? Like

the North Pole.' The cat had moved into the garden now, perched disdainfully on a snowy fence post, looking in at me with sharp green eyes. The cat and I had never got on. Somewhere, a dog barked. The cat dropped out of sight.

'Can I have Coco Pops?' asked Philippa, swinging her legs at the table, starting on some colouring. I thought that I would not have time after to clear it up.

'You can,' said Tom. 'But *may* you?'

'May I?'

'No,' he said. 'They'll rot your teeth. Anyway, there's no milk.' He turned to me, buttoning his coat. 'Could you pick some up later?'

I nodded.

'Peanut butter!' exclaimed Joe, climbing onto his cushion and reaching for the jar. I heard the jingle of the news returning. I turned the radio down.

'Wait – I want that,' said Tom.

'Why?'

'The headlines.'

He turned up the volume. Various items rolled on but there was nothing about him. I shouldn't have imagined there would be. He was the sun around which all my planets revolved; but to anyone else, just a name eclipsed by time and other tragedies.

The toast popped up, startling. Tom took his briefcase off the counter.

'See you tomorrow,' he said, hugging me then hugging the children.

'You forgot these,' I said, giving him his sandwiches. I was

keen to get him out before Philippa said anything about Peggy. 'Bye.' I paused. 'Good luck today.'

'You too,' he said, smiling at me. 'Whatever secret mission you're on.'



While the children were brushing their teeth, I wrote a note to my husband. Though I had contemplated every other detail, I had never settled on what I'd say to him. I wrote:

I'll be gone a few days. I hope you understand.

Which was asking a lot, but it was better to be brief.

'We're ready,' said Philippa, lingering at the door. She'd plaited her hair into two mooring ropes. I folded the note and held it behind my back. 'D'you think Lucy will be in?'

'She might,' I said.

'I'll have no one to partner with in PE. I hate PE.'

'Ten minutes, darling,' I said. 'Put on a video.'

'I don't want to.' That suspicion again.

'I have to get your things together for Nanny.'

She twisted the end of her plait, eyeing me before going downstairs.

I pulled Gamma's carrycase out of the wardrobe. I hadn't meant to take this one but now it was happening it seemed right. Maybe what she'd have wanted. So often in my life I had sought to emulate my grandmother's principles, but on this I had none: it was bigger, more serious, than either of us. The bag was tan leather with tarnished metal buckles. Its leather was lightly cracked like the icing on the cakes she'd used to

bake on Sundays after church. The best bit about church had been thinking about those cakes, while the vicar talked on about abstinence and Jesus looked down at me from the cross with his lamenting eyes and the wounds in his feet, and I hadn't heard a word he'd said.

I didn't know how many changes of clothes I would need. I folded in a few, and plenty of knickers, as those seemed to me the most important things. Then I opened the chest of drawers and fumbled in the top towards the back until I felt it. I'd told Tom the box contained my sister's music and a few of the long, colourful letters she'd written me from school, which naturally he'd accepted, and he'd accepted too that I would never want to open it and take the contents out. I set the box down, waiting for a revelation, but none came. The lid shone. I saw my reflection in it, as clear as if I were meeting it in a perfectly still pond. My palms were dry. My heart ran steadily, like a faithful car engine.

I reached for my engagement-ring case. The small silver key was stitched into the cushion. I'd been aware when I'd done that of some unsettling irony, difficult to pinpoint, and was pleased to remove it now: I picked the thread and put the key in the lock, which opened smoothly, in agreement. I lifted its lid. A smell rose to meet me, deep and oaky.

The gun was a Beretta Cheetah. I had been told the model but wasn't concerned. Would it kill a man? Yes. Was it compact enough to conceal? Yes. I felt no need to hold it in a display of reunion or exchange of trust. It had waited for me for a decade, patiently.

