

1

IT HADN'T STOPPED raining all summer, and the narrow stream that divided Limeburn ran deeper than Ruby Trick had seen it in all of the ten years she'd been alive.

The ditch that marked the crease in the gorge usually held a foot of tumbling, tuneful water. Enough to wet your knees but not your knickers.

But this summer was different. This summer, the sun had only shone apologetically through short gaps in the dirty Devonshire clouds, and the stream was fast and deep and dark. And although Adam Braund could still jump from one mossy bank to the other if he had a run up, the children all gathered to watch him now because if he fell in, it was just possible that he might drown.

The lane that rose a steep, curling mile through the forest to the main road was always mirrored with wet, while the cobbles between the cottages closest to the slipway had never lost their green winter sheen. The trees that threatened to push Limeburn's twenty-odd houses into the greedy sea below never dried out. Leaves dripped even when the sky did not; the stream spewed from the cliff face like a fire hose, and the steep dirt

footpaths that escaped Limeburn through the woods were nothing but lethal slides.

Not that that stopped anyone, of course.

There were only five children in the village so they were forced to be playmates, just as they were forced to live in this dank place that smelled of kelp.

Chris Braund was the eldest at thirteen. His brother Adam was a year younger, but a year taller. The Braunds were descended from Armada sailors washed ashore, and they all looked like gypsies. Then there was Ruby with her shock of red hair. After her came seven-year-old Maggie Beer and her two-year-old sister, Em, who slowed them all down. Both were stick thin and see-through pale. Maggie had to linger for Em, the boys went on ahead, while Ruby was always left somewhere in the middle.

To the west they were allowed to climb the path through the forest to the stone stile. In a small clearing there, a bench on the cliff looked out through a leafy frame and over the black pebble beach to the Gore. The Gore was a slim, flat spit that jutted a hundred yards into the waves before turning abruptly and stopping. It was said that the Devil had tried to build a bridge across to Lundy Island, but had been thwarted when his shovel broke.

Ruby didn't like the Gore or the story.

They made her wonder where the Devil was now.

Hanging from an ancient oak beside the bench was a loop of fraying rope where they could swing – if they wanted to burn their palms and fall in the mud. Still, they did swing more often than not, because that was all there was to do.

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Sometimes Chris and Adam climbed over the stile and went on up the pathway. ‘All the way to Clovelly!’ Chris had boasted on several occasions, but when Ruby had asked him to bring her back a toy donkey from the visitor centre, he said they’d run out.

Ruby never went past the stile. ‘That far and no further,’ her mother had warned her. That was partly why. The other part was that, even on a sunny day, the woods beyond the stile were too dark and too quiet – a tunnel of green with the threat of the unseen drop on one side, and tangled undergrowth rising on the other. The pixies in the woods would lead you in circles – even right off the cliff – if they could. You’d have to turn your coat inside out to keep them away.

At the foot of the Clovelly path was a small stone beehive-shaped hut. They didn’t know what the hut was supposed to be for, but they called it the Bear Den because even in the dry it smelled like bears. The children took turns to squeeze through the tiny door and sit in the dark with their knees tucked under their chins for as long as they could stand it.

Adam held the record, which was ages.

To the east, the Peppercombe path was even steeper – a switchback of mud and wooden planking in a makeshift staircase between clinging brambles.

Halfway up was the haunted house where they weren’t allowed to go. They spent much of their time there, picking among the cinders in the fireplaces and knocking glass from the empty windows at low tide, to hear it tinkle on the wet pebbles a hundred feet below. Each year the worm-chewed floor jutted out further and

further over the disintegrating drop. There was one place where Ruby could lie with her eye to a knothole in the floor, where there was nothing between her and the dark grey sea.

It was like flying.

Or falling.

Ruby Trick lived in a tiny two-bedroomed cottage called The Retreat. It was owned by a family in London who had bought it and named it and then found it was too distant, too dreary, too damp to retreat to – even just once a summer – and had rented it out until they could sell at a profit.

That was never going to happen. The Retreat would cost less to demolish and rebuild than it would to repair. Ruby's father, John Trick, hammered bits of scrap wood into draughty window frames, and slapped filler at the widening cracks in the walls, but each year The Retreat fought a losing battle against nature.

The forest didn't want them there – that was plain to Ruby. While Clovelly kept it at bay with size and industry – and, ultimately, brute tourism – Limeburn was just in its way. The stream and the road and the thin line of houses were never going to be enough to keep the trees on *this* side of the coombe joining the trees on *that* side. It was only a matter of time. The advance party was already established. Ferns sprouted from stone walls like little green starfish, while rhododendrons and hydrangeas crowded back doors and shrouded rear windows. And, even as the trees surrendered their branches to loppers and chainsaws, so they tunnelled sly

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roots under enemy lines, breaking through pipes, loosening foundations and shifting walls out of true. In Rock Cottage the living-room floor had bulged and finally splintered to reveal a root of oak as thick as a man's leg. They'd all been in to look, and to help old Mrs Vanstone rearrange the furniture around it.

John Trick always said there were some things you just couldn't stop. Already the houses further up the hill had been swallowed by the forest, their stone hearths now washed with rain, and home only to spiders and bloated toads, while the houses that were left had nowhere to go but the sea, which gouged relentlessly at the cliff beneath them.

The long, curved slipway tempted the water up into the village, and sometimes it came. During spring tides and storms, sandbags were packed tight behind wooden slides in the doorways, and people took their heirlooms and TVs up to bed with them, just in case.

By day, it was easy to forget that the trees and the ocean were lying in wait. By day the children played in the woods and stepped gingerly across the giant pebbles on the beach to paddle in the rockpools.

But by night Ruby could feel the tides tugging at her belly, while the forest tested The Retreat, squealing against the glass and tapping on the tiles.

And she wondered what it would be like – when the outside finally broke in.

2

JOHN TRICK DROVE them up to the main road to get the bus – Ruby to Bideford, her mother only as far as the hotel, from where she brought home leftovers so good that Ruby would sometimes get up in the middle of the night to finish them off.

Their car, once white, was now frilled with rust. The car seemed to hate them as much as the forest did, and sometimes wouldn't start. When it did, it coughed and jerked all the way up the winding mile.

The hill from Limeburn to the main road was like a ride. Ruby had been to the fair once in Bideford. The rollercoaster had been small, but big enough to frighten her, and it had started like this – with a grindingly slow pull up an incline that had looked like nothing from the queue, but which had felt so steep once she was in the little cart that she'd thought she might flip over backwards.

They were always tense in the car – waiting for it to fail. Her father hunched over the wheel, her mother gripped her bag in her lap, while Ruby's fingers ached, she clutched the headrest so tight. They all leaned forward, as if it would help, as the car lurched in bad

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gears around hairpins, under the murky canopy of green.

Halfway up was a stable made from an old railway carriage, and a tiny paddock of mud. There was never anything in there, but Ruby always looked.

‘That’s where I’ll keep my horse,’ she said five times a week.

‘What will you call it?’ her father always asked.

‘Depends,’ Ruby idled, ‘on its colour and nature.’

‘What if it has a name already?’ asked her mother. ‘You can’t change it.’

Ruby frowned. She hadn’t thought of that.

‘She can call it anything she likes, can’t you, Rubes?’ said her father in the mirror. Then he shook his head and murmured, ‘Spoilsport.’

Ruby liked it when Daddy told Mummy off. Mummy was too big for her boots, with her fancy job at the hotel and her fancy chef’s uniform. Showing off – that’s what Daddy called it.

They passed the stone chapel where thick ivy knitted the graves together, then surfaced from the cover of trees into daylight, next to the little shop where Ruby spent her pocket money. There was a sign that promised ice cream – although the freezer was always full of fish fingers and frozen peas – and a wire cage by the door that held a local newspaper headline to the wall. It changed once a week, or whenever Mr Preece remembered to do it. Today there was a FLOOD THREAT TO 1000 HOMES.

The car juddered to a halt and they clambered out. Ruby had to wait for Mummy to get out because there were only two doors. She could see a small knot of

children already at the stop. They were divided between above-the-hills, who came from the clifftop farms and hamlets, and below-the-hills, from the beaches and the forest. Aboves had wifi and ponies; belows piled sandbags in their doorways against high tides, and their hair was always matted with salt.

Before she closed the door, Mummy bent down to look back into the car. 'Could you try to see about the bathroom window, John?'

Ruby rolled her eyes. Mummy was always going *on* and *on* about the window! Why didn't she fix it herself if she was so bothered?

'If I get time,' said Daddy.

'What else do you have to do?' said Mummy, and Daddy leaned over and pulled the door shut. Then he turned the car round in a jerky circle, and sank beneath the trees.

The above-the-hill kids waited for her mother to get off the bus before they called Ruby 'fat bitch' and 'ginger minger', and stepped on her black shoes and white socks until they were good and muddy.



John Trick was twenty-nine and had not worked for three years.

He used to do welding at the shipyard, and when there was no welding he'd done scaffolding, and when there was no scaffolding he'd done labouring, and when there was no labouring, he'd started to do nothing at all.

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Then he had done nothing at all for so long that he'd gradually adjusted, until nothing had become the new something.

The new something was the drive up the hill and back and breakfast in front of the TV. It was combing the beach for driftwood, and surprising limpets for bait. It was a six-pack of Strongbow cooling in a rockpool, and pissing in the sea like a castaway.

After a while, he wondered how he'd ever found time for a job.

And on days like this, that suited him just fine. The morning rain had stopped and the cloud had thinned so that it only diluted the sunshine, rather than blocking it out completely – a reminder that, somewhere up there, summer was as it should be. The sheltered cove was always warmer than the clifftops, and the moisture was already leaving the land for the sky again in steamy wisps.

Through cheap earpieces, Johnny Cash and Willie Nelson sang to him of real men and the women who'd wronged them. Sometimes – when the wind was up – he'd join in.

Short snatches of songs carried off on the spume.

He had collected half a dozen limpets and now dug one out of its shell with his penknife and put it on the hook. The outer flesh was tough, and the creature pulsed in his fingers as he threaded it over the barbs.

He cast and felt the weight touch the bottom, then he took up the tension on the line, and settled back into his old nylon camping chair.

John fished mostly at the Gut – a squareish wound

blown out of the rock with gunpowder two hundred years before, so that ships could land their cargoes of lime and anthracite. The kilns where the lime had been burned were still there, built into the sea wall either side of the slipway – fortress-like stone ovens forty feet high that were now occupied by rats and by gulls, and so acrid with the shit of both that not even the children played there.

Mackerel was his most common catch, with whiting a close second. Both were good enough eating, and if he bothered to pick his slippery way to the end of the Gore, he could catch eels as long as his arm, and dogfish. Rock salmon, they were called in fancy restaurants, and sometimes Alison rang Mr Littlejohn at the hotel and he'd say yes or no. If he said yes, he gave Trick a tenner a fish. Then cut them into eight thick steaks that he sold for twenty quid a time.

John snorted around his roll-up. A hundred and sixty quid for a fish *he* caught and his *wife* cooked. He failed to see how Mr Littlejohn could sleep at night, for the thieving old bastard he was.

He could have sold the dogfish to the Red Lion in Clovelly, of course, but he never went to Clovelly, even though he could see it from here, across the shallow curve of the bay. Clovelly was the favoured brother to Limeburn's runt, and nobody in either village ever forgot it.

The fluorescent end of the fishing rod shivered, and he tensed, ready for action. But the tip pinged back into position, pointing skywards with a trembling finger.

John subsided.

Bloody crabs.

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Sometimes he would reel in and check the bait and cast again somewhere else, but it seemed like a lot of work when the air was so warm and the cider so cool.

He closed his eyes and waited.

He slept.



That night the window row began again. First the window, then how much the new tyre on the car had cost, then the mess Daddy had made cleaning the fish in the sink. Ruby went into the other room before it could get to the job.

Wherever the row started, it always ended up at the job.

It got there without her.

3

MISS SHARPE WROTE two words on the whiteboard and Ruby copied them carefully on to the cover of a brand-new blue exercise book.

My Dairy.

‘You should write in your diaries every day,’ said Miss Sharpe, to groans from the boys. She put down the marker pen and walked up and down between the desks. Ruby liked it when Miss Sharpe walked about, because it made it harder for Essie Littlejohn to poke her with a pencil. Essie’s daddy owned the hotel where Mummy worked and Ruby hated her, with her big ears and her good crayons and her fancy mains gas.

‘All the things you do, and the thoughts you have,’ Miss Sharpe continued. ‘All your secret dreams and plans for the future.’

Ruby noticed that she had pale pearl varnish on her short nails. Ruby wasn’t allowed to paint her nails because only slags painted their nails, but Miss Sharpe didn’t look like a slag. She had ugly brown hair and no make-up, and her only jewellery was a bracelet that tinkled with charms, including a little silver horseshoe. Ruby liked the horseshoe, and – by extension – Miss

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Sharpe, so she didn't see how Miss Sharpe could be a slag. Maybe nail polish was only slaggy if it was a French manicure, like the girls from the college, who smoked on the bus.

Miss Sharpe saw Ruby looking at the charms and smiled her lopsided smile. She had only been here since the beginning of term, so she hadn't had time to get miserable yet.

David Leather put up his hand and asked if he could write about his milk-bottle collection and Shawn Loosemore asked if he could write about smashing up David Leather's milk-bottle collection, and everyone laughed – apart from David and Miss Sharpe, who had to clap her hands to make them all be quiet.

'Of course, David. Hobbies, or what you did at the weekend, or what you want for your birthday, or your pets. It will be like Facebook, but just for 5B. Then,' she said, 'those who want to can read their diaries out in class, and we'll be able learn about each other's—'

The bell rang and Miss Sharpe had to raise her voice over the scraping chairs.

'—everyday lives! Have a lovely weekend everybody!'

Ruby stuffed *My Dairy* into her plush pony-shaped backpack, then trailed out of the classroom behind the others.

The other kids had no interest in her *or* her everyday life.

Writing it down wouldn't make any difference.



Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, Cowboy.

Cowboy Night was the best night of the week.

On Cowboy afternoons, Ruby would get off the bus and go into the shop to spend her pocket money under the suspicious eye of Mr Preece. She didn't like Mr Preece, who had hair curling from his ears, and eyes that looked too big behind thick glasses. She took an age every Friday to buy the same two things: a Mars bar and a copy of *Pony & Rider*, which were her treats for the week.

By the time she reached the little chapel, she'd always eaten the Mars bar.

Pony & Rider lasted longer, and Ruby ambled down the hill, envying the pretty girls with their long legs wrapped around immaculate ponies, and looking for good pictures to cut out and stick over her bed, until it became difficult to see by the miserly light that the forest allowed. Then she hurried the rest of the way to Limeburn, letting gravity speed her home.

Daddy sucked spaghetti into his mouth in long strings that were still attached to his plate, and Ruby did the same, but Mummy said 'Ruby!' and made her stop. *She* wound her spaghetti around her fork so that it was like putting a knot of wet wool in your mouth. It wasn't half the fun.

'Mmm,' said Daddy, 'that was great, thanks.' He leaned back and played the drums on his tummy. Sometimes Ruby had to guess what song.

'More?' asked Mummy.

'Please.' He made the most of a burp and Ruby

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giggled. Daddy could say ‘Bulawayo’ before finishing a burp. He laughed too; Daddy was always in a good mood on Cowboy Nights.

Mummy got up and crossed to the stove. Daddy watched her all the way. When she got back with the second plateful, he said, ‘What’s the occasion?’

‘What?’

‘New shoes.’

Mummy looked down as if they were a surprise to her too.

‘Oh,’ she said, pushing her hair behind her ear.

Ruby leaned off her chair to see the shoes. Mummy always wore flat ones because she was too tall. These were far from flat, and had lots of thin straps. They looked like the shoes models wore in magazines.

‘Mum gave me some money for my birthday,’ said Mummy. ‘You remember.’

‘That was months ago.’

‘I haven’t had time to go shoe shopping.’

‘Bit high, aren’t they?’ said Daddy.

Mummy looked under the table at her feet. ‘They *are* a bit higher than they felt in the shop. I just thought it would be nice to have one good pair just in case . . .’ She tailed off.

‘In case of what?’ said Ruby.

‘Just in case we went out somewhere,’ she shrugged.

Daddy sucked up the new spaghetti.

‘Can I have some more spaghetti too?’ said Ruby.

‘What’s the magic word?’ said Mummy.

‘*Please.*’

‘Are you still hungry?’ said Mummy. ‘That was a big bowl for a little girl.’

‘Let her eat if she’s hungry,’ said Daddy.

‘I *am* hungry,’ said Ruby.

‘See?’

Mummy pursed her lips and Ruby felt cross, because faces like that made her remember that she was fat. Not fat like David Leather, whose legs rubbed together so hard that there were threadbare patches on his school trousers, but fat enough to hate a waistband and a mirror. Daddy said it was puppy fat and it was cute, but Ruby knew it wasn’t.

Mummy got up and brought the pan over and draped a little more spaghetti into Ruby’s bowl. She didn’t sit down again; she stood, watching the clock.

‘So,’ said Daddy, glancing at the clock. ‘What’s the occasion?’

‘No occasion,’ said Mummy. ‘Just thought I’d wear them tonight to show Mum what her money bought, that’s all.’

Ruby wound the spaghetti around her fork against the bottom of her bowl. ‘They’re too high, Mummy,’ she said. ‘You’ll fall over on the cobbles.’

‘Break an ankle,’ agreed Daddy.

Mummy stared at her feet and bit her thumbnail. The nail was already ragged, and when she went to work every day she put a fresh blue plaster on it.

Daddy pushed his chair back from the table and Ruby sucked up her last mouthful of spaghetti, then rushed upstairs after him, to watch him change.

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Ruby loved Daddy every day, but on Cowboy Night she loved him even more, with his black clothes and black hat and the fake brass bullets glinting at his waist.

Cowboys was the best game she played in the woods, even though she didn't have a hat or boots or a gunbelt. She had sticks that were shaped like guns, stuck into the pockets of her jeans as if they were in holsters.

Daddy adjusted his black Stetson so that it was low over his eyes, then opened the bottom drawer. Ruby craned to see what was coming out of it, because she wasn't allowed to open the drawer herself. She wasn't allowed to mess with Daddy's cowboy things.

It was the Texas string tie, with a blue stone cattle skull and pointed silver tips to the laces. Daddy stood in front of the pitted mirror that hung on the back of the bedroom door, and looped it over his head, then replaced his hat – making sure it was just right in the mirror.

'Wow!' said Ruby.

He grinned and tipped his brim in her direction.

'Why, thank you, Miss Ruby,' he drawled, making her giggle.

He sat on the bed and pulled on his cowboy boots. Black with fancy white stitching. Mummy had found them in a charity shop, but they fitted like gloves.

'You need spurs,' Ruby said.

'You think so?'

Of course she did; she'd heard *him* say so often enough.

'Mummy has new shoes,' she pointed out.

‘Well,’ shrugged Daddy, but didn’t go on.

Her father never said it in so many words, but they both understood that if her mother’s work weren’t so *seasonal* they would all have things that they wanted. In the season she worked almost every night and some days. In the winter she only did weekends, and they ate so much fish that Ruby could smell it on her pillow.

Daddy pulled open the drawer once again and took out the black leather gunbelt. He hitched it loosely, so that the holster hung low on his hip.

‘Can I tie the string?’ said Ruby, kneeling up beside his leg.

The leather thong was difficult to wrestle into a knot and turned into a loose half a bow.

‘Nice tyin’, young ’un.’

Ruby beamed at up him. ‘Sure, JT.’ She tried the accent, but it wound itself around her tongue like a cat and came out in a miaow.

Daddy used to have a gun in his gunbelt. Not a real one, but that didn’t matter – the government had made all the Gunslingers hand in their guns just because one stupid man shot some people miles away. And the man wasn’t even a cowboy, so it was really unfair.

But even without a gun, something about Daddy’s hat and his cowboy voice and his unshaven jaw always excited Ruby in a way she couldn’t put into words. He looked like a film star. Even the pale scars that curved through his eyebrow and across his right cheek looked good on Cowboy Night. In Ruby’s eyes they almost made him better. More *dangerous*.

‘John?’ her mother called up the stairs. ‘It’s quarter past.’

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Daddy rolled his eyes at Ruby, and Ruby rolled them back. Nanna and Granpa came at half past. Granpa made her sit on his lap, and Nanna's idea of sweets was fruit.

'Can I come with you?' It burst out of Ruby. She'd learned not to ask often, but she hadn't asked for *ages*.

Daddy stopped adjusting his belt, and made a face in the mirror that looked like consideration. She held her breath.

'Not this time, Rubes,' he said.

'When?' she said, emboldened by the pause.

'When you're older.' He always said the same thing.

'I'm older *now*. I'm getting older all the *time*.'

There was a silent moment when Ruby thought she'd gone too far. But then he turned towards her and grinned.

'No, you're not!' he said, and started to tickle her. 'You're not getting older!'

She giggled and rolled. He'd forgotten his cowboy accent, and the only burr in his voice was a West Country one, as he made her suffer with joy.

'You're my little cowboy,' he said as she shrieked. 'You'll *always* be my little cowboy.'

'John? They'll be here any minute.'

Daddy stopped tickling and sighed, and Ruby flopped on to the bed, wheezing and still giggling on the out-breaths.

'Big Nose and Ping Pong are on the warpath,' Daddy whispered, and Ruby laughed. They called them that – just between themselves – because Granpa's nose *was* big, and Nanna's eyes were as poppy as ping-pong balls.

He straightened up. 'I guess I'll be headin' out then,' he said, back in character. 'You have fun now, y'hear?'

Ruby made a face. ‘*How* old must I be before I can come with you?’

Daddy adjusted his belt for a long time, and when he spoke, it wasn’t in his cowboy voice.

‘Don’t rush to grow up, Rubes,’ he said. ‘There’s nothing good waiting for you there.’

He tilted his hat so it was low over his eyes. Then he got his accent back. ‘You stay home, Miss Ruby. Stay out of trouble.’

At the door, Daddy spun on his heel like a gunslinger, and drew on Ruby.

‘Pow! Pow-pow!’

Instead of a six-shooter he pulled a Mars bar from his holster and lobbed it gently to her. She gasped with delight – then shushed as he raised a secretive finger to his lips.

‘Don’t tell Mummy,’ he said.

Then he tipped his hat to her one last time and jig-jogged down the stairs, whistling ‘Red River Valley’, because it was her favourite song.

Ruby’s smile faded with the tune.

How could Daddy say she shouldn’t rush to grow up? It was all right for *him* to say! He’d probably forgotten what it was even *like* to be little, with all the fatness and the bullies and the homework.

She thought of all the good stuff waiting for her when she got older. The first thing she would do was buy a pony so that when she got a job she could ride it to work and to the shops and hitch it up outside so she could see it from the window. And with the money she made from doing . . . *something* . . . she’d buy her own custard creams

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and not have to search every time for where Mummy had hidden theirs. She'd live in a warm house in a sunny field, miles from trees, where mould didn't blacken the walls and where the wind never squealed through the windows.

Daddy must be wrong about growing up.
She couldn't *wait* to get there.

4

LEGEND HAS IT that in AD 878, Vikings under the leadership of Hubba the Dane landed thirty-three ships right here, at the broad mouth of the River Torridge, and headed up the steep hill to launch an assault on Kenwith Castle. They barely got a mile before they met the English defenders coming the other way. The king's men had the high ground and the raiders were repelled, but not before the battle claimed the lives of thousands of winners and losers alike.

The dead victors were carried back to Kenwith under the first Eagle standard ever captured, while the Danes were buried where they fell – in mass graves dug easily in earth so softened by carnage that it is known to this day as Bloody Corner.

Since then, not much had happened in Appledore.

For nearly twelve hundred years, the little village serried its way up that same hill like a much slower, more respectful invasion. The first row of cottages rose straight from the muddy estuary, and the tide lapped against painted walls and seeped into basements on a twice-daily basis.

Appledore had a post office, three churches and six

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pubs: the usual ratio. In summer, little galleries and gift shops opened in people's front rooms, selling handmade and home-made gifts, although the hands and homes were mostly Chinese. Not like the Hocking's ice cream, which was made right here in the village from great golden mountains of real butter, and sold from a fleet of vanilla vans.

And not like the ships.

Appledore folk had been building boats for generations, and at its peak Appledore Shipbuilders had employed over two thousand men: so many that one village alone could not satisfy the demand, and men had come from miles around, working shifts around the clock, and riding to the yard on cheap old step-through scooters that cut through sleep like 4am buzz-saws. For half a century the huge iron shed had dominated the river and made bonsais of the trees. Great warships slid from it and into the river, causing passing yachts to bob and pitch like toys. The dry dock had once been the biggest in Europe, and it had seemed that the good times would never end.

But everything ends – especially good times.

And when they ended in Appledore, fifteen hundred men lost their jobs.

Overnight.

Fifteen hundred breadwinners. Fifteen hundred skilled welders and fitters and carpenters and machinists, suddenly unemployed in a place where the job centre only regularly offered bar work, labouring and babysitting.

Many of the men never worked again. Not legally,

anyway. They missed the work and the money, of course, but more than that, they missed their mates and the way men could be when they were with other men – which was not the same way they had to be when they were with women.

So they found other places to meet. Some of them met in the bookmaker's, some in the pubs, some in the snooker halls.

And some of them joined the Gunslingers.

The Gunslingers were a loose group of maybe twenty men who, once a week, dressed up as cowboys and met at the George in Appledore – just as the Shootists did at the Bell in Parkham and the Outlaws did at the Coach and Horses in Barnstaple.

North Devon had its fair share of cowboys, that was for sure. All week they worked in banks or did odd jobs, but Cowboy Nights transported them for just a few hours to the Wild West, where men were men, women were buxom, and jails were made of wood.

When the Gunslingers had first appeared, the residents of Appledore had been a little nervous of the men in boots and black hats who swaggered down the narrow canyon of Irsha Street every Friday night. But after a while the net curtains stopped twitching every time a cowpoke passed through the little fishing village on his way to the pub, and it was left only to small gangs of teenaged boys to laugh and shout insults.

From a safe distance.

Once at the George, the Gunslingers got drunk and showed off and flirted with the barmaids, and talked in a cowboy way about cowboy things.

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Like fashion.

They fell on any new item of cowboy clothing or equipment like Beverly Hills housewives – poring over it for style and authenticity. Funds and geography dictated that items usually failed on both counts. Nellie Wilson's holster was from army surplus, Scratch Mumford's poncho had been crocheted by his mother, and Blacky Blackmore's cowboy hat had a Pixar logo under the brim.

The Gunslingers' most authentic asset came when Frank 'Whippy' Hocking would ride his hairy skewbald, Tonto, through the village and tie him up outside the George. There, tourists took pictures, and small children fed him sugar and ketchup and any other pub condiments that were free. 'No mustard,' Whippy always told them. When he left, the worse for wear, the other Gunslingers would come outside and help to push Whippy up into the tooled leather saddle. It always took at least three of them to heave him upright, because Whippy was one of the ice-cream clan, and quality control was his life.

When they weren't peacocking, the Gunslingers played a casual game of poker for pennies and bickered back and forth about old TV Westerns – wavering between *Bonanza* and *The High Chaparral* and *The Virginian*. Between them they had pirated all the box sets. In the films they were split between Clint Eastwood or Gary Cooper; John Wayne or Jimmy Stewart. Their jury was always out on Kevin Costner, who promised so much and so often – then somehow always managed to ruin things with gills or a bad haircut.

If a man joined the Gunslingers – and if he were not

thoroughly unpopular – he'd be given a cowboy name. Whether he liked it or not. Mostly these names were bestowed for low reasons that barely troubled the imagination. Blacky Blackmore delivered coal, Hick Trick lived in the sticks, while Daisy Yeo mooed loudly and randomly, in a sort of agricultural 'Tourette's'; in the supermarket you could hear him aisles away.

Some men tried to join up with their cowboy name all ready to go, but the Gunslingers had no truck with that. Indeed, they were apt to punish such presumption, which was why Len 'Pussy' Willows' membership had been short and fractious, ending in a brawl that had memorably spilled out of the George and all the way down Irsha Street.

Just like real cowboys.

It had happened six months ago, and they still worked it into at least one conversation a week.

As the night and the beer ran down, the Gunslingers would get reflective on how much better life would be if only North Devon were open of range and filled with cattle – preferably ones which needed driving from one end of the county to the other on a regular basis. They'd put Willie and Johnny on the jukebox in a mournful loop, and sigh into their empty glasses and empty holsters, and long for the good old days before varmints started shooting small children and everyone got so damned jumpy – even about replicas.

