

Thursday's Children

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Extract

It started with a reunion and it ended with a reunion and Frieda Klein hated reunions. She was sitting in front of her fire, listening to its slow crackle. Beside her was Sasha, who was staring into the glow. Beside Sasha was a buggy. In the buggy was Sasha's ten-month-old son, Ethan, a blur of dark hair and soft snoring. A cat lay at Frieda's feet, faintly purring. They could hear the wind blowing outside. It had been a day of fog and swirling leaves and gusts of wind. Now it was dark and they were inside, hiding from the approaching winter.

'I've got to admit,' said Sasha, 'that I'm intrigued by the idea of meeting an old school friend of yours.'

'She wasn't a friend. She was in my class.'

'What does she want?'

'I don't know. She rang me up and said she needed to see me. She said it was important and that she'd be here at seven.'

'What time is it now?' Frieda looked at her watch.

'Almost seven.'

'I don't know things like that any more. Since Ethan was born, I've forgotten what a night's sleep is like and my brain has turned into sludge. I don't even know what day it is. Is it Wednesday?'

'Thursday.'

'That's good. Almost the weekend.'

Frieda gazed back into the fire. 'Thursday's perhaps the worst day of the week. It's nothing in itself. It just reminds you that the week's been going on too long.'

Sasha pulled a face. 'That may be reading too much into it.' She leaned over the buggy and stroked her son's hair. 'I love him so much but sometimes when he's asleep I feel relieved and grateful. Is that a terrible thing to say?'

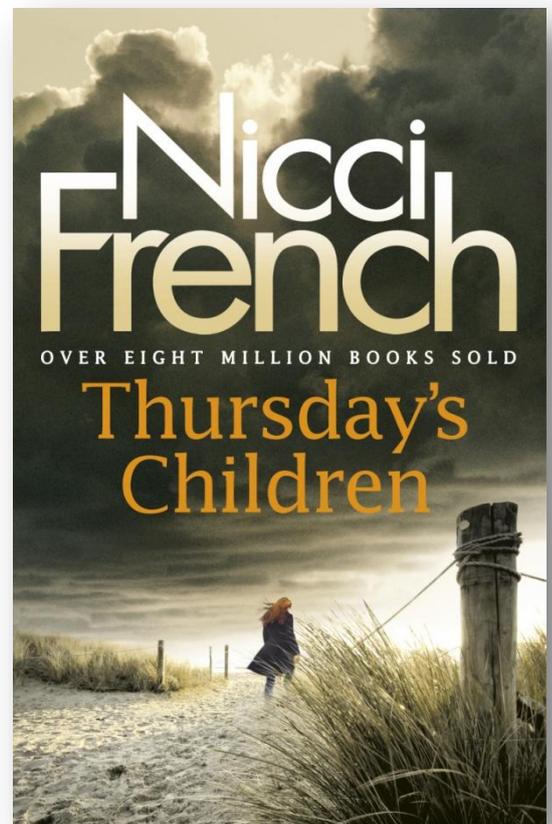
Frieda turned to her friend. 'Is Frank helping out?'

'He does his best. But he's so busy with his work. As he says, helping the guilty walk free.'

'That's his job,' said Frieda. 'He's a defence barrister and –'

She was interrupted by a ring at the door. Frieda gave Sasha a rueful look.

'You are going to answer it, aren't you?' Sasha said.



'I was tempted to hide.'

Opening the door, she heard a voice that seemed to come out of the darkness and was immediately enfolded in a hug.

'Frieda Klein,' said the woman. 'I'd know you anywhere. You look just like your mother.'

'I didn't know you'd ever met my mother.' She gestured towards the fireplace. 'This is my friend Sasha. This is Madeleine Bucknall.'

'Maddie,' said the woman. 'Maddie Capel. I got married.' Maddie Capel put down her large embossed bag and unwound a chequered scarf from her neck. She took off a heavy brown coat that she handed to Frieda. Underneath she was wearing a maroon crossover dress with wedge- heeled leather boots. There was a thick gold chain round her neck and small gold earrings in her lobes. She smelt of expensive perfume. She stepped towards the fire and looked into the buggy.

'What a darling little thing,' she said. 'Frieda, is it yours?' Frieda pointed at Sasha.

'Just the sight of it makes me want to have another,' said Maddie. 'I love them at that age, when they're like a warm bundle. Is it a boy or a girl?'

'A boy.'

'So cute. Is he walking yet?'

'He's only ten months old.'

'You just need to be patient.'

Frieda pulled a chair up, close to the fire, and Maddie sat down. She had long brown hair, artfully styled into shagginess and streaked with blonde. Her face was carefully made up, but this only emphasized the tightness of the skin over the cheekbones, the little lines around the eyes and at the corners of the mouth. Frieda remembered her from school, cheerful, laughing, loud, but there was always an anxiety: being in the group or not in the group, having a boyfriend or not having a boyfriend.

'Should I give you some privacy?' said Sasha.

'No, no, it's lovely to meet a friend of Frieda's. Do you live here as well?'

Sasha gave a faint smile. 'No, I live with my partner. Somewhere else.'

'Yes, of course. Thank you, thank you,' she said, as Frieda handed her a mug of tea. She took a sip and looked around her. 'Such a sweet little place you have here. Cosy.' Another sip. 'I read about you in the newspaper, Frieda. About how you helped on that terrible, terrible case with all those girls. And you rescued one of them.'