I secreted the gun in Gamma's bag with a pair of

disposable gloves, and zipped it shut. The obvious place for Tom's note was on the bookcase – he'd see it straight away when he got home – leaning against the spines of some Dorothy L. Sayers. Then I decided that could look rather contrived so I moved it onto his bedside table. I collected the bag and left the room.



The snow was heaped up in banks on either side of the road. Salt grit made red slush of the tarmac. The car door was frozen shut but gave with enough of a yank, snow sliding off the driver's window like a dropped blind. I fished about in the glovebox for a scraper, locating it behind a bag of stuck-together mint humbugs and a Joy Division cassette. It took a long time to clear the windscreen. This I did methodically, from top to bottom and left to right, with the fans on full blast. Philippa sat in front picking silver polish off her nails. Joe dropped his packed lunch in the footwell and cried. Finally, we departed.

There weren't many parents at the school gates. Philippa saw a friend and was keen to get away. My fingers brushed the sleeve of her blazer as she carelessly exited the car; it was like trying to catch a scarf as it flew off the deck of a ferry. 'Bye then,' I said.

'Bye, Mum. See you.'

'See you.'

I watched her link arms with the friend. They skidded,

laughing, on the pavement, pretending to skate. I thought about going after her, but there wouldn't be a reason.

Joe and I made slow progress towards his classroom, where a teacher I didn't recognize welcomed us: the usual one couldn't start her car. I gave Joe his lunch bag.

'My mother-in-law will be collecting him this afternoon,' I told the teacher. 'I'll let the office know on the way out.'

'Lucky you!' she exclaimed to Joe, as if I hadn't spoken. 'Grandma picking you up? What a treat. All that fun you'll have with Granny.' Clearly she had never met Wilma.

Joe was clinging to my knees.

'Come on then,' said the woman. 'We've got the paints out.'

I crouched to hug Joe. His hair smelt of almonds and clean towels. I breathed him in, every last bit of him, the lovely heft of him in my arms, his soft cheek on mine, the groove at the back of his neck where his Cash's nametape poked out of his collar.

'Have a good day,' I whispered.

I felt better when I got back in the car. The snow made it necessary to think of little else but navigation of the route. I joined the main road, trying not to catch sight of Joe's vacated booster seat in the rear-view mirror and the thumb-sized purple dinosaur he'd dug out of a cereal box and brought along for the journey. My tyres churned wetly. The landscape looked fresh and eerie. I had known these fields a long time but now the ice made strangers of them, washed out, indistinguishable from one another, lacking any detectable notes of scale. Dark straws pierced the banks, wet bark and the stalks of rotten vegetation. A shape crossed the road in front of me, small and quick, low

to the ground, so quick in fact it could have been a ripple of paint or light, or the onset of a migraine.

Wilma's house was in the heel of a cul-de-sac. When I pressed the bell I heard a contracted version of the *William Tell* Overture ringing into the air-freshened hallway.

'This is awfully short notice,' she said when she came to the door, checking to see if the neighbours were watching. 'You're lucky I'm available.'

'I know. Thank you. Tom will get them tomorrow.'

'And when will you be back?'

I gave her the children's bag, which she took, and parted the handles and looked inside as if she'd been expecting a present.

'I'm not sure,' I said.

'All right then. Well.'

'Philippa's likely to have homework,' I said. 'If it's maths she'll need help.'

'Fine.' She sighed. 'But there'll be no snowball fights. No tramping it all through the house. I've just had the carpets done.' She stood back to let me see.

'Very nice,' I said.

'Are you sickening for something, Bridget? You look peaky.'

'Just a headache,' I said. 'It's not too bad.'

'You should get those seen to. Who knows what might be going on? Jill's nephew had a brain tumour; he went completely blind in one eye. He wears a patch now.'

'Well, you know. Life gets in the way.'

'Until it doesn't.'

She looked at her watch. I looked at mine.