5

THE NAKED GIRL sat on the empty beach. The tide was so far out that its edge had disappeared in the low grey cloud, and the sand was hard and wet in the persistent drizzle.

She sat cross-legged and hunched over. Cold and snivelling, with her back to the invisible sea, and her hands trapped under her icy buttocks.

‘Call your mother,’ the man said.

Fresh sobs burst from the girl and the man looked at his watch. He prodded her again with the phone. It was an iPhone. Better than any phone *he*’d ever had. And the girl was what? Sixteen? Seventeen? Ridiculous.

‘Call your mother,’ he repeated slowly.

The girl was crying so hard now that when she tried to say something, he couldn’t understand it.

‘What?’ he said. He frowned in concentration, but her words couldn’t get past her weeping.

‘Oh, for fuck’s *sake*! Stop crying and speak clearly!’

‘You’re going to kill me!’

‘Yes, I am,’ he agreed. ‘Call your mother.’

She only wailed loudly.

‘Don’t you want to say goodbye?’ he asked, almost kindly.

The girl raised her snot-stained face defiantly.

‘Shut *up!*’ she shrieked, and lunged at his legs. She didn’t get her hands from under her bottom fast enough, and toppled forward on to her shoulder and her face.

He righted her roughly with the toe of his boot. The left side of her face was coated in a gritty tan mask, and she blinked and gasped as though she’d risen from the sea, not the sand.

He held up the phone so he could take a picture.

‘Eight megapixels,’ he observed. ‘On a bloody phone.’ He showed her the photo. ‘Maybe I’ll send that to your mates. What do you think? I’ve got all their numbers in here.’

Her face slackened in misery.

‘Please don’t,’ she whispered. ‘Please don’t send that to anyone.’

‘Then call your mother.’

The girl started to cry again – hard and steady. She shifted her weight to release one of her hands from under her buttock, and took the phone from him. She was shaking so hard that she took three goes to hit the right number. On the screen a picture of an old-fashioned telephone vibrated in time to the ringtone. Under the buzzing picture were the words *Calling Mum*.

‘It’s ringing,’ she wept.

‘Really?’ he said sarcastically.

‘What do I say?’

‘Say goodbye.’

‘Can I tell her I love her?’

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‘If you do.’

‘I do love her!’ cried the girl. ‘Can I speak to my dad too?’

‘This isn’t *Who Wants To Be A Millionaire*.’

The ringing stopped and a face appeared on the screen.

‘Mum?’ said the girl.

‘Do I look like Mum, peabrain?’

‘Ricky, get Mum.’ The girl was suddenly calm.

‘What am I? Your slave?’

‘Just get her, Ricky! It’s an emergency.’

The boy had a stud through his eyebrow. Spoilt brats, the both of them.

‘What’s the magic word?’

‘The magic word is *fucking please you fucking asshole*.’

‘I’m gonna tell Mum you said that. You’re in deep shit.’

‘I know,’ said the girl, and started to cry again. ‘I know.’

Ricky turned his head to one side and yelled, ‘Mum! Kelly’s on the phone!’ Then there were some random ceiling shots before a woman’s cheerful face appeared.

‘Hi, Kells.’

‘Mummy?’ That was all the girl could get out before the crying overtook her completely.

The woman’s face was instantly washed with panic.

‘Kelly, what’s wrong? Where are you?’

‘MummyMummyMummyMummy . . .’ The girl’s snot and spit looped from her lips and on to the phone.

‘Say goodbye,’ the man reminded her sharply.

‘Kelly, who’s that? Who’s with you? Where are you?’

‘He’s going to kill me, Mummy. He made me call you to say goodbye.’

The woman’s face went loose with horror.

This was more like it.

‘I love you, Mummy!’

‘KELLY! Brian! Call the police! BRIAN! Kelly, baby – wait! Who’s there? Who’s with you?’

The girl tilted the phone towards the man and he grinned and waved.

‘Hello,’ he said. ‘I’m going to kill your little girl now, while you watch.’

‘NO!’ she shrieked. ‘No! Wait! Wait! Stop! Brian! BRIAN! Someone’s got Kelly! BRIAN!’

He started to laugh. Her hysteria was so tinny and tiny; it was like watching a sea-monkey throw a tantrum in a little glass bowl.

The woman babbled, ‘Don’t hurt her. Please don’t hurt her. What do you want? I’ll give you *anything*. What do you want? Money? Please just talk to me and tell me what you want. Anything you want. PLEASE!’

He didn’t want anything else, but he couldn’t answer, he was laughing so hard. He doubled over, choked with mirth.

The girl saw her chance; she got up and ran away.

Away from the pile of clothes and towards Westward Ho! Back to the slipway, the bingo hall and the Hocking’s ice-cream van.

The man straightened up and ran a few loose paces after her, but then stopped and just watched her go – arse jiggling, phone waving, and a high, reedy ‘Help!’ squirting from her every few strides.

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It was one of the funniest things he'd ever seen.

He pulled off the balaclava and laughed until he finally wound down into long sighs of amusement – then he wiped his eyes and looked across the flat brown sand, where he was the tallest thing for miles. It made him think of *Gulliver's Travels*. He'd had the book as a child and had never read it – but he'd looked at the pictures again and again and again.

Now *he* felt like Gulliver, stomping all over those little people, flicking them off cliffs and picking them up by their heels between his giant thumb and forefinger.

Making them do whatever he wanted them to.

It made him feel *mighty*.

6

IT WAS SATURDAY, so Ruby lay on the floor and watched the sea as it swirled far below the overhanging room in the haunted house. The water was slate-grey with white veins, and when it withdrew it hissed and made a deep clicking sound as the big round stones rolled about the beach under the waves.

It was hypnotic.

She didn't know how long she'd been here. Maybe an hour. It was getting dark and she was getting cold, but she kept waiting for one more wave, one more retreat.

One more.

One more.

Ruby shifted a little against the musty floor. Her chest hurt.

Again.

She'd first noticed the pain when she'd been reading *Pony & Rider* on the old rug that was the same colour as the big spiders that marched into The Retreat in the first week of every September, as if they'd booked a room. It was a sharp ache, like lying on a hair bobble. But when she looked there was nothing there.

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Now, as then, Ruby drew her forearms under her sides a bit, to relieve the pressure on her chest.

Just one more wave.

‘Can I look?’

Ruby took her face from the hole in the floor to see Adam Braund standing beside her.

He laughed. ‘You have a red ring round your whole eye.’

She blushed and touched her face, but felt nothing.

‘It’s not bad,’ he said. ‘It’ll go.’

She shifted over, and Adam lay down and put his eye to the hole. Ruby was on her tummy beside him, propped on her elbows, staring at the wall. There had been paper on it once – yellow daffodils and purple crocuses. Now the flowers were faded to brown, just like real ones, and speckled with black damp.

‘We should make another hole,’ said Adam. His voice was muffled, because he was speaking into the floorboards. ‘Then we can both watch.’

‘OK,’ said Ruby.

He got to his feet and Ruby trailed around the house behind him, while he picked up scraps and tested window frames. There wasn’t much left that the children hadn’t already dropped into the ocean.

‘Shit!’ Adam sucked his thumb, and when he took it out of his mouth blood welled quickly, then leaked away through the tiny canals of his skin. It made Ruby feel a bit sick to see it.

‘Does it hurt?’

‘No,’ said Adam. He wiped the blood on his jeans, and started to tug at a banister spindle. It came free with a

surprising jerk, and they both laughed. Then Ruby followed him back through to the overhanging room.

Adam chose a place twelve inches from the knothole, where two floorboards were parting and daylight already showed through. He inserted the spindle and twisted and levered until the rotting board split and opened into a new hole a few inches wide, then he picked at the edges until the worst of the splinters were gone.

‘There,’ he said, and lowered the spindle through the new hole. ‘Let’s watch this.’

They both got on to their tummies again – their elbows tucked in and their hands in fists next to their ears – and counted down together.

‘Three.

‘Two.

‘One!’

Adam let go of the spindle and it speared the next wave and disappeared. Then they saw it again, briefly, tumbled in the froth, before it was sucked out to sea for ever.

‘Cool,’ said Ruby.

‘Yeah,’ said Adam. He shifted to get more comfortable and his leg nudged Ruby’s. She nudged back, and he held firm. Without taking their eyes from their spy-holes, they giggled as they pressed their calves and ankles against each other in a fake tussle, then gave up and subsided into silence.

They watched the sea for another five minutes, then Ruby remembered how cold she was. She was about to get up and go home when Adam spoke. His lips were so

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close to the floor that Ruby had to ask him to repeat it, so he lifted his head and looked at her.

‘Do you know why this house is haunted?’

‘No.’

He turned his head and looked at her. ‘Do you *want* to know?’

Ruby pursed her lips and thought about it. She’d thought *Haunted House* was just a name they called the dilapidated old building. Sure, it was run-down and creepy and had cobwebs and draughts and drips and weird noises, but until this moment she had never truly considered that it might actually *be* haunted by real *ghosts*. That idea was both awful and thrilling. She could already feel the back of her neck prickling just at the thought of it, and it was on the tip of her tongue to say no, when she realized that Adam Braund *wanted* to tell her, so she said yes instead.

He rolled on to his side to face her, with his elbow under his ear, so Ruby did the same. Their knees touched, but this time they both ignored it.

‘My dad told me this,’ Adam started, thus establishing the truth of it right up front. ‘It was a hundred years ago and there was this pedlar—’

‘What’s a pedlar?’ said Ruby.

‘Like a sales rep. But in the olden days. He came down the hill with all his stuff that he was selling on the back of a donkey.’

‘He can’t have had much stuff.’

‘Nobody did in those days,’ said Adam, and Ruby nodded because that was true.

‘What kind of stuff?’ she asked.

‘I dunno,’ said Adam. ‘Toilet roll and Pledge and things. Just stuff for the house.’

‘OK.’

‘So he came down the hill to sell stuff and there were these two old sisters who lived in this house, and they offered to let him stay over for the night.’

‘In this house?’

‘Yes,’ said Adam.

‘Why?’

‘’Cos it was night and it was raining outside.’

‘OK.’

Ruby wanted to glance around the room, but was starting to feel too nervous to do that, in case she saw something frightening. This was nowhere near a ghost story yet, but she was primed . . .

‘So he tied his donkey up on the cobbles and spent the night here.’

‘OK,’ said Ruby warily.

Adam lowered his voice. ‘And nobody . . . *ever* . . . saw him again.’

The words hung in the salt air between them.

‘Where did he go?’ whispered Ruby.

‘Nobody knows,’ Adam whispered back. ‘His donkey was still there in the morning, but all the pedlar’s stuff was gone, and his money too. Someone stole it *all*.’

‘Who?’ said Ruby.

Adam shrugged mysteriously, then went on. ‘This is the good bit. Like fifty years later, when the old sisters died, another man bought this house and was going to fix it up, but he started to hear noises from upstairs, when there was nobody there.’

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Ruby glanced nervously at what was left of the ceiling. 'What kind of noises?'

'Banging. Moaning. *Ghost* noises, y'know?' said Adam breezily. 'And one night he went up to see what was going on, and the bedroom door slammed shut behind him, even though he was alone in the house, and he couldn't open the door, even though the key was on the *inside*.'

Ruby stared at Adam, her mouth suddenly dry.

'And then something in the room attacked him.'

'What thing?' she breathed.

'Nobody knows,' said Adam solemnly. 'He was a grown man, but he screamed so loud that people ran up from the village to see what was happening, but none of them could open the bedroom door, and all they could do was stand there and listen to him screaming and crying until morning.'

'What happened then?' said Ruby, her voice cracking with dread.

'In the morning the door suddenly swung open all by itself, and they found the man inside, all bloody and stuff, shaking under the bed. He'd been beaten up, but there was nobody else in the room with him.'

'Sssshh-it,' Ruby said, even though she wasn't allowed to.

'He'd screamed so hard he couldn't even speak any more. And *then*,' said Adam, propping himself up to better effect, 'and then he *runs* out of the room past them, and down the stairs, and starts digging in the fireplace with his bare hands, all through the ashes that were still hot from the night before, but he didn't care and he

dug until his hands were all bloody and his nails fell off.'

Ruby was cold with fear. She couldn't encourage Adam any more; she only stared, unable to look away from his sombre face.

'And under the ashes and the flagstones he found a hiding place dug out of the earth, and in there was the skeleton of the pedlar.'

Adam left room for her to gasp, and Ruby did.

'Those old ladies had murdered him and stolen all his money and stuff, and it was *his* ghost that was so angry that he, like, *lured* the man up there and sort of put it into his head where to look for his bones, so that his body could be found and given a Christian burial.'

Ruby shivered and Adam did too, even though he knew the story already.

'Wicked, hey?' He grinned.

But Ruby only looked over his shoulder and said slowly, '*That* fireplace?'

Adam rolled over to follow her gaze.

The fireplace stared silently back at them, squat and square and grey, with ashes in its middle, and blackened all around by centuries of scorching.

All cold now.

The waves crashed and hissed below, and the stones rumbled, and Ruby was suddenly very aware that the only thing between them and the sea was an inch of rotten wood and a one-hundred-foot drop.

She scrambled to her feet. 'I want to go home.'

'Don't be scared,' said Adam. 'It's only a story.'

'I know that,' said Ruby. 'I'm not scared. I have to do my homework.'

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‘Me too,’ said Adam, and got up.

Both of them avoided looking at the fireplace, and Ruby knew for sure that if they *weren't* scared, they would even now be sifting through the ashes and lifting the flagstones to find the secret hiding place that was big enough to hold the body of a murdered man.

‘You’re shivering,’ said Adam.

‘I’m cold,’ said Ruby.

‘Do you want to wear my hoodie?’ It was thick and red with BIDEFORD COLLEGE on the back.

Ruby nodded, and Adam took it off and Ruby put it on. She didn’t try to zip it up in case it wouldn’t fit and Adam saw how fat she was. Still, its fleece lining was cosy, and it smelled like detergent and warm boy.

They went less cautiously than usual down the brambly, muddy steps into the village. At the steepest part, Adam reached up and took her hand.

When they got to the gate of The Retreat, she gave his top back to him and said thank you.

‘No problem,’ he said. He didn’t turn and leave though. He lingered.

‘Don’t tell anyone I told you that story, OK?’

‘OK,’ she agreed. ‘Bye then.’

‘Bye,’ he said.

When she shut the door, Ruby noticed he was still standing at the gate.

7

MUMMY HAD GONE to work and left a chicken pie and a note about how to heat it up. Ruby looked up at a noise from her parents' room. She'd thought Daddy was fishing, but when she went upstairs, there he was.

'What are you doing?'

'Cleaning the house,' he said. 'Want to help?'

'OK,' said Ruby, and went in and sat on the bed and watched him take stuff out of the wardrobe, look at it, then put it back exactly where he found it. He only threw away about three things, and that was all make-up that Mummy didn't need.

Ruby saw a little book with 'Diary' on it.

'Oh,' she said, 'I have a diary!' She opened the diary to see what kinds of things Mummy wrote in hers, but there was only boring stuff like 'School, 4.40. Double shift Thurs/Fri. Knickers for R.'

She was R. She remembered getting the knickers from the market in Bideford – they had the days of the week on them and Friday was spelled 'Fiday'. She always hoped she didn't get hit by a bus on a Friday.

'Let's see,' said Daddy.

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She gave him the diary and he flicked through it while she carried on cleaning. There was a first-aid box with some old plasters, a bottle of Calpol from when she was little and a box of Paracetamol.

‘Can I put a plaster on?’

‘Sure, Rubes.’

She chose a cute round one from the box and stuck it on her face so it looked as if she’d been shot with an arrow.

There was a crumpled plastic bag that held a few old boxes containing necklaces and things. Mummy didn’t wear jewellery because it made her look cheap, and she didn’t have any good stuff anyway. Not like Maggie’s mother, who dripped with jangling gold and wore a big ring on every finger. All Mummy had was one pair of small diamond earrings in a blue velvet box with a crown on the inside and the word *Garrards*, and a matching necklace in another box, except oblong this time, not square. The diamonds were tiny and the inside of the lid was covered with white silk and someone had written on it with felt-tip: *Think of me when you wear this, baby girl*. Ruby frowned. She hoped the necklace wasn’t for *her*. Sometimes Mummy tried to girlyfy her by buying her a pink top or a flowery clip for her hair. Christmas was coming in a few months and she didn’t want a boring old necklace.

Inside the third box was a brooch. It was shaped like a fish, covered with diamonds for scales and with rubies for eyes. It was cute, but it wasn’t even Mummy’s; on the box it said it belonged to someone called Tiffany. Ruby stuffed the bag back where she had found it and opened

a shoebox filled with loose photographs of people she didn't know.

'Who's this?' She held up a photo of a pretty young woman with dark hair. She was wearing a white summer dress, and was holding the hand of a little boy in a cowboy outfit.

Daddy took it from her. 'That's me,' he said. 'And my mother.'

'Ha!' laughed Ruby. 'You were a cowboy then too!' She peered up underneath the photo in his hand. 'It says *Johnny and me* on the back.'

He turned it over and touched the writing with his fingers.

'Your mummy was sooooo pretty,' said Ruby. 'Not like Nanna.'

'Yeah, she was,' said Daddy, and winked. 'That's why I'm so good-looking!'

Ruby giggled, then sighed. 'I wish I had a cowboy outfit.'

Daddy ignored the hint. Everybody ignored her hints. Sometimes she wondered why she bothered *giving* hints. She'd been hinting about a pony for years.

Daddy was still looking at the picture, so Ruby sidled up alongside him so she could look at it too.

'Was your daddy taking the photo?'

'I can't remember.' Daddy put the photo in his pocket and looked around him. 'There's nothing here.'

They put almost everything back exactly where they'd found it, then they ate the pie cold, and straight out of the dish, because Daddy said it was nicer that way.

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* * *

Later, while Daddy watched TV, Ruby took her diary out of her pony backpack. She opened it on the first blue-lined page, which was always so encouraging.

She wrote: MONDAY.

It didn't look quite the way she'd wanted it to – the D was a bit like a P and she had to go over it twice – but so far, so good.

She gazed at the window and chewed the top of her pen. Then she bent over the book again and underlined 'Monday'.

It was wonky. She should have done it with a ruler.

She chewed the pen some more, until the little plug came out of the end of it, then she sucked on that so it stuck to the tip of her tongue like a big blue pimple. If she waggled it about, she could see it at the bottom of the slope of her own cheek.

Then she underlined 'Monday' again.

Then she went and got a glass of milk to help her think.

Finally she wrote:

MONDAY. No horses in the paddick. Drew maps for school.

TUESDAY. Maggie fell off the swing on the cliffs and it bled in her sock.

WEDNESDAY. Played in the woods. Found a good stick for a gun.

THURSDAY. No horses in the paddick again.

FRIDAY. My Mummy got new shoes and my Daddy said they are to high then Daddy went to cowboy club and I tied his holdster on his leg.

BELINDA BAUER

SATURDAY. Me and Daddy cleaned the house.

Ruby put down her pen and sighed deeply at the nice blank page she'd ruined with her boring life.

8

‘CALL YOUR MOTHER.’

The woman sat in the woods. Cross-legged on her hands and a bed of red-brown pine needles, soft and prickly under her naked thighs.

She squinted up at the man.

‘What?’

He wagged the phone at her again. ‘Call your mother.’

He didn’t know it, but her name was Katie Squire. She was twenty-six and she’d been walking the South-West coastal path alone for twenty-four days without experiencing anything worse than a blister between Fowey and Kingsands. Completely preventable; she’d forgotten to wear two pairs of socks.

She was wearing them now though – two pairs of red hiking socks, and nothing else.

She stared at the hand holding her phone. Apart from his lips and eyes, it was the only part of the man Katie could see, and the fingernails were bitten and dirty around the cuticles. The thought of those fingers touching her skin made her feel hot and shivery.

‘Call your mother.’

‘No,’ she told him. She hadn’t called her mother for months; she wasn’t going to start now with this.

Whatever *this* was.

She was shocked by how calm she was. It was too bizarre to take seriously, she supposed. She’d been walking through an unexpectedly lovely tunnel of trees, with the sea sighing softly somewhere to her left. The only warning she’d had was a loud rustling in the undergrowth – and the time between *that* and *this* (whatever *this* was, she thought again) was an iron grip on her arm and a surreal blur of stumbling and shaking and standing on one leg, trying to unlace her walking boots, while her skin raced with goosebumps and her teeth chattered like a joke skull.

But now she was calm.

Numb, possibly.

He’d said he had a gun but she didn’t see one, and it was too late now.

Above them, it was raining, but here on the forest floor it was dry. Only the sound of the drops on the canopy overhead gave the rain away. Katie had been to a spa once and they had played the sound of raindrops while she’d had a massage. This was a bit like that – apart from there was no massage.

And she was naked in the woods with a pervert.

Apart from that.

The man fiddled with her phone and then held it up. She heard the fake shutter noise and blinked in the flash, then he turned the phone so that she could see her own stark image – as pale as a frightened ghost on the bed of terracotta needles.

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'I'll send that to your mother. Then she can see.'

Katie said nothing.

He looked at the photo and his teeth grinned through the hole in the black wool. 'For a young maid you've got right floppy old tits.'

It wasn't true but it stung. This, *of all things*, brought tears to her eyes. Katie fought them. She wasn't a crier. She hadn't cried when he'd forced her to walk off the path. She hadn't cried when he'd forced her to strip. And what did she care what this weirdo thought of her breasts?

But she did care. It made no sense, but she *did*.

And then the wrongness of that caring made her angry. She shook her straight dark hair out of her eyes defiantly and glared up at him. 'How would you know? I bet you never even *touched* a breast. Is that why you force women to strip off in the woods? To get your jollies?'

'Shut up.'

'*You* shut up.' Katie had three brothers, so 'Shut up' was home turf to her, and she drew strength from a row that suddenly seemed very familiar, despite her nakedness and his balaclava.

'I want my clothes back. I'm freezing.'

'I want you to call your *mother*.'

'Why?' she said suspiciously. 'Do you know her?'

He hesitated. 'Yes, I know her.'

'Bollocks,' she decided. 'You don't know my mother. And anyway, she wouldn't want to talk to anyone who'd do such a pathetic, cowardly thing.'

It was true, Katie realized with a surge of emotion. Her mother might be an interfering old cow, but she had

principles. *Why* hadn't she called her in months? There was no real reason. And suddenly Katie was impatient to speak to her. To hear the gossip. To tell her she loved her.

But she wasn't doing it in front of this bastard.

She glared at her attacker. 'Look,' she said, 'either hurry up and rape me or bloody well let me go.'

He made a sound that was halfway between a gasp and a cry.

'*Filthy!*' he said. 'Filthy little *whore*.'

'*You're* filthy,' she spat back. 'Making a total stranger take her clothes off. Taking pictures of it. *That's* filthy. *That's* sick.'

He angrily pressed the phone against her face, squashing her nose, pushing her off balance. 'Call your fucking *mother*.'

Katie slapped the phone away, sending it spinning off a tree.

'Call *yours*, asshole!'

He swung at her so hard that when he missed, he almost fell.

Katie got up and ran, and he went after her.

This time he didn't stop after a few strides. Instead, her running ignited some deep chase instinct in him. Like a hound after a hare, he wanted to catch her. Wanted to bring her down.

But the girl was quick – even in socks – and nimble through the slender trees that were close-knit and had thin, stiff branches that jabbed at head and hands.

With every stride his anger grew. Once, he got close enough to touch her shoulder with his outstretched fingers, and she shrieked and ducked backwards under

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his arm and ran off at a new angle. He turned too fast and fell on to needles so thick they were like a prickly mattress. It didn't hurt, but it did harm: by the time he got up she had broken the dark cover of the trees and was on the main road, crying and shouting and waving down cars – naked but for her tattered red socks.

Shameless.

He watched from behind a tree as she got into a little silver car and disappeared, then yanked off the balaclava, his blood pounding with the fury of losing her – of losing *control*.

He'd blown it. Both times, he now realized. It was all over too fast and brought him no satisfaction. This time hadn't even been funny – only frustrating. And the girl had given him a load of cheek too, which made him feel like a stupid little boy instead of like a man in charge of the situation.

He scratched his head all over; it was hot and itchy from the wool.

He went back through the trees and found her clothes and her rucksack and the broken phone. There was a thick wad of money in a beaded purse, and shop-bought cheese and pickle sandwiches, which he ate as he drove out to Abbotsham cliffs. Pretty much everything else he threw into the hungry sea.

He watched her T-shirts and knickers and cotton trousers spread-eagle over the waves and felt cheated.

This time he hadn't wanted it to end.

9

GIRL, 17, IN BEACH ASSAULT.

Mr Preece was changing the headlines in the little wire cage as Ruby got off the bus.

Ruby wondered what assault was. She had a mental image of a girl rolling about in the salt that the sea had left behind on the sand. The new headline was MASKED MAN STRIKES AGAIN. But then Ruby saw the poster for the Leper Parade.

The Leper Parade in Taddiport was an annual orgy of running sores and fake blood, hunchbacks, crutches, and people with their arms hidden in their jumpers. Every year there was a prize for the best leper adult and the best leper under fourteen. Daddy had entered last year, but that man from the King's Arms always won the adult prize because he really *didn't* have a leg, and that meant nobody else was in with a chance. But Ruby always imagined that one day she might be the best leper under fourteen. She'd dress in rags and put ash and dirt on her face, with tomato sauce and Rice Krispies for scabs. That's what the other children did. Last year's winner also had black stuff coming out of his eyes, which was amazing. She wasn't sure she could compete with that,

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but she would certainly try. She must remember to ask Mummy to get Rice Krispies, because usually they only had boring old fake Weetabix.

Ruby was in for another treat inside the shop. *Pony & Rider* this week had a free LED safety light in a little plastic bag stuck on to the front of the magazine with a blob of clear gum. She couldn't wait, and bought the magazine and a Mars bar without even browsing.

'That was quick,' said Mr Preece.

Ruby said nothing.

Outside the shop she peeled the bag off the magazine cover, then tore it open with her teeth and took out the light. It was small and round and had a clip, and a button on the back that, when pressed, started it flashing red.

'Wow!' she said out loud, even though she was alone.

She wriggled out of her backpack and clipped the light to the plush pony's ear, like a rosette. Then she set off down the hill.

As the light grew dim under the trees, she wondered what the LED looked like on her back. Just past the chapel, she balanced her backpack on the tarmac and trudged back up the hill a-ways before turning around to look at it.

'Wow!' she said again. The tiny little light was like a beacon – flashing brilliantly, even in what passed for daylight in this miserable summer.

She hurried to pick up her backpack before it could soak up the rain from the road.

There were no ponies in the paddock, but Ruby hung on the gate anyway, reluctant to walk away in case one suddenly appeared.

Starlight would be a good name. Or Pegasus if it was white. *Grey*, she corrected herself. *Pony & Rider* said there was no such thing as a white horse.

A car pulled up behind her. She turned and saw Mrs Braund.

‘Jump in out of the rain, Ruby!’

Limeburn people never passed someone on the hill without offering a lift, whether they knew them or not. The road was so steep that it was a difficult walk up *or* down. Mummy often got a ride down the hill from the bus stop on Thursday nights with Mr Braund, because that was when he was on his way home for the weekend from his fancy job in London.

Ruby opened the door of the big 4x4 and climbed in beside Adam in the back seat; Chris was in the front because he was the eldest.

‘Hi,’ she said.

‘Hi,’ they said.

Adam and Chris didn’t go to her school. They went to a private school and they never caught the bus. They wore striped ties, and grey blazers with red shields on the pockets. She looked at Adam’s knees. Usually they were covered by denim, or bare and tanned in khaki shorts, but today they were in black school trousers. They made his legs look like a man’s.

The back of Chris’s head looked more grown up than the front.

In the cage behind Ruby, the dogs whined because they were close to home. They weren’t Jack Russells or collies like normal people had, they were matching brown Labradoodles called Tony (blue collar) and Cleo

(red), and their birthday was celebrated in the Braund house just like the boys' birthdays were, with balloons around the front door and a cake. April the twenty-ninth. Even Ruby knew the date, although she wasn't sure any of the Braunds knew the date of *her* birthday.

Mrs Braund smiled at her in the mirror. 'That light's a good idea, Ruby. Makes you easy to see in the shadows.'

'I just got it free on my magazine,' she said.

'That's nice,' said Mrs Braund.

