



SCARE ME

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HODDER CHILDREN'S BOOKS

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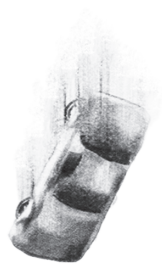
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1

Echo

I try to stop myself getting on the train.

I've been at Victoria all day. Leaning on a wall, pacing, sometimes on a bench. Ignored or avoided by commuters, then students and waves of tourists. Now and then, just for fun, I stare and almost catch someone's eye; they look uncomfortable before turning away. A lone teenage boy – one that looks like me? – they don't want to engage.

Then the students and commuters come again, and finally the evening crowd. Still I watch the departures board for each train to Brighton, willing myself not to go. I was here yesterday, the day before too. Each day it is harder to stop myself.

The last train will go soon. I've almost made it, but even as I'm congratulating myself and heading for the exit my feet turn me around in the wrong direction, towards the train and not away from it. I'm fighting to stop, to turn, each step of the way.

I reach the ticket barrier and don't even pause to look around and choose a likely moment: hands up on either side of the gate, I vault over to the platform. Maybe a guard will see, give chase? But there are no cries of stop, wait, no rushing footsteps.

No such luck.

Platform eighteen. The train is already here. People are running to catch it, out of breath as they go through the doors.

This is it; this is the moment. Stop agonising; either get on the freaking train, or don't.

Who am I kidding?

I step on just as the doors start to close. The whistle sounds and now it's too late to change my mind. I'm committed.

I follow a group of gasping, giggling students down the aisle. There are more students already in seats, some drunks. A few people with laptops and suits. Enough empty seats this late for me to avoid them all and find a row to myself, and I sit down, lean against the window.

Why am I doing this?

It's almost a year since Mum died. There's nothing I can do to change what happened, but I can't leave it alone.

They thought I couldn't hear the whispers – that it couldn't have been an accident, not when she pointed her car at the cliff's edge, hit the accelerator, hurtled down and crashed into the sea. They think she did that, on purpose, with me in the car? I'll never believe it.

And it kills me that I can't remember. Somehow I must have opened the passenger door, jumped out. Hit my head. When I woke up, I didn't know what had happened – it was amnesia from the trauma, or the head injury, or both. I'd hoped my memory would come back, but it never did. The last thing that I remember before the crash is getting in the car; the next is waking up on the side of the road, lost, confused and alone.

When I opened my eyes I didn't even know that my mother was dead.

It's all a blur from that point. The inquest, with its open verdict; the funeral. The few relatives who turned up – like

my dad's parents – who grudgingly took me home to London with them. It was all like it happened to someone else, as if I saw the funeral – my mother lying in her coffin, still and cold – through a fog.

But now the closer the anniversary of that day gets, the more stark and painfully clear everything becomes. There's no point in fighting it because there is nothing else I can do. As much as I never, ever want to go there, where it happened, I have to do it. I have to see if being there will make me remember.

And if the memory still won't come, there is another way – to return to the moment. To live the nightmare again.

I flinch inside to even consider it, but the closer the train gets to Brighton, the more the darkness calls.

2

Liv

‘Can you jump it?’ I say.

Bowie eyes the distance between the window and ground below. One floor up, grass to land on.

‘Yeah. No problem. Where are my . . .’

We hold our breath as floorboards creak on the stairs.

‘. . . trainers,’ he whispers, finishing the sentence.

I find one and after a minute he finds the other on the floor, under his jacket. He pulls them on and bends to tie the laces.

One step, two . . . past my door. Pipes grumble and water splashes in the bath two doors down.

Thank God.

‘I know this doesn’t look good, but is she really that scary?’

I shrug, preferring not to answer. Mum’s reaction if she finds Bowie in my bedroom at – I glance at the clock – almost 1 a.m. doesn’t bear thinking about.

He straightens up, pulls on his jacket. Leans on the windowsill and smiles. Framed in moonlight. His blond hair is tousled, his eyes still sleepy from our unplanned nap over our English homework. They seem to be staring into mine. My mouth goes dry and my stomach flips.

