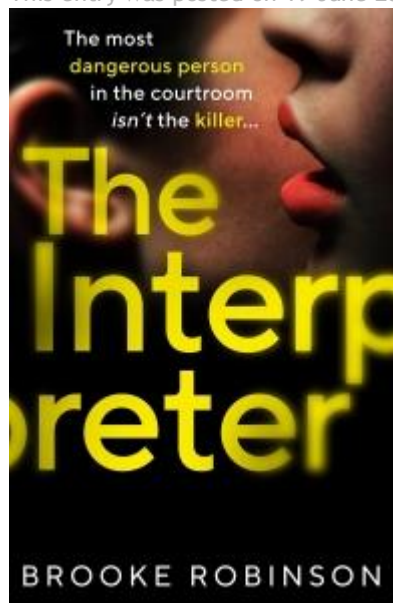


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Extract: *The Interpreter* by Brooke Robinson

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Single mother Revelle Lee is an interpreter who spends her days translating for victims, witnesses and the accused across London. Only she knows what they're saying. Only she knows the truth. When she believes a grave injustice is about to happen, and a guilty man is going to be labelled innocent, she has the power to twist an alibi to get the verdict she wants. She's willing to risk it all to do what's right. But then someone discovers she lied ... An unputdownable, jaw-dropping thriller.

## Prologue

One good push releases the handle, and the brass tongue withdraws into the lock.

'I'm sorry, we're actually closed.' A young woman is fussing behind the counter.

Entering, I peruse the shelves closest to the door.

'Victorian fittings - it never locks properly unless I use the key. Sorry.' Her words travel towards me; I swat them away.

There's a blackboard sign by my feet, the shop's opening hours announced in pink and emerald chalk. Upcoming events are listed, author talks and playgroup sessions. Stickers in the shape of lions and elephants dot the clean, white walls.

‘We open at nine. If you’d like to come back tomorrow?’ She’s speaking loudly now, all wide-mouth and heavy vowels in case I don’t understand English. My fingers dance across the merchandise as my heels strike the hardwood floor.

The lights at the shop’s entrance have been switched off, only after another step forward is my face fully lit. I take my time, move past the fabric books for babies, and linger over a puzzle display. The girl has emerged from behind the counter and fiddles with a string of coloured flags which droop from the ceiling.

‘I only get paid ‘til six and I’ve already closed down the system,’ she says. ‘So I can’t sell you anything.’

I cannot come into a children’s bookshop during business hours, not when there would be parents and children inside. A few weeks ago I ordered a gardening book online. When the delivery came I prised it open on my doorstep and saw a rectangle peeking out from behind the front cover. It was a promotional bookmark: Give your child the gift of reading this Christmas. Underneath the text, images of the top five selling children’s titles this year printed in a single column. It felt like the rubber band I wore on my wrist as a girl, the au pair would snap it when she caught me biting my nails. Snap. Standing outside my front door, the bookmark dropped from my fingers, into a puddle of last night’s rain. My hands let go of everything - the book, the box, bubble wrap, my receipt. The whole package tumbled down the front steps until it reached the dirt. I went inside. It’s still there, three weeks later. I have to step over it to leave the house each morning.

Give your child the gift of reading this Christmas. I only took one look at it but that was enough to lock it away. All day today I’ve been thinking about the time I read to him from *James and the Giant Peach*, a favourite from my own childhood. It was summer so we lounged in the garden, a stone plate of sliced white peaches sat between us. Has anyone read to him since me? That’s what I keep wondering. I think I know the answer, but the question keeps on tunnelling. Christmas is coming. How am I supposed to survive until the new year?

‘I only get paid ‘til six?’ the girl says again.

It is twenty minutes past six. I extract a single note from my handbag, the new £50 with Alan Turing, and hold it out until she comes.

‘Is this...’ she says, taking it.

‘Overtime,’ I say. ‘Wow. I guess I could turn the computer back on.’ She looks lovingly into Turing’s flat, red eyes.

‘He died of cyanide poisoning,’ I tell her, scanning the books filed under the letter D. ‘It’s a profoundly slow and painful death. Your whole body convulses. Then there’s a flood of blood, vomit, bile - until eventually, you run out of oxygen. But only after you beg for it to end.’

She steps backwards and almost crashes into a giant *Where’s Wally?* cut-out. I tilt my head to examine the picture books, one about a wombat, another with an alligator on the cover. My thumb presses their flimsy spines, so easily snapped.

