**No Place To Run
by Mark Edwards

Chapter 1**

Aidan Faith arrived at King Street Station an hour early. He’d been up since five, unable to sleep, his bag already packed.

If he disappeared and the police came to check his desktop computer’s recent activity, they would find train timetables, the ticket purchase page, maps of Northern California. His history would show searches for Francesca Gilbert, Eaglewood and the name of his own sister. His Uber account would show that he had booked a car at 08.00, and that it had arrived at his address in Bellevue at 08.10. If the police had cause to speak to the driver, he would tell them his passenger had barely spoken, except to say ‘Good morning’, and that he had noted the man’s British accent, and had attempted to start a conversation about soccer as they drove towards downtown Seattle. The staff in the coffee bar where Aidan had waited for the Coast Starlight would note that there was nothing particularly remarkable about the man in his late twenties who had sat at a corner table with an oat latte, except that he had appeared to be deep in thought, pale with what might have been nerves. One of them might remark that he had been tall and slim – good-looking if you liked the geeky type. Aidan’s neighbours would tell them he’d said he’d be gone for two or three days, and had asked them to feed his cat, Frosty, while he was away.

But that would all be if Aidan disappeared – and he had no plans to do that.

One disappearance was enough for any family.

He took his seat on the left-hand side of the train in Coach. The train was half full. A man was roaming up and down the carriages complaining loudly to his companion about the unreliability of the Wi-Fi. A woman was on her phone, telling someone how she had chosen to take the train – despite the great personal inconvenience – because she had vowed to live a carbon-neutral life.

Aidan sat up straight and looked out of the window as the train rattled out of his adoptive city, passing the Starbucks headquarters, the mermaid peeking from above the central tower. Soon, they were passing through Tacoma, then out into the countryside.

Aidan put his noise-cancelling headphones on and, forcing himself to relax – he had a very long journey ahead of him – settled back to listen to a playlist he used when he was coding, when he needed to chill. He turned his face to the window again, and before long he found himself mesmerised by the view: lush green forests and the peaks of the Cascade Mountains. Later, after they’d passed through Portland, somebody spotted what might have been a bald eagle soaring high above the fir trees of the Willamette Valley, and half a dozen people leapt up and rushed to the windows, phones in hands. The Coast Starlight continued to speed through Oregon, past mountain peaks and shimmering lakes, through dense forests and one-horse towns, and Aidan got a sense of the country he had called home for the past five years. Its wildness. The great spaces between human settlements. It reminded him once again how hard it would be to find anyone in this vast, populous landmass – a country seemingly designed for those who wanted to vanish.

He picked up his phone and went to the website he had set up two years ago: FindScarlettFaith.com. There she was, his sister, gazing back at him. He’d taken the photo himself on the last day he’d seen her, the day she vanished. She was looking right at the camera, that slightly fake social-media smile on her lips, a few freckles visible on the bridge of her nose. As always, what stood out was her hair. That flame-orange hair that made her look like a Pre-Raphaelite princess with an Instagram filter. She had a little birthmark on her upper lip, which she hated, and a gap between her front teeth, which ran in the family.

Nobody had seen that face since 2017, two years ago.

Until this week.

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Yesterday’s journey to Edmonds, which was about ten miles north of Seattle proper, had taken almost an hour from Aidan’s office.

He’d seen the email while he was at work, grappling with a problem with a new app they were developing. Aidan had set up FindScarlettFaith.com so that any new emails that weren’t deleted by the sophisticated junk filter were sent straight to his phone, with their own distinct chime. Hearing it, he immediately stopped what he was doing and grabbed his phone, just as he’d done a hundred times before, and read the email.

*To the family of Scarlett Faith –*

*This might sound like a strange story and I’m sure you’ve had a lot of false leads over the years, but please do not discard it. I am absolutely certain about what, and who, I saw. Yesterday, I was travelling home on the Coast Starlight from Los Angeles to my home in Seattle . . .*

As soon as he finished reading the email, Aidan phoned the number its sender had included. In the past, he’d been given phone numbers that didn’t exist or that connected him to lost-and-found offices or dog pounds. There were a lot of people out there who got their kicks in sick and peculiar ways. But this time, an older woman answered.

‘Mrs Gilbert?’ he said, and she sounded so relieved to hear from him that when he ended the call he knew that either she was a great liar or she believed everything she had told him. It was enough to merit a face-to-face meeting. He even managed to get his boss to let him leave early so he could beat the appalling rush-hour traffic.