She was a pretty woman, Ruby thought, with hair so blonde it was almost white, except for that curious dark bit down the middle, like a reverse badger, and she wore lots of make-up and jewellery. Ruby had never seen Mrs Braund in dirty old jeans or a bad jumper. Even the welly boots she wore when she walked the dogs were fancy brown leather things with laces at the top. Chris had told her once that they cost £200 but he was a liar because nobody would pay that for wellies.

'What's your magazine?' said Adam.

'*Pony & Rider*.' She showed it to him.

'Do you have a pony?'

'No.'

'Do you ride?'

She hesitated. 'No.'

Chris laughed without turning round, and Ruby felt herself going red.

'So what?' said Adam at the back of Chris's head. 'You read *FourFourTwo* but you don't play for Arsenal, last I heard.'

'Yeah, but—'

‘Now, boys,’ said Mrs Braund, and Chris shut up and they drove on in silence.

Slowly, Ruby pushed her feet as far under the driver’s seat as they would go, so that Adam wouldn’t see her muddy socks.



The Retreat was unlocked, which meant that Daddy was home.

Ruby stood with her back to the front door and listened for the familiar sounds her father always made before her mother came in from a shift – the scraping of fish scales, slide guitars on the CD player – but there was nothing. Only the usual background noises of the wind keening through the bathroom window, and the trees testing the bowed roof.

‘Daddy?’

She fumbled for the switch and turned on the light.

‘Daddy?’ She wanted to be the first to tell him about the leper parade. And to show him her light.

And then Ruby froze at a sound she’d never heard before.

Ching.

It was a high, metallic ring. Like someone dropping a five-pence piece into the bathtub.

She only heard it for a second and then it stopped.

Ruby felt the silence thud against her eardrums.

Nothing. There was nothing.

‘Da—’

Ching. Ching.

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She sucked the word back into her mouth and held it there.

Ching. Ching. Ching. Ching.

Ruby felt a little black worm of fear twist across her belly. The sound was like the ring of a loose shoe on a horse.

Or on a pedlar's donkey . . .

She quietly turned off the light, and looked up at the ceiling.

Ching. Ching.

It was coming from Mummy and Daddy's bedroom.

'Daddy?' she said carefully, but there was no answer, and suddenly the sound of her voice all alone in the damp air made her resolve not to speak again.

Ching. Ching. Ching across the floor. *Ching. Ching. Ching* back in the other direction.

Luring her up there.

The thought made Ruby's bladder loosen a little, and she clenched her thighs to keep the piddle from running down her leg.

She wouldn't go up there. She *couldn't*. Couldn't open the bedroom door and get trapped by a crazed ghost until morning. She thought of her mother tugging at the unlocked door, screaming for help, she thought of her father hammering on the yellowing paint, and of Adam Braund shouting her name, while all the while a dead man in chains terrified the rest of the wee out of her – and worse.

Ruby's face crumpled in self-pity. She wasn't going to go upstairs to be got by a ghost!

But she didn't have to . . .

Ching. Ching. Ching. Her breath caught once more and she watched the ceiling all the way across the bedroom to the door. And then she gasped at the unmistakable transition: *Ching-creak. Ching-creak.*

The ghost was coming downstairs to get her.

Ruby's back flattened against the front door, which snapped shut under her shoulders. Her eyes fixed on the narrow white door that shut off the winding stairwell from the front room.

Ching-creak. Ching-creak. Ching.

The sound stopped behind the little door and her breath stayed in her bumping chest. Then, in a rare show of athleticism, she darted to the sofa and tumbled over the back of it, dropping into the dark triangle of space that was filled with dust bunnies and lost things – a glove, a pen lid, the back off the remote control. A red light pulsed to the same crazy rhythm as her heart and with a jolt Ruby realized that it was the LED. She fumbled behind her and pressed the button, then knelt there, shivering, her eyes only just above the velour back, staring so hard at the little white door that they stung.

The door creaked slowly open.

'Daddy!' Relief was like a sugar rush. Ruby jumped up.

'Why's it so dark in here?' he said, flicking on the lights. He was already in his cowboy gear.

'Didn't you hear me shouting?' said Ruby.

'I wanted to surprise you.'

'Why?'

By way of an answer, Daddy swaggered across the room towards her.

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Ching. Ching. Ching.

Ruby frowned at his feet, and then gasped. 'Spurs!'

'Not just any old spurs,' he grinned. 'Jingle Bobs.' He lifted his heel to show her, spinning the spiked wheel that jingled like sleigh bells. 'Those little metal bits? That's the clappers. That's what makes the noise, you see?'

He put his foot down and did a little dance to make them ring.

'Wo-ow!' Ruby climbed back over the sofa and bent to have a closer look. Now that she could see how it was made, the sound wasn't scary at all, only pretty. She felt like a fool.

He put his boot up on the coffee table. 'Look at that workmanship,' he said, running a finger across the silver shanks. Horseshoes and tumbling dice were hammered into the metal in little dots. 'They're the real thing, Rubes. All the way from Wyoming.'

'Wyoming,' she breathed. 'Like a real cowboy.'

He grinned. 'You should see the stuff you can buy, Rubes. Real genuine cowboy things.'

'I bet they cost *loads*,' she said.

Daddy said nothing and picked lint off his knee.

Ruby's awed expression flickered. 'Does Mummy know?'

He frowned and took his boot off the table with a clink. 'She isn't the only one around here who can buy things, you know.'

Now she'd upset him.

'I know.'

He jingled into the kitchen and back out again with a bunch of red roses. 'See?'

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Ruby's eyes popped. 'Are they for Mummy? They're *beautiful*.'

'They should be. They cost enough.'

'She'll *love* them.'

'Yeah, I know.' Daddy smiled at the roses and everything was fine.

Ruby plumped down on the sofa. 'Make them go again!'

Happy to oblige, he jingled around the room in his spurs. He kicked up his heels and tapped his toes, and Ruby laughed and clapped in delight.

And the fun only stopped when Mummy opened the front door.

10

THE ROW WENT on longer than any row Ruby could remember. The job and the shoes and the car and the job and the window and the spurs, and the job and the job and the job.

Ruby bit her thumbnail. It wasn't Daddy's fault he lost his job. It was the recession. He caught fish for them, didn't he? He cleaned the house and he made her dippy eggs and baked beans for tea. But all Mummy ever did was be mean to him and yell. She never *used* to yell – neither of them *used* to yell. They used to laugh and show each other things on the telly, and go for bus rides to the beach. Not *this* beach with its rocks and pebbles, but a *real* beach with sand.

They used to love each other.

Ruby turned up the TV, but she could hear the ebb and flow behind the kitchen door. Finally it flew open and her father strode past the TV, the Jingle Bobs quiet in his fist.

'Where are you going, Daddy?' said Ruby.

'To cool off!' he said, then looked at the kitchen and shouted, 'Before I do something I regret!'

Mummy appeared in the doorway, tea towel in one

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hand, a plate dripping in the other. ‘Something *you* regret? What about *my* regrets? Living in this dingy little *hole*. Working all hours while you go fishing and dress up with your friends and buy stupid *toys* instead of taking care of your family! *That’s* what *I* regret!’

‘If you think you can do better, then leave me and Rubes here!’ yelled Daddy. ‘And you go off with your fancy man!’

Ruby gasped.

Daddy yanked the front door open and slammed it so hard behind him that the little china dog trembled on the window sill.

‘Fuck *you!*’ Mummy hurled the tea towel after him, but it flopped on to the rug halfway across the room.

Ruby got up and went after Daddy.

‘You stay *right here*, Ruby Trick!’

Ruby hesitated, then pulled open the door – her heart thumping at her own disobedience – and ran down the hill, tripping and slipping across the green cobbles in her white school socks.

Daddy was already in the car.

‘Can I come with you?’

‘No,’ he said. He turned the key and the car started.

Her face crumpled. ‘Please, Daddy! I don’t want to stay with *her*.’

His jaw clenched.

‘All right then.’

She climbed in beside him.

‘Put your belt on.’

Ruby did.

* * *

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They drove in silence. First towards Bideford, and then away from the sea through the unlit lanes, where the lights of oncoming cars could be seen from miles off, lighting up the sky over the high hedges.

Ruby didn't know where they were and she didn't care. Daddy and Mummy had argued before, but they'd never thrown things; never walked out, never said the F word. She didn't even think that grown-ups *knew* the F word. She thought about Mummy kissing a fancy man and tears welled up in her eyes and made the night into coal-coloured cobwebs.

'I *hate* Mummy!' she said, and burst into tears against his arm. 'She didn't even say thank you for the *flowers*.' And another wave of weeping broke over her.

Daddy put his arm around her. 'Women want a man who can take care of them, Rubes.'

'But you *do* take care of us!'

Daddy just squeezed her against him while she cried.

She looked up when he stopped the car in a narrow lane between two high hedges.

'Where are we?' said Ruby, wiping her eyes.

'Here,' said Daddy and nodded at a gap in the hedge. 'I ever show you this?'

Ruby looked across the road at a little white box of a guardhouse beside a red and white barrier. There was a light on in the hut, and Ruby could see an old man inside, drinking from a mug. His uniform collar was too big for his neck, which made him look like a tortoise.

'What is it?'

'This is where I used to work.'

She was confused. The hut was only big enough for one person. ‘Where?’

‘There.’ Daddy pointed.

Ruby looked beyond the hut. For a moment she thought she was looking into the black sky. Then she realized it was an enormous corrugated-iron shed – bigger than fifty houses – looming over the landscape.

‘Wo-ow!’ she said. ‘It’s *huge*.’

He said, ‘Got to be big, see? We built proper big ships inside. Ships big enough to go all over the world. South America. Africa. Brazil. Places like that. Proper big ships.’

‘Bigger than the ones on the Quay?’

‘Some of ’em, yeah. Fifty thousand tonnes, some of ’em.’

‘Wo-ow!’ said Ruby again, although she had no idea what a tonne was. But fifty thousand of them was a lot.

The shed was gigantic, and being out here in the countryside made it look even bigger – towering over the high hedges, next to the narrow lanes and with no other buildings around it.

Ruby pointed down the lane. ‘How do they get the ships to the sea when they’re finished?’

Daddy laughed and told her they slid straight out of the shed and down into the river on the other side, dripping with champagne.

‘Wow!’ she said. ‘I wish I could see that!’

‘Me too,’ said Daddy sadly. He stared at the shed. ‘We used to have a right laugh here. I remember we used to send the new boys down to the stores for a long stand, or to get a bubble for the spirit level.’

‘Why?’

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‘It was just a joke, see? Just a bit of fun.’

‘Ohhh,’ said Ruby, but she didn’t get it.

He wound the window down. The rain had stopped and the night smelled like green and river, and the hedges rustled with small, secret night things.

‘Daddy?’ said Ruby carefully.

‘Hmm?’

‘Are you and Mummy getting . . . *divorced*?’ The word was so hard for Ruby to say that it ended in a tearful squeak.

‘No,’ he said. ‘Never.’ He flicked his cigarette out of the window, and the night was so quiet that Ruby could hear it sizzle as it hit the ground.

‘Don’t you worry, Rubes,’ he said. ‘I’ll always take care of you. I just wish Mummy didn’t have to work. I wish I could keep her safe at home in a glass box.’

‘Like Snow White?’ said Ruby.

‘Yeah,’ said Daddy. ‘Like Snow White.’

Ruby imagined Mummy lying in a box on the kitchen table, with her hair all brushed and a little bunch of flowers on her chest.

It was so romantic that Ruby’s lip wobbled.

They drove back up to the main road and soon Ruby recognized the outskirts of Bideford.

Daddy stopped outside a shop and bought a six-pack of Strongbow for him and a Twix for her. He opened one of the cans and took a few gulps, then wiped his mouth on the back of his hand.

‘Now eat your Twix, and we’ll go home and have hot milk.’

‘With sugar?’

‘Yes.’

Ruby opened her Twix and took a bite. It wasn’t her favourite, but it would definitely do.

‘Better?’ said Daddy.

She nodded.

‘Good. Hold that,’ he said, and handed her the can and pulled back on to the road towards home.

As they drove, he held out his hand now and then, and Ruby gave him the can. It emptied quickly and she put it in the well behind his seat.

As they left Bideford, they passed a woman standing at a bus stop.

‘That’s Miss Sharpe!’

‘Who’s Miss Sharpe?’

‘My teacher. Can we give her a lift?’

‘Maybe she doesn’t want a lift, Rubes. Women can be a bit funny about taking lifts.’

‘But it’s raining. *Please*, Daddy!’

Daddy trod on the brakes and peered in his rear-view mirror. ‘All right,’ he said. ‘Get in the back.’

The car didn’t have back doors so Ruby scrambled between the seats as he reversed up the road to the bus stop. When he was level with it, Daddy leaned over and wound down the window a few inches.

‘Want a lift?’ he said.

Miss Sharpe peered at him from under her umbrella with a suspicious look on her face. ‘No, thank you,’ she said. ‘I’m waiting for the bus.’

‘Hello, Miss,’ said Ruby, leaning forward between the seats.

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Miss Sharpe's face cleared. 'Oh, hello, Ruby! I didn't see you there!'

'We can take you home, Miss,' said Ruby eagerly.

'It's all the way in Fairy Cross,' said Miss Sharpe. 'I don't like to put you to any trouble.'

'It's on our way,' said John Trick.

Miss Sharpe still seemed uncertain. She looked back up the road towards Bideford, as if she might see the bus coming, but it wasn't.

'Well, OK then . . .' She got into the front seat and shook her umbrella into the gutter. She also had a gym bag and a badminton racquet.

'Thank you,' she said. 'You're very kind.'

'No problem.'

They drove for a bit, with only the sound of the wipers clicking back and forth on the windscreen. Ruby hung between the front seats so she could smile at Miss Sharpe whenever she looked around.

'Did you like my diary, Miss?'

'Yes, Ruby, it was very good.'

Ruby looked at Daddy eagerly, but he didn't give any indication of having heard her.

'Is that a tennis bat, Miss?'

'No, it's for playing badminton,' said Miss Sharpe.

'What's bammington?'

'Well, it's a bit like tennis, but you don't play with a ball, you play with a thing called a shuttlecock.'

'What's a shuttlecock?'

'It's like a little cone made out of feathers.'

'Does it fly?' said Ruby, and Miss Sharpe laughed.

'Only when you hit it.'

‘Oh,’ said Ruby. She found it difficult to picture that. Hitting one of those with a bat must be like swiping a cartoon bird – with all the little feathers floating down to earth afterwards.

They passed the sign that said FAIRY CROSS AND FORD. From the other direction, Ruby knew it said FORD AND FAIRY CROSS, just to be fair.

Miss Sharpe said, ‘You can drop me just past the pub. Thank you.’

‘But it’s raining,’ said Ruby.

And her father added, ‘It’s no problem to take you to the door.’

‘You’re very kind,’ said Miss Sharpe again.

John Trick followed two more brief instructions, and then stopped the car outside a short terrace of white-washed cottages.

‘Thank you very much, Mr Trick,’ said Miss Sharpe, getting out. ‘And I’ll see you on Monday, Ruby, bright and early.’

‘Bye, Miss.’

Miss Sharpe put up her umbrella and waved back into the car with her racquet, and they set off again.

Ruby hung between the front seats and told Daddy about the diary.

‘Miss Sharpe said it was excellent,’ she lied, but it was wasted anyway, because Daddy had gone quiet again, so Ruby went quiet too, because she realized that things couldn’t be all better just because they’d been for a drive.

Daddy sipped from another can of cider, so Ruby got back in the front and dozed the rest of the way. She knew the route so well from her bus ride to and from school

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that even in her semi-sleep she could map the road home. Dimly she felt the swings through the S-bends at the Hoops Inn, and slid forward a little as the car nose-dived down the hill to Limeburn.

When they finally pulled up in the tiny cobbled square just feet from the drop to the beach, she stretched and yawned.

Daddy sat without getting out, finishing the second can of Strongbow.

Ruby was getting cold, but she was nervous of going into the house alone and seeing Mummy again.

Maybe Daddy was too, because he drank a third can, looking up at the light in the bedroom window of The Retreat while the ocean breathed in and out in the darkness.

‘You know,’ said Daddy suddenly, ‘when we first got married, your mum used to call me her hero. She used to say I’d rescued her.’

‘Like Snow White’s prince!’

‘Yeah, like that.’

‘Did you have a horse?’

‘No.’

‘Oh.’ That was disappointing. ‘What did you rescue her from?’

He shrugged. ‘Just, you know, I come along like a prince and swept her off her feet.’

His smile faded. ‘She needed me then, see. When I had a job.’

‘Can’t you just get another job?’

Daddy shook his head and gave a bitter little laugh. ‘Not in this economy.’

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Ruby nodded. Her socks were still wet from the cobbles, and her feet were like ice, but she could hear Daddy thinking, so she didn't want to whine like a girl.

Finally – without taking his eyes from The Retreat – Daddy sighed deeply. 'Women can't help it, you know, Rubes.'

'Can't help what?' she asked through chattering teeth.

But Daddy went on staring up at the bedroom window, while Ruby sat and shivered beside him.

'Can't help *what?*'

11

WHEN SHE GOT home, Miss Sharpe realized that getting a lift had gifted her an extra half-hour with which to do whatever she liked.

So she put her badminton gear in the washing machine and cleaned out Harvey's litter tray, while the big grey rabbit rocked gently around the kitchen behind her. Then she got out her marking for the evening and poured herself half a glass of white wine.

Any more would be stupid, and she didn't *do* stupid.

She was sensible far beyond her twenty-six years, and had been that way for most of her life.

Georgia Sharpe had realized quite young that she was not pretty enough to catch a boy with her looks. She had believed her mirror when it told her that her wiry hair fizzed and spat like brown sparks around her head, that her eyes were small and pale, and that she had a mouth that turned down at one corner, making her look a little disappointed. But the truth had never daunted her, and by the time she was sixteen she was glad not to have been burdened by beauty. By then she'd watched her prettier friends dumbing down their lives to accommodate idiot boyfriends, and made up her mind that that

was not for her; that she would get by on her brains and her good nature, even if it meant being single her whole life long. An old maid, her father said, but young Georgia thought that being single sounded rather exciting – and a lot less complicated than having to worry about the hopes and dreams of what she always referred to as ‘some random man’.

So, instead of succumbing to panic-led convention, Miss Sharpe had upped sticks from flat Norfolk and moved to sinuous Devon, where she joined the badminton club for exercise, bought a house rabbit for cuddles, and – until she could have her own children – enjoyed those belonging to other people in class 5B at Bideford’s Westmead Junior School.

She wasn’t stupid, so she’d never expected *all* children to be enjoyable – and so it proved. For every Jamie Starke with her A in English, there was a Jordan Whitefield, with his essays punctuated only by bogeys. And for every sweet-natured David Leather, there was a Shawn Loosemore, who gave smaller children Chinese burns when he thought no one was looking.

Children lied, too. Miss Sharpe had expected a bit of exaggeration, but she had been surprised by just how tall their tales could be. In the first week’s diaries alone, Shawn had tamed ‘a wild stallion’ and Connor Nuttall had done a triple somersault in gym – which he’d then painfully failed to repeat for a rapt crowd of children on the hard tarmac of the playground.

Miss Sharpe still had a pile of this week’s books to go through, but already Noah Jones had swum all the way from Appledore to Instow, and Essie Littlejohn had

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found an adder. It was half dead this week, but Miss Sharpe suspected that next week it could well be fully alive and – if nothing was said – the week after that Essie might be charming it out of a basket with a flute.

She understood why they did it. The more outlandish the lies, the more attention the children seemed to glean from their classmates.

Miss Sharpe knew that it was probably her duty to caution the children against embellishments, but she was reluctant to be too dictatorial because the lies were so much more entertaining than reality. Most of the diaries were plain boring. There were endless Playstation sessions, karate clubs, homework, and doing each other's hair. David Leather seemed to practise the violin every spare minute of the day, and if Miss Sharpe heard one more time about there being no ponies in Ruby Trick's paddock, she'd scream. Even Jordan had said '*Again?*' and made a loud snoring sound, which had made the other children laugh.

She thought of how Ruby had tried to show off to her father in the car tonight. She understood that little-girl need to have her daddy's approval – even about something as mundane as a diary. She'd spent her own formative years trying to catch her father's eye.

But after her mother had died, nothing had ever really caught his eye again.

Miss Sharpe wondered where the scars on Mr Trick's face had come from – ugly, pale arcs that distorted his eye and his dark brow. He wasn't what she'd have expected for the father of Ruby Trick, with her red hair and freckles. For her own amusement, she'd started to give

herself points out of ten for predicting what the parents of each child in her class would look like. She hadn't met them all yet, and wasn't terribly good at the game. She'd only have given herself a two for Mr Trick. Unlike David Leather's parents, who were perfect tens. *They* had come to school about David being bullied, and could barely fit through the classroom door. They were nice people, but as the parents of a victimized child they were ineffectual – too kind and too comfortable with their own girths to understand that what their enormous son needed to survive school was boot camp, not violin lessons.

Children were sponges – sucking up whatever was around them without any effort or intention, be it prejudices or food. They thought what their parents thought, said what they said, did what they did.

Ate what they ate.

By that reckoning, David Leather was doomed.

But Ruby Trick wasn't. Not yet. Her red hair and dirty socks made her an outsider, but Miss Sharpe understood *that* only too well.

Miss Sharpe finished her wine. Maybe she could give Ruby the support and encouragement *she'd* missed out on? Maybe she could make a difference to her life. Be remembered fondly. Get a card when she was sixty saying *I owe it all to you*.

Wasn't that what being a teacher was all about?

Miss Sharpe sighed and scooped Harvey on to her lap. His ears were so soft they were almost imaginary, and she murmured gently against his silken head, 'Clever boy, Harvey.'

She giggled at her own tippy foolishness. Harvey was a

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rabbit. All he did all day was hop, eat and poo – none of which really required a motivational speech from her!

Ruby Trick, on the other hand, was an isolated child without discernible talents, assets or friends.

That chubby little sponge needed all the help she could get.

12

ALL WEEK LONG, Ruby watched her father like a dog watches a man with a tin opener. She knew from school that it was always the daddies that left, and her tummy squeezed like a fist every time he reached for his keys.

Sometimes he took his fishing rod, but he didn't bring home any fish, and when they drove up the hill in the morning, empty cider cans rolled backwards from under the driver's seat.

At school Ruby huddled on the dry strip under the overhanging roof and watched the other children mob Shawn Loosemore, who had stroked a seal on Westward Ho! beach, and Paul Powers, whose father had bought him a brand-new motocross bike. Ruby knew Paul from the bus. He often smelled mouldy and Ruby noticed that his school shoes were still as scuffed and peeling as ever. His dad must have spent all the money they had on that bike.

If *she* had exciting things to write about, the other kids would be nice to her the way they were to Paul. Nobody had liked him either before he got his motorbike. Now he had lots of best friends hanging off his

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shoulders, giving him things and begging for a playdate.

She didn't have a motocross bike or a pony, only a cross Mummy and a silent Daddy, and who wanted to come all the way to Limeburn to see that?

The wind changed direction and the other children under the overhang shuffled off to find somewhere drier to stand until the bell rang. Ruby was too miserable to notice.

'Why are you crying?' demanded Essie Littlejohn.

'Shut up,' said Ruby. 'I'm not.'

But Essie only tilted her head so she could look at Ruby better, and said, 'Is it because nobody likes you?'

'Shut up, *whore*.'

Ruby didn't know what the word meant.

But it shut Essie up.

After school Ruby cleaned the mud off Daddy's walking boots, gouging it from the treads with a pointed stick and scraping it off the leather with a teaspoon.

On Tuesday she spent hours sorting his fish hooks into the right little plastic boxes, even though she jabbed her thumb twice – sending tingles right up to her ears, and drawing a deep-red bubble of blood that made her shiver.

On Wednesday it stopped raining long enough for her to clean the car. First she took out all the rubbish and put it in the kitchen bin. There were receipts and sweet wrappers and one of Mummy's old earrings in the passenger-door pocket, but mostly it was empty Strongbow cans.

She had to make two trips.

Washing the car took buckets and buckets, and twice she slipped on the cobbles while trying to reach the roof and spilled freezing water all over her shoes.

Adam came out of his house and asked what she was doing.

‘Washing the car for my Daddy,’ she said, and then she bit her lip and turned away and went on washing, because she didn’t want Adam to see her crying. But he didn’t say anything else after that – just did the roof for her and helped to squeeze out the sponges.

‘Thanks,’ she sniffed, and squelched home.

Later, Ruby stuck the little hoop earring into her diary with clear tape. Underneath it she wrote carefully, *I found this treshure in my Daddy’s car when I cleaned it for him. I also washed the outside and it took three buckets.*

On Thursday she recorded *True Grit* for him off the telly. The old film, not the new one, because Daddy didn’t trust any cowboy with long hair, or who wasn’t John Wayne.

Mummy and Daddy didn’t speak except to say *Pass the butter*, and when Ruby came home, Daddy was often not there. Sometimes the car was gone, sometimes just he was. Sometimes he went out at night, even when Mummy was working. He told Ruby not to tell Mummy and she didn’t – partly because she was on his side and partly because she was ashamed to admit to anyone that Daddy would go out and leave her alone. What if she burned the house down? Ruby didn’t like the feeling it gave her – that something bad could happen and she was too small and weak to do anything to stop it.

Mummy did a lot of extra shifts, and often had to walk

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up the hill to catch the bus, but Ruby reckoned it served her right. This was all her fault. Her and her fancy man. What if *Mummy* wanted a divorce? What if Daddy left? What if they moved? What if she got a new Daddy she didn't like?

At night she lay awake for hours, straining to decipher the voices from the next room. The soft bitterness that made her understand all the anger and all the fear, and none of the meaning, while the wind squealed and howled through the bathroom window, in a ghostly soundtrack to her misery.



School was seven hours a day when she didn't know where Daddy was, so Ruby tried her very best not to go.

She had a belly ache; she had a broken foot; she couldn't see out of one eye.

Mummy had all the answers. She gave Ruby peppermint cordial for her stomach, she rubbed Deep Heat on to her toes and threw a pair of balled-up socks at her.

'There,' she said. 'You couldn't catch those if you were blind in one eye, because of depth perception.'

But Ruby was dogged. 'My chest hurts,' she said. It didn't right then, but it did quite often, so Ruby didn't think of this as a lie. More like a postponement of the truth.

Mummy said nothing. She drew back the curtains, although it hardly made the room any lighter, the leaves and branches were that thick around the window. Then

she sat down on the edge of the bed and took Ruby's hand, but Ruby took it back.

'Are you happy at school, Ruby?'

Ruby said yes, even though saying yes to that question was silly. Who was happy at school? Nobody, apart from Miss Sharpe, as far as she could see. But if she said no, then Mummy would know her chest wasn't really hurting.

'Nobody's bullying you, are they?'

'No,' said Ruby, because if she said yes, Mummy might come up to the school and give Essie Littlejohn or the kids on the bus a row, or ask to speak to their parents. And then Ruby would be an even bigger target than she already was.

'Let's have a look at your chest then . . .'

Ruby pulled her Mickey Mouse T-shirt up to her armpits and Mummy peered down.

'Why are you mean to Daddy?' said Ruby.

Mummy looked surprised. She didn't say anything for a little while – just pulled the T-shirt back down and patted Ruby's tummy.

'You know, Ruby, sometimes grown-ups have arguments, just like children do. It doesn't mean they don't love each other.'

Ruby thought about that for a moment, then said, 'Daddy says he used to be your hero.'

Mummy nodded. 'He was,' she said. 'He came along just when I needed him most.'

'Don't you need him now he hasn't got a job?'

'I—'

Mummy started and then stopped.

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‘What?’

‘Nothing,’ said Mummy. ‘Listen. These are grown-up things, Ruby. I don’t want you worrying about them. Worrying is a mummy’s job!’ She was trying to make a funny joke of it, but Ruby didn’t smile back.

‘Up you get now,’ said Mummy.

‘But my *tummy* hurts.’

‘A minute ago it was your chest,’ said Mummy, and Ruby realized she’d blown it.

‘You have to go to school, Ruby,’ said Mummy. ‘You don’t want to grow up stupid, do you?’

‘I don’t care,’ said Ruby.

‘Well, I care,’ said Mummy. ‘Up you get.’

Ruby sighed and got up.

Mummy didn’t understand. *She* could get off the bus.

13

MISS SHARPE BOUGHT a *Gazette* and read the front page as she walked towards school.

POLICE WARN AFTER SECOND 'ET' ATTACK

Police have warned that the man responsible for two assaults on lone women in North Devon could 'go too far' and commit an even more serious crime.