‘Were you looking for anything in particular?’ she asks, voice cracking on the final syllables.

There's a famous comic where the villain is trying to build an acoustic weapon. '*The Calculus Affair*,' I say. 'It's a Tintin book.'

'Let me see if we have it.' The girl scoots behind the counter. 'I know we have Tintin in Tibet and one of the hardback collections.'

Sound is a wave which can move through air, liquids, solid human bodies, building up pressure. It's been calculated that 240 decibels is required to make a human head explode. If I had one wish, this is how I would like to kill you.

'No, sorry,' she says, disappointed, wondering, no doubt, if this means she'll have to return the money. 'I can order it in for you. Can you wait a week?'

The wish would grant me an evil scientist with crazed hair who would be glad to do it. One word is all it would take. Special headphones over your ears pumping at a 240 decibel volume, not music but speech; one word, repeated over and over until you died. Just one word.

'That won't do,' I say, turning for the exit. 'I'll find it somewhere else.' When I reach the door: 'Keep the money.'

One wrong word in the right place can be enough to kill.

But you already know that, don't you?

## Chapter 1

I don't always jump when the phone rings, but today ELLIOT SCHOOL flashing on the screen sends my unsipped coffee to the floor.

'Elliot's alright, but you need to collect him, he's not feeling well.' The barista's machine gasps and splutters and I step out of the cafe in order to hear. 'How soon can you come?' The voice belongs to the school receptionist.

'He was happy when I left him an hour ago. I don't understand how he could feel poorly so quickly.'

'I'm sorry Revelle,' she says, her tone suggesting she means it. 'I know this is probably inconvenient. Are you at work?'

'I was about to walk in.'

'It's the policy, in case he's infectious, you know?'

From outside I wave an apology to the waiter for the mess. 'I'm coming,' I say, and speed-walk down Fleet Street to flag a black cab. When we arrive at Greenwich, I ask the driver to keep the meter running. Elliot and the receptionist stand waiting, my son with his coat buttoned-up and a silver rucksack on his back. My son. The words arrive of their own accord;

not forced, for once not strange. I can't help but smile. 'Hey Batman, you're not feeling well?' I crouch in front of him.

## **“Who would leave their not-quite-seven-year-old in the company of a stranger?”**

'My throat's a bit sore.' Elliot twists around my leg.

'Honestly, he was fine this morning,' I say. 'Weren't you love?' Elliot shrugs and plucks his Draggie-the-never-washed-Dragon toy from his bag - a crutch he's probably too old for. Should I insist on washing it? Is that what parents do? I don't have time to think about that as I bundle him into the car. 9:27am. Elliot loves black cabs. He wants to sit in the front seat, and I try to explain why it's unsafe without going into gory details about car accidents and what could happen, horrible accompanying images smashing through my mind. His eyes are fixed on the window as I rush through my phone's contact list looking for someone who isn't working on a Monday morning.

'Gherkin tower. Draggie will beat The Gherkin!' My boy's forehead stamps a shape on the glass. Other people would call their partner to see if they could work from home for the day, then they'd try the grandparents. I have no plan B.

'He sure will,' I reply, as I reach L then M then all the way to T with still no idea as to who could take Elliot. 9:53am. The car turns onto Newgate Street. Paused at traffic lights, the driver's hand finds the radio button and three words in, it's obvious what the announcers are discussing.

'Sorry, would you mind switching off the sound?' I ask. I don't want to hear any commentary or opinion on the matter immediately before court. Not this case, it's too depressing.

The driver eyes me in the rearview mirror and presses the button with a grunt. The trial is in London's ether. Its molecules have edged out the lorry fumes and usual pollution so that this month, it's all anyone is breathing in. Another scroll through my contacts list to confirm that there is no one, absolutely no one I could call.

'Batman,' I say, gently pulling him back from the window. 'Would you like to come with me to work today?'

He's nonplussed.

'Oh look over there, it's a block of firds,' I say, pointing.

Elliot snorts. 'Flock of birds!'

'You're too good at this,' I say. A "spoonerism" is when a speaker accidentally mixes up the initial sounds or letters of two words. We ran out of time this morning for my pre-rehearsed game over breakfast.

'Are you...?' My jaw drops in mock disgust. 'Are you nicking your nose?'

