



THE GAPS

*What does
it mean*

LEANNE

*to be the one
left behind?*

HALL

'Haunting and beautiful.' Wai Chim

DAY 1

There's a photo of a schoolgirl next to the newsreader's head, emblazoned with the word ABDUCTED. The orange-and-green check of the girl's dress is unmistakable.

'Yin Mitchell,' I say to myself. A cold feeling races through me.

The photo on the screen is at least a few years old—Yin has stubby ribboned pigtails, round cheeks. She wears her hair longer these days, with a feathery fringe she pushes to the side.

I stab the volume button on the remote and my sketchbook slides to the floor. The newsreader's voice is flat, but laced with an appropriate amount of sorrow.

'The armed assailant broke into the Sandpiper Drive house in the early hours of this morning via a ground floor window. The victim's mother, Chunjuan Mitchell, intercepted the intruder, but was forced into a downstairs bathroom and tied up. The alarm was raised around dawn when Stephen Mitchell, who had been sleeping in a separate part of the house, heard his wife's cries and discovered that their sixteen-year-old daughter was missing.'

Yin. Yin. Hangs out with Claire and Milla. Was in my English class in first term, but switched out later, I'm not sure why. Wears liquid eyeliner to school on the sly. Quiet, smart, deep into the orchestra scene.

It can't be true. Not again.

'Turn it down, Chlo. We'll get another note under our door.'

Mum points to the thin wall we share with our elderly neighbours, leans against the doorframe to put her earrings in, her hair hanging like a silk sheet. Everything about her is tiny and neat and pretty; she always looks immaculate in her work uniform.

'Someone else has been abducted from Balmoral.'

'Oh my god.' Mum comes closer and we watch grainy footage of a suburban street, cordoned off with striped plastic tape and swarming with shadowy figures searching for clues. Rosy-dawn-tinged, police-light blue. In the background a curious neighbour lingers in a pink dressing gown, hand clamped over her pixel mouth.

'Is she in your year level?' Mum sits next to me and grabs my hand.

My brother Sam slinks into the room and crouches in the shadows next to the couch. Our Jack Russell, Arnold, lifts his head from the rug to look disapprovingly at him.

'Yeah. Not in my class though.'

The scene doesn't look real.

It looks like a Bill Henson photograph, one of the barely lit landscapes I saw at the National Gallery on first term's Art excursion. I'd never seen photos that looked so painterly.

They featured beautiful young bodies and ancient sculptures and mammoth rocks and the ocean sliding in and out of shadows, night-time scenes barely lit in ways that made them unsettling, enticing, mysterious.

I stayed and looked at the exhibition for so long the bus almost returned to school without me. I drank in the photos like they were water. I wanted life to be something like those pictures: dark, raw, significant.

But not like this.

When I decided to take the scholarship to Balmoral Ladies College, my Morrison High friends called it the Kidnapping School.

This isn't the first time this has happened.

'When?' Mum says.

'This morning.'

'Ransom?'

'Don't think so. Not yet.'

I catch myself playing with the dangly jade charm on Mum's bracelet, a childhood habit.

The Mitchell family property has a six-foot-high wall, and a video intercom on the front gate. It's a fortress—so how did someone break in?

'Her parents must be frantic.' Mum always gets upset when bad things happen to other people, even though she never gets that upset for herself.

The view switches to a helicopter shot, showing the blue and green shapes of swimming pools and tennis courts, driveways as long as airport landing strips, avenues of trees and cream-and-yellow Lego mansions. So this is where my

classmates live. I've never been to a Balmoral girl's house; I've never been invited.

'I'll cancel my shift. Where's my phone?'

'No.' I nudge her phone under a cushion.

I'm not scared to be at home alone. Not very, anyway. Not enough to lose money over.

'I'm not leaving you by yourselves.'

'No, Mum!'

Mum's manager is a real knob. He hates giving her time off or letting her swap shifts. It's probably because he asked her out in her first few weeks at the hotel and she said no.

An identikit portrait fills the screen—a man wearing a balaclava and sunglasses, his whole face covered. A ridiculous thing to show because it could be anyone. Generic bad dude.