Despite that, it was still slow-going, and as he waited at yet another stoplight he found himself scanning the sidewalks for a flash of auburn. It was impossible for Aidan to drive through Seattle without straining for a second look whenever he passed a red-headed woman. Impossible not to be thrown back two years, to be reminded of that awful lurching sensation, like going over a bump in the road, when he realised Scarlett was missing.

He found a parking spot close to the address Francesca Gilbert had given him, and got out of the electric hybrid he had started leasing a year before in an attempt to do his bit for the planet. It was overcast but warm. Puget Sound was a stone’s throw from here, and above the soft drone of traffic Aidan could hear gulls in the distance.

He found Francesca’s address easily. She lived in a blue clapboard house with a double garage, built on a corner lot with a neat, square lawn. Not dissimilar to the place he rented, though Aidan guessed property was considerably cheaper here than in Bellevue.

He took a deep breath and rang the doorbell.

To his surprise, a young woman answered.

‘Hey,’ she said. ‘You must be Aidan, right? I’m Bethany. I’m Mrs Gilbert’s housekeeper.’

Bethany was pretty, dressed casually in jeans and a white T-shirt, with a smile that revealed dimples in her cheeks.

The moment they stepped inside, a voice called out from somewhere in the house: ‘Bethany? Is he here?’

Before Bethany could reply, a grey-haired woman appeared in the doorway of the nearest room. Aidan knew, from her email, that Francesca was seventy-five and that her husband of more than fifty years had died just a month ago.

‘Would you like a cup of tea?’ she said, then laughed. ‘Why am I asking? You’re English, of course you would. Bethany, I believe we have some breakfast tea somewhere.’

‘I’d actually prefer coffee, if that’s okay,’ Aidan said. ‘I’ve been fully converted.’

‘Coffee I can do,’ said Bethany, and she headed off to the kitchen while Francesca beckoned for Aidan to join her in the living room. She directed him to an armchair and sat opposite him. The room was bright and airy, a little chintzy, with floral patterns and several vases stuffed with flowers.

‘You look like her,’ Francesca said. ‘Your hair’s not as fiery as hers, but otherwise . . .’

‘A lot of people say that.’

She gave him a sad smile. ‘I can only imagine what it must have been like for your poor parents. I’m lucky. I’ve always known where Stephen, my son, is. Even if he’s not particularly interested in what I’m doing these days.’

She went silent for a few long moments, apparently lost in a reverie about how she was neglected by her son. While Aidan waited, Bethany came into the room and handed him a mug of coffee.

Francesca snapped back to life. ‘What were we talking about? Oh. Yes. Your poor parents. Your sister. It was the talk of Seattle at the time.’

‘A big news story,’ said Bethany. ‘I think I saw you on TV.’

Aidan nodded. He’d been asked to do an appeal at a press conference. Scarlett, if you’re watching this, please know that no one is angry with you. We want you to come home. Then, with a message aimed at an abductor: If Scarlett is with you, please let her go. There are a lot of people who love and miss her.

‘A terrible business,’ said Francesca. ‘This city used to be so safe . . .’

Aidan noticed Bethany raise an eyebrow, as if this was something she was tired of hearing. How different things had been in the good old days.

‘Can you tell me what you saw?’ he said. ‘I need to hear it again.’

‘Of course.’

Francesca went ahead and told him the same story she’d told him in the email and on the phone.

‘As soon as they were out of sight,’ she said, after describing what had happened the previous morning, ‘I went through the train, to see if anyone else had seen anything. But they were all asleep or glued to their phone screens. I thought about pulling the emergency brake, but Kenneth always said they were only to be used in a critical situation, like if someone was caught in the door. I really didn’t think they’d take kindly to an old woman saying she’d seen something that had nothing at all to do with the train itself.’

‘I don’t suppose you got any photos? Or a video?’

‘No. That’s what Bethany said. But I’m not young like you. It didn’t cross my mind until afterwards.’

‘But you thought straight away that it was Scarlett?’ This was the part of the story that most bothered him. How could Francesca be sure she had seen someone she had, presumably, never met?

‘It’s one of her superpowers,’ Bethany interjected.

Aidan turned to her.

‘When I first started to work for Mrs Gilbert, she kept saying she was sure we’d met before. Was insistent about it, even though I was certain it couldn’t be true. Then one day, out of the blue, she said, “Where’s your pink rabbit?”’