‘Away you go, then,’ I say.

‘Kiss me first.’

‘What?’

‘Kiss me, or I’ll tell everyone we slept together.’

‘You wouldn’t dare!’

He laughs. ‘You can’t deny it: it’s true.’

‘Ssssh.’

‘OK, you’re right; I wouldn’t dare,’ he says, his voice lower. ‘But kiss me anyhow. Please?’ He holds out his hands and smiles again.

Moonlight *and* dimples. My feet seem to have plans of their own, and step forward. He catches my hand in one of his. Bends – when did he get so tall? – and slips his other hand around the side of my face, my neck. My skin comes alive, vibrates with the warm touch of his.

I shiver. ‘This is weird.’

‘Shut up.’ He leans down, and there is mint and soft lips and some earthy smell all his own and I’m melting, inside, until all that is left of me is where his hands and lips hold me still, unable to breathe, to move, to do anything but kiss him.

All too soon he pulls away.

‘Bye, Liv.’

He pushes the window open wide, sits on the ledge. Starts to swing his legs around, but then my bedroom door opens.

‘Livia Brogan Flynn! What on earth is going on in here?’

Bowie freezes.

I spin round, heat rushing up my neck, my face.

Mum. Still dressed – thank God for small miracles – and looking very amused.

She is across the room to Bowie before I can blink.

‘Hi, I’m Liv’s mum.’

‘Ah . . .’

‘Don’t worry. I won’t bite.’

‘Hi, Mrs Flynn. I’m Bowie.’

‘It’s Ms, but call me Lexi.’

He has one leg hanging out the window and one in, looking from me to her, holding on to the window ledge with his hands like he’ll fall off if he lets go. Sort of how you feel I guess when you are expecting the parent of a not-quite-sixteen-year-old girl to react in a hysterical fashion, and instead you get a Lexi.

Mum laughs. ‘You can jump if you want to, but now that I’ve caught you sneaking out of my daughter’s room you might as well use the front door.’

He swings his other leg back in the room.

‘Stay for tea? Or a beer,’ Mum says.

‘Ah, sure?’ He’s hesitant, a bit shocked. I’m guessing his parents don’t offer beer to the underaged.

‘Mum, the bath?’ I say.

‘Oh!’ And she dashes out of the room to turn off the water.

‘Run,’ I hiss at Bowie.

‘What?’

‘I mean it. Go!’

But he is too slow, only half across the room when she reappears in the door.

‘Come on, you two miscreants. Downstairs.’

‘He’s cute,’ she stage whispers as she follows behind. Then she adds, ‘It’s about time.’

I wish very hard I could melt like the wicked witch of the west into a puddle and disappear.

No such luck.

She puts the kettle on for us and hands Bowie a beer, and I

make myself small on a chair. Bowie's eyes follow her. I told her that dress was too tight before she left on her date.

'Don't you need to get home, Bowie?' I say. 'Won't your parents be worried?'

'Nah. They're not bothered on a Saturday night.'

I look daggers. He's too busy looking at Mum's cleavage as she bends to pour the tea to notice.

She puts the cups on a tray. 'Follow me,' she says, and crosses the hall. I groan. The sitting room. I *hate* anyone going in there.

'So, where have you been hiding your young man?' she says to me. 'Apart from in your bedroom after midnight.'

I cringe. 'He's not my *young man*, whatever that is supposed to mean. We were just doing our English homework.' Something that would never have happened here if Mum hadn't been out.

'This late?' She raises an eyebrow.

'Honest,' Bowie says. 'Shakespeare's *Richard III*. And we fell asleep.'

'Hardly surprising,' Mum says, and switches on lights, gestures towards the sofa.

Maybe a proper miracle will happen now; after all this I'm due one, I'm sure of it. Maybe he won't notice the photographs.

'That's you?' Bowie says, and goes straight up to the last on the wall. It's me and Mum almost a year ago, on my fifteenth birthday.

Don't, my eyes are saying to Mum, pleading, but she either doesn't notice or ignores me.