'Whoa,' says Sam. 'Freaky.'

Mum starts like she's only just realised he's in the room.

Sam crawls closer, his mouth rapturously open in the television glare. It's probably the same as the opening scenes of *CSI* to him. Arnold pedals his tiny legs against Sam's encroachment and whines.

Mum reaches over and switches the telly off. She hasn't got the memo yet that Sam isn't a baby anymore.

'I'm still watching!' Sam balls his fists.

'You're not watching anything,' Mum tells him. 'Keep your phone on and beside your bed,' she says to me. 'I'm going to text you every half hour. If you don't get back to me straight away, I will jump in a cab immediately.'

'Don't worry, Chlo, I'll protect you,' Sam says.

‘Actually, Sam, he’d tie you up and then take me. Easy as that.’

Sam flinches and I regret my words. He’s wearing shrunken Star Wars pyjamas that he refuses to admit he’s grown out of. Sam still believes in superheroes and the Force.

Mum corrals us into a family hug, holding on a little bit longer than normal. My chin sits on top of her head; our long black hair gets tangled together.

‘You’re both getting so tall,’ Mum murmurs.

Arnold huffs and rolls over. He puts his head on his paws and looks up at me, angling for a walk. I look away, over Mum’s head, trying not to get strangled.

‘Arnold will protect us,’ I say, to make Sam, and maybe Mum, feel better.

I decide to leave the hallway light on all night, and put the outside porch light on as well. Mum’s asked the landlord more than once for a security light along the driveway. It’s one of the few things we agree on with Ron and Pearl next door.

For a moment I push the front curtains aside and look over at the car spots opposite. The only time ours is used is when Dad visits, which is hardly ever. The porch light is feeble; beyond our block of units the leafy darkness quickly takes over. It makes no sense that light makes humans feel safer, when it doesn’t protect us at all. Fear has a steady grip around my throat and I regret telling Mum to go to work.

My phone beeps for the billionth time tonight, since the first news reports, and my nerves jangle afresh.

Liana.

babe you need to leave that school n come back!!!!

My old school friends are losing their minds. My phone goes off again.

Katie.

dont get killed x

I send the knife emoji and the scream face and then put my phone on silent. I was already wondering how I was going to survive my first year at Balmoral, this is just adding to the sick joke.

At ten o'clock I watch the late news with the volume down low. It's mostly a rehash of what's been said in the earlier reports—they show the same outdated photo of Yin, the same identikit drawn from Yin's mum's description, and the same aerial footage that shows us how improbable it was that anyone broke into the compound.

There's still no ransom demand; no one has seen anything or anyone suspicious in the area. The reporter mentions that Yin's eight-year-old twin brothers were spending the night at their grandparents' house. I try not to think about how distraught her brothers must have been when the news was broken to them. They're barely old enough to understand.

My phone vibrates again and this time it's a relief to answer.

'Babe. Oh my god.' Liana's voice echoes. I'm sure she's

calling me from her backyard. ‘Do you know her? Are you okay?’

‘I’m okay. I don’t know her that well.’ I hate saying that, as if Yin should matter less to me because I’m not in her friendship group. ‘She’s in my year but I’ve only talked to her a few times.’

‘I’m freaked out Chlo. What if it was you who got taken?’

‘It wasn’t me. I’m at home and I’m fine.’ Liana’s voice is a balm, though, and I want to keep her on the line as long as possible.

‘Please, please come back to Morrison. It’s not safe there.’

‘L, I’m not rich, we don’t live anywhere near Glen Park, I’ve only been at Balmoral for three terms...it’s like, minimal risk.’

‘I don’t know what I’d do if you went missing.’

That silences me. I believe her, but this is probably the first time she’s called me in two weeks.

‘Do you know anything?’ she asks. ‘Like, insider info?’

‘No. I only found out watching the news earlier. I know as much as you do.’

After I finish speaking to Liana I search online for reports about the first Balmoral girl who was kidnapped, three years ago.

