

**Biddy** Ford – otherwise known as Baby Sugarcandy, star of stage and screen – was sick with nerves. She knelt beside the toilet bowl and waited for it to pass. She was always like this before an important occasion – movie premieres, opening nights, concerts. Every public appearance filled her with this awful, gut-churning fear. And today? Well, she couldn't imagine a more important occasion. No wonder she felt queasy.

The worst of it was over now, she thought: the nausea was subsiding at last. Putting both palms on the rim of the toilet, she began to push herself up.

She didn't hear the soft tread of feet behind her, or see anyone approach. Only when a hand grasped her head and forced it down did she realize that something was terrifyingly wrong...

# the invisible girl

**M**y name is Poppy Fields. I'm average height, average weight, average build, and I'm invisible.

Not *literally*, of course. I'm not a superhero. It's just that fading into the background is my speciality. At school, I've mastered the art of sitting in the teacher's blind spot – not at the back with the troublemakers, or at the sides where people who haven't done their homework try to sink into the walls, but slap-bang in the middle of the classroom. What you have to do is maintain an expression of polite interest – not too keen, not too bored – and that way the teacher's eyes sort of slide over you as if you're not there.

At weekends I know exactly how to brush my hair



and precisely which clothes to wear to remain unseen. I've got a wardrobe full of uninteresting garments in indeterminate shades of blue and grey that get me through most situations totally unobserved.

It's not because I'm shy, it's because I'm fascinated by other people. My mum says I study their behaviour with the same curiosity that a scientist gives to the inner workings of a termite colony. She's probably right. To pursue my hobby I've learnt to camouflage myself. No one ever notices Poppy Fields.

So when I first set foot on American soil, why did I have the unnerving sensation that someone was watching me?

It had been OK on the flight over. I'd been sandwiched between Mum and my friend Graham right in the middle of this massive aeroplane. For the whole of the journey from England to America I'd stayed nicely anonymous. In fact, I'd avoided attention so successfully that when I'd edged out to go to the toilet the steward handing out the lunches had tripped over me. The passenger sitting on the other side of Graham had been hit by several flying trays but he hadn't glared at me even though I'd caused the accident. He hadn't registered my existence.

Collecting our suitcases and going through the

no-man's-land of passport control and immigration had been fine.

But then we'd entered the brightly lit arrivals hall. Mum was looking for the person who had come to collect us when I experienced something strange.

Eyes. Looking at me. Staring. I could feel it like the press of fingertips on my skin.

Alarmed, I whipped around, spinning in a full circle to catch whoever was doing it. Yet everyone in the crowded airport seemed busy with their own concerns – noisily greeting friends, or running to catch buses and trains. No one was looking at me. So why were the hairs on the back of my neck standing bolt upright?

"Someone's watching us," I hissed to Graham out of the side of my mouth. "I can feel it."

"That would be physically impossible," he replied, flashing me one of his blink-and-you-miss-it grins. "But I gather that disorientation is a common sign of jet lag. I expect you're suffering from that. The majority of people who fly across more than five time zones do, you know. And we've flown across eight."

"OK." I nodded. I knew that California was eight hours behind London. Graham had explained all about Greenwich Mean Time and the earth's rotation on the way to the airport – he knows about stuff like that – but I still found it peculiar. We'd taken off from Heathrow

at ten o'clock in the morning and flown for eleven hours. *Eleven hours!* As far as I was concerned it was bedtime. But although Graham and I were yawning and our eyelids were drooping, everyone in Los Angeles was just having lunch. No wonder I felt weird. Graham was right. That was all it was, I told myself. There was nothing to worry about.

Mum had started waving energetically at a woman clutching a sign with GREEN FIELDS AND FAR AWAY scrawled across it. "That must be Baby Sugarcandy's secretary," she said to us as we made our way towards her. "Sylvia Sharpe. I talked to her on the phone. She's the one who made all the arrangements."

We stopped in front of a solid woman who was wearing a severe dark suit, tightly-laced shoes and heavy black-rimmed glasses. Her hair was scraped back into a ponytail so tight that it pulled her eyebrows up and made her look as though she was unpleasantly surprised by everything she laid eyes on, including us. She reminded me of my PE teacher at school – strict, efficient and completely devoid of soft edges and sympathy.

"You must be Miss Sharpe!" said Mum warmly. "Hi! I'm Lili Fields. It's really nice to meet you."

"I'm glad your plane was on time," Sylvia Sharpe answered crisply, giving Mum a brief, tight-lipped smile. "The car's this way. Follow me, please."

Just as I was beginning to relax into a happy state of invisibility, Sylvia glanced over her shoulder and flashed an unnaturally white set of teeth at me. I'd been reading a new book about body language on the plane and couldn't help noticing that her grin didn't reach her eyes. That's not a real smile, I thought. But then the one I gave in reply wasn't exactly sincere either. How could it be when we'd only just met?

"You must be Poppy," Sylvia Sharpe said briskly as she led us across the arrivals hall towards the exit. "And I guess you're Graham. If you need anything while you're here, you come to me. Burgers, fries, magazines, movies... If you want it, it's yours. Nothing's too much trouble for Miss Sugarcandy's guests."