'I am not picking my nose,' he laughs. Three months ago, I bought a book of kids' jokes the weekend before he came to me. I memorised as many as I could but then neglecting to ration, used them all up by the end of our first forty-eight hours together. Maybe it was just as well. Children can tell when you're trying too hard.

As we approach the Old Bailey, the cab crawls through puddles of people spread onto the road. 'Bloody circus,' the driver says. 'You'll have to get out here.'

Groups of press, onlookers, cameras, TV vans and tents smother the entrance to Central Criminal Court. When the cab door opens, the roar from the crowd pushes inside.

Why did you catch a bug today of all days? I think to myself, guiding a curl behind Elliot's ear. 9:57am. The defence team will be looking for me. Elliot's palm burrows in mine as we walk towards the door.

Eight witness service volunteers loiter at the entrance. All hands on deck for the final days of a fraught proceeding. 'I'm the interpreter,' I tell one of them.

'There's a juror caught in traffic,' she says. 'We're on Old Bailey time, as usual, so you've about another ten minutes.'

'Thank you,' I say.

'Is this your son?'

'Normally at school on a Monday.' Could she mind him while I'm inside the courtroom? Between soothing shaky witnesses - no, that won't work. 'Don't worry, he won't be coming in with me,' I say.

'Bit young for work experience.'

I summon a laugh.

Her voice changes gear. 'Children can't go inside.'

'I know. I have someone coming. They'll wait outside together.' She nods, approving, while I feel increasingly sick. 'A friend,' I say, gesturing to my mobile phone as though it is proof, as though the received calls are not all from Elliot's doctor and his school; the text messages more personal than automated alerts from my bank. What am I going to do with him?

Two minutes until the trial starts. I thought this would happen one day, but not on my first court assignment since adopting Elliot, not on such a significant case. A case which, if I don't go inside, could be adjourned. This crime that has the nation gripped with its themes of class and privilege, a luxury car and a dead baby. They need the best interpreter. They need me.

I look at my phone again in case a miracle might occur, his teacher calling to apologise for the confusion, she'll be here to whisk him back to school any second now.

'I don't know what to do,' I say to the volunteer.

'Your friend isn't here?'

'I should be in there already. But my son got sent home from school.' My pleading tone tells her the friend was never coming.

'I can watch him.' I hear a female voice from behind. 'My boss is inside. I have to wait here for her anyway. Your son can wait with me,' the woman says. 'I'm Sandra.' She grins into Elliot's face. I make an instant assessment: Nice, harmless, female, dressed professionally, no red flags. But even so, who would leave their not-quite-seven-year-old in the company of a stranger? I remind myself that Elliot's adoption isn't yet finalised. At present, I'm a caretaker, mothering on probation. If I make any wrong move, they can still take him away.

'For the next twenty minutes you're going to be standing right here?' I ask.

She nods. 'Promised my boss I would wait near security.' I look over at the pair of security guards and wave at Arkam on the left. Right before Elliot, I worked here on a three-month murder trial. Interpreting almost feels, briefly, like a normal job on those lengthy cases; going to the same place each day, seeing the same faces. I'll ask him to keep an eye on Elliot and Sandra. And no one would kidnap a child from the Old Bailey with its cameras and permanent police presence. This woman's boss must be a barrister or solicitor - she probably works for one of the nearby chambers.

**"I crane my neck to see past the woman's middle. Through the doorway I can see a group of people right by the exit, but no sign of Elliot."**

'If you wouldn't mind sitting with him, you'd be saving my life,' I say.

'No problem.'

'This is Elliot. He has some things in his rucksack to keep him occupied.' I slip my mobile into his pocket.

'Hey Elliot!' Sandra squats to his level. I like that she hasn't commented on his appearance. So many strangers consider it appropriate to note the vast differences in our looks. 'It's so light, it's practically white!' they say, fingering his hair. 'Don't worry, it'll darken like yours once he gets older', or, once, comparing us: 'His father must be practically albino!' Maybe he is.

'A cupcake after this, I promise,' I tell Elliot. Then, in a more serious tone: 'Be good, yeah?' The parental need to set boundaries and teach manners, when all I really want is to get him to like me.

'Thank you, again,' I say to Sandra. 'I don't know what I was going to do.'

'Good luck in there,' she says.

'I hope your boss wins,' I say, and walk towards the wooden doors.