Karolina Bauer was a fourteen-year-old exchange student from Düsseldorf. Her host family were the Sheldons—they had a daughter, Maddie, in Year Twelve at Balmoral at the time. Karolina was abducted from her hosts’ home while the parents were at the next-door-neighbour’s house; Maddie

was left behind. Karolina was eventually returned after a few days, unharmed and wearing nothing but a plastic rain poncho. Even though it had happened way across town, to a girl who was nothing like me, it was easy to picture.

How cold you would be, how goosebumped your bare skin under the thin plastic. Walking down the street, shivering and rustling. Numb inside, knowing nothing would ever be the same. Trying to pick the right house, a safe house with good people in it who would rescue you and call the police and give you hot tea.

Could two students from the same school be a coincidence?

Later, close to midnight, I check on Sam. He's asleep on top of his covers, with his football boots still on and Arnold slumped across his legs. His doona cover has rockets and planets and stars on it. He's only two years older than Yin's brothers.

If anyone ever did something bad to him or Mum, I'd hunt them down and kill them. Adrenaline swirls in my arms and legs and gut when I think about it. I'd destroy anyone that hurt my family.

I leave Sam as he is. Mum likes to come home from the hotel and tuck him in, no matter the hour. Arnold opens one eye triumphantly as I leave; he isn't usually allowed on our beds.

The washing machine cycle has finished, but I can't bring myself to walk outside into the dark space behind our house and hang it out. I leave the wet clothes in a basket on top of the machine. Tomorrow morning.

One last patrol of our brick unit takes around twenty seconds and ten steps. Sam's bedroom, my bedroom and our tiny, plant-filled bathroom huddle in one corner. The lounge is separated from the kitchen by the bench, and beyond that, the door to Mum's bedroom.

From my bed I stare at the photos and drawings and magazine pages I've blu-tacked to my bedroom walls in one big chaotic collage. Normally I love to lie here and look at it. Maybe this is what the contents of my brain would look like if you tipped it out. Colours and patterns and shapes and faces. Memories and wishes and plans for the future. Like the answer to me, the sum of me, is up there on the wall.

Tonight, though, I can't stop my eyes from sliding left, to the window. It's fitted with a flimsy plastic handle that winds it open and closed. There's no lock.

I think through the logistics.

Force the window open, drag me out. The window opens onto a narrow side passage. You'd have to haul me past Ron and Pearl's unit, but they're ancient and no threat. Then I'd have to be dragged over the low dividing wall, kicking and screaming, into the front yard. It'd be difficult. Not impossible, but maybe not easy enough.

The detective that spoke on the late news seemed to be deliberately avoiding mentioning Karolina Bauer.

When I was deciding whether or not I was going to take the scholarship to Balmoral, Karolina's kidnapping was mere trivia. I was more interested in poring over the school prospectus, reading about subjects and results and awards, trying to understand what it all meant in real-life terms.

Trying to decide if I should do my final three years at a brand new school.

None of it prepared me for the harsh and dizzying reality of Balmoral Ladies College.

I'd actually talked to Yin in my first week. She was one of the first girls to pay me any attention at all.

I had been in the bathrooms near the science labs, in a cubicle. Not to pee, but to buy time away from the maelstrom of new faces and hard-to-find classrooms. I wasn't the only new student. Lots of families couldn't afford the full six years at Balmoral, so plenty of girls started in Year Ten. But those families at least paid three years' tuition. I wasn't supposed to be there at all.

I'd gone into the bathroom alone, but soon several pairs of feet came in and set up at the mirrors and sinks. The taps turned on and off, and I remained deathly quiet. Someone used the hand dryer, there was quiet chatter interspersed with silence. I held my breath.

'Gimme that,' someone said. Laughter followed by spray-can sounds.

'Wang is better than Doolan.'

I was in Mrs Wang's form but I had no idea who was speaking. Now that I'd waited those extra moments I couldn't come out of the cubicle. I'd been too quiet; it was obvious I wasn't in there to use the toilet.

'Liz says Scrutton is the best form teacher. He lets you do anything as long as you don't bother him.'

'There are four new girls in our form, including two scholarship students. That's a lot, right?'

‘It’s so funny how we’re not supposed to know who the charity cases are.’