In terrifying ordeals, the women were made to strip, while being threatened with violence by a man known as the ET attacker, because he makes his victims phone home.

Miss Sharpe took a moment to snort derisively. One man and his dog in the *Gazette* office might know him as 'the ET attacker' but nobody *normal* ever said rubbish like that.

Neither was physically harmed, but both were left traumatized by the encounter with the man, who wore a black balaclava.

One woman was assaulted on Westward Ho! beach, and the other in woodland near Clovelly.

Detective Chief Inspector Kirsty King, who is leading the

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investigation, told the Gazette, 'These were disturbing and frightening attacks on young women minding their own business in broad daylight.

'Thankfully, neither suffered any physical harm, but we are concerned that the nature of the attacks may be escalating, and fear this individual may injure somebody.

'We would appeal to him to come forward so that he can receive the help he needs before he goes too far.'

Oh yes, thought Miss Sharpe, *that'll happen.*

She read on:

'We would also urge women alone in isolated areas to be aware of potential threats, and not to put themselves in harm's way.'

Police have described the man as being white, with a local accent, and about six feet tall.

Despite the newspaper hype, the story was disturbing. Miss Sharpe was relieved that she was far too busy to wander about pointlessly on beaches or in woodland, and decided that she'd take a lot more notice of whether her doors were locked at night. It was easy to become casual in the countryside, but she already had a spyhole and *never* opened the door to anyone she didn't recognize. Maybe she'd get a chain put on the front door by the local community policing team. She was overthinking things, she knew, but Miss Sharpe's motto had always been *Better safe than sorry.*

EEEEEE-ee-ee!

The car screeched to a halt less than two feet from her

hip. The yellow bonnet with two broad black stripes running down it sprang back up from the sudden harsh braking.

She'd walked straight out in front of it. Hadn't even realized she was in the road.

'Sorry!' she mouthed. 'Sorry!' But the reflection of the sky in the windscreen made it impossible to see whether she was forgiven or not.

She finished crossing and the yellow car swerved noisily around her.

Not forgiven.

Nerves fizzed all over Miss Sharpe's body. She'd almost been killed! While she was planning her own safe passage through life. One split second of inattention and she could be dead now, or paralysed, seriously injured, lying in the road with two broken legs and tarmac under her cheek.

She started to shake.

It was shock, certainly. But it was also anger at herself. How could she have been so *stupid*? That wasn't like her. That was the kind of thing other people did. People who weren't as cautious; weren't as clever.

Those were the people who were alive one second and dead the next.

And in the *Gazette* the day after that.

14

‘LOOK!’ RUBY SAID triumphantly from the triangle behind the sofa.

‘What’s that?’ said Daddy.

‘The back off the remote control.’

Ruby clambered over the back of the sofa with the bit of plastic and the glove.

‘Clever you,’ said Daddy.

Daddy fixed the remote and pressed Play on *True Grit* and for a bit they watched a one-eyed fat man help a little girl find the killers of her father.

Ruby over-laughed in all the good places, but Daddy didn’t. He toyed with the glove and tried it on, but it was too big for him.

‘This was behind the sofa?’ he said.

‘Uh-huh. There’s a pen lid too. Shall I get it?’

‘No,’ said Daddy. ‘Leave it.’

Ruby snuggled up under his arm, but Daddy was restless. In the middle of the shoot-out, he made her stand up so he could move the sofa to look for the other glove.

It wasn’t there.

He stood for a moment, staring down at the carpet, then looked at the door and said, ‘Back soon.’

‘How long is soon?’

‘Not long,’ he said. ‘Be a good girl.’

He closed the door behind him and Ruby heard him picking up his fishing gear from the porch. She switched off the TV by pressing the remote-control button as hard as she could.

She’d *been* a good girl and it hadn’t worked.

So she went upstairs and messed with Daddy’s cowboy things.

The cowboy drawer always swelled in the damp, and Ruby got red and sweaty in the wrestle.

Once she’d got it open far enough to reach inside, she put the gunbelt on first, hitching it all the way round to the final hole, which was small and stiff. It was too big for her, but not *too* too big, and if she spread her legs a bit, it would stay on her hips. The holster hung to her knee.

Then the hat.

She lifted out the black Stetson and placed it on her own head like a crown.

The Jingle Bobs were complicated. She couldn’t work them out. She spun the little wheels to make them ring, and decided she’d try them on another time.

Holding the gunbelt up all the way with a casual hand, Ruby waddled splay-legged the few paces to the mirror on the back of the door.

She looked *exactly* like a cowboy. Her bunny slippers spoiled it a bit, so Ruby chose not to look at them.

Her right hand fell naturally to the holster and she felt a jag of disappointment that there was no gun to play with. Sticks were just fine until there was something real

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to measure them by. In this holster they would have been just sticks. A real holster needed a real gun.

Ruby drew her finger at the mirror. ‘Pow! Pow-pow!’

The hat fell over her eyes with the recoil.

Ruby pushed it back, then tried to catch sight of herself while she wasn’t looking, so she could see how she *really* looked.

Still amazing.



The tip of the fishing rod dipped and danced, but John Trick didn’t see it. He saw *past* it – across the pale-grey sea to the vague hump of Lundy Island on the fuzzy horizon, and beyond that to a more distant place, while the crabs made merry with his bait . . .

As a child, John had rarely gone to primary school, where he’d been relentlessly teased about the scars on his face. And when he had gone, he’d learned to lash out first and let the other kids ask questions afterwards – if they still had teeth that weren’t a-wobble in their heads.

But then – on his first day at big school – he had seen Alison Jewell.

She had hit him like measles.

He hadn’t stopped fighting, but he had gone to school every possible day for the next four years just to see her – just to occupy the same space. Now and then, he and the other boys would shout inappropriate things at her in a bid to make contact, but he never had the courage to say anything *real*, because she came from Clovelly, and he’d heard that her mother was a doctor.

Her *mother!*

Even though he'd barely spoken to Alison in all the time they shared a classroom, just enough of that unexpected schooling rubbed off on John Trick that by the time he left he was taken on as an apprentice welder at the shipyard.

John remembered the early mornings when he got up in the dark and felt like a man. Riding his scooter through the lanes, the indicator clicking loudly in the night, to join the other men. They'd start with nothing but their hands and a plan and they'd build a ship. Every day they welded and moulded and fabricated their own lives; their own pride; their own futures. They talked and they shouted above the noise and they told dirty jokes and laughed whether they were funny or not. They arrived together and they left together, bonded by clocks and hard labour.

With his first pay packet he'd got just drunk enough that he'd caught a bus to Clovelly, banged on doors until he'd found Alison Jewell's home, and asked her to marry him.

She'd laughed.

'I didn't even know you liked me,' she'd said.

'I don't like you,' he'd told her. 'I *love* you.'

Alison had frowned – as if she couldn't understand how someone who looked like him could ever love someone who looked like her – and so he'd leaned in and kissed her with tongues, and then pushed her down on to her bed under her 'Take That' poster. Her parents were downstairs, so she'd tried to shove him off, but she hadn't tried *that* hard, and he wasn't so drunk that they couldn't seal the deal.

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Happy days.

He'd wanted to tell the whole world, but Alison said it was more fun if they kept it a secret, and was careful not to let on at school or anywhere else. She'd barely even let him *see* her, let alone have sex again – that's how much fun she thought their secret would be – but they couldn't keep it a secret for ever.

Ruby had seen to that.

At first John couldn't believe his bad luck. Getting Ali pregnant on their very first time! But, as it turned out, a baby on the way was like a proof of purchase for a girl he would otherwise never have been able to afford.

Alison's father had hit the roof. Gone *through* the roof. He'd actually cried. It would have been funny if it hadn't been so insulting. And the more pissed off Malcolm Jewell got, the more obstinate *he'd* become. Mr Jewell had demanded an abortion – what he called 'Taking care of it so we can all get back to normal' – but Alison had refused point blank. Even John had been surprised by how vehement she'd been about wanting to marry him – and moved by how much she loved him.

For the first time in his life, he'd felt he had the upper hand. Alison was *his* now. She was having *his* baby and *he* would call the shots – and if that meant a register office and a suit from Oxfam, then so be it. Her father could rage and her hoity-toity mother could cry and moan all she liked, but John had taken pleasure in telling them both that he was not one for charity.

'It's not about *charity*,' Rosemary Jewell had said in her squeaky, sneaky, pop-eyed way. 'It's about *tradition*.'

John Trick snorted and snapped open another can. Tradition, bollocks; it was about *possession*.

Nine-tenths of the law.

They'd married in Barnstaple register office, with Alison in a plain blue dress and her mother sobbing throughout. He hadn't even told *his* mother. She'd made her own choice years before, and it wasn't him.

When he'd kissed the bride, she'd cried and whispered into his mouth, 'Thank you.'

It seemed a long, long time ago, and lately, even nine-tenths didn't feel like enough.

In the slow drizzle of the beach, John stared into the shimmering gold of his cider and thought about possession. Possessions were difficult things. Other people liked them too, and would take them from you if they could.

Alison's parents would like to take her from him, for starters. They *still* thought she was too good for him. He tried only to see them at Christmas, but he could tell that was true in Malcolm's stiff handshake and the way Rosemary touched his good cheek with hers – dry and distant despite the contact. They gave Ali money in secret – he knew that. Not just for her birthday and Christmas, but at other times too. She tried to hide it from him, but he had eyes. He'd found the receipt for the groceries they could not afford; noticed the new jeans Ruby was wearing before her old ones had even gone through at the knees. They were trying to buy Alison back, to control her with money, to loosen his hold. They must have thought they had a shot at it, ever since he'd lost his job.

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As if losing his job had made him less entitled to his own wife.

And they tried to buy Ruby too, even though she was more *his* than anything had ever been. Last birthday they'd bought her a bicycle – pink, tassled, and the silliest gift you could buy for a child who lived squeezed between a hill and a cliff. Malcolm Jewell had spent hours puffing up and down the hill behind Ruby, holding on to the saddle, and with his face as red as his thinning hair. Ruby never rode the bicycle now, John was pleased to note, but buying it had been disrespectful to him.

And the worst of it was, Alison *let* them disrespect him and then *lied* to him about it. He could always tell – the way she tucked her hair behind her ear.

And now something strange was going on too. Something to do with the big glove, and those new shoes that were too high for either of them.

Alison lied to him about money. Now – for the first time ever – he wondered what else his wife might lie about.

And he wondered who the shoes might *really* be from. Or for.

15

THERE WERE TWO things Donald Moon hated above all – liberals and litterbugs. They were the same thing, really. Without liberals there would *be* no littering. Nor much crime at all, Donald figured, because without liberals, those found guilty of any crime would be locked up so fast that their feet would barely touch the ground.

And at the head of that queue, if Donald had his way, would be the litterbugs.

Donald had once owned seventy acres of clifftop along the coastal path, and had spent half his life picking up plastic bags and bottles so that his lambs wouldn't choke on them, and the other half glaring through binoculars, hoping to catch someone red-handed in the act of dropping contraband. He never did – the stuff seemed to drop itself! – but he never gave up.

Donald and his wife Marion had kept a hundred endangered sheep until he'd finally had to admit that he had become that most endangered breed of all – a small farmer in a world where livestock was just another product, like cardboard or biscuits. Each year it got harder and harder, and when his income finally became an outcome, Donald sold sixty-five acres to a neighbour

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and ninety-seven sheep to other doomed enthusiasts. He turned his remaining five acres over to vegetables and fruit to save on the shopping bill, and used his last three Leicester Longwools to lever his way into a part-time job at The Big Sheep in Bideford. Tourists flocked there to watch sheep shows and sheep shearing and even sheep races, where sheep competed in the Sheep Grand National, with straw-bale jumps and little knitted jockeys on their backs – all as though sheep were exotic beasts in a woolly circus.

Once his sheep and his land were gone, there was nothing to stop litter becoming Donald's primary focus. He would roust the stout Marion every weekend to traipse across North Devon armed with pointed sticks for spearing paper or hooking Tesco bags out of hedges. They wore matching Day-Glo vests for safety, and carried big green waste sacks for the cans and the plastic that people flung randomly around the countryside, and the disposable nappies laid carefully in lay-bys – as if they would soon be dealt with by some kind of state-funded poo patrol.

Donald was on his way home from work that Saturday when he saw the newspaper in the lay-by into Abbotsham.

Newspapers were Donald's *bête noire*. An entire village could be ruined by a copy of the *Sun* and a stiff breeze. Lurid headlines flapping in gutters, flattened against hedges, fluttering up trees. Paper tits dissolving to porridge in the rain.

So, even though the light was almost gone from the

sky, and even though it had rained all day and his overalls were damp against his thighs, Donald Moon did a U-turn and pulled over.

This newspaper was the *Daily Mail*, which was even thicker than the *Sun* and, therefore, potentially even worse. Already the *Coffee Break* insert had escaped and spread itself across a field gate twenty yards away.

Donald picked up the main section, then went after the rest. When he got to the gate, he could see in the dim light that *Coffee Break* had already come apart, and that several pale pages were now dotted about the wet grass of the field beyond.

There was nothing for it. Now he had seen it, he had to do something about it. Donald muttered under his breath and climbed the gate.

In the half-dark he dropped to the ground on the other side and landed on something that rolled under his boot. He slipped to one knee, while the other leg twisted away from him at an angle that made his eyes water.

Donald was not a swearer by nature, but he couldn't help himself, and he was surprised to find that – contrary to what he'd always claimed in company – it actually *did* make him feel better.

Finally he got his breath back and blew tears out of his nose between his finger and thumb.

Then he peered down through the gloom to see what it was that he had trodden on.

It was a woman's face.

16

WOMAN'S BODY DUMPED IN LAY-BY.

Miss Sharpe had read the *Gazette* right there, outside the newsagent's.

The meagre report underneath the giant font consisted mostly of caution and police-speak. The police wouldn't say who she was or how she'd died. They wouldn't even call it murder. Yet. All they were doing was asking anyone who'd seen a woman hitching a lift between Bideford and Northam to contact this number. There was a photo of a five-bar gate and a field beyond it.

Now Miss Sharpe stood at the staffroom window with a cup in one hand, a saucer in the other, and felt a wave of melancholy wash over her.

The thought of some poor woman lying in that lay-by – maybe for days – undiscovered in the rain, had disturbed her deeply.

Without a face or a name for the victim, it could be anyone.

With a hitch in her chest, she almost felt that it could be *her*.

After all, who would miss her? Who would call the

school and let them know she hadn't come home the night before? She had only moved here three months ago; she didn't have a husband or a boyfriend. Her father was across the other side of the country and her colleagues were friendly, but only as far as the car park. Her badminton partner at the club was a sixty-year-old man called Edward, whose dentures had once fallen out during an exuberant rally, and who only ever spoke to her to shout things like 'Mine!' and 'Down at the net!' He might miss her drop shot, but he wouldn't miss *her*.

Only Harvey would miss her if she disappeared – and then only when the Buggy Supreme ran out.

A loud wooden squeal interrupted her thoughts. Behind her, Dave Marshall was making his usual noise. He was the PE teacher, and so used to shifting the gym equipment around the school hall that he couldn't even sit down for a cup of tea without a great scraping of furniture. He was the only male member of staff, and treated everyone – even the headmistress – like girlish underlings.

Now – without even turning her head – Miss Sharpe could tell he was picking up the *Gazette*. Flapping it open like a tarp in a typhoon.

It took him a nanosecond to form an opinion.

'Silly cow,' he pronounced, expecting to be listened to, as always.

Usually Miss Sharpe wouldn't indulge his masculine nonsense, but today she was rattled by death, so she turned a cool eye on him. 'Excuse me?'

He held up the newspaper for her to see. 'Hitchhiking. What does she expect?'

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A couple of the other teachers tittered nervously. Not Miss Sharpe. If Miss Sharpe ever caught herself tittering, she'd give herself a good smack.

'I imagine,' she said icily, 'that she expected someone to pick her up and drop her off closer to home.'

Marshall gave a snort of laughter.

'Why, what would *you* expect?' she demanded.

'What I expect and what *she* can expect are not the same thing,' he smiled.

'What do you mean?'

'I'm a man,' he pointed out, in case she hadn't noticed his lack of deodorant. 'Everyone knows women shouldn't hitch.'

Miss Sharpe knew that too, but she still bristled like a hog. 'That's as good as saying she deserved to get murdered. I suppose women shouldn't wear short skirts either? Or show off their ankles.'

Marshall snorted again. 'Don't get your knickers in a twist, Emily Pankhurst.'

'Emmeline,' she snapped.

'Christ, I'm only joking,' he said – then raised his brows and rolled his eyes meaningfully.

Miss Sharpe was *this close* to tipping her tea over his big stupid head. She knew that look. Her father used to do it too – more and more after her mother had died. It was a look that said she was acting irrationally, but that he wasn't going to argue with her because acting irrationally was what women *did*, and that sanity would only be wasted on her.

Miss Sharpe controlled her urges, and turned her back on Dave Marshall.

BELINDA BAUER

She wasn't being irrational. A young woman – just like her – had been murdered and dumped in a lay-by like a fast-food wrapper, and a grown man thought she had it coming.

Wasn't that reason enough to be angry?

17

THE WOMAN WHOSE face Donald Moon had found under his size-ten boot turned out to be Frannie Hatton, a twenty-two-year-old addict-slash-barmaid, who had been reported missing after failing to show up for a shift at the Patch & Parrot in Bideford.

And the police – who hadn't been that interested in a missing junkie – were *very* interested in a dead one . . .



Detective Constable Calvin Bridge checked the rear-view mirror to make sure he looked like a policeman.

Because he never felt like one.

Take this morning. This morning, any *real* policeman would have been happy. Here he was, driving Detective Chief Inspector Kirsty King to Old Town to speak to Frannie Hatton's mother. It was quite the coup for a young constable with only six months in plainclothes under his belt; DCI King was an impressive woman and right now everybody was trying to impress her back, because there was a promotion in the offing. Detective Sergeant Franklin had taken early retirement due to ill

health. And that thing about filling up his wife's car with police petrol. Anyway, it was quite possible that now he had gone, a couple of people at Bideford would move up a rung of the ladder without much effort – which had been Calvin's preferred method of advancement ever since kindergarten.

He'd only applied for plainclothes because keeping his uniform clean and pressed and shiny had been an awful lot of work.

So driving DCI King around on a murder investigation was a feather in his cap, even if it was really only because he had known Frannie personally, though marginally. She'd been a few years behind him at school, and light years ahead of him at everything else.

Calvin Bridge knew he should be on cloud nine.

So why did he feel like a man in a wool suit on a hot day?

The car behind theirs tooted and DCI King looked up from the pathology report on her lap and said, 'Green light.'

'Sorry,' said Calvin, and raised his hand in apology before pulling away, barely fast enough to keep up with his frantic windscreen wipers.

All up Meddon Street he gave himself a good talking to. *Don't be so bloody ungrateful, Calvin. You're young and solvent and you've got your health. Look at Frannie Hatton! Dead in a ditch! You think she wouldn't change places with you? Pull yourself together!*

Calvin always heard his mother's voice in his head when he was giving himself a good talking to, because she always knew best.

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Just like his girlfriend, Shirley.

Shirley wore the pants in their relationship. Calvin didn't mind; he was too lazy to wear the pants. Shirley was a stolid, no-nonsense girl who, at twenty-nine, was five years his senior – and she was used to having things her own way.

Calvin was happy to have things her way too.

Most of the time.

But this weekend she'd taken pants-wearing to a whole new level.

She'd caught him off-guard while he was watching Formula 1 at her flat. Cuddled up to him on the sofa just as the red lights went out and said, 'Why don't we get married?'

'Hmm?' Hamilton was on pole but Vettel darted up the inside and the two of them went into the first turn a bare inch from each other at 180mph. Bloody brilliant.

'Why don't we get married?' she'd said again.

Calvin had had to think fast. If he'd said no – or even hesitated – there'd have been a row or a terrible silence, and he'd have had to leave her flat and drive to his flat, which would have meant missing twenty critical laps. Thirty if he got stuck behind a tractor.

So he'd said, 'Good idea,' and hoped that would be non-committal enough to take the pressure off until the end of the race at the very least.

Instead Shirley had gone into an uncharacteristic frenzy of squealing and kissing his ear and calling her mother and each of her sisters in turn, then her mother again.

Apparently he'd proposed.

Calvin had felt a bit uneasy at first, but by lap thirty-two he was getting used to the idea. Why *not* marry Shirley? He might as well. They'd been going out for three years and they got along fine. He loved her, he supposed, although he had nothing much to gauge it by.

Shirley was big boned, but she was clean, self-financing and happy to sleep with him, all of which Calvin liked in a woman. They never rowed because he always gave in, and whatever it was she wanted to do usually turned out to be pleasant enough. They went out three times a week to the pub or the pictures, and they had sex once a week, either in bed or on his leather sofa – but never on her corduroy one, because it was harder to get clean.

Anyway, by the time Vettel took the chequered flag, Calvin had decided that marriage would probably just be more of the same but without all the hassle on Valentine's Day. Last year he'd bought Shirley a cheese grater and they hadn't had sex for a fortnight – even after he'd shown her the receipt! It wasn't *any* old cheese grater – it was one endorsed by her favourite TV chef and had cost a ridiculous sum for a piece of metal with holes in it.

Marriage had suddenly seemed like the simpler option, and Calvin almost wondered why he hadn't thought of it before.

'You've gone past it,' said DCI King.

'Huh?'

'You've gone past it,' she said, tapping the window. 'It's back there.'

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Calvin said, 'Sorry, Ma'am,' and started looking for a place to do a U-turn.

Mrs Hatton lived in a run-down terrace with a cracked-concrete front garden. Calvin reckoned she couldn't be more than fifty, but she looked seventy. She wore a long porridge-coloured cardigan and maroon carpet slippers. One of her big toes was showing through at the end.

He made the tea. There was no milk but he pressed on bravely. Tea was vital to the investigation. People told you things over a cup of tea that they wouldn't under torture.

The tiny kitchen smelled of drains, and the mugs were chipped and charity-shop random. RGB Building Supplies, the Little Mermaid and a Smurf. Obviously he would have the RGB mug, but he dithered over the allocation of the other two. Neither seemed appropriate to either a senior investigating officer or a bereaved mother.

He put them all on a tray to let Fate decide.

'She was crying,' said Mrs Hatton flatly, as Calvin came in with the mugs. 'She kept saying goodbye and I love you.'

'And this was on the phone?' said DCI King.

Mrs Hatton nodded and took the Smurf.

'Was Frannie alone when she called you?'

'There was a man's voice.'

Kelly Bradley and Katie Squire popped into Calvin's head. It was inevitable. Most police work in these little country towns was as uncomplicated as Calvin had hoped it would be – and often revolved around the three Ds –

drink, drugs and debt. So two women forced to strip naked and phone home was a bit different and was sure to stick in the mind – even *his* mind, which could be like a Teflon butterfly unless it was about sport.

DCI King reached over the Little Mermaid and took his RGB mug. ‘Was it Mark?’ she asked.

Mark Spade was Frannie’s boyfriend. They already had him in custody and were making him cry. Mostly because he couldn’t get his next fix.

‘I don’t know,’ said Mrs Hatton. ‘The reception was very bad. And I’m a bit deaf.’

‘You couldn’t see anyone?’

‘It was on the phone.’

‘You don’t have a smartphone?’ said Calvin.

‘What’s that?’

DCI King raised her eyebrows at him. Calvin looked around the dingy front room with its dirty carpet, its glued-together china ornaments and its smell of wet dog, and realized how silly the question had been. Mrs Hatton only just had a television set – a big old thing in a wooden case, like something out of the ark. *Like* an ark.

He should probably just shut up.

‘Could I possibly see your phone, Mrs Hatton?’

Mrs Hatton handed King the oldest of Nokias and King handed it to Calvin.

‘Find her call, will you?’

Calvin had never seen a phone as big as this one; it was like a brick in a plastic case. It had an *aerial*. He ran through the received-calls menu, but Mrs Hatton apparently didn’t know how to assign names to each contact.

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With some fiddling, and with a break for Mrs Hatton to find her glasses – which were around her neck on a chain all along – Calvin identified Frannie’s number.

‘There are two calls here from her,’ he said. ‘Right after each other.’

‘I didn’t get another call. Didn’t answer it, anyway.’

‘Why not?’ said King.

The grey-faced woman shrugged at the wall over the mantelpiece, where a square of clean wallpaper spoke of an absent painting. Or maybe a mirror.

‘Did Frannie say anything else?’ King asked.

‘She said he was going to kill her.’

DCI tilted her head and said, ‘Pardon me?’

Mrs Hatton cleared her throat. ‘She said he was going to kill her.’

There was a pregnant silence before King asked, ‘Did you call the police?’

‘No,’ said Mrs Hatton, and sighed as though she’d forgotten to pick up washing powder at the shops.

Calvin felt cold. Frannie Hatton had called her mother and said she was about to be murdered, and her mother hadn’t called the police. Hadn’t even picked up the phone to her second call. And had only mentioned it now as an afterthought! Calvin didn’t have kids of his own – didn’t really *want* kids of his own – but even to him that sounded just . . . *wrong*.

He looked around the room with new eyes. What had to happen that a young girl who’d started out right here in this little house had ended up dead in a lay-by – her last desperate plea ignored by her own mother? Did Mrs Hatton have a personality disorder? A habit of her own?

A boyfriend who hadn't been able to keep his dirty hands to himself?

So many forks in the road where things had gone wrong when they should have gone right.

Calvin sighed inwardly. They'd probably never know. Only Frannie knew and Frannie was dead, and the only question to be answered about her now was who had killed her.

There was no excuse – *could* be no excuse – for Mrs Hatton's inaction. Calvin felt that anger deep in his core.

DCI King cleared her throat and modulated her tone to take all the judgement out of it. Calvin recognized what she was doing and admired her. Along with the tea thing, it was one of the most useful things he'd learned on the force. He used it all the time.

'Why didn't you call the police, Mrs Hatton? When she said this man was going to kill her?'

'I don't know.'

They both knew she must know, and neither of them spoke in the long tea-filled silence that followed.

Finally Mrs Hatton went on, 'She'd say anything, you see? To get money out of me. To get clean, she always said, but I knew it was for drugs. Even if she *meant* it, I knew she wouldn't *do* it. And even if she *did* it, I knew it wouldn't last.'

The anger left Calvin Bridge and instead he felt naive. What had seemed unjustifiable was obvious. What had seemed monstrous was mundane. The ghastly roller-coaster of addiction. Hopes raised a little and dashed a lot. Again and again and again, until all the hope was

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gone and all that was left in its place were broken hearts and suspicious minds.

‘Had you given Frannie money in the past?’ DCI King asked Mrs Hatton cautiously.

‘Of course!’ she said with sudden fire. ‘I’m her mother. I gave her everything I had!’ She gestured roughly at the room. It looked as if someone had moved out and this was all they’d left behind.

‘I’m sorry,’ said King. ‘I didn’t mean to—’

But the outburst had exhausted Mrs Hatton’s tiny reserve of energy. She flapped the apology away, then rested her hand on the head of the faded little terrier on the sofa beside her.

‘Makes no difference,’ she said. ‘She’d only have stolen it.’



Missing, presumed run off with her smackhead boyfriend, had been the local consensus about the disappearance of Frannie Hatton, but now that she was dead, people had nothing but good things to say about her.

Poor girl.

Pretty little thing.

Wouldn't hurt a fly.

‘Her was a right skinny maid,’ said Shiny Steele the next time the Gunslingers met. ‘But her had a proper pair on her regardless.’

‘What a waste,’ said Scratch, speaking for them all.

Shiny drank at the Patch & Parrot, and Razor Riddle

claimed to have known Frannie Hatton 'for years'. Both of them – bald and thick respectively – had been bought drinks all evening on the strength of it.

'Her'd shake 'em in yer face for a good tip,' Shiny added. Then he sighed like he was missing an old dog, and all the Gunslingers felt the loss of Frannie Hatton just that bit more personally. If *they'd* been in the Patch & Parrot, she might have shaken her proper pair in *their* faces. Now that would never happen, and they called for another round to drown this new sorrow.

Then another.

'To Fannie,' slurred Razor, slopping his latest cider into the air, and there was an immediate outcry.

'*Frannie*, not Fannie, yur wazzack!'

'Thought you an' her was like *this*!'

'Owe me a bloody pint, you do, Razor!'

'No, boys,' said Hick Trick, holding up a hand for quiet. 'I'm with Razor on this.' And when they all looked at him in bewilderment he raised his pint and said, 'To Fannie!'

