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Margaret Johnson
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Chapter 1 *The carrot flower*

It's not every day that you wake up to find a carrot on your bed. But that's what happened to me on Day Thirty-Six of my stay in the House.

Well, it wasn't a carrot exactly; it was a flower. A flower cut carefully out of a carrot with a knife. I know it sounds a bit odd, but it was really beautiful, honestly. I felt pleased that somebody had taken the trouble to make it for me. But I had no idea who that 'somebody' might be. I knew who I *wanted* it to be though – Simon. Simon had beautiful hands, along with a beautiful body and a handsome face. But were they hands that could make such a flower? I hoped so.

Looking around the bedroom, I saw that Leo was still in bed. There was one bedroom for all of us in the House with ten beds in it. But no-one was using five of the beds any more, since five people had already left the House. I looked at Leo sleeping. Big Eye turns the lights on in the bedroom at eight o'clock every morning, but that doesn't wake Leo up. Nothing wakes Leo up until he wants to wake up. So he can't have made the flower, I thought. It wasn't the kind of thing he'd do anyway. Leo prefers talking to doing.

Suddenly a voice filled the room. 'This is Big Eye. Would Annie come to the Diary Room please?'

The Diary Room was the place we went to for private conversations with Big Eye. Well, they were private because

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the other people in the House couldn't hear what you said. But actually they were very public, because everyone watching the *Big Eye* programme on TV could see and hear you. But you usually forgot about that.

Putting on my dressing gown, I put the carrot flower carefully in my pocket. For some reason I wanted to keep it a secret, although I knew this was silly. Thousands, or maybe even millions, of television viewers had already seen me find it.

'Morning, guys.' Out in the main living area, Pete and Nigel were making breakfast. They smiled at me.

'Morning, Annie.'

I looked at both of them as I walked towards the Diary Room. Nigel was a very intelligent man, but he wasn't very good with his hands. I couldn't imagine him being able to make my carrot flower. Pete was an engineer though. Maybe it was him?

I looked out of the window, searching for Simon. There he was, jogging as usual. Every morning, he ran for an hour before breakfast. He'd already worn out some of the grass in the small garden. By the time the competition ended on Saturday there probably wouldn't be any grass left at all. Had Simon taken some time off from his exercise to make my presents? It would be very nice if he had – very nice indeed.

Smiling to myself, I pressed the button on the wall outside the Diary Room door. As I waited for the door to open, I continued watching Simon. If the women watching the programme were anything like me, then Simon and his beautiful body had an excellent chance of winning this competition. The winner would be the person who

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managed to stay in the House the longest. And the prize for the winner was £70,000. Now there were only four days left until the competition was over.

On Leaving Night thousands of people phoned the TV station to vote – to say which person they wanted to leave the House. At first, Leaving Nights had taken place once a week, on Saturdays. And five people had left the Big Eye House. But now the competition was almost over, there were going to be two extra Leaving Nights. By Saturday, the last day of the competition, there would only be three people left.

Leaving Nights were always the same. Everyone in the House had to sit on the sofas and wait for Violet Carlton, the TV presenter, to tell us who was leaving. So far Simon had always been safe – he hadn't got many votes at all. Neither had I actually. Very few people had phoned to say either of us should leave. I don't know why I was popular. I'm not ugly, but I'm certainly not beautiful.

I was still staring at Simon when I heard the door to the Diary Room start to open. I began to walk into the room. I didn't realise that the door wasn't open wide enough for me to be able to go in. My arm hit the door.

'Ow!' I said, holding my hurt arm. Pete and Nigel looked over.

'OK, Annie?' Pete asked.

'Yes,' I said. 'Just another injury.' All the men were used to me having accidents. I was always dropping something or falling over something.

I was still holding my arm as I sat down on the chair in the Diary Room. Or rather, *in* the chair, because it's so big and so soft you have to half-lie on it. It's impossible to sit

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in it without relaxing. I think Big Eye knows we'll be more open about what we say if we're relaxed.

'Good morning, Annie,' said Big Eye.

I was halfway through a yawn. 'Good morning, Big Eye,' I said, smiling at the camera in front of me. Big Eye had four or five different voices, depending on what time it was. Sometimes Big Eye was a *he*, and sometimes Big Eye was a *she*. This morning it was the man with the soft voice, a voice like milk chocolate. I liked him.

'And how are you feeling this morning, Annie?' Big Eye asked.

