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## Six days earlier

**H**OW DID IT ALL BEGIN? WELL, I SUPPOSE IT WOULD BE THE day I rescued a newborn baby from a poisonous snake, heard the news of my mother's death and encountered my first ghost. Thinking about it, I could even pinpoint the time. A few minutes before six on a Friday morning and my quiet, orderly life went into meltdown.

Seven minutes to six. I'd run hard. Panting, dripping with sweat, I found my key and pushed open the back door. The moment I did so my young charges started screeching.

Rubbing a towel across the back of my neck I crossed the kitchen, lifted the lid of the incubator and looked down. There were three of them, hardly more than a handful apiece, hungry, grumpy balls of feathery fluff. Barn-owl chicks: two weeks old and orphaned just days after birth when their mother hit a large truck. A local bird-watcher had seen the dead owl and knew where to find the nest. He'd brought the chicks to the wildlife hospital where I'm the resident veterinary surgeon. They'd been close to death, cold and starving.

They'd been starving ever since. I took a tray from the fridge, found a pair of tweezers and dangled a tiny, dead mouse into the incubator. It didn't last long. The chicks were thriving but, worryingly, getting far too used to me. Hand-rearing wild birds is tricky.

Without some sort of human intervention, orphaned chicks will die; at the same time, they mustn't become dependent on humans. In a couple more weeks I was hoping to introduce them to avian foster-parents who would teach them the skills they needed to hunt and feed themselves. Until then I had to be careful. It was probably time to move them to an enclosed nesting box and start using a barn-owl-shaped glove puppet at mealtimes.

Three minutes to six. I was heading upstairs for a shower when the phone rang, and I braced myself to be called in to deal with yet another roe deer run over on the A35.

'Miss Benning? Is that Miss Benning, the vet?' A young woman's voice. A very distressed young woman's voice.

'Yes, speaking,' I answered, wondering if I was going to get my shower after all.

'It's Lynsey Huston here. I live just up the road from you. Number 2. There's a snake in my baby's cot. I don't know what to do. I don't know what the hell to do.' Her voice was rising with every word; she seemed verging on hysteria.

'Are you sure?' Silly question, I know, but be fair, a snake in a cot isn't something you see every day.

'Of course I'm sure. I'm looking at it now. What the hell do I do?' She was too loud.

'Stay quiet and don't make any sudden movements.' I, on the other hand, was moving fast, out of the house, grabbing my car keys as I went, bleeping open the boot, reaching inside. 'Do you think it's bitten her?' I asked. Surprising myself, I remembered that the baby was a girl. I'd seen pink balloons outside the house a few weeks ago.

'I don't know. She looks like she's asleep. Oh God, what if she's not asleep?'

'Is her colour normal? Can you see her breathing?' I grabbed a couple of things from the back of the car and set off up the hill. I could see the Hustons' house, a sweet, whitewashed cottage at the top of the lane. The family was new to the village, had only lived there a few weeks, but I thought I could picture the mother, about my age, tallish, with shoulder-length fair hair. She and I had never spoken before.

'Yes, I think so; yes, she's pink. Can you come? Please say you can come.'

'I'm nearly there. The important thing is not to frighten the snake. Don't do anything to alarm it.' I pushed open the gate and ran up the path to the front door. It was locked. I ran round the back. The phone I was carrying was too far from its base station and began to beep at me. I switched it off and pushed at the back door.

I was inside a brightly coloured, modern kitchen. For a house with a newborn baby it seemed remarkably tidy and clean. I put the phone down on the table and walked along the hall in the direction of the voice I could hear gabbling upstairs. As I approached the stairs I noticed damp patches and traces of mud on the otherwise spotless tiled floor. A familiar sound caught my attention. Glancing to the right I saw an incubator of newborn chicks in a small utility room. The family kept chickens.

'I'm in the house,' I called out softly. When I reached the top of the stairs I saw a scared, white face peering at me from behind a door at the far end of the corridor. The woman beckoned and I walked towards her. She stepped back and allowed me into the room.

I was in a small, pink and cream bedroom tucked under the eaves. Supporting beams stood out dark against the white plaster of the walls. Pink fabric, printed with fairies and toadstools, lined the small, deep-set window. Stuffed animals, mainly pink, were everywhere I looked. Against the longest wall stood the crib, a baby princess's cradle from a fairy tale: all cream lace and pink flounces. I stepped closer, still nourishing the hope that had sprung up when I answered the phone, that the snake would be a toy one, a practical joke played on the mother by an older child.

The baby, tiny and perfect, panted softly in a white baby-gro embroidered with pink rabbits. Her mouth was slightly open, I could see the perfect raised pores above her upper lip, long dark eyelashes and the faint traces of a milk rash on her cheeks. Her fists were clenched and her arms thrown above her head in the classic newborn-baby sleeping pose. She looked absolutely fine.

Apart from the fact that she was sharing her bed with a venomous snake that would strike the moment she moved.