The men whooped with laughter and echoed his toast, and Daisy moed enthusiastically until Jim Maxwell came over and told them all to keep it down or they'd be out. He was nice enough about it, because he knew which side his economic bread was buttered, but he'd barred them for a week after the Pussy Willows fight, so they knew he'd do it again, and let their laughter tail off into a series of snorts and exaggerated sighs.

'Ah well,' said Scratch in the new quiet. 'It's a shame.' There were grunts of agreement all round.

'Wouldn't happen in the West,' said Blacky, and even

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though they were *in* the West, they all knew he meant the *wild* one.

‘That’s right,’ said Chip Fryer. ‘A man who was thinking of doing something like that *didn’t*, ’cos he knew he’d be strung up.’

There were enthusiastic nods all round. Lynching was a well-worn trail the Gunslingers rode down whenever a crime had particularly offended them. It didn’t have to be murder; often it was child abuse, sometimes it was the mugging of an old lady, and just two weeks back, they’d agreed that it should be imposed for whatever bastard had keyed Blacky’s car in the car park of the George.

‘Young girl murdered right under our noses,’ sighed Whippy Hocking, ‘and there’s nothing we can do about it.’

All the men muttered now, their anger warming them just the way their laughter had.

‘Short of a posse,’ said Scratch, to nods and grunts all round.

‘And a gun,’ said Whippy.

His words hung there in the sudden silence of the bar. They were so self-evident that they didn’t even *have* to be agreed with out loud.

Instead, the Gunslingers nodded sombrely into their glasses and looked almost as wistful for a gun as they had for Frannie Hatton’s boobs.



The police made Donald Moon cry too. They searched his house three times that first week, they questioned

him hard and often, and they only bought his story about stopping to pick up the *Daily Mail* when his terrified wife showed them the his 'n' hers Day-Glo vests and pointy sticks.

They did meticulous forensic sweeps of the lay-by and of the victim's flat in Northam, and at a press conference they launched an appeal to find Frannie's missing bag, which had contained various personal items and a week's wages.

The *Gazette's* in-depth investigation revealed the contents of Frannie Hatton's Facebook page, and they printed the only photo that did not feature an obscene gesture or an illegal substance. It was an old picture of Frannie as a blurry bridesmaid, in a dress so pink and sleeves so puffed that she looked like a gay quarterback.

The same photo appeared on posters that the police put up in public places and on lamp posts, so that people who'd never known the victim almost felt as though they had, and started to refer to her as 'Frannie' instead of 'that girl'.

People left bouquets and little teddy bears in the lay-by, and the regulars at the Patch & Parrot, who felt guilty that none of them had ever offered her a ride home, started a collection on the bar to help her mother with the funeral expenses.

All in all, dying was very improving for Frannie Hatton.

18

RUBY COULD TELL Daddy was in a good mood, just by the way he opened the front door.

‘That’s a twenty-quid fish!’ he said as he dropped the dogfish on the draining board.

‘It’s like a *whale*,’ she enthused. She’d seen bigger, but having Daddy in a good mood again changed everything: everything *did* seem better than it was before.

The dogfish had bitten Daddy as he took it off the hook, but he didn’t even care. ‘Been bitten by worse!’ he said and put some salt on it so it wouldn’t go manky. Then they measured the fish with Ruby’s school ruler. Twenty-seven inches! A lot of that was tail, but even so. Then he let her feel its skin – smooth one way, rough the other – and touch its sharky little teeth with her finger until she shivered with dread, and they both laughed.

She got a chair to kneel on so she could watch him gut the fish. The insides were such a dark red they were almost black. Daddy scooped them down the cut-off foot of one of Mummy’s old tights, all the way to the toe, then knotted the top and put it in the freezer. Ruby knew that the next time he went out on the Gore, he would dangle

it in the water and, as it thawed, blood and juice would leak from it and attract more dogfish, and eels too.

Daddy wrapped the rest of the fish in plastic and put it in the fridge. Then he started to wash down the drainer and the sink. Without looking at her, he said, 'Can you keep a secret, Rubes?'

'Yes,' she said instantly, because she wanted to hear one.

'Cross your heart?'

She crossed her heart. 'And hope to die,' she said. 'What *is* it?'

Daddy stood very still. He glanced towards the kitchen door as if someone might be there, spying on them. Ruby looked too, as the atmosphere thickened in the dingy little kitchen, and she drew closer to Daddy to hear the secret.

When he spoke it was in a low voice, only just above a whisper.

'The Gunslingers are getting up a posse.'

That was all he needed to say. Ruby's mouth fell open and she felt almost dizzy, as foreign-familiar images flooded her brain. A hot place, with a wide sky that smelled like summer. Cowboys firing their guns in the air, legs flapping, spurs digging, manes flying; dust clouds and small boys swirling in their wake. A posse was fearless and fast. A posse was the law. When a bad man came to town, a posse hunted him down and made him pay. A posse never gave up. The thought of Daddy on a posse was completely thrilling.

'We're going to catch the man who killed that girl,' Daddy went on in hushed tones.

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‘What girl?’ said Ruby, matching his whisper.

‘That girl. Frannie something.’

‘Oh yeah.’ Ruby remembered vaguely; there was a poster on the shop door next to the one about the Leper Parade. ‘What will you do when you catch him?’

‘Well, we’re *supposed* to call the police.’ Daddy shrugged. ‘But who knows?’ He did the cowboy accent. ‘Blood’s running pretty high, Miss Ruby.’ He made a finger gun and drew a bead on her with narrowed eyes, then blew the tip.

She stared at his fingertip, enthralled – as if she could actually see the smoke curling off it.

‘Can I come with you?’ she whispered. ‘On the posse.’

‘It’s not a game, Rubes. This is serious work. *Man’s* work.’

‘I *know*.’

Ruby frowned. She was the wrong sex – again.

‘But I could help you,’ she suggested. ‘I could look out for him.’

Daddy wrung out the cloth. Bloody water squeezed out between his knuckles. ‘Mummy will be home soon.’

Ruby could tell he was trying to change the subject and she was determined not to let him. ‘Please, Daddy? You can look one way and I’ll look the other way. Then we’re looking *all* the ways. I’m *really* good at looking for things. Even out of the very corners of my eyes. Watch this!’ To demonstrate, she looked away from Daddy and slid her eyes right to their very corners. ‘See?’ she said. ‘I can see you really well.’

‘I don’t know, Rubes . . .’ The water ran clear through the cloth now.

Ruby rushed, 'Please, Daddy – I want to go on the posse! I'll be really, really good and quiet. I *promise*.'

There was a chink of silence and Ruby held her breath.

'You'll get bored.'

'I won't!' said Ruby vehemently. 'I *won't* get bored! I'll be too excited!'

'You'll whine to come home.'

'I won't! I won't whine!'

'Well, we'll be out really late and what if it's a school night? Mummy will be cross with us if she finds out.'

'She'll be at work! And I won't tell her! I won't!'

'What if she sneaks in to kiss you goodnight and you're not there? Then I'll get it in the ear.'

That could be a problem. Mummy did come in and kiss her when she got home from work. Sometimes Ruby woke up and grumbled at her.

Ruby frowned. She felt the approach of crushing disappointment. Mummy was such a spoilsport!

'Can't we get home before her?'

Daddy shrugged as he wiped down the sink. 'We can *try*,' he said. 'But maybe there's some way we could fool her into thinking you're *in* bed when you're really not.'

Ruby had a flash of inspiration. 'I'll put Panda in my bed so he looks like me! I'll put him under the blankets. Mummy won't even know I'm gone!' It was a ruse they'd seen in more than one TV Western – the baddie emptying his gun into the hero as he lay by the campfire, then picking up the bedroll full of rocks that he'd mistaken for a man. Panda was quite big. It would definitely work.

Daddy laughed. 'That's pretty clever, Rubes.'

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‘Can I come then?’

He put up his hands in cowboy surrender. ‘You got me, Deputy.’

Ruby squealed with delight and buried her face in his old blue jersey that smelled of salt and smoke.

19

DC CALVIN BRIDGE looked down at Frannie Hatton and thought that she was just his type.

If she'd been alive, of course – he wasn't sick.

Dark-haired, petite, but with nice tits – if you ignored the Y-incision – and with a neatly tended ladygarden.

He stared at the dead girl's crotch and thought that Shirley could really take better care down there. She had when they'd first started to go out together three years ago, but nowadays he was lucky if she shaved her legs, let alone her bits. Calvin never mentioned it. But now, seeing Frannie Hatton's wasted Brazilian made him wonder if maybe things with Shirley weren't happening a bit quick. He didn't object in *principle* to marrying her – just to the *speed* of it all.

But how to raise the subject without Shirley mistaking one for the other?

He couldn't.

Could anyone?

He sighed.

'Hard day, Calvin?' said DCI King sarcastically.

'Excuse me, Ma'am,' said Calvin. 'I was miles away.'

'Well, don't be,' said King sharply. 'Be right here.'

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Calvin blushed. He had a tendency to drift off, and knew he *must* try to concentrate if he was going to be even slightly impressive.

‘Was she sexually assaulted?’ asked King.

‘No indication of that,’ said Dr Shortland. He had a manila case file in one hand and a cheese and coleslaw sandwich in the other. Calvin could smell formaldehyde and mayonnaise and there was a piece of cabbage in Dr Shortland’s beard.

‘And yet she was naked,’ mused King. Then she bent over Frannie Hatton’s face and pointed at a tiny dark mark on the side of her nose. ‘What’s that?’

‘Aaah,’ said the pathologist. ‘Watch this!’ He handed King the file, picked up a needle and casually slid it straight through the tiny hole.

Calvin swallowed sudden sick.

‘Stud?’ said King. She handed back the file and bent to have a good look at the hole.

‘I assume so,’ said Shortland. ‘It’s not new.’

Calvin regained his equilibrium. ‘She was wearing a nose ring on Facebook.’

They both turned to look at him.

‘We haven’t found a ring,’ said King. ‘We’ll do another sweep of the scene.’ She turned away and studied the woman’s face again, then asked, ‘She was suffocated?’

‘Indeed.’ Dr Shortland took a messy bite of his sandwich. ‘Although she was found face-up, there’s bruising consistent with finger marks on the back of the head and neck, upper arms, shoulders, contusion of the nose and lips, and mud in her teeth, eyes and nostrils.’ He didn’t open the slim folder, because his other hand was full of

sandwich, but he wagged it as he spoke – apparently to indicate that what he was telling them was all in there, if they didn't believe him.

'So someone held her face-down in mud until she died,' said King.

'That's my conclusion.'

'After quite a struggle, from the look of the other bruises.'

'She certainly put up a fight.'

King bent again to examine Frannie's face. Under the stark bulbs of the path lab, her skin looked almost translucent. She had a ring in one eyebrow, another in her belly button, and a tattoo cuff around one bicep.

Calvin pondered whether Frannie Hatton's death had been an accident, or whether the killer had always known that this was how his obsession was going to end.

King looked around and then took what appeared to be a long-handled spoon from a row of instruments on a nearby counter, and prised open Frannie Hatton's lips. The dead girl's teeth had dark bits between them, like brown spinach.

'Is this mud from the crime scene?'

Good question, thought Calvin.

'Good question,' said Shortland. 'And the answer is, I don't know.'

'So she could have been killed somewhere else and then dumped.'

'Possibly.'

'Shit,' sighed King, and straightened up.

'Indeed,' said Shortland.

Half a minute later, Calvin caught up. Two crime

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scenes – one unknown. The body wasn't helping them narrow their options.

'Any idea where the mud in her teeth came from?'

'No.'

All three of them stood in silent contemplation of the body.

DCI King sighed. Then she held up the spoon thing. Its bowl was pierced, making it look like a little metal squash racquet. 'What is this?'

'A gall-stone scoop.'

'Can I keep it?' she asked.

Dr Shortland looked a little surprised. 'If you think it will be useful.'

'Thank you.' DCI King tucked it into one of the several pockets of the belted Barbour jacket she wore over everything – skirts, dresses, slacks, jeans. She looked good in all of them, Calvin thought, with a very nice bottom for jeans.

'What do you think, Calvin?'

He blinked. 'About what, Ma'am?'

'Life, the universe and everything,' said King so flatly that, for the smallest of seconds, Calvin Bridge almost told her that he didn't believe in God but that he *did* hope for an afterlife, and some system of spiritual checks and balances, dependent upon his actions as a corporeal being.

Then he realized she'd just caught him looking at her arse.

A phone rang somewhere and Dr Shortland excused himself and the rest of his sandwich.

'Here, help me turn her over,' said DCI King.

Calvin looked cautiously at the door through which the pathologist had disappeared.

‘Oi,’ said King. ‘I’m the senior investigating officer. If I want to turn the body over, I don’t need a note from my mummy.’

Calvin blushed and helped turn Frannie over. From the back she looked like a child, and Calvin was sorry he’d ever looked at her front disrespectfully.

King started to walk around the table, bent a little at the waist so that her eyes were good and close to the corpse. Now and then she stopped and parted Frannie’s hair, or changed her angle of vision. Touched a mark or a mole with a latex finger. Stood and thought.

‘What are those?’ she said. Calvin followed her finger to one of Frannie’s waxy white shoulder blades, where there were two small blurred marks, maybe three-quarters of a centimetre long.

‘Bruises?’ he said.

‘That’s right.’ She checked the map of the body that Dr Shortland had put in the file and read from his notes: *‘Two small curved contusions to right shoulder blade. Possibly caused by contact with a hard, undetermined material immediately ante mortem.’*

There were plentiful bruises down Frannie’s arms, but only a few on her back – one large one on her left shoulder and these two small ones.

‘So,’ said Calvin, ‘during the struggle. Or when she was in transit. Maybe little stones or something that were under her back at some stage?’

‘Maybe,’ nodded King. ‘And now look at this one.’

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Calvin leaned in to her and peered at the Celtic cuff tattooed around Frannie's right arm.

'Where?' he said.

King put her finger on a mark that was easily missed, hidden in the ink. Even now Calvin had spotted it, it was hard to make it out, but it looked similar to those on her shoulder blade, although the edges were a little more distinct.

'They look as though they've been made by the same object, wouldn't you say?'

'Yes,' agreed Calvin.

'Curved. Maybe a fingernail?' King put her hands around Frannie's bicep – first the left and then the right – and tried several different ways to make her nails fit the bruise, but nothing seemed quite natural.

'This one's more distinct,' she mused. 'Sharper.'

'Because she wasn't wearing sleeves,' said Calvin, surprising himself by remembering. 'Didn't the witnesses at the Patch & Parrot say she was wearing some top that was all . . .' he mimed a big pair of breasts before he could stop himself, then quickly tucked his hands into his armpits and finished the sentence with 'revealing?'

But King just gave him a serious look and said, 'That makes sense.'

They both looked again at the tiny mark disguised within the indigo design.

'So,' said King, 'assuming that this case is connected to, and followed the pattern of, the earlier assaults, these bruises could have been made before she was naked.'

Calvin nodded eagerly. 'What would that mean?'

'Who knows?' said King. 'But every little helps.'



DCI King had taken over the driving duties, which Calvin Bridge found refreshing rather than insulting. In his short experience, senior officers loved the idea that they had a driver, rather than a colleague, and rarely dirtied their hands behind the wheel.

She drove well, too. At Tiverton they came off the dual carriageway and, to his surprise, King turned away from the link road and chose instead to take the old road to Bideford, which was little more than a lane in some places, and forty miles long.

Within minutes, Calvin understood why she'd chosen the old road. There wasn't much traffic, and he could tell she was enjoying the corners. They weren't *breaking* the speed limit between the high hedges, but they were testing it, and every now and then, Calvin resisted the temptation to put his hand on the dash. DCI King's own hands were at ten and two and there was a little frown of concentration on her face, as if she was defying the world to slow her down.

'When we get back,' she said, 'I want you to call Professor Mike Crew at the university in Falmouth. He's in the geology department.'

Calvin wrote it in his notebook. *Mike Crew. Geology. Falmouth.*

'He knows all about mud,' King continued. 'What it's made of, where it's from, how it got there.'

'Very interesting,' said Calvin, although he didn't think so.

'Most boring man on the planet,' said King. 'And I've

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known some corks. But we'll pick a sample out of Frannie Hatton's teeth and send it to him. See what he can tell us about where she might have been killed.'

'Yes, Ma'am.'

She glanced at him and said, 'Always be honest with me, Calvin. Don't bullshit me or tell me what you think I want to hear.'

'Yes, Ma'am,' he said.

'It's not a crime to say you don't know something,' she went on. 'You're a constable in the Devon and Cornwall police, not Stephen bloody Hawking.'

'Yes, Ma'am.'

'And if you've got a hunch, let me know. Hunches are fine, as long as they're part and parcel of good police work, not a replacement.'

'Yes, Ma'am.'

'Good. Any questions?'

Actually he *did* have a question. He wasn't sure how important it was, but on the basis that he wasn't Stephen Hawking, he decided to ask it anyway.

'There is one thing, Ma'am,' he said cautiously. 'What's the significance of the gall-stone scoop?'

DCI King just gave a short laugh, then changed down to a much louder gear.

Calvin sighed. He'd obviously already missed something critical. He was starting to wonder whether he was really cut out to be a detective.

Maybe just taking better care of his uniform would have been easier.

20

IT WAS COWBOY NIGHT AND Mummy and Daddy were both out, and so was the sea. Ruby couldn't see it from the house because the big limekiln on the beach blocked the view between the cottages, but she knew in her gut that the tide was low. It made her feel calmer to know that it was far away, and not pounding the cliff or surging up the slipway.

Once, when she was little, a storm had driven water all the way into the square between the cottages. The limekilns had been waist-deep, and she'd held on to Daddy's trouser leg at the garden gate and watched the sea sigh across the cobbles towards them. She remembered the stink, and the rat that had been washed from its nest in one of the kilns, scuttling frantically about at the water's new edge, sitting up now and then to stare anxiously out to sea for its lost babies. Daddy had crept up behind it and Ruby had tensed almost unbearably, but the rat hadn't seemed to care – even when he'd hit it with a spade.

Ruby rolled on to her side on the spider rug.

Her chest hurt. It could be cancer or something, but Mummy still didn't care because of the letter from the headmistress.

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Daddy wouldn't make her go to school.

'I wouldn't make you go,' he'd said. 'But women always stick together. Like your Mum and Miss Bossybritches.'

'Miss *Bryant*,' Ruby had giggled, and Daddy had winked. 'That's what I said.'

She rolled back on to her elbows and sighed down at *Pony & Rider*. Despite the big, exciting headline PLAITING MADE EASY! the article made plaiting look incredibly difficult. Ruby had triple-checked the numbered photos, but there still seemed to be one missing. One minute the pony's mane was all tufts and fingers and dangling thread, and the next it was a perfect little hair rosette, with all the ends tucked in. Instead of reassuring her, the article had only increased Ruby's anxiety that when the time came, she would be found wanting in the plaits department.

Somebody knocked at the front door, and Ruby's head snapped up.

Mummy and Daddy had keys. They never knocked. *Nobody* ever knocked because strangers never came to Limeburn – not even Jehovah's Witnesses.

A pedlar had passed through once.

A goose walked over Ruby's grave.

She tiptoed carefully across the room. She pressed her ear against the door. There was a knock right on it, and she squeaked in surprise.

'Ruby?'

She stared at the door. The person who was knocking knew her name. Was that a good thing or a bad thing?

'Ruby?'

‘Yes?’ she whispered.

‘It’s me.’

She frowned. ‘Adam?’

‘I have something for you.’ he said. ‘Open the door.’

Ruby hesitated. She wasn’t supposed to let anyone into the house when her parents weren’t there. But they didn’t mean Adam, she was sure. And he had something for her. So she fumbled the key into the lock and let him in, along with a faceful of rain.

Adam was wearing the same red hoodie he’d lent her that day in the haunted house.

‘All right?’ he said.

‘Hi.’

They stood and looked at each other for a moment.

‘You OK?’ he said. He seemed nervous.

‘Fine,’ she said. Ruby was nervous too. She didn’t know why. They talked all the time when they were up on the swing or in the haunted house. She didn’t know why this was different, but it was. Maybe because it was night and she was alone, and because Adam had never been in her house before, and this seemed like a strange time to start.

‘It’s raining *really* hard.’

‘I know.’

Adam looked around the room and Ruby was acutely aware of its every shortcoming – the old stained sofa, the threadbare carpet, the dark patch of damp in the corner of the ceiling. Adam’s house was fresh and clean, and had one chair so old and precious that no one was allowed to sit on it.

‘Your house smells of fish,’ said Adam.

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‘Yes,’ she said. ‘Daddy catches them in the Gut.’

He nodded.

‘Sometimes he sells them to the hotel,’ she continued, just to fill the air. ‘They’re worth loads but he only gets ten pounds.’

‘That’s bad business,’ said Adam sagely. ‘He should speak to my dad. He knows how to make money for people. That’s what he does.’

‘That’s a really good job,’ she said.

‘Yeah,’ he said, ‘but he’s away a lot.’

Ruby already knew that. Mr Braund was a tall, well-fed man who wore suits and drove up and down to London every week, in a different car each year.

There was a longish silence.

‘Do you want a custard cream?’ Ruby said.

‘No thanks.’

‘OK,’ said Ruby, then she asked, ‘What have you got for me then?’

‘Oh. Yeah.’ Adam handed her a smallish packet wrapped in blue tissue paper. He kept his other hand in his jeans pocket, as if he didn’t care.

‘What is it?’ she said.

‘Open it,’ he shrugged, ‘and find out.’

Ruby parted the tissue cautiously. Inside was a little plastic donkey. It was covered with grey flock, with beige around its eyes and muzzle, and hitched to a small wooden sledge that had *Clovelly* painted on the side.

Ruby felt a wave of something so warm and special flood through her that she almost cried.

‘Wow!’ she breathed. ‘It’s . . . *amazing*.’

‘It’s nothing really,’ said Adam.

It wasn't nothing. It was *something*. *More* than something.

'Did you get it in Clovelly?'

'Yeah. I remember you said you wanted a donkey, so . . .' Adam tailed off. Then added, 'I walked all the way there and all the way back. It rained the whole time.'

'I'm sorry,' she said.

'That's OK,' he said.

'But it's not even my birthday.'

'It's not a birthday present. It's just . . . you know, for *any* old day.'

'It's the best present I ever had.' Ruby meant it; she couldn't think of a better one right at that moment.

Adam went red but he looked very pleased.

'I'm going to call him Lucky,' said Ruby.

Adam moved closer so that their heads almost bumped. He touched the sledge. 'I thought it would be pretty funny to put some carrots in here; like, *behind* the donkey.'

'Yeah,' nodded Ruby. 'That *would* be pretty funny.' She didn't know why, but she totally agreed.

'Thank you,' she added.

'No problem.'

They stood together for a moment, looking at the donkey. Then Adam said, 'Anyway, I'd better go. Got tons of homework.'

'Me too,' she said.

'Mine's Roman roads and aqueducts,' he said.

'Mine's a diary,' said Ruby. 'We have to write something every day.'

'That's harsh.'

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‘I know. I usually just do it all on one day.’

He nodded at the donkey. ‘Well, today you can write about that.’

‘I will,’ said Ruby.

‘Night,’ he said.

‘Night.’

She closed the door behind Adam and locked it, then took the key out.

Ruby went upstairs to bed, even though it wasn’t even nine thirty. She made a space on her bedside table, carefully sweeping a spot clear between the mugs and the sweet wrappers and the books, and put the donkey there.

They didn’t have any carrots so she got a potato from the sack in the kitchen and put that in the sledge for now, like a big pale-brown boulder.

She wrote FRIDAY in her diary.

Adam brought me a donkey from Clovelly. It’s the best present I ever got. He walked there and back in the rain. He has a slej and his name is Lucky. I am going to put carrots in the slej because that will be pretty funny.

Ruby tried to stay awake, straining to hear Daddy’s car pull up on the cobbles, but instead she fell asleep, looking at Lucky.



John Trick was late home because someone had cut off Tonto’s tail.

Most of the Gunslingers had already meandered their

way down Irsha Street by the time he and Shiny and Nellie helped Whippy outside to his steed.

The old horse was tied to the drainpipe where Whippy had left him, chewing on a complimentary sachet of Heinz Salad Cream.

They got a chair for Whippy to sway on, and guided his boot into the stirrup, then Hick and Nellie pushed, while Shiny ran round the back to stop Whippy tumbling straight off the other side. It had happened before.

‘Hey,’ said Shiny, but the other three were puffing and grunting too hard to hear him.

‘Hey!’ he said again, and rejoined them. ‘Tonto’s tail’s gone.’

‘Bollocks,’ said Nellie.

But it was true.

They helped Whippy out of the stirrup and off the chair and then the Gunslingers stood and stared at the rough bob, which was all that was left of Tonto’s wavy white tail.

Sometimes people shouted that they were wankers. Sometimes kids threw pebbles at them. But this was much worse.

‘Bastards!’ shouted Whippy. ‘*Bastards!*’

Hick Trick shook his head. ‘First Blacky’s car gets keyed, and now this.’

They peered under wooden tables and even crawled about between chair legs – as if finding the missing tail would rectify the situation.

But Tonto’s tail was gone for good.

21

MIKE CREW *was* the most boring man on the planet. Calvin Bridge had only been in his company for half an hour, and yet he had already mentally moved him to the top of that chart in the face of tough competition from his old European History teacher, Mr Branch, and the desk sergeant, Tony Coral, who had an extensive collection of railway memorabilia and didn't care who knew it.

'People think mud is just mud. They could not. Be. More. *Wrong,*' said Professor Crew, with all the excitement of a member of the Magic Circle who has decided to blab.

Calvin glanced at DCI King from the corner of his eye and saw the same glazed look on her face which spoke of a monumental effort to give a shit. He was going to have to work very hard not to drift off.

Or laugh.

Would that be so bad? Calvin hadn't laughed for ages. Last week he'd tried to make a joke about the bridesmaids' dresses, but it had backfired. Then he'd committed the cardinal sin of not knowing what frangipani was. He'd thought it was a kind of cake, but

Shirley told him he was just being ‘difficult’. He realized that the few minutes when DCI King had forced him to engage with her over Frannie Hatton’s corpse had been the most fun he’d had all week.

That couldn’t be right, could it?

‘These are your two samples.’ Crew was holding up two glass slides. ‘I have taken the liberty of labelling them OS 2425 by 1265 Interdental 45, identifying the geographical location according to the Ordnance Survey, and the physiological area from where the sample has been extracted – in this case interdental – and finally a code relating to my own files and order of work, which is really just for my personal reference—’

‘And what did you find?’ said King, rubbing her hands together and leaning forward a little in the universal body language of ‘Let’s cut to the chase.’

Crew stuck his hand in front of her face and said imperiously, ‘Culm down, dear!’

King looked coldly at his palm.

‘Old pedology joke!’ Mike Crew laughed all by himself while King and Calvin exchanged strained looks. Then he continued, ‘So, the other sample has been labelled OS 2425 by 1265 Gateway 46.’

He stopped – almost daring King to try to hurry him up, but Calvin could see her mentally biting her lip. You couldn’t hurry some people. Professor Crew was going to say what he wanted to say and any attempt to curtail him would only result in prolonging the agony. It was like talking about seating plans, which was fast becoming the Rubik’s Cube of the wedding. Everyone had a back to be got up, an offence to be taken; everyone bore a grudge.

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Shirley assured him that there *would* be a way to make it work, but they just hadn't found it yet.

God forbid people should just sit down and shut up and be grateful for a free lunch.

'So,' said Crew, 'sample OS 2425 by 1265 Interdental 45 is basically a Capers series soil of heavy clay with particulate inclusions. *However*, sample OS 2425 by 1265 Gateway 46 consists of Manod soils, which are typically Brown Podzolic, which is a silty loam most prevalent over rock typical of the area between Bideford and the village of Abbotsham.'

He stopped again and they both waited for the next bit, but Crew just got a disappointed look on his face, and said a little tetchily, 'That's it.'

Apparently they'd missed the punchline.

'Oh!' said King. 'Sorry, I was just . . . engrossed.'

That placated him. 'I *know*!' he enthused. 'We walk on it every day, build our homes on it, grow our food in it, bury our dead in it, and yet how many people really *think* about soil? How many people really *care*?'

Calvin had to turn his head so he wouldn't catch King's eye.

'So these are two different soils?' she said.

'The fine earth fractions are entirely incompatible,' nodded Crew.

'So you're saying that Frannie Hatton was killed somewhere else?'