'Fine,' I said, still smiling. 'Very good, in fact.'

'Is there any special reason why you're feeling so good this morning, Annie?'

I could feel the carrot flower under my fingers in my pocket. I knew Big Eye wanted me to talk about it, but I still wanted to keep it to myself. 'Well, things are quite peaceful in here at the moment, I suppose,' I said.

'And why do you think that is, Annie?' asked Big Eye.

I thought about it. 'I suppose it's because Janine and Gloria have gone,' I said. 'They made a lot of trouble, those two.'

Janine and Gloria had both been very loud people. *Obvious* people. As well as the prize money for the winner, there was £10,000 for anyone who had a romance in the House. Both Janine and Gloria had tried very hard to have a romance with Simon.

'Is there any other reason why you feel so good this morning, Annie?' asked Big Eye.

I looked at the camera. It seemed as if Big Eye wasn't going to give up. 'Yes,' I said at last. 'You know there is. Somebody

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left me a present again. Yesterday it was that beautiful paper boat, and today it was ... this.' I brought the carrot flower out of my pocket and held it in my hand in front of the camera. 'It's lovely, isn't it?'

Big Eye didn't give an opinion. Big Eye *never* gave opinions. 'Do you know who gave you this present, Annie?'

I shook my head. 'No, I don't. It's a complete mystery. I tried to find out who made me the paper boat yesterday, and nobody would admit to it. So I don't know who my secret present-giver is.' Then I realised something, and looked at the camera, wide-eyed. 'But *you* know, don't you? You must do. You know what's going on all over the House.'

The Big Eye House has cameras everywhere, except for inside the shower and the toilets. The cameras can even see us at night – there are special cameras that work in the dark.

'Who is it?' I asked Big Eye. 'Who's been leaving me these presents?'

'Big Eye cannot give you that information, Annie,' Big Eye said.

'You mean you don't *want* to,' I said.

Big Eye stayed silent. I put the carrot flower back into my pocket, suddenly realising (I'm a bit slow in the mornings before I've had a cup of strong coffee) that if Big Eye knew who was giving me the presents, then everybody knew. That was, everybody in the United Kingdom who was watching the *Big Eye* programme. It was very strange to think that millions of people knew more about what was happening to me than I did myself.

'How does it feel to be the only woman left in the House, Annie?' Big Eye asked.

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I thought about it. 'Well, I suppose I'm not sure what the men really think of me any more. I mean, they're being very nice to me, but how do I know if they really like me or not? Maybe they're just being nice to me because they want to start a romance and win £10,000.'

'And how do you feel about having a romance with someone in the House?' Big Eye asked next.

I immediately thought about Simon and smiled to myself. 'I'm not sure,' I said to Big Eye. 'The men left are all very different, aren't they? I like some things about all of them.'

There was a pause. Big Eye often leaves pauses. He wants you to feel uncomfortable so you say anything just to fill the silence. I don't mind silence myself. I think that comes from working in a museum. Museums can be quite silent places, especially in the summer. People don't want to look at old pictures and furniture when the sun is out.

'Big Eye has some instructions for you now, Annie,' Big Eye said.

'Oh?' I said and waited.

'You are to tell Leo, Simon, Pete and Nigel that Big Eye wishes them to write a poem for you. This poem should say how they feel about you.'

'A poem?' I said, feeling suddenly annoyed that I only had a camera to look at. I wanted to be able to stare Mr Milk Chocolate right in the face. 'You mean like:

Roses are red,
Violets are blue,
Sugar is sweet
And so are you?'

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‘Everyone is allowed to decide what type of poem they want to write themselves,’ Big Eye said.

‘They’ll hate it!’ I said, not looking forward to going out there and telling them all.

Big Eye continued, obviously not worried about how the men might feel. ‘They must complete their poems by ten-thirty this morning,’ he said. ‘At eleven o’clock you will read the poems out and decide which poem is the best. The poems should be anonymous – nobody should sign their poem and you should not know who has written them. This is the task for today.’

Every day we were given something to do – a task. This was partly to keep us busy, but mostly to interest the viewers at home. Some people enjoyed just watching us cleaning the House or chatting to each other by the pool in the garden. I have no idea why. But most people wanted to see us doing silly things. While I’d been in the House I’d dressed up as a horse with Simon, taken part in a singing competition (I came last), and had a girls against boys water fight in the garden (the boys won). We had to do what Big Eye told us – those were the rules of the Big Eye competition.