'You need to start at the beginning,' Mum says, and takes his arm and draws him to the other end of the room.

Starting at the beginning is a framed ultrasound – from before I was *born*. No privacy even in the womb.

‘Now, this is a very special photograph,’ Mum says. ‘See, here, this is Liv.’ She traces me as a foetus. ‘And there, the smaller shadow next to her? That is Molly, her sister.’

‘Twins?’ Bowie turns to me. ‘There aren’t two of you?’

‘It would explain her moods, wouldn’t it?’ Mum laughs. ‘Sweet Liv, evil Liv.’

I glare.

‘No. Sadly Molly died.’

Thankfully she spares him the details and he doesn’t ask. But he will eventually. Won’t he? He’ll want to know, and then what? It’s not like I can tell him anything like the truth about Molly.

Mum goes on to the photo of me seconds after birth: a great look.

Then follows one of Mum and me on each of my birthdays. For the first four years Dad was in them too, but when they split she had the photos enlarged and reframed with him neatly excised off the side. I see Dad so seldom now, leaving the photos as they were might have been useful for recognition purposes.

By the time Mum has Bowie back across the room to look again at the photo from my fifteenth, he comes up with the compliment she’s been hoping for. She’d gone to lengths on that photo session, now that I was older. We’re nearly the same height, though I’m a bit like a weed standing next to Marilyn Monroe. Eyes similar dark brown, both with long dark hair – hers straightened to look more like mine for the shoot – jeans and

white T-shirts that show off the tan we'd got on a beach in Spain at the end of the summer.

'No way do you look like her mum. You look like her sister,' he says. 'You could be twins: Lexi and Liv.'

He's made her night.

He finally leaves after many promises extracted to visit whenever he likes, with no necessity to use the window. Not sure, but I think Bowie just got granted a parental pass to my bedroom at any hour of the day or night.

Huh.

It starts as soon as the door shuts behind him.

'Liv, he's adorable.'

'Why don't you go out with him, then?'

'Liv!'

'What?'

She sighs. 'I'm just trying to help. He's a sweetie but he'll get away if blah blah blah blah . . .'

I tune out of Mum's guide to pleasing men. She should know, I guess. I eventually escape back upstairs.

My phone beeps as I shut my door. A text from Bowie: your mum is amazing, what were u worried about? xxx

Three kisses: he hasn't signed off a text like that before. My stomach lurches as I remember Bowie in moonlight: he held out his hands by the window. He kissed me. Did it really happen? It's confusing, he's my friend, I don't think of him like that – but then, all at once in that moment, I did.

But now Amazing Mum is all over it.

I put my phone on silent and chuck it on my desk. I throw

the window open wide, lean out into the night. The cool breeze is tangy from the sea; Brighton beach is close enough to hear the comforting murmur of the waves in the background, but far enough away that in daylight I have to stand on tiptoe in exactly the right place to see a stretch of blue.

Whatever I do, wherever I go, my friends . . . everything. If it's not her, then it's Mum. Wanting to be there. Crawling into my skin, living my life.

All I want – all I have *ever* wanted – is space. To be able to breathe.

Goosebumps creep up my arms, my back, like an army of little spiders. Mid October, a clear night; it's not that cold. I don't turn.

Mum's right; he's adorable.

'Go away.' I shut the window and get into bed. I should have known Molly had been lurking when Bowie was here, even though she promised not to. Not even that moment is mine, alone. Nothing ever could be, could it?

Sorry. I tried to stay away; I couldn't help it. That kiss was . . . yummy.

I touch my lips with my tongue; they tingle with the memory. I shake my head. 'He's not coming back. I'll see to it.'

Liv, come on. I hardly get to see anyone.

'I thought you didn't like it when I had friends over.'

Sometimes I don't. But Bowie is different.

'Bowie is my friend. Not yours.'

That's not fair!

'Life's not fair.'

Death isn't, either.

I don't reply. What is there to say to the ghost of your sister when you're the one who killed her?

Nothing.

Molly stretches alongside me, cradles her arms around me until the cold seeps into my bones.

It wasn't your fault. I don't blame you.