'Of course,' said Crew. 'As we say in the business – mud don't lie.' He affected a bad Al Jolson voice and matching racist hand-waggle, but King remained utterly straight-faced. She was a better man than Calvin. She

cleared her throat. ‘And do you have any idea where that somewhere else might be?’

Crew milked it, of course. He made a great show of finding an Ordnance Survey map of North Devon, which was in his desk drawer all along. Then he spread it across the pens and books and in-trays on his desk so that it was almost as bumped and hilly as its printed surface swore it should be.

Finally he hummed and hawed and waved a pencil over it like Harry Potter, until he settled on an area between Westward Ho! and Appledore.

‘Around there,’ he said.

‘That’s the Burrows,’ said Calvin.

‘What’s the Burrows?’ said King.

‘It’s this sort of . . . flat bit. Behind the pebble ridge.’

‘What’s the pebble ridge?’ said King.

‘It’s a ridge, Ma’am,’ said Calvin. ‘Made of pebbles.’

‘Aah,’ King smiled. ‘The clue was in the name.’

Crew hurried to regain the lead role in this play. ‘If you could send me a sample, I could be more specific. Close to the sea, given the presence in OS 2425 by 1265 Interdental 45 of particulate glucosamine.’

‘Sugar?’ said Calvin.

‘Shells,’ said King.

‘That’s right!’ Crew rushed to expand. ‘Tiny particles of crustacea, either fragmentary or granulated, interspersed with the parent pedogenic structure.’

‘Ground-up shells,’ King translated firmly. She had her message; apparently she no longer needed to massage the messenger.

‘Have a look,’ said Crew, and at his urging, Calvin

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stepped over to the microscope and peered through the eyepiece while the professor twiddled things.

The smear of mud they'd collected from Frannie Hatton's front teeth blurred and unblurred and was suddenly in focus – and unexpectedly beautiful, with a thousand tiny fragments which Calvin assumed had once been shells, glittering like mother-of-pearl stars in a chocolate sky.

Even though he was looking at a blob of mud down a microscope, Calvin suddenly felt very small. He wished he could be that tiny, that insignificant.

That hard to find.

'Are the Burrows near the sea?' asked King.

Calvin straightened up. 'Without the pebble ridge, Ma'am, the Burrows *are* the sea.'



DCI King glanced over as she swung the Volvo out of the car park and said, 'Don't say I didn't warn you.'

'You *did* warn me,' admitted Calvin. 'But I still wasn't ready.'

King laughed. 'The mud lets the boyfriend off the hook, wouldn't you say?'

Calvin looked at her blankly. He had no idea why she was asking him or what the right answer might be.

'They lived together . . .' said King encouragingly, and then stopped speaking to allow him to pick up the thread.

'Yes,' he agreed. 'So . . . that . . . means . . .' he went on, speaking slowly to give himself time to think.

She helped him out. 'If you lived with someone and you wanted to kill them, where would you be most likely to do it?'

Calvin thought about killing Shirley. He'd have to avoid the corduroy sofa.

'In the bath?' he said. 'With a knife?'

King raised her eyebrows. 'I wasn't thinking of specifics,' she said. 'But you'd kill them at home, right?'

'Probably,' he agreed.

'You wouldn't take her out to a field and push her face into mud until she died, and then load her body into your car and drive it somewhere else and dump it, would you?'

'Probably not,' said Calvin again. He wasn't crazy about mud in his car.

'That would be too much like hard work,' King went on. 'Too organized.'

'Yes, it would,' he agreed.

'Especially for a junkie who doesn't own a car,' she said, and Calvin finally caught a glimpse of how her mind worked.

It was apparently quite different from the way *his* worked.

In fact, Calvin was starting to worry that his mind worked differently from everybody else's.

For instance, he had gone out last Saturday and bought Shirley an engagement ring, but instead of postponing everything for a couple of years the way he'd imagined it would, the ring had only seemed to make her worse. Suddenly there was a church booked, and he was being bombarded by wedding-invitation designs and something called *swatches*, and he was expected to pore

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over *The Big Book of Baby Names* on date nights, instead of watching Korean gangster movies and having sex on the sofa.

Calvin had committed to a ring; he hadn't realized that the ring had committed *him* to pretty much everything Shirley claimed it did – including three children, because 'It's a nice round number.' He'd wanted to point out that in fact three was uneven and also a prime, but was afraid that Shirley would actually agree with him – and push for four instead of dropping back to two.

Calvin sighed and wondered what having kids would be like. Better or worse than puppies? Probably very similar, he thought. Messy and tiring to start with, and then after a few months they learned your routine and things got a lot easier.

He could always do extra shifts at work until then.

'Calvin!'

Calvin blinked at DCI King. He had the distinct feeling she'd said his name more than once.

'Are you *deaf*?'

That confirmed it. 'No, Ma'am,' he said.

'Well then, try to pay attention, will you? I don't want to keep repeating myself like those idiots you see calling their dogs in the park.'

'Sorry, Ma'am.'

Calvin touched his sleeve to his brow. Trying to keep up with life was making him sweat.

22

JUST AFTER MUMMY went to work, Daddy appeared at Ruby's bedroom door in his cowboy clothes even though it wasn't Friday.

'Want to go catch a killer, Deputy?'

Ruby gasped in excitement and Daddy held up a warning finger. 'Don't tell Mummy.'

'Cross my heart and hope to die,' said Ruby, and bounced off the bed



Ruby kept craning forward on her seat, even though it wanted to tilt her backwards. She wanted to see the killer first; wanted to be the one to spot him; wanted to shout, 'There he is!' and point her finger, and feel the car swing around hard in pursuit.

If they didn't catch him tonight, next time she would bring a cushion.

She looked at Daddy. 'You should have a badge,' she said. And then immediately, 'Can I have a badge?'

'What kind of badge?'

'A deputy's badge. And you can have a sheriff's.'

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‘We’ll see how it goes, Rubes. I don’t think the Gunslingers would want me to give out badges until they knew you were going to stick at it.’

‘I *am* going to stick at it,’ Ruby assured him.

‘We’ll see then.’

Ruby perched on the edge of her seat, even though they weren’t in Bideford yet. They passed tiny hamlets, no more than a house or three, but she glared at them all with raw suspicion.

They reached the outskirts of the town – the supermarket and the discount shops and the little industrial estates where little industry happened.

Here they saw people, out and about, walking their dogs, waiting at bus stops, eating chips from paper cones.

‘What does a murderer look like?’ Ruby eventually thought to ask.

‘The news said white and about six foot tall.’

‘How tall is six foot?’

Daddy showed her a few inches between the tips of his thumb and forefinger. ‘About yea much taller than me.’

‘What colour is his hair?’

‘Don’t know.’

‘What colour are his eyes?’

‘Don’t know that too.’

Ruby screwed up her face. ‘It’s *difficult*.’

Daddy laughed. ‘If it wasn’t, the police would have caught him, I reckon. That’s why we got up the posse, see? To keep an eye open.’

‘I thought we were on the posse to hunt him down?’

‘We are,’ said Daddy. ‘But that’s *how* we hunt him

down. You keep an eye open and when you spot him you hunt him down. These things take time, Rubes. I told you it weren't a game, didn't I?'

Ruby nodded.

They drove through Bideford in a zigzag, and then went on towards Westward Ho!, slowly up the long hill, and quickly down the other side as if they were surfing a wave to the beach.

'Where are the other Gunslingers?' she asked.

'Round and about,' he said. 'We split up so we can cover more area. Some of us on this side of the water and some on the other, off towards Barnstaple. Chip's covering Torrington. Nobody knows where he'll strike next, see, Rubes? That's why he's hard to catch.'

She nodded. That made sense, although she was disappointed that they weren't all riding in convoy, the way she'd imagined they'd be. Of course, she was even more disappointed that they weren't all on horses, but even she knew that that was unrealistic.

Now and then Daddy did flash his lights at another Gunslinger, or raised a hand as they passed. When he did, he'd murmur their names.

'Shiny,' he'd go. Or 'Whippy.'

Just that. No more.

Ruby watched the men's silhouettes pass and longed to ask questions about Shiny and Whippy and Blacky and Daisy. Wanted to know why they had those names; wanted to say hi and show them that she was a deputy, even though she was only a girl and only ten. But the Gunslingers didn't stop to talk, just drove on – all hunting for the same killer.

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It was very grown-up.

They looped through Westward Ho! and then went through the lanes to Appledore, past the shipyard, and back up to Northam.

They slowed a few times as they passed men walking alone, or sitting in parked cars, and Ruby peered from the window with her heart thudding in her ears.

What would she see? What would a killer look like? Would she be able to spot him? And if she did, would he *know* he'd been spotted? The idea made her shiver, and at those moments when Daddy took his foot off the pedal and they coasted past a stranger, Ruby wished she'd brought her guns. Even if they were sticks, somehow she'd feel safer with them in her pockets.

'Any good, Rubes?' Daddy would say.

'No good,' she'd say.

Some were too short to be the killer. Some were too tall. Some were too fat or had dogs, or umbrellas, or were laughing, or holding hands with a girl.

'Everyone looks just . . . *normal*,' she said.

'Well, everyone is,' said Daddy. 'But even normal people do bad things.'

Ruby didn't like that idea. If *that* was true, then *anyone* might be the killer – and that made her feel a bit weird inside.

As they drove back along Bideford Quay, with the shops and pubs on one side of the road, and the masts and rigging and wheelhouses of little ships on the other, Ruby started to sing 'Red River Valley', and Daddy joined in.

Then he sang 'Mama, Don't Let Your Babies Grow Up

To Be Cowboys’, and by the time they were halfway to Westward Ho! they were both singing ‘Stand By Your Man’ at the top of their voices. Daddy did the ‘boom boom BOOM’ in a funny deep voice that made Ruby laugh so hard she could barely catch her breath.

Then Daddy stopped singing.

‘Dad-deee!’ giggled Ruby. ‘You missed your booms!’

But he was looking at a young woman, who was walking back towards Northam with her thumb stuck out.

‘Look at this,’ he murmured, and shook his head.

He checked his mirrors, then swung the car around in the road.

‘What are you going to do?’ asked Ruby.

‘Take care of her,’ he said. ‘Before anybody *else* does.’

‘Where am *I* going to sit?’

‘In the back.’

Ruby made a face. ‘But I don’t *want* to. I can’t see the killer so well from the back!’

‘Taking care of people is part of the job, Ruby,’ said Daddy sharply. ‘Don’t spoil the whole night now.’

Ruby pursed her lips and crossed her arms. She didn’t want to spoil the whole night, but she also didn’t want to sit in the back. It wasn’t *right*. The back was where she sat when she was a little girl going to school with her Mummy and Daddy, not when she was a deputy on a cowboy posse.

The woman looked around with a frown as the car stopped beside her, then bent as the window squealed down slowly. It was electric but it didn’t work that well.

‘Hi,’ she said warily. She was younger than she’d looked from behind – maybe eighteen, and with hair

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pulled so tightly into a knot on top of her head that her eyebrows were miles above her eyes.

Daddy leaned across Ruby. 'You shouldn't be hitch-hiking. We'll take you anywhere you need to go.'

The girl looked at him, then up and then down the road, then at Ruby.

'This your little girl?'

'Yes,' said Daddy. 'She'll get in the back if you want a ride home.'

The girl looked at Ruby, then smiled and said, 'Yeah, OK. Thanks.'

Ruby huffed and puffed and squeezed between the seats so that the girl could sit in the front, and they set off.

The girl's name was Becks. She was coming from her grandmother's in Appledore, and walking the three miles home to Bideford.

'Why don't you catch the bus?' said Daddy.

'I do if it's raining.'

Daddy leaned forward and made a show of peering up at the black sky through the windscreen wipers.

'And it's three quid each way,' the girl amended.

'Still,' he said. 'That Frannie girl got herself murdered around here, you know.'

'Yeah,' shrugged the girl, as if she doubted the relevance of that. 'But everyone knows that were her druggie boyfriend, and six quid's six quid, innit?'

'It is,' said Daddy. 'Are you going to call your grandmother to let her know you're safe?'

'I don't have a phone.'

'You want to use mine?'

‘Nah, it’s fine. She’ll be in bed by now. Thanks.’

They slowed for a roundabout and Ruby hung between the front seats. She couldn’t resist telling the girl, ‘We’re going to catch the murderer.’

‘Yeah?’ said Becks, looking at John Trick with new eyes. ‘Are you a policeman?’

‘We’re just helping out,’ said Daddy. ‘The police haven’t got the manpower these days.’

‘I’m a deputy,’ said Ruby. ‘I’m getting a badge soon.’

‘What’s a deputy?’

Ruby rolled her eyes. ‘It’s like a sheriff, but his assistant.’

‘That’s nice of you,’ said Becks. ‘More people should take care of each other like that.’

Ruby tickled the back of Daddy’s neck. It was an apology, and she was rewarded with a smile.

Then they drove down into Bideford in silence until Becks pointed and said, ‘Right here.’

They turned right into the lane that ran behind Blackmore’s Coal, and let her out halfway down.

‘Hold on,’ said Daddy. ‘It’s raining. I’ve got an umbrella in the boot.’

‘No need,’ said the girl, but Daddy insisted on going round to the boot and getting a big golf umbrella Ruby had never seen before and walking the girl to her door. While he did, Ruby clambered into the front seat once more with a sense of relief.

Daddy came back and opened the boot again, and Ruby could see a tiny strip of him shaking out the white and green umbrella before putting it in and slamming the boot shut. Then he got in and turned the

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car around and set out on another long, winding circuit.

‘She was a nice girl,’ said Ruby.

‘She was a very stupid girl,’ said Daddy. ‘*Anyone* could have picked her up and done anything they wanted to her. Women are just asking for it if they hitchhike, Rubes. I want you to promise me you’ll never *ever* do it.’

‘OK, I won’t.’ Ruby started to sing ‘Red River Valley’ again, but Daddy cut her off sharply.

‘*Promise me!*’

‘I promise,’ said Ruby in surprise. She was a little cowed. Daddy didn’t often shout at her.

He glanced over her way and softened. ‘It’s only because I love you hundreds, Rubes. You’re my little cowboy and I want you to be safe, that’s all.’

‘I know.’ Ruby nodded and hugged his arm. ‘I love you hundreds too.’

It was gone ten o’clock when Daddy pulled up outside the Blue Dolphin and bought them both chips. Just the smell was like heaven – the actual explosion of oil and salt and vinegar on Ruby’s tongue was almost too much. Mummy never made chips at home; she called them artery plugs.

They drove down to the end of the quay and parked on the corner near the statue with the road cone for a hat. There was a small gang of learner motorcyclists there too, admiring each other’s bikes in the drizzle, and an old yellow sports car with black stripes down the front. Now and then the driver tooted the horn and it played the first few bars of ‘Dixie’. Ruby laughed at first, but Daddy said

‘*That asshole*’ and after that she agreed that it was very irritating.

She finished her chips before Daddy was halfway through his, and so he gave his to her, and reached into the back to get a can of cider instead.

He handed her a bottle of Ribena. Not *real* Ribena, but blackcurrant squash in a water bottle.

‘Brought that for you,’ he said.

‘Thanks!’ She drank half of it in one go, she was so salty.

‘Yum!’ she said, and wiped her mouth just the way Daddy always did. ‘This is the best posse *ever*.’

Daddy laughed.

Ruby ate, but she never took her eyes off the people passing by. Small groups of drunken girls or shouting boys; old men with small dogs, fumbling poo into black bags; two teenagers peeing against the Arts Centre wall; a man alone, staggering a little and singing loudly as he emerged from Rope Walk, taking advantage of the flattering echoes from the high warehouse walls.

When Ruby had finished her chips, Daddy got out to throw away the chip paper. He walked back, wiping his hands on his jeans.

‘You’re doing a great job, Deputy. Ready for round three?’

Ruby yawned loudly but nodded and said, ‘Mmm.’ She was tired, but she didn’t want him thinking she was too young to be on the posse.

She didn’t want to be Em.

But round three of the posse turned out to be more like being a free taxi service than a posse. The pubs were

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coming out, and they picked up two more women and took them home. One from a bus stop in Northam to East-the-Water, and another from Bideford to Abbotsham. Each time Daddy made sure they got home safe and dry under the umbrella; each time Ruby had to get in the back. For a while she did her best to look for the killer, but it *was* much harder from there, especially when her eyes kept closing.

The last time someone got out of the car, Ruby didn't even say goodbye. She was curled up in the back, fast asleep.

Posses were exhausting.

23

THE SECOND MURDER was textbook.
Murder for Dummies.

A twenty-five-year-old woman named Jody Reeves put out her thumb and thought, a little tipsily, ‘Mum would *kill* me if she saw me doing this.’

She wouldn’t have done it at all, except that she’d had a row with her boyfriend at the pub, made a bit of a scene and stomped off.

Her mother had always told her, never *ever* hitchhike. And she never ever would have . . . if only it hadn’t kept raining and if only the buses hadn’t stopped running, and if only two miles wasn’t such a long way in those stupid heels that lengthened her legs while they shortened her stride.

Jody was blonde but she wasn’t dumb; she knew all about the dangers. But she also knew what a weirdo-slash-mad-axeman looked like – and how to say *Thanks, but no thanks* and to wait for a woman, or a family, or someone she knew.

She heard a car approaching from behind and turned to look over her shoulder.

Jody Reeves wasn’t about to take any chances, but

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with a bit of luck she'd be home in five minutes, her boyfriend would still be worrying about her, and her mother would never know a thing.



Ann Reeves was watching *You've Been Framed* when her daughter called her for the very last time. Children hitting each other at weddings seemed to be the theme of the show, because all the little girl combatants were in party dresses, and all the little boys wore cummerbunds. Ann had had two glasses of red wine during the course of the evening, which made toddlers pushing each other down church steps even more hilarious.

So she was still laughing when she answered the phone to Jody.

'Hi, darling! It's *You've Been Framed* and these little kids are knocking seven bells out of – *oh!*' she chortled. 'Right in the eye! What, darling? I can't hear you.'

Ann reached for the mute button. The room was suddenly very quiet.

'Say again, sweetie?' She smiled.

'What do you mean?' she said, turning to look at the photo of her daughter that sat on top of the piano. Not a grand piano – just an old upright her mother had left her. She'd learned by ear and Jody had the same talent, right from when she was little. Sometimes they still sat there together and played 'Heart And Soul' or 'Bridge Over Troubled Water'.

'What do you *mean*, Jo? I don't understand . . .' Ann frowned at the photo as if it could translate for her, from

the muffled, sobbing, cracked voice that the caller ID claimed to be her daughter's.

'Mummy. He's going to kill me.'

Ann Reeves stood with the phone to her ear and felt real life drop away from her like a silk cape sliding from her shoulders.

She walked on without it.

Crumpled in her wake, she left behind her the night Jody was born; the smell of her head, the childhood illnesses, the pink eyes, the clammy hair, the spots – each with a dab of camomile lotion crusted around it – the mumps, the colds, the tonsillitis ice cream; the first day at school in an Alice band and long white socks; the sports-day beanbags; the homework tears; tadpoles in a jar and bringing home the hamster for the holidays. The first disco, first date, first period, first teenage row.

I hate you!

I hate you too!

It was all behind her now.

Ann flinched at a new voice on the phone, then slowly put it back to her ear and whispered, 'Who are you and what do you want?'

She listened to the answers without the life left inside her even to beg. She was defenceless, but she had nothing left to defend anyway.

The sounds of a struggle flowed into her head, grunting and harsh.

'Mummy! Help me!'

Ann dropped the phone. Horror ran amok in her with no outlet. She couldn't scream. She couldn't cry. She couldn't move. She was a closed circuit – a super-collider

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where the only conscious thought particle whirring endlessly in her head was, *There's nothing I can do.*

When Jody needed her most. The only time it really counted. She couldn't do a thing to help her.

Bile boiled in her throat and she turned her head as it sprayed from her mouth and nose – across the sideboard, the fruit bowl, the scented candle.

It was a vent. A breach.

A release.

For a long, clouded moment she stood and watched pink-tinged bile drip off an apple. Golden Delicious – Jody's favourite.

Ann had fallen in love with Jody the very first moment she'd seen her. Heart and soul. The thought of Jody being frightened and hurt and alone was unbearable. *Unbearable.*

Then she knew that there was something she *could* do.

Ann Reeves breathed.

She bent.

Her numb fingers found the phone and finally managed to pick it up and put it to her ear. The struggle was still going on. Her little girl was still fighting for her life.

Ann croaked and stopped. Then she cleared her throat and said loudly and clearly, 'I'm here, Jody.'

'Mummy! Mummy!'

Ann swayed. She put out a hand and held on to the sideboard for support. 'I'm right here, Jody. Don't worry about anything. I won't leave you. I won't ever leave you.'

There was a small shriek, an angry grunt, the sound of something heavy hitting the ground.

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'Mummy! I love you!'

'I love you too, my beautiful baby girl.'

Ann Reeves let go of the sideboard.

Then she stood up straight on her own two feet – pinned there by love alone – and stayed with her daughter while she died.



At the end of the day, only one car had slowed down beside Jody Reeves.

That was the one she'd climbed into.

That was the one that had driven her to her death – and from there to a place where no human being would ever find her.

Textbook.

24

PEOPLE WERE STRANGE and obsessive beings. This much Calvin Bridge had learned since joining the police force.

Some of them spent their life savings on toys they never touched; others had secret wives who only ever met at their husband's funeral. Some paid other people good money to smack them on the bottom with a ping-pong paddle. Calvin's own twin brother shaved until he bled, and his body was as hairless as a squid's. They'd been camping in the Peak District last summer and Louis had plucked his own shins by the light of the campfire, with a pair of machine-edged pink tweezers.

Basically, Calvin had learned that people who were *without* kinks and quirks were the exception, rather than the rule.

But forcing a woman to call her mother while she was being murdered was a kink that his heart couldn't fathom.

They hadn't found the body yet, but nobody expected to find Jody Reeves alive – not the *Gazette* or the police, or even her mother.

Especially not her mother.

‘He’ll kill again,’ Calvin told Shirley as they watched Jeremy Kyle.

‘Shush!’ she said. ‘It’s the results of the lie-detector test.’

Calvin shushed, but he knew he was right.

The death of Jody Reeves was nothing like the death of Frannie Hatton. With Frannie there had been an undercurrent of excitement at the station at the thought of a *serious* crime – the kind of crime most of them had joined the force to solve. And Frannie herself – well, it was a shame, of course, but junkies weren’t expected to die of old age.

But Jody Reeves was no junkie – she was a bright, hard-working young woman, and suddenly the undercurrent at the station was one of fear. While Calvin and his colleagues did their jobs and went about their business and followed procedure, there was a disturbing sense that they weren’t the ones in control. And the worst of it was that the where and the when, and the who and the how were already out of their hands. The only real question left was ‘How many?’

Shirley turned to him so suddenly that he flinched. ‘Did you order the hotel brochures?’

‘Yes,’ said Calvin. He’d started saying yes before he’d properly processed any question. It was safer that way. There was a list of hotels that Shirley and her mother wanted to hire for the reception. It was his job to order the brochures and price lists. He hadn’t done it yet, but there was plenty of time.

‘Thanks, Pookie!’

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Pookie was her affectionate name for him. He didn't know why.

Jeremy Kyle's audience booed. 'I knew it!' said Shirley. 'I can always tell when they're lying.'

She leaned against his arm, which was often a sign that she was open to offers, and they were on the leather couch too . . .

But Calvin wasn't in the mood.

There was a killer on the loose. Not the one-off, fumbling, accidental killer they'd all hoped for, but a killer who had started small and was escalating, and whose trajectory could be charted and predicted along psychological *x* and *y* axes.

Ever rising.



The school was abuzz with murder.

Miss Sharpe was a little appalled to discover that a class of ten-year-olds were quicker to lurid speculation than a tabloid journalist. Wide-eyed children told each other the story of Jody Reeves, even though they all knew it already and almost none of it was true. Then they told it again a different way – to even greater effect.

Their diaries testified that several of them had heard screams in the dead of night. Shawn Loosemore had patrolled with a torch and a pellet gun. *Its for rabbits*, he wrote, *but it would blow a hole in your face if you put it rite up close*. Craig Hunter had hitched a ride home with *a weerd man with half a beard*, Essie Littlejohn said she'd

found the dead woman's shoes in a hedge, and even Ruby Trick had entered the fray . . .

If she was hitchhiking then she was just asking for it.

It was straight out of the Dave Marshall school of sexual liberation.

Even in the staffroom, the teachers crowded around Melanie Franklin, whose husband was Jody Reeves' cousin. From her they gleaned every possible detail about the deathly phone call – using tea and digestive biscuits as sly leverage – while Dave Marshall himself stood on the fringes and said loud, pointless things like 'I know what I'd do to the bastard,' and 'Just give me five minutes alone in a room with him,' which guaranteed a no-risk return on his empty machismo.

Miss Sharpe would love to have granted Marshall his wish of five minutes alone in a room with a serial killer. She believed she could have sold tickets.

She sighed and turned to the window to watch the children at play. In the tarmac yard beyond the staffroom window, games of tag and football and hopscotch were in full flow. Kids bickered and laughed, and a black and white ball rang against the brick-wall goal. Ruby Trick's red hair drew her eye. She was alone, as usual, but as Miss Sharpe watched her crouch on the tarmac to re-draw the blue chalk squares melting in the drizzle, her reflection relaxed into a more familiar smile.

She had done the same thing when she was that age. In identical long white socks.

Things changed, but things stayed the same.

Feeling encouraged, her eyes drifted across the playground. She became aware of a pattern emerging in a

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group of children near the school gate. It was mostly 5B, she noticed – all playing some rough game of pushing and pulling and running away screaming, then back in, laughing. A boy would grab a shrieking girl around the neck and hold her, while the others scattered. Then one of them would speak urgently with their fist at their ear, then the others would rush in, release the girl from the boy's grip and wrestle him roughly to the ground with his hands behind his back.

Then the whole thing would start again.

For a moment Miss Sharpe just stood there, trying to make sense of it. Then gooseflesh skittered up her arms as she realized that they were playing murder.

She put down her mug with a sloppy bang and elbowed her way past the ghouls. She stormed out of the staffroom, down the short corridor and out into the rain.

The playground air was filled with the shrieks and chatter of a giant aviary, and although Miss Sharpe shouted 'Stop!' three times, she was almost on top of the children before they looked up. Connor quickly dropped his arm from around Essie's neck and the giggling child hitched her coat back into place.

Miss Sharpe was shaking. 'What do you think you're doing?' she demanded. 'What are you playing?'

Nobody answered. Her eyes drilled into them one by one. 'This game is *sick*. Do you understand?'

Their faces said they sort of did, sort of didn't.

'Two young women are dead,' she snapped at them. 'And that's not something you laugh about in a playground and tell lies about in your diaries! It's something very, very serious!'

Connor laughed and then stopped. The other children stood and looked uneasy and didn't make eye contact. Essie and Amanda Fitch started to cry. *Good*, thought Miss Sharpe. *Teacher's pets, the pair of them, and not used to being yelled at.*

'If I see *anyone* playing this game again, you'll be coming to Miss Bryant's office with me. The whole lot of you. And your parents will get a letter. Do you understand?'

Rose Featherstone, who was on playground duty, wandered over and said, 'What's going on here then?'

'Nothing,' said Miss Sharpe, and brushed past her to walk briskly back inside. As she did, she felt tears start to spill from her eyes. She'd been wrong: things *did* change; they got worse. And there *was* no innocence. Not any more.

'All right?' said Dave Marshall as she passed the staffroom doorway.

'Fine,' she said curtly, then shut herself in the staff toilet and cried until the bell rang for the end of break.

Little children playing murder.

Ruby Trick's well out of it, she thought.



Nanna and Granpa came round with a copy of the paper and a bunch of bananas for Ruby, as if she were a pet chimp.

'What do you say, Ruby?' said Mummy.

'Thank you, Nanna and Granpa,' said Ruby, appalled.

'Full of potassium,' said Nanna to Mummy. 'And

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at least it's *good* sugar. She's still a bit tubby, isn't she?'

She said it right in front of her! Like she was deaf or something. Ruby hated Nanna, with her high voice and her chicken neck and her poppy eyes. She was glad Mummy always said *No, thanks* when Nanna and Granpa offered to take care of Ruby on the nights Daddy was out and she had to work – even if it *did* mean she was alone.

'It's puppy fat,' said Mummy. 'She'll grow out of it.'

Nanna made very high eyebrows, then she shook the paper at Mummy. 'Did you see about this other poor girl?'

'Yes,' said Mummy, glancing at Ruby.

'He made her call her mother while he did it!'