'Only one,' said Frieda. 'And it wasn't just me.'

'How can people do things like that?' There was a pause.

'What was it you wanted to talk to me about?' A gulp of tea.

'I can't believe we've lost touch,' Maddie said. 'You know that I still live in Braxton. Do you ever come back?'

'No.'

'Some of the old lot are still there.' She gave a mischievous smile. 'I remember you and Jeremy. I used to be rather jealous of you. He was quite a catch. He left, of course. Do you keep in touch with him?'

'No.'

'I married Stephen. Stephen Capel. Did you know him? We had some good years but it went wrong. He's remarried, but he still lives nearby.'

'When you phoned, you said there was something you needed to talk to me about.'

Another gulp of tea. Maddie looked around. 'Is there somewhere I can put this?'

Frieda took the mug from her.

'I've read about you in the paper.'

'You said.'

'More than once,' Maddie said. 'You've attracted quite a lot of attention.'

'Not by choice.'

'Yes, it must be difficult sometimes. But they said that apart from solving crimes . . .'

'That's not really . . .' Frieda began, and Sasha smiled again.

'No, but the articles mentioned that you're a psychologist.'

'I'm a psychotherapist.'

'I'm not very good on all the jargon,' said Maddie. 'I'm sure there's a difference. I don't know all the details, but from what I understand, people talk to you and you help them. Is that right?'

Frieda leaned forward. 'What is it you want?'

'It's not me.' Maddie gave a little laugh. 'If that's what you're thinking. Not that I couldn't do with some help. When Stephen left, I was crying for days and days. Weeks, really. I didn't know who to turn to.'

There was another pause.

'I know things like that are terrible,' said Frieda, 'but, please, why have you come to see me?'

'It'll sound silly. It's probably a waste of your time, my coming up all the way from the country.'

'Should I leave?' asked Sasha, again.

'No,' said Maddie. 'We're just old friends talking.'

'Tell me what you want from me.'

Maddie hesitated. Frieda had experienced this moment dozens of times with her patients. One of the most difficult, precarious moments in therapy was that first naming of the patient's fear. It was like jumping off a cliff edge into darkness.

'It's my daughter, Becky,' said Maddie. 'Rebecca. But everyone calls her Becky. She's fifteen, almost sixteen.'

'Has something happened?'

'No, no, nothing like that. It's hard to put into words. Becky was such a sweet little girl. When I looked at this little boy in the buggy, it reminded me of those days, when it was all so simple. I could just look after her. You know, when Becky was that age I thought I was going to have lots of children and I was going to be the best mother in the world and protect them from everything. I was so young when I had her, almost a child myself. And then . . .' she breathed deeply, as if she were trying to control herself ' . . . I couldn't have another child. And then Stephen left. It was probably my fault. I tried to hide the way I felt from Becky but I didn't do a very good job. She was only six. Little thing. And I was still in my twenties and all over the place.' Her voice wavered and she stopped for a moment. 'It must have hit her hard but I thought we'd come through it. I suppose I'd always dreaded the teenage years.' She glanced at Frieda.

'Maybe I was thinking of our own teenage years. We got up to one or two things that we probably regret now, didn't we?'

A voice inside Frieda was saying, What do you mean, 'we'? We weren't friends. We didn't get up to anything together. But she stayed silent and waited.

'In the last year or so she's changed. I know what you're going to say. She's just an adolescent. What am I worrying about? Well, I am worrying. To begin with, she was just withdrawn and moody and she wouldn't talk about any- thing. I wondered whether there were drugs or boys involved. Or drugs and boys. I tried to ask her about it. I tried to be sympathetic. Nothing worked.

'About a month ago, it got worse. She seemed different. She looked different. She stopped eating. She was on this stupid diet before, and was already rail-thin. Now I don't know how she's managing to stay alive. I've cooked everything I can think of, but she just moves it about on her plate. Even when she does eat, I think she makes herself sick. She misses school. She doesn't do homework.'

'Does she see her father?'

'Stephen's hopeless. He says it's just a phase. She'll get over it.'

'What do you want from me?' said Frieda.

'Can't you just talk to her? Isn't that what you do? Just have a word with her?'

'I'm not sure if you're clear about what I do. I see patients over extended periods of time in order to explore problems they have in their life. I wonder if your daughter ought to see a school counsellor or a teacher.'

'Becky won't accept it. I've tried everything. I'm completely desperate. I don't know who to turn to. Please. As a favour to an old school friend.'

Frieda looked at Maddie's pleading expression. She didn't like this woman from her past claiming to have been her friend and wanting something she couldn't really give. She felt bad about Sasha being there to witness it.

'I'm not sure I'm the right person for this,' she said, 'but if you bring your daughter here, I'll talk to her. I'll see if I can give you, or her, some advice. But I can't promise anything.'

'That's wonderful. I can be there too, if you want.'

'I'll need to talk to her alone. At least at first. She needs to know it's private and that she can say anything. That is, if she wants to say anything. She may not be ready to talk. Or, at least, ready to talk to me.'

'Oh, I'm sure she'll talk to you.'

Maddie stood up and fetched her coat as if she needed to get away before there was any possibility of Frieda withdrawing her offer. She pulled it on and wound the scarf back round her. Frieda felt she was watching someone put a shell on. In the doorway, after saying goodbye, Maddie suddenly turned round.

'You know, there's something in my daughter that frightens me,' she said. 'Isn't that terrible?'