‘Big Eye would like you to go and tell the others about today’s task now, Annie,’ Big Eye told me. I pushed myself out of the chair.

‘OK then,’ I said. ‘Bye for now.’

‘Goodbye, Annie,’ Big Eye said.

I left the Diary Room to go and break the bad news to the guys.

Chapter 2 *As blue as the sea*

It's difficult to describe what it was like, living in the House. You didn't exactly forget your life outside – your friends, your family, your job – but they almost felt like a story you'd heard. The House was the reality – with its rooms, people, and Big Eye telling us what to do.

You even forgot about the cameras most of the time. I know that probably sounds unbelievable, but you did. There were so many of them everywhere, recording every little thing we did or said. But you got so used to it; you stopped thinking about it. We were like fish swimming around in a bowl, except it was a bowl we couldn't see out of. We didn't know what was happening in the world outside. The House, and what happened in it, was our world. Which is why something like a stupid competition to write a poem became so important.

When I broke the news about the task, none of the guys seemed very happy about it, but Nigel was especially annoyed. 'That's not fair!' he complained, after I'd described what Big Eye wanted them to do. 'I don't even like writing shopping lists! I wouldn't even know how to *begin* to write a poem. And *he's* a writer already.' Nigel pointed at Leo, who had climbed out of bed five minutes before, when Big Eye had ordered everybody to meet on the sofas. He was holding onto the mug of coffee Pete had made him as if it were life-saving medicine.

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‘I write detective stories, not poems,’ he said with a yawn. ‘And anyway, I have to be really interested in something to want to write.’

‘You mean you have to be inspired?’ Pete asked.

Leo nodded, drinking some of his coffee. ‘That’s right. I have to be inspired.’

‘And you feel more inspired by a dead body than by Annie?’ asked Simon, looking over at me. ‘That’s not very nice, is it, Annie?’

Leo smiled at me. ‘Sorry, Annie, I’m afraid it’s true. Blood, fear and mystery – that’s what I’m inspired by.’

I felt annoyed, but tried not to show it. Out of all the men in the House, Leo was the one who had made the least effort to get me to like him. He was the same with everybody though – Leo was just Leo, and we could take him or leave him. But somehow we liked him anyway. He was very sociable, and even though he could be lazy, he was also funny and interesting. I didn’t think Leo had ever had to try very hard with people.

‘Well,’ I said, ‘I hope you’re all going to co-operate. You’ve all got to do the task, so there’s no point in complaining. You know what will happen if you don’t.’

‘No nice food,’ Nigel said.

Big Eye gave us the very basic food we needed, like bread, rice and potatoes, but we had to earn anything more than that by doing these tasks successfully.

‘And it’s Tuesday today,’ Nigel went on.

‘Takeaway night!’ said Pete.

On Tuesdays, if we’d achieved our task, Big Eye gave us beer and a takeaway meal from an Indian or a Chinese

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restaurant. We all enjoyed takeaway night. Even Simon, who usually only ate healthy food.

‘We’d better get busy then!’ said Leo, and he went back towards the bedroom, taking his cup of coffee with him.

‘Don’t forget – no names on the poems. They must be anonymous,’ I called after him.

The others went out into the garden. When I tried to follow them, Simon told me to stay indoors. ‘I won’t be able to think properly if you’re around,’ he said. ‘I’ll feel too stupid.’

‘Me too,’ agreed Pete. ‘Sorry, Annie.’

‘That’s OK,’ I said. ‘I’ll do a bit of cleaning. This place is a mess.’

It was true. Janine had been the one who liked cleaning. When she hadn’t been trying to get Simon alone, she had been busy with the Hoover or washing the kitchen floor. It had been a bit annoying at the time – you couldn’t put your coffee cup down for a moment without Janine taking it away to wash it up. But now she wasn’t with us any more and the place was getting dirty, I missed her. Well, to be honest, I missed the work she had done, not her. She hadn’t been very nice to me at all.

As I got the Hoover out and got started, I was still thinking about how the guys had taken the news about the task. None of them had wanted to do it. While I knew it wasn’t easy to write poems, I did feel they might at least have pretended that I was a good subject for a poem. But as it was, they had all complained about it. Leo had even said he would rather write about dead bodies. None of which was very good for a girl’s confidence.