She groans and shouts so that I can hear. 'I don't!'

The jury looks exhausted. In the public gallery, the grief-stricken, groups of law students, and the plain nosy sit staring straight ahead, at the floor or at the ceiling. This is a rare place on earth that does not allow the distraction of mobile phones. A Maldives brochure rests on a man's lap, he's left his belongings at the travel agent around the corner who'll cloak your bag for two pounds. The room falls into silence. Sighs and sniffles of the victim's family members spread through the court.

The day begins. It's a complex dangerous driving case. Immediately, my eyes occupy themselves with the defence barrister's hands. Back straight, chin raised, he limits his hand movements to open, relaxed gestures. 'How would you describe the defendant's demeanour on the day in question?' Everything about him expresses authority, honesty.

Seated next to the smartly dressed witness, I inhale the room's stale leather and stagnant air as I wait for my turn to speak.

'Who made the call to emergency services?'

The thirty-something woman answers the barrister's questions succinctly and it's no trouble interpreting her Polish into English. She can understand English well enough and doesn't really need me to repeat the questions into her native tongue.

'How would you describe the sound?'

As I interpret the questions and answers from Polish to English, English to Polish, I keep my eyes fixed on the barrister's palms, his clean pink flesh without one trace of sweat.

The woman I'm interpreting for, a tourist visiting London last June, attended the opera on the night of the alleged crime. Out of sheer bad luck she saw the incident take place and is here to provide evidence, summoned by the defence.

'And what did you see when you stepped closer?'

After Madame Butterfly, my witness returned to her rental car in the opera house carpark and saw the defendant reverse her £80,000 Audi, hitting a member of the catering staff. Then the defendant drove off. The charges include dangerous driving, failing to stop at the scene of an accident, and child destruction - the victim survived, but her unborn baby did not. The press, titillated by this case and its glamorous twenty-year-old accused, heiress to a software company and a Knightsbridge resident, is predicting an acquittal on the gravest charge of child destruction. Legally speaking, it is almost impossible to prove; rarely is anyone convicted of killing an unborn child. I let my eyes rest on the defendant. She is in a dark navy suit with tiny earrings which reflect the light when her head turns. I could not stand to listen to the radio in the cab this morning because I knew they were going to say she'll go free.

Some cases I work on, I really can't tell which way the jury or judge is likely to go. Today, my being here seems futile. The defence team appear so assured - they hardly need this witness to bolster their case. And now in the final days of the trial, the prosecution barrister is visibly struggling to hide his gloom. But you never know when things might turn around. My witness

could fluff one of her answers, wobble off course and do more harm to the defence than good. That probably won't happen.

'At what point did you notice the woman was pregnant?' I repeat the question in Polish with complete accuracy. Then the answer into English. To me, the words must all taste the same. I will say whatever is demanded of me. In this room, I have no personal morals of my own, I am not really here. That's what I have to tell myself. Some days, during some assignments, I need reminding, until the reality of my job really sinks in. I bet the accused gets away with everything except for the dangerous driving charge. But I am not allowed to care.

It's now twenty minutes since I left Elliot.

The questions keep coming. Twenty-five minutes since I left Elliot. He has my phone, and knows how to use it, but who would he call? If the prosecution cross-examines for even half as long, I'll be stuck in court for almost an hour. What if Sandra leaves? She may have already handed Elliot to a police officer, called Social Services about the boy dumped in the Old Bailey with the world's filthiest soft toy.

Cross-examination begins and I rush my sentences, the Polish words colliding, saving a few seconds of time.

'No further questions my Lord,' the barrister says. 'The witness is dismissed.'

My pumps skid along the floor.

Recess. The court spills into the foyer, everyone desperate for the loo, a drink of water or a surreptitious Walnut Whip. Through the crush I head for the building exit.

'Where did you learn Polish? Your accent is very good.' The witness has inserted herself into my eye line.

'Thank you.' I avoid eye contact. I need to go outside; I have to find him.

'Have you been to Zabki?' The woman beams. 'My hometown.'

'No.'

'The pierogi are the best in the country.'

I crane my neck to see past the woman's middle. Through the doorway I can see a group of people right by the exit, but no sign of Elliot.

'You should visit,' the woman says. 'They'll think you're Polish.'

'Excuse me.' I dart past her, push through tight circles of onlookers and officials until I reach the spot where I left Elliot and Sandra.

They're gone.