Graham and I exchanged a quick look. My mind was fuzzy with tiredness but I couldn't help finding this sudden generosity a little strange. We weren't *guests*, after all, we were *employees*, or at least Mum was. Did Americans always make such a fuss over people who came to work for them? And if they did, why didn't Sylvia's words quite match her manner? It was like she was delivering a speech that she hadn't rehearsed often enough to make it sound sincere. Odd, I thought, very odd. I'm going to keep an eye on her.

We were in the States because my mum Lili runs her own landscape gardening business, Green Fields

and Far Away. She won a bronze medal at last year's Chelsea Flower Show for outstanding garden design, but she still spends most of her time mowing old ladies' lawns and digging vegetable plots for people who've put their backs out. Then, out of the blue, she'd had a phone call from America and the next thing we knew she was invited to make over the Hollywood estate of Baby Sugarcandy. Mum was dead impressed but I didn't have a clue who Baby Sugarcandy was. I had to look her up on the internet. She turned out to be an actress and singer who'd been part of the Sugarcandies, a British girl band who'd made it big in the States years and years ago. ("Their first single 'Go Baby Go' spent a record number of weeks at number one," Graham informed me on the plane.) The other girls in the group – Lady, Gypsy and Queen – had sunk without trace when the band split, but Baby had gone on to star in several films. ("She won an Oscar in 1989 for her performance in *Shoot Me Dead, Honey*," according to Graham.) She'd now decided that she wanted to be surrounded by an English country garden, even if she did live in the middle of Beverly Hills. The day Sylvia had called I'd come home from school to find Mum exploding with excitement. She'd given me such a violent hug that she'd almost cracked my ribs. "It's my big chance!" she'd yelled. "Who knows where

it will lead? I'll be garden designer to the stars! This is where my career takes off!"

Sylvia had told Mum that Miss Sugarcandy was not only paying megabucks for the design, but she was also happy for Mum to bring me along. "She even said you could invite a friend to stop you being bored. I'll be working all day – you'll need someone to keep you company. She's going to pay for our flights and everything. Who do you want to invite?"

"Graham." My answer had been instant.

"Graham?" said Mum. "Are you sure? Don't you want to bring someone a bit more ... well ... fun?"

But yes, I was absolutely sure. No amount of persuasion would make me change my mind. True, Graham was generally reckoned to be a bit of a geek, but I knew that his nerdy exterior concealed hidden depths. His head was stuffed full of useful information, and he was capable of sudden, surprising bursts of courage. He'd saved my life when we were on holiday in Scotland and we'd been friends ever since. Plus he was perfect company. I didn't have to talk to him unless I wanted to. He could be relied on to get totally immersed in the *Guinness World Records* for hours on end, leaving me the time and space to pursue my favourite hobby of people-watching.

So as soon as the autumn half-term had started



we'd got on the plane, really looking forward to what lay ahead.

But now we'd arrived Mum's excitement was fading and she was looking slightly green with nerves. "I've never done anything this big," she whispered as Graham and I climbed into the back of the huge car. "Oh, Poppy, suppose she doesn't like what I do?" I squeezed Mum's hand reassuringly, watched her climb into the front passenger seat, and then promptly fell asleep.

It was the squeal of brakes that woke me. That, and being flung so hard against the side of the car that I cracked my head on the window. I blinked, wondering for a moment where I was and why Graham was sprawled across my lap. The car had stopped and was skewed sideways across the road about a hundred metres away from a huge pair of wrought-iron gates that had the house name SUGARCANDY HEIGHTS worked into the design. The Sat Nav had been knocked off the windscreen to the floor and the wrong button must have got hit because it was screaming with electronic enthusiasm, "1171 Orangeblossom Boulevard!" Sylvia was scrabbling around in a frenzy trying to find it but the address was repeated five times before she managed to silence the thing.

"What happened?" Mum cried. "Why on earth did you brake?"

“My apologies!” said Sylvia, dabbing beads of sweat from her forehead with a handkerchief. “A raccoon ran across the road and I had to swerve to miss it. Are you kids OK?”

“A raccoon!” I said, looking out at the empty road. “Where?”

“It’s gone. Ran into the trees over there. It’s fine, though – don’t worry – there wasn’t a scratch on it.”

I was disappointed not to catch a glimpse – I quite like wildlife. “Did you see it, Mum?”

“No,” she said, and her voice was tight with nerves. “I wasn’t really looking.”

“We’ve plenty of raccoons on the estate. You’re sure to see one soon.” Sylvia turned and gave me another of her fake smiles before restarting the engine. She pressed some sort of remote control so the gates swung smoothly open and we entered the grounds.

“We’re here,” Sylvia announced. “Ms Fields, may I present to you Miss Sugarcandy’s estate? It eagerly awaits your expert attention.” The words were addressed to my mum. But in the rear-view mirror, I noticed that Sylvia Sharpe’s eyes were firmly fixed on me.