‘Pink rabbit?’ Aidan repeated.

‘Yeah. I was shocked, because when I was a child I did have this pink rabbit that I carried everywhere. Anyways, I told my grandmother about it and it turned out she used to know Mrs Gilbert back in the day. My grandma was a waitress at a restaurant Mrs Gilbert used to go to, and sometimes I’d be there, sitting at a table in the corner with my crayons and my rabbit beside me. And Francesca recognised me, even though she hadn’t seen me for twenty years, since I was a child.’

‘Wow.’

‘It’s just something I’ve always been able to do,’ Francesca said. ‘I never forget a face. And I saw your sister’s in all the TV coverage, in the papers, all over. There are still a few posters around the city, aren’t there?’

‘Yes. I put them there. I go around every couple of months and put up a fresh batch.’

Bethany looked at him, clearly impressed. ‘I bet my brother wouldn’t do the same for me if I went missing. He’d be hanging around my apartment helping himself to my stuff.’

‘It’s the least I could do,’ Aidan said in a quiet voice. Addressing Francesca, he asked, ‘You don’t think you actually saw Scarlett in the flesh? Back then, I mean?’

‘No. Yesterday was the first time I’d ever seen her in real life.’

Aidan took his phone out of his pocket and opened the web browser. He brought up the picture of Scarlett and handed the phone over for Francesca to look at.

‘You don’t need eyeglasses?’ he asked.

‘No. I still have twenty-twenty vision. And I’m certain this is the woman I saw.’

‘You were really able to get a good look at her?’

‘Yes – like I told you on the phone, the train was going slow, stuck behind a freight train, I imagine. I think maybe she’d been planning to cross the tracks, but of course there was a train in the way.’ She sighed. ‘If the Coast Starlight hadn’t been going so goddamn slowly we would have already passed through that clearing and she would have made it. She might have gotten away from that man.’

‘But then you would never have seen her,’ Aidan said.

‘True.’

Aidan sat back in his chair. Francesca seemed so convinced. But was it possible that this woman had really seen his sister? He tried to think clearly and rationally, to look past his desperation to believe her.

On the one hand, it seemed so unlikely, fantastical. Mrs Gilbert was an elderly woman. What were the chances that the only person on the train who had been awake and looking out the window recognised Scarlett? But then, Scarlett’s face would be familiar to anyone living in Seattle; it really had been a huge news story, and Aidan had done everything he could over the past couple of years to ensure it didn’t fade from the city’s collective memory. The train had been on its way to Seattle, so was presumably full of locals. Perhaps if everyone on the train had been awake then lots of them would have recognised her. He might have had lots of messages. And Francesca had already proven, if Bethany could be believed, that she had a remarkable memory for faces – even recognising adults she had only seen as children, although he didn’t think Scarlett’s features would have changed enormously between fifteen and seventeen, the age she would be now.

He pictured the scene Francesca had described.

The man, chasing Scarlett. Bearing down on her. Catching her.

He tried not to picture what might have happened next, in the same way he had tried not to imagine all the terrible things that Scarlett might have endured since she disappeared.

‘Please excuse me a moment,’ Francesca said, and she got up and left the room, presumably to use the bathroom.

‘What are you thinking?’ Bethany asked after a moment.

He looked up at her. ‘Do you think she really saw her?’

She shrugged. ‘I honestly have no idea. But if that was my sister out there, being chased by some dude, I wouldn’t hesitate.’

‘You’d go and investigate?’

‘I wouldn’t be able to live with myself if I didn’t.’

Aidan got up and went over to the window, thinking hard. From somewhere in the house a toilet flushed.

He turned back to face Bethany.

‘I can’t help but think this is going to be a wild goose chase.’

She rolled her eyes, then laughed when he looked offended. ‘It seems pretty clear to me that you’re going to go and check it out. I don’t understand why you’re hesitating.’

‘I guess I don’t want to get my hopes up.’

‘Surely you’d rather that than spend the rest of your life wondering what if?’

She was right. Of course she was right. He thought about his parents back home – his parents who said they didn’t blame him for what had happened, but how could they not? Scarlett had gone missing on his watch. She had been visiting him here in Seattle. He was supposed to have been looking after her. He pictured what it would be like if he was able to phone them and tell them he had found her, that she was alive.

And he pictured his sister. In danger. Scared. Waiting for someone to come and find her.

He wouldn’t be able to live with himself if he didn’t at least check it out.