

Footsteps in the night.

"See you at 5, then?" bellowed Kate as she crossed the high street. Without a backward glance, she disappeared into the misty distance.

"Wait, Kate, I..." Sarah drifted off. With her friend now a shrinking shadow, she turned and began the slow trudge home from school. A trudge that would let her forget the awful day she had just suffered - test after test, homework upon homework. To top it all, a night of revision with Kate lay ahead of her. Nevertheless, Sarah smiled. At least Mum would be home to meet her with a big, warm hug.

Sarah meandered down the emptying High Street. The wind whipped her cold cheeks; she pulled her scarf tightly around her neck. Lights, glowing feebly in the darkness, lit her path home. Streets were covered by a growing white sheen. Frost. Shivering and cold, tired and weary, Sarah ambled slowly through the maze of houses. Ahead of her - home. Home and Mum, waiting to wipe her worries away. Heaven.

As Sarah turned her key in the lock, she stopped. Crunch. Something was behind her. Hardly daring to breathe, she turned. Darkness. Just as she was about to turn back to feel a warmth, a softness snaking around her ankles. A grin spread across Sarah's face as she bent slowly to the ground. "Miaow!" Ebony purred.

"Silly old cat, getting locked out again!" Sarah laughed and turned the key in the lock, Ebony under her arm.

The house was shrouded in an eerie darkness. Ebony, who was now purring more rapidly, jumped and scurried inside. Like a drum, Sarah's heart was beating out of her chest. An empty house. A house where Mum should have been, where Mum always was. Sarah took a deep breath and crept into the hallway, shutting the heavy door behind her.

"Mum, where are you?" she hollered at the top of her shaking voice. Nothing. Her heart beat faster. "Pull yourself together Sarah," she muttered to herself, turning on the hall lights. Sarah blinked at this bright, luminous scene. Deep red, velvet curtains clung onto the pole above the door while a deep, cream carpet snaked merrily up the winding staircase. A warmth spread itself across her chilled face and hands. Placing her bag and coat on the floor, Sarah hurried to the welcoming, glowing kitchen. A cup of tea, a cure for everything - just what Mum would have done.

Mum's car keys sat proudly on the kitchen table; a sinking feeling appeared deep in her twisted stomach. Mum never went out without her keys, never. Either Mum was still in the house, or something had happened to her. Just as Sarah was about to reach for her phone, she stopped. Footsteps. Footsteps that appeared to be coming from the back garden. Without warning, Sarah raced to the door and flung it open.

A wall of ice hit Sarah between the eyes. Scared, she inched further into the gloom. Branches, which were being blown violently by the wind, danced and cackled. Looking ahead of her, Sarah squinted and tried to make out where the noise was coming from.

Crunch, crunch, crunch. She froze. The sound was getting closer and closer. A bead of sweat, a sign of terror, slipped timidly down Sarah's forehead. Where was the noise coming from? And where was Mum? Despite her nerves, she pressed further into the lonely garden. But all of a sudden, Sarah stopped. Stopped and held her breath. The footsteps, louder and louder now, had suddenly stopped right behind her. Icy air snaked over the back of Sarah's neck. Someone was standing behind her. Someone, or something...

With her eyes half closed, Sarah turned to view her fate. "Mum!" she screamed in relief, flinging her arms around the beaming face that stood before her.

"What are you doing out here Sarah? You're shaking, is everything alright?" Mum asked worriedly. Sarah shook her head while tears of both joy and relief rolled down her chilly cheeks. Putting her arm around her daughter, Mum led Sarah back into the house, into the warmth, light and welcome.

"I thought something had happened to you Mum, something awful..." Sarah managed to mutter once she had warmed up with a friendly mug of tea.

"I set off to meet you from school Sarah but must have missed you. I forgot my keys too which was why I was in the garden," Mum explained, smiling and looking at her pink faced daughter.

They both smiled. Wrapping their arms around each other, both mother and daughter stood as still as statues, breathing slowly. Just as they were parting, Sarah froze. Crunch, crunch, crunch. Footsteps - and this time at the front door. Hardly daring to look, she watched as Mum ambled from the kitchen to investigate. Without warning, she flung the heavy door open.

"Sarah, it's Kate. Time for revision!" Mum yelled merrily.

Sarah laughed to herself. Revision with Kate didn't seem quite so bad now. As the two friends settled down at the kitchen table, flakes of snow began to twist and turn gracefully to the ground outside.