'Ruby,' said Mummy, 'go and put the bananas in the bowl in the kitchen.'

Ruby knew Mummy didn't want her to hear about the murder, but she knew anyway, because of school and Mr Preece's headlines. It was scary, but it was exciting too.

Ruby went through to the kitchen and put the bananas in the fruit bowl. The bowl was always full of keys and old pens and shrivelled-up apples, and the bananas looked too bright in there.

'You want me to cut one of those up for you?' said Granpa behind her.

'No, thank you,' said Ruby.

'You sure, maid? Chopped-up banana with a little bit of cream on it?'

That didn't sound much better. A banana was a banana. But Ruby pretended to think about it for a while so as not to hurt Granpa's feelings.

'No thanks, Granpa.'

He winked at her and lowered his voice. 'I know. Bananas. Ugh.'

Ruby laughed.

'But they're full of potassium,' he said in a high whisper with an exaggerated shrug.

He was being Nanna. It was pretty funny.

Then he said, 'Is there any cake?'

'No,' said Ruby wistfully. She looked at the door to make sure nobody could hear them. 'But there *are* biscuits.'

'Good,' said Granpa. 'Where are they?'

'I don't know. Mummy hides them.'

'Your Mummy can't hide anything from me.' He winked.

They looked through all the cupboards together. He even looked in the pedal bin, which made her giggle.

'What about on top of the cupboards?' he said, stepping back to see.

'Maybe.'

'You want to see what's up there, maid?'

'OK,' she said and reached for a kitchen chair, but Granpa said, 'Don't bother with that—' and picked her up under the arms.

'No!' Ruby hadn't been picked up for years and she didn't like it. She stiffened and Granpa's fingers dug into her armpits, and Granpa regretted it too, because he muttered '*Jesus!*' and almost dropped her before plonking her down on the kitchen counter with a huge puff of air from his red cheeks.

'I'm not as young as I was,' he chuckled, but his whole head had gone so red that Ruby could see it through his

ginger hair. She went red too, at the embarrassment of nearly killing Granpa from being fat. But it was his own fault; she *told* him not to pick her up.

He stood for a moment, getting his breath back, and Ruby checked the doorway to make sure nobody had heard them. While they were quiet Ruby could hear Nanna, still talking about the dead girls.

'What that poor woman must be going through. Not being there when her daughter needed her most . . .'

'Get up there then,' Granpa said, and Ruby got to her knees and then her sock-clad feet on the counter so she could feel along the top of the cabinets. Granpa put both his hands on her bottom in case she fell.

'Careful now, baby girl,' he whispered as she shuffled along. He gripped her a bit tighter to hold her steady.

'There's nothing up he—'

'What are you doing?'

They both jumped and Ruby nearly fell off with fright. Mummy was in the doorway.

'Nothing,' said Granpa.

'Granpa wanted a biscuit,' said Ruby.

'Get *down* from there.' Mummy came over, took her hand roughly and made her clamber down quickly on to the floor.

Nanna tutted and said, 'The last thing she needs is biscuits.'

'Just *leave* it will you, Mum!' said Mummy, and Ruby knew it was serious. Her face was all tight and her lips had gone white. About *biscuits*!

'Go to your room,' she said.

'What did I *do*?' said Ruby.

‘I said go to your *room!* *Now!*’

‘It’s not fair,’ said Ruby. ‘I only—’

‘NOW!’

Ruby made as much noise as she possibly could going upstairs to show everyone it wasn’t fair. Then she got out last week’s *Pony & Rider* and flicked through it angrily.

Nanna and Granpa left soon afterwards, and she heard their big fancy car start up on the cobbles and drive slowly up the road. Their car was red and in the boot there was a carpet that was nicer than the one she had in her room. In the *boot*.

She listened to Mummy clearing up downstairs and then the creaking of the wooden steps. If Mummy was still cross with her she was going to be rude. She was going to tell her it was all *their* fault. Nanna with her stupid bananas and Granpa wanting a biscuit.

But instead Mummy came into her room with a glass of milk and a custard cream and said, ‘I’m sorry I shouted at you, Rubes.’

It took all the angry wind out of Ruby’s sails and she said, ‘OK.’

Mummy sighed. ‘Nanna really winds me up sometimes.’

‘I know,’ said Ruby. ‘She winds me up too.’ She put down her magazine and nibbled the end of the biscuit.

Mummy smiled and touched Lucky on the head.

‘Where did you get this?’

‘Adam gave him to me. His name’s Lucky.’

Mummy picked Lucky up carefully and touched the lettering on the sledge. ‘I thought Granpa might have given it to you. You know, as it comes from Clovelly.’

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‘No,’ said Ruby. ‘Adam walked all the way there and all the way back and it rained the whole time.’

‘Well, that’s nice,’ Mummy said. ‘Why is he pulling a potato?’

‘Because we didn’t have carrots.’

‘Aah,’ said Mummy, and laughed. Then she went over to the little window, where the tree outside pressed right up against the glass.

‘Daddy should cut back these branches,’ said Mummy.

‘I don’t mind. Except for the scratching.’

‘Wouldn’t you like to see out properly?’

‘I don’t really care.’

Mummy stared between the leaves at the dense forest beyond. ‘I’d like to be able to see out,’ she said, but then she drew the curtains anyway.



The few Gunslingers who had bothered dressing up and coming out that Friday night were in a sombre mood.

A second murder had knocked all the swagger out of them – as though their disapproval alone should have been enough to stop it happening twice. A photo of Jody Reeves stared at them accusingly until Daisy Yeo turned the *Gazette* face-down with a short, disgruntled moo.

A posse was a joke, a rope was not enough.

There had been some vague notion that they might find a watering hole of normality together, but it had dried up in the face of their own impotence, and staring into the dust of their failure was no help.

They didn’t have much to drink or much to say. Chip

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and Shiny played a desultory game of cribbage where they lost score halfway through and didn't care. Nobody even thought to put money in the jukebox, and they sipped their ciders and nursed their shorts to the upbeat jangle of 'Barbie Girl'.

They didn't stay late, and when Hick Trick said he was off, they all left together.

Which was how they all discovered at the same time that some son-of-a-bitch had kicked in the front right headlight of each of their cars.

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THE HEADLIGHT WAS only a bit of old plastic, but when Daddy told Mummy about it over breakfast, she cried.

Ruby had seen Mummy cry before, but never so openly. Before, she'd always tried to hide it; this time she cried like David Leather had cried when Shawn threw his violin on the toilet-block roof – with the tears running out of her eyes and down her face in shiny rivers, and making a proper boo-hoo noise, and the air going all wobbly whenever she took a deep breath.

It made Ruby uneasy.

'Stop it, Mummy,' she said, but Mummy didn't.

'Come on, now,' said Daddy. 'It's only an old headlight. I'll get one from the scrappy. And it's just the one. I can still drive it.'

'You *can't*,' sobbed Mummy. 'The police will pull you over and give you a ticket and then I'll have to pay for that *and* the headlight!'

Ruby looked anxiously at Daddy, who pursed his lips and spread out his palms. 'It's not my fault,' he said. 'Someone did all the boys' cars while we were in the George.'

'I *know*,' said Mummy. 'I *know* it's not your fault. But it's always *somebody's* fault and *I'm* the one who always has to pay for it!'

Daddy got up angrily. 'It's always about the bloody money with you!' He picked up his keys, then strode through the house to the front door and Mummy didn't even try to stop him, so Ruby ran after him.

'Can I come?'

'No,' he said and slammed the door behind him.

Ruby stared at it for a long moment, waiting for him to come back and say she could really.

When he didn't, her nose tingled with hurt and anger. Why did Mummy always have to make Daddy feel so bad?

She started to pull on her coat and boots.

Mummy darted out of the kitchen, wiping her eyes and nose on a piece of screwed-up tissue.

'Ruby! Where are you going?'

'To the swing.'

'Why don't you play indoors today?' Mummy was trying to stop crying fast. Trying to smile. 'There are lots of fun things you could do right here,' she went on. 'Maggie can come round for tea if you want. I'll do fish fingers. You could make a den in the garden.'

Ruby was suspicious. Usually her mother couldn't wait to get her out of the house. She was always going on about fresh air and exercise and things being *good* for her. And the *garden*? She hadn't played in the garden since she'd learned to walk.

'Why?' she demanded.

'I just don't want you running about in the woods all

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the time. It's so wet and muddy, Rubes. Wouldn't you rather be indoors? Where it's s— dry?'

She'd been going to say *safe*.

Now Ruby understood: Mummy was scared of the killer. She wanted Ruby to be safe. She wanted something *from* her – and Ruby sensed an opportunity.

'If I play indoors, can I have a biscuit?'

Her mother hesitated. Ruby knew what she was thinking – they'd only just had breakfast, and she wasn't supposed to eat biscuits at all before teatime . . .

'Just the one,' said Mummy.

Ruby ate her biscuit while she tried out cushions for the next posse. She chose the blue tapestry one on the easy chair. It was small and hard, and would give her lots of extra height.

Then, when Mummy went upstairs to strip the beds, she sneaked out anyway.



Ruby sat on the damp bench next to the swing, and picked the bark off two new guns.

Beside her, Maggie painted her fingernails bright red. She had already done her toes, and now she sat with her dirty bare feet tucked up on the bench, spotted with scarlet, while her flip-flops lay empty in the mud.

'You going to the Leper Parade?' Ruby asked, even though Maggie was only seven, so it didn't make any difference to Ruby *what* she did.

'Yeah.'

‘I’ve got a sack to wear,’ said Ruby. ‘And I’m going to have bloody scabs all over.’

‘I’m going to be a fairy,’ said Maggie.

Ruby screwed up her face. ‘You can’t be a fairy. You have to be a leper.’

‘I don’t care,’ said Maggie. ‘I got the costume. It has wings and everything.’

Ruby made a noise that meant that Maggie was an idiot, just like all the girls at school with their secret lipstick and their pop-star crushes and their pencils topped with pink fluff. She must remember to tell Mummy to get Rice Krispies to make the scabs.

‘Look!’ said Maggie, and spread her left hand for Ruby to see. ‘Like a lady.’

Ruby grunted.

‘Mine,’ said Em, snatching at the nail polish. ‘Mine.’ She had only just started to talk but had already mastered all the useful words. *No. Shut up.* And, just lately, *Mine.*

‘No!’ said Maggie and slapped Em’s hand away. ‘You want me to do yours, Ruby?’

‘Nah. My Daddy says girls who paint their nails are slags.’

Maggie shrugged. ‘Just a thumb then?’

Ruby shook her head and Maggie started on her other hand. This one wasn’t even as good as the first. Out of the corner of her eye, Ruby watched Maggie’s left hand bend and twist awkwardly as she tried to control the little brush. The polish splodged over the edges of her nails and smeared down her fingers. Some even dropped on to her dress.

‘Shit,’ said Maggie.

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‘*Shi*,’ said Em. ‘*Shi shi shi*.’

Maggie laughed as she painted. ‘Listen to her! She only knows bad words, don’t you, Em? Shit and fuck. Shit and fuck.’

‘Shi’ an’ fuh!’ said Em, and then shoved a finger so far up her nose that Ruby had to look away.

She finished taking the bark off the second stick and held them both out like a gunslinger, twitching with recoil. *Pow. Pow-pow.* One was better than the other.

Voices floated up through the woods, and soon Adam and Chris followed them.

Ruby hadn’t spoken to Adam since he’d given her Lucky and wasn’t sure what to say.

‘Hi,’ he said, so she said hi back.

‘What are you doing?’ said Chris.

‘Painting our nails,’ said Maggie.

‘I’m not,’ said Ruby scornfully. ‘I’m making guns.’

Adam came over and she handed him the sticks. ‘This one’s good,’ he said.

‘I know,’ said Ruby. ‘The other one’s just the best I could find.’

It didn’t feel any different from the last time they’d spoken, and Ruby was relieved.

He handed both of the sticks back to her. ‘I’ll see if I can find a better one in the woods,’ he said, nodding his head towards the avenue of trees beyond the stile.

‘Are you going to Clovelly?’ asked Ruby.

‘Not today.’ He smiled, and Ruby blushed.

‘Look!’ Maggie waggled her red fingers at the boys and Adam laughed and said, ‘Very grown up.’

‘She’s going to do mine in a minute,’ said Ruby quickly. *She* was the eldest, not Maggie!

‘Mine,’ said Em, and snatched one of the guns. Ruby held on to it and didn’t let go, and then did – and Em fell backwards on to her bottom, squirting an invisible cloud of noxious fumes from her nappy.

‘Oh my God, it’s a stink bomb,’ said Chris, and both boys jogged away, laughing, and vaulted over the stile.

Ruby watched them until they disappeared around the turn in the path.

‘Ready?’ said Maggie.

Ruby turned. Maggie had the little brush out, ready for action. Ruby looked at it warily. It was so *red*!

‘Just a thumb then. And don’t go over the edges.’

Maggie did go over the edges, but only a little bit. Ruby held up her thumb. It shone like a sucked sweet. It was so gorgeous that it made her other nails look pale and naked.

‘D’you like it?’ said Maggie.

‘Sort of,’ said Ruby. She didn’t want Maggie to think she’d been right all along.

‘You wave it around like *this* and it will dry. This is the stuff that dries really fast.’

Ruby started to wave her hand.

‘You want them all done?’

Ruby screwed up her face. ‘How long does it last?’

‘Not long,’ said Maggie. ‘And it’s easy to get off.’

‘Yeah?’

‘Yeah. You just rub it with cotton wool. I seen my mummy do it.’

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Ruby hesitated for ages, then said, 'OK then.'

She held her right hand steady while Maggie leaned over it.

When Maggie lifted her head away, Ruby regretted her decision. Five fingers was *way* too many to paint – especially badly. Instead of her single thumbnail looking like a marvellous and exotic jewel, her hand now looked as though she needed first aid.

'You went over the edges!'

'Only a little tiny bit.'

'I don't like it. Take it off.'

'You have to rub it with cotton wool.'

'Go on then.'

'I don't have any.'

'Well how am I going to get it off then?'

'Your mummy can get it off when you go home.'

Maggie got up and hung over the rope swing on her belly.

'Don't blame me,' she croaked. 'You wanted it done.'

Then she looked at the stile and wheezed, 'They're coming back.'

Ruby got up and walked over to the stile, but she couldn't see Chris or Adam.

'No they're not,' she said.

Maggie got off the swing and joined her. 'I heard them.'

The path led away from the stile for thirty yards before curving sharply inland to skirt a gouge in the cliff. It was made of a narrow strip of compacted earth that softened at the first hint of rain.

Ruby leaned against the slab of slate that made the stile; it was cold against her ribs.

‘Hey!’ she shouted, and there was the sudden sense of something *stopping*. To listen?

‘They’re sneaking up on us,’ whispered Maggie.

‘Then I’m going to go sneak up on them,’ Ruby decided suddenly, and felt a dangerous thrill as she heard her own words.

She wasn’t allowed over the stile, but who cared what Mummy said? She’d been on a cowboy posse, hadn’t she? Hunting a *killer*. She could climb over a *stile*. She would hide and jump out at the boys right at that corner thirty yards off, before she even had to lose sight of the stile and the bench and rope swing. She’d give them a fright, and Adam would see how grown up she was, and they’d all walk back together.

‘You’re not allowed,’ said Maggie.

‘Shut up, slag,’ said Ruby. She swung a leg over the top of the slate.

‘I’m going to tell my mummy on you,’ said Maggie.

‘See if I care.’

‘Shut up.’

‘Shut up times a *zillion* times and no returns.’

There was no answer to that, so Maggie took Em’s hand and yanked her off down the path. Em started bawling – as usual – waddling after her sister with her muddy nappy showing under her dirty pink skirt.

As she watched them go, Ruby felt a flutter of excitement in her tummy. She clambered awkwardly over the stile and dropped down on the other – new – side.

She looked over her shoulder. She was only inches beyond the stile, but the little clearing already looked much smaller.

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She turned and walked away from it.

With every step her confidence grew. She was doing it! She was over the stile and walking on the coastal path. If she kept going she would end up in Clovelly! If she wanted to she could go and find Granpa and Nanna's door. They'd be so impressed by how she'd walked all the way by herself. They'd have tea and biscuits – not fruit – and then she'd walk back again and Mummy would never even *know*.

Ruby steadied the guns in her pockets and started to swagger. Up ahead she heard twigs and small branches snapping, but her own footsteps were silent in the mud.

The curve up ahead was the perfect place for an ambush.

She jogged towards it on tiptoe, careful not to make a sound. Then she dropped to her knees and inched forward until she could see around the thick hazel and ferns.

After the corner, the path straightened out and ran for another fifteen yards before turning to the right again.

Nobody was on it.

Ruby stood up, a little confused. But she had heard someone coming! Maggie had too. And the path was the only—

The back of her neck prickled as she saw a brief flash through the trees to her left. Heard the rustle of undergrowth.

Ruby held her breath and her right hand dropped to her gun.

There was no path there. Nothing but close-grown forest and ferns, and brambles that sent out runners in

long, tripping loops. But something was moving through the dark woods – down the hill towards the village. Towards her.

The killer.

Ruby's mouth went dry.

She turned and looked back at the stile and the clearing beyond. It seemed to be a lot further than thirty yards now. Could she make it?

Her legs decided for her.

She ran.

She almost wished she hadn't. Running made everything more frightening. The thirty-yard dash; the scramble over the stile, banging her knees and falling on her hands; slipping and sliding down the muddy track into the village, now on her feet, now on her bottom. Ruby's ears were filled with the sound of her own heart and lungs. Once she turned and saw something big between the trees. Not the boys, and not on the path. Something big was very close to catching her.

She thought she could hear it breathing.

Ruby's chest burned for air. She wasn't going to make it home. She wasn't going to make it into the village.

The Bear Den!

She tumbled inside, headfirst and frantic, then reached up awkwardly and slammed the little door shut behind her.

It was utterly black and instantly cold. The dirt floor was lower than the pathway, and had turned to mud.

Shock hit Ruby hard and she started to shake and then sob. The dark took the sound and wrapped it around her like a thick marshmallow echo.

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She had to stay quiet. She had to hold on.

She put her hands to her guns, but they had fallen out of her pockets, so instead she drew her knees up and clenched her fists at her chest, shivering.

It smelled. It smelled so bad.

Something brushed against her leg and she slapped it away. What was in here with her? She told herself: *Nothing, don't be silly.*

She froze as she heard footsteps outside. Someone approaching, breathing in short, angry bursts. A chain rattled and she thought of the pedlar under the hearth, all bones and revenge.

Something stopped – right outside the door.

Ruby clamped her hand over her mouth. Her hot tears pooled along the edge of her finger as she looked up at the blackness where she knew the door to be. She had nowhere to go – nowhere else to hide. If she made a sound now, she'd be found. The something touched her leg again, and the smallest shriek escaped her.

Then there was an endless silence where she couldn't even hear the beating of her own heart.

The door opened.

And a bear lunged through it. Lunged at the child who had invaded its home. Huge and snarling, its white teeth shining against its blood-red tongue—

Ruby screamed and screamed and screamed.

Long after she knew it was a dog.

Long after she could see it was attached to a policeman.



There were four dogs searching for the body of Jody Reeves. Two big German shepherds and two brown and white spaniels.

Ruby watched them from the front window, wrapped in a blanket and drinking sweet tea with a custard-cream chaser. Mummy had left the tin on the wide sill, so she could have as many as she wanted, but she'd been on this one for ages.

The dog that had scared her so badly was called Sabre. His handler had tried to get Ruby to shake his paw, to show her what a nice dog he was. Sabre had waved his paw again and again, but she had only cried and clutched at Mummy's waist, while Maggie and Em and Chris and Adam stood in a worried knot along with the rest of the village, who'd run to see the hoo-ha.

She could see Sabre now, coming up the slipway, head down, ears pricked, bushy tail swinging. She hated him for scaring her so. She shivered for the hundredth time as she recaptured the fear for just a split second. That was plenty.

Once they'd come out of the forest, the dogs had moved through the village like panting, wagging pin-balls, zigzagging their way up and down the lane and along the banks of the stream, and between the houses and around the cars. The men had told Mummy they were heading towards Westward Ho! and meeting another team that had started from there.

Now they passed the front gate and Mummy and Ruby went to the kitchen window to watch them clamber up the slippery steps of the Peppercombe path.

Just as the last dog and handler disappeared, the front

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door burst open and Daddy shouted 'Ruby!' and Ruby cried all over again while he hugged her and asked if she was OK and checked her hands, as if for injury. Then he hugged her again while Mummy rubbed her back.

And even through the crying, Ruby thought: *This is how it used to be. All of us together.* And she stayed there as long as she could, feeling loved and safe.

Mummy ruined it by saying, 'What's that *smell*?'

'What smell?'

They stepped away from each other and Ruby sniffed. There *was* a smell. It burned the back of her throat and made her eyes water, the way the limekilns did.

Mummy gasped at the muck on the carpet.

'Where the hell have you *been*, John?'

'Must've been tar on the beach,' Daddy said. 'Sorry.'

'Take your shoes off! It's all over the carpet!'

Mummy got the bucket from outside the back door, making a lot of angry noise with it. She started scrubbing, then she looked at the clock. 'I have to be at work in twenty minutes!'

'I said I'm sorry, didn't I?' said Daddy. 'I was worried about Ruby. That idiot Tim Braund told me she'd had her hand ripped half off!'

'I thought it was a bear,' said Ruby, welling up at just the memory, but nobody looked at her.

Mummy threw the sponge in the bucket and dumped them both in the kitchen sink with a clatter. 'He's not an idiot. She wasn't bitten, but she was very frightened.'

'What do you mean?'

'What do you mean, what do I mean?'

‘You said he’s not an idiot.’ Daddy followed her to the kitchen. ‘What do you mean by that?’

‘Nothing! I just meant he was mistaken. That doesn’t mean he’s an idiot. That’s all. It’s not important.’

‘It’s important to me.’

Ruby watched them anxiously.

She knew why Mr Braund wasn’t an idiot. As Mummy had led her home, shaking and crying, Mr Braund had seen her fingers, stained bright red with nail polish.

Did it bite her? he’d yelled.

She’s OK, Mummy had called as they’d hurried up the hill. *She’s OK*.

Then, while Ruby had stood and sobbed, Mummy had got cotton wool and something from under the sink and scrubbed her fingers and nails until they were clean and sore and smelled like decorating.

Mummy tried to leave the kitchen, but Daddy filled the doorway.

‘Just tell me what you meant,’ he said. ‘That’s all I’m asking.’

‘*Nothing!* I just *said* it.’ Mummy ran her hands through her hair and then put them on her hips. She looked at the wall. ‘John. Please. I need to get changed and I need a lift to work or I’m going to be late.’

He stared at her. She stared at the wall. And Ruby stared at both of them.

Finally Daddy stepped aside.

Mummy brushed past him, then opened the little white door and ran upstairs.

Daddy glared at the door as if he could still see her through the yellowing paint.

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Ruby stood on the spider rug, unsure of what to do. She hugged the blanket closer to her. She'd like to go upstairs to bed, but following Mummy upstairs might look like she was taking her side.

Daddy turned to her. 'You all right, Rubes?'

She nodded.

'Good,' he said, then he whispered, 'I'll get some biscuits and something to drink. Why don't you go and put Panda to bed?'

They were going on a posse.

Ruby screwed up her face. The fear of the Bear Den was still fresh in her mind. It was too easy to revisit. To relive how quickly she'd turned from a swaggering cowboy into a scared little girl – and from that to a screaming baby, unable to stop crying even when Adam was standing right there with his father, watching her.

She wasn't in the mood to hunt down a killer.

'I'm so tired,' she said. 'Because of the dog and all the running and everything. Can you go? And I'll come the next time?'

She was letting him down, she could see it on his face.

'You scared, Rubes?'

'No!'

'It's OK if you're scared. You can tell me.'

'I'm *not*. I'm *tired*.' She'd battled so hard to get Daddy to allow her to go with him. What if he thought she was just a silly scaredy-cat girl now? He might never take her on another posse.

Or anywhere.

Daddy sat on the sofa and patted the cushion beside

him. She sat down and leaned into the space under his arm that seemed to fit her so well.

‘You know how I got these scars, Rubes?’

‘You were bit by a dog,’ said Ruby. ‘Mummy told me.’

‘Did she?’ said Daddy. He stroked the scar that ran through his eyebrow and stared thoughtfully at the table.

‘Did it hurt?’ she breathed.

‘Hurt like billy-o,’ said Daddy.

‘Did you cry?’

‘Like a baby. Much harder than you cried today. And I was *scared*.’

‘Did the police take the dog away?’

‘No.’

‘Why not?’

‘Well, it was my own fault. I was always winding the dog up. My mother always said it would bite me one day.’

‘Oh.’ Ruby nodded. ‘But I didn’t do *anything* to the police dog.’

He laughed without smiling. ‘You can’t trust the police, Rubes! They’re always out to get you – even the dogs.’

Daddy took her hand. There was a tiny speck of red at the base of her left thumbnail, but he didn’t notice.

‘The point is, I *understand* about being scared, you see, Rubes? But when that dog bit me, you know what I did?’

‘What?’

‘I got back on the horse.’

Ruby pricked up her ears. ‘What horse?’

‘When you fall off a horse, you have to get straight back on, or else you might start worrying about falling off again, and then you’d *never* get back on. See?’

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Ruby nodded.

She could hear Mummy starting down the stairs.

‘So,’ Daddy said in his cowboy voice, ‘you all set for the posse, Deputy?’

Ruby hesitated.

‘Next time,’ she said. ‘I’ll get back on the horse next time.’

26

IT WAS A DARK and stormy night and the last bus was late. Or Becky Cobb had missed it. She was so drunk she kept forgetting which was most likely.

She frowned at the watch Jordan had given her for her eighteenth birthday, and saw that it had stopped. She shook her wrist and it started again. It really was a piece of shit, but how could she not wear it? He'd only want to know where it was if she didn't. It was a fake Rolex he'd got in Morocco for *Asda price* and it looked great – apart from the green mark it left around her wrist – but when it came to telling the time it was as useful as a chocolate teapot.

Becky shivered. Seizures Palace was always hot – warmed by the sheer number of bodies on the dance floor and crowding the bar – so Becky was wearing long black boots, a micro-miniskirt and a pink polo-neck sweater that was all neck and barely any sweater, because it showed off her belly ring. It was her latest acquisition and therefore demanded to be displayed, whatever the cost to her health. Now the warmth of other bodies was wearing off fast and she rubbed her arms and looked up and down Bideford Quay, as though she could conjure a bus out of thin air.

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She decided to call Jordan. He'd be cross that she'd woken him, because he worked shifts, but it was his fault for buying her a fake watch, so she didn't feel too bad.

For a moment she thought she *had* already called him, and wondered how long he would be and did she have time to nip behind a car for a wee? Then she remembered that she *hadn't* called him, and needed her phone if she was going to.

Becky staggered a little with the effort of peering into her handbag. Why didn't they make them white inside, so a person had a bloody chance? Especially in the dark.

'Sorry to wake you, Jordy, but my watch stopped and I've missed the last bus home.' That's what she would say when he answered.

When he answered.

The phone went to voicemail, so she hung up and tried again.

Still Jordan didn't answer.

'Bastard,' she said.

'Pardon me?' said a man walking his dog.

'You too,' said Becky.

The man shook his head and walked on.

Becky dialled again. Jordan was a deep sleeper. She'd once had a ten-minute shouting match with that old cow next door right under their bedroom window, and he hadn't stirred. And now he couldn't hear his phone. Becky had imagined it on the bedside table, but now she adjusted her mental picture to it being on the kitchen counter, or in his jacket pocket in the hall cupboard. All those things were just as likely.

'Come *on*, Jordy, pick up the *phone*.'

He didn't.

Becky left a message, then hung up and shivered again.

A car pulled up alongside her and the window went down.

'Need a ride?'

She put one hand on the roof of the car to steady herself, and peered through the window at the man. She couldn't really see him in the dark, but he sounded nice enough. She was half tempted. But he was a man alone in a car and she was a girl alone on a dark and stormy night, and she still had options. Jordy might call her any minute now, and she could probably get a cab.

'Naah,' she mused. 'Better not.'

'You sure?' said the man. 'You've been waiting a while.'

'You been watching me?' said Becky. 'That's fucking *creepy*! My boyfriend'll smash your face in.'

'Be like that,' said the man, and drove off, leaving Becky without the car to keep her upright. She stumbled and would have fallen into the road if it weren't for the lamp post.