'Thanks again.' I returned to the car and started the

engine. She waited in the doorway until I drove off and turned out of sight. I waved to a postman getting out of his van, which seemed a weird thing to do, very far from where I was in my mind, but I thought it might be the last time I did something ordinary. Besides, I knew him. Wilma had tried to get him taken off the round once, on a claim he'd stolen money, the envelope split and her friend's ten pounds for a bistro lunch gone from inside. Wilma didn't trust people. She didn't trust me, which made her a wily bird, I supposed. She'd been frank about it from the start, at least. She hadn't tried to keep the pinch from her face when Tom and I had announced our engagement. When we'd first brought Philippa to visit, she hadn't greeted the girl in a grandmotherly way, just stared hard at me over the rim of her Silver Jubilee teacup. Tom would have been better off with someone else, she thought. Someone easier, less problematic, without that baggage dragging along after her. More of a woman, for surely in her mind – and often in mine – these things were related.

Still, she put her best foot forward with the children, which was as much as I could ask for, and Tom said not to expect too much. I didn't think she felt a great deal for Philippa. Maybe it was to do with girls and women and having a son of her own (she'd said to me once, '*A daughter's a daughter for life, Bridget; a son's a son until he finds a wife*') – but she was fond of Joe. She found it easier to love him because she'd known him from a baby. Babies, I thought, as I came to the coach station, were so easy to love.

I wiped my eyes and unclicked my seat belt. The snow

stopped. People huddled at the entrance checking tickets and smoking cigarettes, bundled in scarves and coats.

A sister is a sister for life.

I opened the car door. It was too late to go back. I took my bags and went inside.

2

I was born on the bathroom floor of a terraced house in Devon in July 1947. My mother hadn't known she was pregnant, or had, and pretended it wasn't happening until it was. She'd gripped the side of the bath and screamed once and once only, so long and loud it stopped the children playing in the street and a car passing with its window open thought the air-raid sirens were back. I was early, too small ('thin as a comb,' said Gamma), and there was a hospital stay, kept in an incubator and fed by syringe. There's no way I can remember it, but I do remember it. Stuccoed ceiling like cottage cheese. Nurses' hands, rough and capable, the rubber teats of faded milk bottles. White rabbits dangling on a mobile above the cot, blue tails, pink tails, cardboard spinning circles in the sun.

From the start my mother was out of the picture. She was a teenager and had got herself in trouble. The father wasn't interested. I think he might have been married, though I have no proof of this. *My* father, I should say, but who is he to me but a stranger and I'm past caring besides; he's irrelevant to me. She gave me to Gamma, said she couldn't cope with the responsibility, and Gamma said fine, six months then you're back to it, Mary, all right? You've got yourself into this, you can get yourself out. And Mary said yes but then she ran off to Westward

Hol and never came back again apart from as a visiting relative like Great Uncle Clarence or Cousin Norma, a few times for the sake of it, with gifts and pats on the head, and knobbly knees in stockings I was made to sit on clutching my garibaldi, which Gamma always called a squashed-fly biscuit. There's a picture of me sitting on Mary's lap when I was three years old; she's got a patterned dress on like a field of a thousand flowers, open at the neck, and a gold chain I've wound around my fist. I kept that photo and looked at it all through my childhood, searching her expression for clues as to why she didn't want me, but I never found one.

Gamma believed in God. Both her parents had died when she was small and she'd been sent to live with maiden aunts in London who'd been into heaven and hell and the hereafter, and they held seances to summon the dead. Once they'd summoned Gamma's father Benjamin who'd been a miner in the coal pits. He'd appeared to them with his sooted face and loving eyes and complained about how windy it was being caught at the entrance to the tunnel, but they had never ascertained whether this referred to the adit or a channel of the afterlife. Gamma said these days she disapproved of mysticism, but that her aunts' fervour had shown her the importance of believing in *something*. She gave no credence to spiritualism, but to witness their faith had instilled in her a sense of wonder, of openness to whatever the world had to reveal, for it was ignorant to imagine that there was nothing more to unveil than the here and now.

She took me to church every Sunday. We dressed as smartly as we could. Gamma took pride in what little we had, she