

BLACK SHEEP By K E Stokes

Sample chapter

Chapter 1

It had been the best day, and Gem was tickled pink with her new dress and all, swinging the department store carrier bag in the air as she skipped down the pathway. With the front door barely open, she shimmied past her mother's legs towards her bedroom.

"You go steady now – I'll be through in a jiffy," Hattie said.

Gem was in pants and vest, jogging on the spot as she waited for her mother to remove the tags.

"Arms up," Hattie said, placing the dress over Gem's head.

They both stood in front of the wardrobe mirror, admiring the reflection.

"Well, that's just perfect, look at you," Hattie said, as proud as punch.

"Thank you, Mummy," Gem said.

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The kitchen resembled a bakery, covered in pastry and flour, with the window wide open to appease the stuffy heat of a hot oven. Hattie had made a cherry cake, and Gem was hovering in the background, waiting to lick away the dregs from the mixing bowl. As she carried it into the living room, Malc was sat in the armchair, peering over his newspaper.

"Mind your hands on the furniture," he said.

Gem laughed out loud and held out a sticky finger. "Do you want some?"

"No, I don't," he sneered.

"Neh, Lola likes it," she said.

The man seemed intensely agitated by Gem's continuous chatter, answering Lola's countless imaginary questions, so he grabbed the remote to crank up the telly volume.

"I can't hear," he said, like a right old mardy arse.

Hattie was looking on and then marched over to switch the channel to Gem's favourite TV show, *The Bear's Bones*. "There you go," she said, smiling.

It was maybe a little rude to deny Malc's existence and use the situation to administer a crafty marital poke, but he was having none of it and just stood from his chair, slung the newspaper under his arm and left the house.

"Daddy," Gem said, diving to the window.

"Leave him be," Hattie said.

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The pram was unfolded and ready for Gem to climb in.

"Come on you, let's pop out before it rains," Hattie said, putting on her coat.

The daily fresh air ritual was a single lap around the block via Shoal Woods before calling at the village shop for sweeties on the way home. The shopkeeper had a habit of rabbiting on about any old shit, and Hattie wasn't good at halting the conversation, and so she waited for the next customer to reach the counter before leaving. Dark clouds eventually descended, and Hattie slung the rain hood over Gem, quickening her step through the ensuing puddles.

"Why do we always go for a walk?" Gem said.

"Because exercise is good for you, and Mummy needs to lose a little weight," Hattie said, patting her belly.

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Gem loved to play in the back garden, feeding playdough-constructed biscuits to circle of cuddly toys. Hattie was hanging out the laundry when the phone rang, so she dropped the

pegs and went inside to answer the call. She finally came back out, full of spit and bluster – and in the mind of a child there was no clear comprehension as to why.

“You okay, Mummy?” she said.

Hattie didn’t answer and remained silent for the rest of the day. Gem started throwing her toys around and screeching like a banshee to get her mother’s attention, to no avail.

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The dullness descended into early evening, and Gem was expecting the usual bedtime routine where she and her mother would sit together on the sofa, drinking cocoa with Lola between them. Instead, all the lights were off and Gem was alone, standing on the rug in the middle of the living room, wondering what she had done wrong.

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The clanging of pots stirred Gem from her bed, so she grabbed Lola and walked into the kitchen where her mother was by the sink, being purposely noisy. She pulled out a chair to sit at the table, and Hattie turned towards her with an evil and fixated glare.

“Who are you?” she said.

“I’m Gem, Mummy,”

“Yes, but *who are you?*”

“Stop it,” Gem said, holding her hands up to her face.

Hattie stood over the girl in defiance, and then punched her square in the face – over and over again. The force knocked Gem to the floor, so she clambered back up, walked towards the back door and across the lawn to find shelter in the garden shed. With blood dripping from her face, she peered through the cracked and grimy window and saw Hattie on the back step, heaving and grunting like some raging statue.

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At first light, an unbearable hunger drove Gem back to the house. The door had been left slightly ajar, and it felt eerily cold and unwelcoming. All signs of her very existence had been stripped away, including Lola, who she had left behind in a hasty retreat from her mother's fists. Personal mementos and framed snapshots had been cleared from the lounge dresser and fire mantle, as if to erase all connective memories.

Gem opened the fridge to find just enough milk to soak a small mound of cereal, which she devoured in seconds, wishing there was more. Some odious 'being', who bore no resemblance to her mother, thundered into the kitchen and continued on as if Gem weren't even there, humming some innocuous tune. The incomprehensible ignorance was purposeful, such that Gem's heart sunk once again into a hollow, meaningless space.

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