Of course, as soon as he drove off, Becky realized that the driver wasn't a mad axeman, that she'd have been perfectly safe in his company, and wished he'd come back.

'Come back!' she shouted. 'Oi!'

He didn't, and she was back to square one.

Jordan didn't call and finally Becky hitched up her tits and wobbled her way across the road to Key Cabs. She knew she didn't have enough money in her purse for the fare, but she was sure they'd take her home on a promise

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of payment at the other end. Becky wasn't quite so sure that Jordan would have the cash when they got there, but by then it would be the cabbie's problem, not hers.

'Can't do it,' said the big man behind the Formica counter in the tiny Key Cabs office.

'Oh, come on,' said Becky flirtatiously. 'I bet you do it all the time!'

The man was immune. He took a bite of kebab and shook his head.

'*Never* do it,' he said, letting Becky see lamb and lettuce swirl in his mouth. 'Been conned too many times.'

Becky wasn't used to being refused when she was wearing this skirt. 'Can't you do me a favour? I've missed the last bus.'

'Get a watch,' he shrugged.

'I've *got* a watch.' She showed him and then pouted. 'But it stopped.'

The man glanced at it and said, 'Get a *proper* watch.' Then he took a more ambitious bite. This time the shredded lettuce hung from between his lips like barbels, and some kind of thin orange sauce trickled down his chin. He sucked in the lettuce noisily and cleared the sauce with the back of his hand, which he then wiped down the side of his leg, somewhere below the level of the counter.

'Fat pig,' said Becky, even though she knew it sealed her fate.

He shrugged again and said, 'Enjoy the walk, slut.'

Becky headed back towards the bus stop because she didn't know where else to go.

She tried Jordan again and mentally cursed him to hell and back for his deep sleep and his lousy gift. She should get a new boyfriend; one who would come and fetch her from a girls' night out. When she got home, she might break up with Jordan.

Becky waited another few minutes. She hoped for the last bus; she hoped the man in Key Cabs would relent and wave her back across the road; she hoped Jordan would wake up and wonder where she was, and call her back.

When none of those things happened, she put up her umbrella and started to walk. What the hell – she was young and healthy and more than capable of walking the four miles to Weare Gifford any day of the week. It was on an unlit, tree-lined country road without pavements, but she'd just have to be careful, that was all. She wasn't *that* drunk. She'd be fine.

By the time she passed the police station four hundred yards up the road, she was feeling less confident. She *was* that drunk, and kept veering off the pavement and perilously close to the road. Once she hit a dog-mess bin and had a little cry because she'd touched it with her bare hands. Also, her boots weren't made for walking. They'd cost her thirty-five quid in the New Look sale, but they were starting to leak, and squelched coldly with every step.

She had almost left the lights of Bideford behind when a car pulled over and rolled slowly to a halt right in front of her.

Brilliant. Becky almost cried with gratitude.

The door opened and the driver stepped out and

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walked towards her, and Becky Cobb felt her whole body prickle in fear.

The man didn't have a head!

For a ghastly, free-falling moment Becky thought she would faint with the horror of it. Then she realized he was wearing a balaclava. Black and woollen, with holes for his eyes and mouth. That was hardly any better. She was transfixed by it; she couldn't move – couldn't even look away.

He pointed at her face. 'When I say get in the car, you get in the car,' he said firmly. 'It's easier for everyone.'

She hit him with her umbrella. It didn't hurt him, because the umbrella was open and the drag slowed it through the air, but it hit his arms and stopped him being able to grab hold of her properly, so Becky turned and ran back down the middle of the dark road, towards the lights. 'Help me!' she screamed, horrified by how small the noise sounded. 'Help me!'

The man yanked her off her feet so fast that all the breath left her as she hit the ground, and she was dragged away from the lights and towards the car, the wet road grazing the small of her back and rolling her micro-mini down around her hips as she kicked and struggled and flailed about for something to grab on to.

They were at the car. The back wheel passed her peripheral vision and she twisted and grabbed hold of it, hugging the tyre like a long-lost lover while the headless man yanked at her arms and prised her fingers open.

'Let go, bitch!' He picked her up so that her body and legs were completely off the ground, but Becky didn't let

go. She clung on to the wheel, screaming and shrieking, with her cheek pressed to the tyre.

‘Hey!’ someone shouted. ‘Hey!’

She twisted her head. There was a person running towards them – silhouetted gloriously against the last streetlight in Bideford, like Jesus in a sunbeam.

The man dropped her.

Just like that.

One minute Becky Cobb was being kidnapped by a maniac and the next the car door slammed, the engine gunned and she was lying face-down in the road – wet, filthy, and sobbing like a helpless child.

Within minutes Becky Cobb was at Bideford police station, waiting for the doctor and DCI King to arrive, and telling the desk sergeant, Tony Coral, everything she remembered.

It was remarkable how much Becky *did* remember, given how drunk she still was.

Tony Coral took down everything she told him methodically and accurately. He couldn’t remember hearing a more detailed description in all his thirty-one years on the force.

Sadly, it was a description not of a kidnapper, but of a wheel. Four bare bolts, the black cable tie holding the hubcap in place, the crack in the plastic shaped like a dolphin, the metal valve cap and the zigzag pattern of treads on the tyre.

‘I’d know that wheel anywhere,’ Becky slurred vehemently every time she woke up. ‘*Anywhere.*’

MISS SHARPE PICKED Ruby Trick's diary off the top of the pile. The title on the cover was written so wrongly, and yet so carefully, that Miss Sharpe didn't have the heart to correct it.

She skimmed the latest entries, corrected a few spelling errors, made a few ticks. She smiled to herself as she wondered whether the childish pleasure of a red pen would ever wear off.

The last line in the book made her gasp.

She had to read it twice to make sure she wasn't imagining it.

And when she had, Miss Sharpe closed the little blue book and sat for a very long time, just staring at the words: *My Dairy*.

Then she picked up the phone to call Ruby Trick's mother.



Just as Calvin Bridge had promised, the Burrows was a thousand acres of flat land that would have been a lagoon if it weren't for the pebble ridge that ran for over a mile and was as high as a house.

These were not any old pebbles. Not pebbles that would sit snug in the hand or skip across a pond. These were kings among pebbles. Emperors of smooth grey sandstone – each one as rounded and as beautiful as the next, and ranging in size from palm to prize-winning pumpkin.

And the irony was that the sea itself had built the ridge that now kept it at bay. For a hundred thousand years, the tide had picked up and pounded jagged rocks from the foot of cliffs as far away as Clovelly. It had rubbed them and washed them and shaped them and rolled them along ten miles of beach, until each rock was worn to a smooth piece of perfection. Finally the ocean had piled them into this natural wall – slowly cheating itself out of the Burrows, which were instead annexed by locals for their sheep and their ponies and, later, their golf.

Twice a day, the angry sea came back for the Burrows. It slunk about the foot of the ridge, casing the joint. Then, with the full weight of the Atlantic behind it, it threw itself at the pebbles, clawing and snarling and roaring its intent to take back its rightful property. Once a month, General Moon ordered it over the top, where it sometimes caught a tantalizing glimpse of what it had lost, and hurled insults and froth, but rarely managed more.

Every year, the Potwallopers walked the tattered edges of the ridge by torchlight and heaved giant pebbles that had been dragged on to the sand back up to the top of the magnificent ridge. Then they feasted on the beach – taunting the sea, and daring it to try again, if it thought it was hard enough.

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In sunshine the pebbles were a tasteful pale grey, some with elegant white crystalline pinstripes. But today it was raining, and they were slate-grey and shiny.

On *any* day, Calvin knew they would break your ankle as soon as look at you.

‘Remarkable,’ said DCI King as they drove along behind the ridge, and Calvin felt a swell of proprietorial pride at this most prominent feature of his home town – as if he’d built it himself.

King yawned.

Calvin didn’t take it personally. He knew she’d been up half the night with some girl who’d been dragged down the Torrington road on her arse.

‘Any luck with that girl, Ma’am?’ he asked.

‘She’s not going to be any help,’ said King, and yawned again. ‘Even sober.’

They left the Volvo on a patch of gravel at the foot of the ridge and started walking. The grass underfoot was as smooth as lino. Any blade that dared put its head above the parapet was immediately cropped by sheep or ponies. Now and then there was a ditch for drainage, or a stand of spiky marsh grass to remind them that they should have been underwater. Calvin held out a hand to a passing pony. It stretched its neck and lips, but lost interest when it found that all he had to offer was fingers.

They stopped at a shallow pan of mud and Calvin bent down to scoop a sample into a small plastic jar.

‘Keep your eye open for Frannie’s nose ring,’ DCI King reminded him.

‘Will do, Ma’am,’ said Calvin, although they both knew it was a hopeless task.

BELINDA BAUER

‘So,’ said King, ‘when’s the big day?’

‘What big day?’

‘The wedding.’

‘Oh. Next year. March thirteenth.’

‘Lucky for some.’ She shrugged. ‘Looking forward to it?’

‘Sure,’ said Calvin, putting the lid on the little jar.

‘What’s her name?’

‘Who?’

‘Your fiancée.’

‘Oh! Shirley. She’s a really nice girl.’

‘You make her sound like a spaniel,’ said King.

Someone shouted ‘Fore!’ and they hunched their shoulders. A dozen yards away, a golf ball thudded softly into the turf beside an uninterested sheep.

Pans were a feature of the Burrows. They took mud samples from two more before it started to rain hard and King decided they had enough for Mike Crew to make a reasonable comparison with the soil between Frannie Hatton’s teeth.

They got back in the car.

‘You can take those samples down to Mike Crew tomorrow,’ said King.

Calvin made the outraged face of a fourteen-year-old boy and she added cheerfully, ‘Isn’t the chain of command wonderful?’

She put the car into gear and pulled off the gravel on to the narrow road.

Calvin looked out of the window at the wet grass and mud-pans slowly filling with sandy brown rainwater, and sighed deeply.

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‘Getting cold feet about the wedding?’ said King, not unkindly.

‘No, no, no,’ Calvin said. ‘Yes.’

King laughed, but he didn’t, and she stopped.

‘It’s just that it’s all happening very fast.’ He made what felt like a ridiculous face and waved his hands to show he was totally OK with it all. ‘Very *exciting*, you know? Bit of a blur.’

He laughed awkwardly. King cleared her throat but said nothing. That was his invitation to say nothing too.

But instead, after a minute or so, he said something.

‘It’s just that everything feels different. People aren’t the same.’

‘You mean Shirley’s not the same?’

‘Yeah. Suddenly she’s not about *us* any more. She’s all about the wedding and the honeymoon and all the children we’re going to have.’

King raised her eyebrows and said, ‘*All* the children?’

Calvin nodded. ‘Three. Rosie, Charlotte and Digby.’

‘*Digby?*’ laughed King. ‘Bloody hell, Calvin! Get out now, while you still can!’

Calvin opened his mouth to tell her that Shirley had wanted Algie, and he’d got it reduced to Digby on appeal, but he was suddenly flung forward so hard in his seat that the inertia reel belt jammed against his shoulder and he braced his hands against the dashboard.

The Volvo fishtailed a little, then lurched to a stop.

‘Get out!’ said King.

‘What?’

‘Get out of the car! Out!’ And she poked him in the arm.

Confused and a little worried, Calvin opened his door. He didn't move fast enough for King. She poked him twice more in the back as he went, shouting, 'Out! Out!'

He did, then took a few paces before turning to face the car.

King got out of the driver's side, looking flushed. 'That's it!' she said. 'Those marks on Frannie Hatton's arm and back – they're in the places they'd be if someone was poking her to get her out of a car!'

Calvin frowned and touched his arm where her forefinger had first landed. There would be a little bruise there, for sure – even through his jacket. And the two on his back were lower than the marks on Frannie, but then, he was a lot taller.

'*Get out!*' said King. 'That's what made me think of it. But Frannie didn't want to get out – she must've known that something bad was going to happen. So he poked her with his finger and the nails left those short, curved bruises.'

She was pacing with excitement.

Calvin frowned.

'What's wrong?' she said instantly.

'Well,' he said, 'a man doesn't *poke*. A man *pushes*.'

King stared at him, then jerked a thumb at the car. 'OK, you get in the driver's seat and push me out. Let me see.'

He did, and she saw. He sat behind the wheel and shoved her out with his spread fingertips and the heel of his hand. He didn't poke.

'And even if he did poke,' he said, staring at his forefinger, 'men don't have nails long enough to leave marks like the ones on Frannie Hatton.'

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King grimaced and said, 'You're right.'

'And Katie Squire noticed that his nails were quite bitten,' said Calvin. 'It's in the report.'

'You're right again. Bollocks.' She sat back down in the passenger seat.

That made three times Calvin had been right in the past two minutes. He was *never* right about swatches.

'Maybe it was a gun,' said King.

'Seriously?' said Calvin. This was Devon; now and then a farmer sawed his granddad's shotgun in half so that he could put the end of it in his mouth, but criminal guns – handguns – were still mercifully few and far between.

But King said, 'Yes, seriously. The bit at the front. The barrel—'

'The muzzle,' he supplied.

'Yes, the muzzle. That would leave a little curved bruise.' She made her fingers into a gun and poked him slowly three times in the shoulder. 'Would – 'nt – it?'

'Yes,' he said, 'it would.' Then he paused cautiously and added, 'But none of the girls who escaped mentioned a gun.'

'I know,' said King. 'Although he could've had a Howitzer and Becky Cobb probably wouldn't have noticed.'

'And if he *did* have a gun, why didn't he just shoot Frannie Hatton?'

'Noise?' shrugged King. 'Or maybe she tried to run and he caught her and lost control of the situation or himself. Or he dropped the gun. Or she knocked it out of his hand and he had to improvise. Maybe it jammed. Or it's

traceable. Or he only needed it as a threat and never intended to use it. Could have been lots of reasons.'

Calvin nodded. They all seemed obvious now that DCI King had said them.

'Or maybe he just likes the intimacy of suffocation,' she added more slowly.

Calvin frowned at her.

'You imagine it,' King went on. 'Putting your hands around somebody's throat or holding them face-down in mud or sand or water. Feeling them fight and then weaken and finally give up and die.'

Calvin did imagine it.

'You'd literally hold a life in your hands,' said the DCI bleakly.

'Yeah,' nodded Calvin, and – almost unconsciously – his hands gripped the steering wheel in front of him, and squeezed so tight that his knuckles went white. 'You'd really have everything under *control*.'

DCI King gave him a serious look.

'Jesus, Calvin. Just tell Shirley to slow the fuck down, will you? Nobody has to die.'

RUBY WATCHED THE sea a hundred feet below. The tide was on the turn and the deep green water slid quietly up against the cliffs and then just hung around with nothing to do until the next swell came along.

She hadn't been to the haunted house since that last time with Adam. She'd been nervous of the flagstone in the hearth. But now the thought of the swing and the stile and the dark woods that hemmed the Clovelly pathway made her *more* nervous.

Her nose was pressed against the floorboard. It smelled of rot. Now and then she moved her eye and put her nose to the hole instead, to breathe the sea air. Now and then she got a whiff of kelp and dankness that reminded her of the muddy paddock, devoid of horses.

She thought of the horseshoe on Miss Sharpe's charm bracelet tinkling as she tapped her finger on the page of her diary.

Where did you hear that word, Ruby?

I don't know, Miss. On the bus, I think.

Do you know what it means?

No, Miss.

Well, it's not a nice word, Ruby. Don't use it, OK?

I wasn't going to, Miss.

Good.

Ruby was a bit confused. She'd heard Daddy use that word, and it couldn't be *that* bad because then she'd been asked to wait after class, and then Miss Sharpe hadn't been angry with her at all. She had asked her about the swing and the paddock and Adam, and if everything was all right at home. Ruby had said, *Yes, Miss* because the house was fine apart from the damp patches and the bathroom window. She hadn't got a clue why Miss Sharpe wanted to know about their home. Grown-ups often said confusing stuff.

Then Miss Sharpe had said, *You know you can always come and tell me things, Ruby.*

Yes, Miss.

Even secret things.

Yes, Miss.

Miss Sharpe had put her head on one side as if she was waiting for something. Ruby didn't know what.

I have a secret. Do you want to hear it?

OK, Miss.

Well . . . I have a pet rabbit called Harvey, and sometimes I talk to him just like he's another person!

Ruby had smiled because Miss Sharpe had smiled, but she didn't see why talking to a rabbit like a person was such a big deal. She talked to Lucky all the time and he was made of plastic. It was like some grown-ups didn't know the difference between games and reality.

Do you have any secrets, Ruby?

No, Miss.

That was a lie, too. But what was the point of *having*

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secrets if you were going to tell them to the first person who asked? Then they weren't secrets any more.

She did wish she had a rabbit though.

A sharp crack close to her ear made Ruby jump.

'Shit,' said Adam. 'I was trying to creep up on you.' He lifted his foot carefully and the floor creaked back into place.

They both made the same alarmed face, and then laughed.

Adam sat cross-legged beside his own hole, like an Eskimo going fishing.

'You OK?' he said.

He meant after yesterday, Ruby knew, but for some reason she didn't feel embarrassed, even though he'd seen her cry.

'Yeah,' she said.

'It didn't bite you, did it?'

'No.'

'They're trained not to bite,' he said. 'Not until the policeman says so. We had a demonstration at school.'

'Yeah?' Ruby was surprised. The only demonstration *her* school ever had was a policewoman with ladders in her tights showing them how to ride a bicycle.

'Yeah, this bloke had a big padded suit on and when the policeman told the dog to bite his arm, he bit his arm, and when he said to bite his leg, he bit his leg. But the dog only did that when he was told. Otherwise he just barked. Those dogs are so well trained.'

'I hate them,' said Ruby.

Adam nodded. 'Yeah, I'd hate them too if one trapped me in the Bear Den.'

He leaned sideways on to his elbow, and then rolled on to his tummy beside Ruby and put his eye to the hole.

There were hardly any waves, and no foam at all.

‘It’s rubbish today,’ said Adam against the wood.

‘I know.’

But they watched it anyway.

‘How’s Lucky?’ said Adam.

‘He’s fine,’ said Ruby.

‘Did you get carrots?’

‘No, a potato.’

‘A potato?’

‘Mmm.’ Ruby was sorry she hadn’t got carrots now. Adam had told her to and it would have been funny. ‘It’s like a boulder,’ she explained.

‘That’s funny too,’ said Adam.

Their feet touched.

‘Sorry,’ said Adam.

‘s OK,’ said Ruby. Then she giggled and nudged him back.

‘Hey!’

They wrestled gently with their ankles for a bit, never taking their eyes from the holes in the planking. Then Adam leaned over and nudged her shoulder with his.

‘Ow!’

He looked up. ‘Did I hurt you?’

She looked up too. ‘No.’

They laughed.

When they put their eyes back to the floor, their shoulders remained touching. Ruby’s eyes were on the sea but her whole mind seemed to be thinking about

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Adam's shoulder touching hers. She could feel his warmth right through their T-shirts.

The sea was dead dull but they kept looking at it anyway.

Ruby wanted to thank Adam. She wasn't sure why. For Lucky, or for saying he'd have been afraid of the dog too, or just for lying beside her so they could watch the sea together.

But talking would have been too loud, so she didn't.

Her elbows started to hurt. She should get up and give them a rest. But she lay there instead, pressing Adam's shoulder with hers.

'My dad's got a girlfriend,' said Adam.

Ruby looked over at him. 'What?'

Adam didn't take his eye from the hole in the floor. 'My dad's got a girlfriend. I heard my mum telling my gran on the phone.'

Ruby stared at Adam's ear. The outer edge of it was very red. Was it always so red? She wasn't sure.

'Who's his girlfriend?' she said, dreading the answer.

Adam rolled on to his side so they were facing each other, but he stared at the floor between them, picking at it with his fingernail. There was a crack there where he'd trodden just now, and a jagged edge. 'Somebody in London, I think. He's always there.'

Ruby wasn't sure what to say. She was relieved to hear that it wasn't Mummy, but she felt sorry for Adam.

'That's horrible,' she said.

'Yeah,' nodded Adam. 'He's a bastard.'

Ruby was shocked to hear Adam use that word about his own father. He must *really* hate him.

‘Is he going to leave you?’

‘I don’t know,’ sighed Adam. ‘I’m not even supposed to know about it. Nobody knows I know.’

‘Does Chris know?’

‘I don’t think so.’

Ruby picked at the crack too, so they were doing it together. The wood was so rotten it was easy to pull bits off, even with their fingers.

‘Who will you live with if they get a divorce?’

‘I don’t know.’ Adam shrugged. ‘With my mum, probably.’

‘Yes, mostly the kids stay with the mummies,’ said Ruby with some authority. ‘That’s what all the kids at school do.’

Adam nodded and said, ‘Yeah.’

He worried the wood angrily with his fingernail until Ruby touched his hand.

He looked up at her.

Then he kissed her.

It took her by surprise, but she only drew back a little tiny bit. She kept her eyes open and so did Adam as his mouth touched hers like electricity. For a second she saw herself reflected in his pupils.

Then they heard Chris banging into the haunted house, crunching something underfoot and saying, ‘Shitting bollocks to *that*,’ and Adam rolled over and put his eye to the floor once again.

‘Adam!’

‘What?’

‘Tea.’

‘OK.’

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He sighed and knelt up and said, 'Bye, Ruby.'

Ruby got up and went to the window and watched Adam and Chris and the dogs all the way down the hill to their house.

CALVIN BRIDGE WAS exhausted. Somehow he had imagined that getting married would mean more of the same, but it was turning into *none* of the same. In fact it seemed to be a process of *chucking out* the same, and filling the same's space with a whole bunch of new stuff that wasn't the same at all. Stuff he really had no interest in. Organization. Commitment. Babies.

Swatches.

How had it happened? Was he overreacting? Was this just the way things went? And was it temporary? After the trauma of the wedding, would he have the old Shirley back? Or was the Shirley that was morphing into a completely different person in front of his very eyes the *real* Shirley? The one he'd be married to for the *rest of his life*.

Calvin actually shivered at the thought.

He longed for drink, drugs and debt. He longed for a Korean gangster flick and a meat-feast pizza all to himself.

He longed for another life. But, between them, Shirley and the Devon and Cornwall Police had him running through *this* life like a hamster in a wheel.

As well as trying to catch a serial killer, on Tuesday

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night Calvin had held Shirley's hand through a tablecloth crisis. The choices were Ivory, Buttermilk and Vanilla. They were all the same, but it had taken three hours hunched over the huge and hideous books of swatches, and two long, weepy interludes, to reach a decision.

And the swatches were only part of it. Shirley had turned Calvin's flat into her own little incident room, swirling with a thousand paper samples and cloth samples and cake samples and favours and flavours, and infinite lists that Calvin was supposed to have memorized. It was a glittery tide of wedding porn – all of which cost a thousand times more than *real* porn. The invitations were impregnated with bits of lavender and had edges that were 'hand-torn' – presumably by experts, given the price. And the centrepieces – which were only made of *flowers* – were each the same price as a crate of reasonable beer. The cake was costing more than Calvin's first car.

'Is it made of *gold*?' he'd said, and Shirley had cried for the four millionth time since the Italian Grand Prix.

'Do you know what I'm thinking?' said Kirsty King.

'No,' sighed Calvin. 'I don't know what *any* woman's thinking. Ever.'

DCI King gave him a quizzical look. They were eating lunch in the incident room, which doubled as the staffroom. There were vending machines containing curly sandwiches and warm chocolate bars, and a frieze of evidence around the wall. Photos of Jody Reeves and the Burrows and the lay-by, and of Frannie Hatton's body – still the only one they had.

Most of the major-incident team had gone out for

chips, but Calvin was eating a sandwich from the machine that was so tasteless he had to keep looking at it to make sure it was still prawn. DCI King brought the same lunch from home every day – a pork pie and olives, which she fished out of their tall glass jar with Dr Shortland’s gall-stone scoop.

It was perfect for the job.

Now DCI King popped one in her mouth, ignored his lament, and carried on where she left off. ‘I’m thinking, maybe the women weren’t the targets.’

Calvin raised an eyebrow. ‘Frannie Hatton would probably disagree with you.’

‘Touché,’ said King. ‘They were *targeted*, of course, but what if they weren’t the people he was really aiming to *hurt*?’

Calvin wasn’t quite sure what King was getting at, but he was happy to go along with her, if only because she wasn’t talking about renting an owl as a ring-bearer.

‘We have so little to go on,’ King continued. ‘But, taking the assaults on Kelly and Katie into account, what we *do* have to go on is a consistent m.o.’

She started to count the *modi operandi* off on her fingers, using the gall-stone scoop as an aid. ‘One: he covers his face. Two: he makes them take their clothes off, but he doesn’t sexually assault them. Three: he makes them phone their mothers.’

She paused and Calvin looked at her expectantly for ‘four’.

‘That’s it,’ said King. ‘Those are the only three things we know for sure. Everything else is just extrapolation or assumption.’

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‘OK,’ he agreed.

‘So, covering his face is obvious. But you tell me, Calvin, why does he make them strip and then not touch them?’

Calvin did try to think, but it seemed counter-intuitive. Once a woman took her clothes off, the whole *point* was to touch them. Otherwise you might as well just read a magazine. He had to admit, ‘I don’t know.’

‘Neither do I,’ said King. ‘I mean, I know it’s going to turn out to be some weird screwed-up reason because of some sexual dysfunction or some shit that happened when he was a kid or something. But what it does do is speak to *motive*, and it tells us that – for the first three assaults at the very least – the motive was *not* to sexually assault these women. Even if he’d been working up to it, then I reckon he would have got there by Frannie Hatton, don’t you? I mean, if you can murder someone, you can sexually assault them, surely?’

‘Right,’ Calvin assumed. ‘That makes sense.’

Did it? He wondered. What made sense to a killer might not be what made sense to DCI King and him, eating their lunch in Bideford police station.

King went on, ‘But *call your mother*. That’s bizarre and it’s consistent and it’s very specific. And he’s been saying it right from the start, so it must be an important element in whatever sick game he’s playing. It makes me think, why are they all *young*? And that makes me think – they’re all young enough to have mothers to call, so maybe the mothers are the key.’

‘But there are no links between the families,’ said Calvin. ‘The mothers don’t know each other, they don’t

share the same interests or incomes or lifestyles, they don't go to the same places or know the same people.'

'Right,' said King. 'And that's why I started thinking, maybe the mothers have been the targets all along. Not because of *who* they are, but because of *what* they are.'

'And what *are* they?' said Calvin.

King stared at him. 'They're mothers, Calvin.'

Calvin frowned. 'But how can *they* be the targets if he's killing someone else?'

'Think about it,' said King. 'Who suffers more – the victims or their mothers?'

'The victims,' shrugged Calvin. 'They die.'

King tapped her teeth with the scoop. 'You don't have children, right?'

'Not yet.'

'Nor me,' said King. She drummed the scoop on the table a few times, thinking, and then looked over her shoulder to the desk sergeant, Tony Coral, who was eating a cheese and onion pasty at the table behind her. 'Tony, you have kids, don't you?'

'Two boys,' nodded Sergeant Coral, with flaky pastry down his front.

'What are their names?'

'Ivor and Martin.'

'Would you rather die yourself or watch Ivor and Martin die?'

'Bloody hell!' He coughed, but King just kept waiting for an answer, so he croaked, 'How are they dying?'

'Horribly,' said King.

Coral brushed flaky pastry off his tunic and shook his

head. 'Jesus, I couldn't watch that. Don't even like thinking about it.'

'So you'd rather be dead yourself than watch your children die?'

'Yup,' he said, and put his pasty down with a look that said he wouldn't be picking it up again.

'Cheers,' said King, and turned back to Calvin. 'See? What if the killing's just part of the whole *thing*? The stripping and the calling the mothers, and forcing them to witness the murder? The girls suffer and die, but the mothers have to suffer and go on *living*.'

Calvin frowned. 'It seems a bit of a roundabout way of hurting someone.'

'Maybe he can't hurt his own mother – or maybe he doesn't even know he *wants* to – and so he's taking it out on other people's mothers.'

'Acting out,' said Calvin. 'I think that's what Americans call it. Shirley watches those shows where people blame their parents for everything. Acting out. Or is it acting up?'

'No, that's the kids on *Supernanny*,' said King. 'But whatever the Americans call it, it makes sense, don't you think?'

Calvin shrugged. 'As much sense as any other bloody thing.'

DCI King nodded and sat back in her chair. Then she said, 'You're shedding cherubs.'

'Huh?' Calvin followed her gaze under the table to his feet, where a light sprinkling of tiny silver and gold foil cherubs had escaped his turn-ups.

That *fucking wedding*.