‘God—so obvious. Can I borrow some?’

‘First,’ the loudest voice said, ‘there’s the uniforms. Second-hand and huge. And also the shoes, those ugly Mary Janes they recommend even though no one wears them.’

‘To be fair, some Year Sevens have them.’

‘Secondly,’ the lead hyena continued, ‘they’re such try-hards. They join literally everything—orchestra, choir, volunteer squad, debating...’

‘But they have to be good at everything or they’ll lose their scholarships. And then where would they be? Back in the ghetto.’

‘I feel sorry for them,’ a new voice says. ‘No one has told them yet how shit Balmoral is.’

There was laughter before the bell rang, and everyone cleared out.

I waited until the bathroom was quiet, already worried about being late to Maths. I was sure I was alone, but when the door swung open, Yin was there, a Ventolin puffer in her hand.

We looked at each other in the long mirror that stretched from window to wall. Me in my too-big uniform, carrying my new textbooks, a highlighted map of the school sitting on top. My face was bright red in some parts and ghost-white in others. Tears had made two obvious tracks down my cheeks.

Yin handed me some paper towel.

‘I think we had English together first period. Do you need help finding your next class?’ she asked.

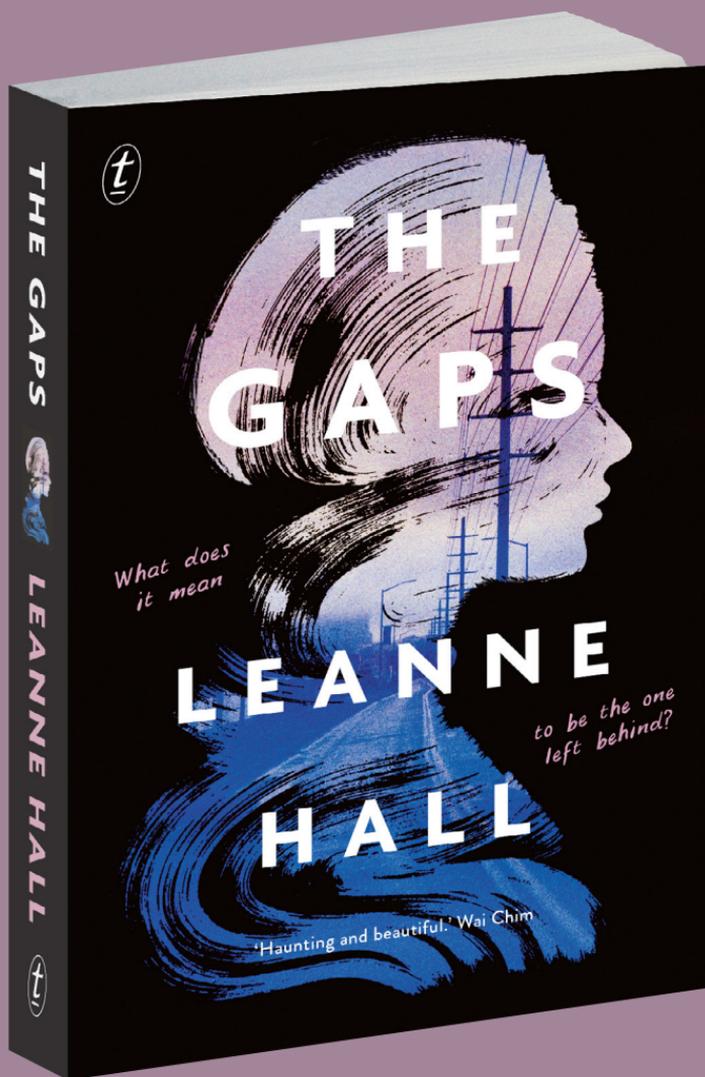
I shook my head.

‘Are you sure? This place is huge. It takes a while to learn your way around.’

Even though taking up her offer would have made my life easier, I refused again. Humiliation had glued my mouth shut.

Yin gathered her things and left, smiling sympathetically at me on the way out.

I splashed my face with cold water, patted it dry, and forced myself to go outside into the corridor. Like I’ve been forcing myself ever since.



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