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DEATH OF A MERMAID

Written by **Lesley Thomson**

Published By **Head of Zeus**

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DEATH OF A MERMAID

Lesley Thomson

I had an inheritance from my father
As small as the note it came on.
Few words exchanged
In such a long time.

An unwelcome surprise
To walk over familiar ground.
Winter sun clears the mind,
My youthful spirit returned.

Accept, forgive, disappoint,
Who needs to know?
I had an inheritance from my father
And I said no.

Stuart Carruthers

2017

For Domenica de Rosa

Prologue

Buffeted by the wind a woman picked her way down the cliff path. A sign on the shingle ridge warned, 'No safe access beyond this point'. Icons showed four kinds of danger. Falling rocks, slippery surfaces, rocky foreshore and deep water with high tides.

The sun had set, the sky towards Shoreham was washed pink.

Four dangers. What is the fifth danger? Or who?

The grille across the entrance to the battery was open. The woman had to look twice to be sure. All her life it had been barred. The Mermaids used to scare each other making up what lay within. They knew the layout from history lessons. Gun chambers off a passage, apertures facing the sea. They'd imagined a skeleton on a heap of ammunition that was used to fire at Napoleon's ships. He would be a lovelorn soldier who'd killed himself and was never found.

At first the tunnel was pitch black, but bit by bit the woman orientated herself and shapes resolved into doorways into the chambers.

As fast as this vision excited her, it dissipated. She felt the enormity – a plummeting realisation – of her mistake. She was no longer seventeen and in love. The gravelly trawl of the sea ground into her thoughts. If she left now, she'd be caught.

Swiftly, silently, she pulled shut the grille behind her. The padlock hung loose, but in the dusk it would not be obvious that it was unlocked.

She groped back down the tunnel. The walls were wet, not with seawater or rain, neither would penetrate into the heart of the cliff. It was the slime of centuries. She clutched her crucifix and made herself retreat to the end of the tunnel. She hid in the furthest cell. The light was dwindling, the shape of the gun sighting blurred. It was as if reality had retreated with her.

She had come to redress sins. Instead she was skulking in a tomb with her secrets. She crossed herself.

She felt a warm grip around her neck. She tried to shout. Something was stuffed in her mouth. She went to prise off the fingers, but snatched at nothing. She fought blindly, kicking, unable to slither out of the iron-like grasp. Whatever was in her mouth blocked her nose. She heaved for breath but her lungs found no air.

‘Where is it?’ A grating question like the shingle dragged by the waves.

She had vowed to be unafraid of death. When her time came, she would welcome Jesus. Except...

Not now... not yet...

1

KAREN

‘Sort it,’ Karen Munday snapped. On her way upstairs, she heard the front door shut. She assumed she was alone.

The bedroom was a heap. Karen picked up a pillow from the floor and then, revved up by the exchange, flung it down. She was within sight of her goal.

That morning she’d bumped into Toni Kemp in the Co-op. Kemp was no better than she ought to be. Just like when they were kids. Acting like she didn’t need God. This time, Toni had served Karen gold on a plate.

She retrieved the pillow and, hugging it, sank onto the bed. Her mind travelled back twenty-five years as if the morning in the convent chapel was hours earlier. The forty-year-old Karen Munday was a teenager again, sliding along the Mermaids’ pew in the hope of sitting close to Mags.

*

‘Sorry, Karen, this is taken.’ Mags did sound sorry, but Karen didn’t pick it up.

‘Then where will I sit?’ Karen glared at the crucifix above the altar.

‘We don’t care, but you can’t be there.’ Freddy Power’s rosary dangled from her fingers. She jerked a thumb for Karen to move away from Mags.

‘I was here first.’ Although marked with a prayer card, Karen flicked through her missal for the place. Some pages were ripped from when her mum had gone off on one.

‘Toni’s dad’s dead,’ Freddy hissed. ‘That’s *her* seat now.’

‘But I’m a Mermaid,’ Karen asserted loudly.

‘Shut up!’ Freddy hissed. Being a Mermaid was a secret thing. ‘*So* is Toni.’

‘Who says?’ Karen was stung by this news. You got to be a Mermaid if you liked the Disney film of *The Little Mermaid* or, like Karen, you’d stopped Mags being done over by one of the Dunnings. Karen survived home life by keeping her head down, and school by going in fists first. A face-off with Freddy Power was new territory. Freddy’s dad ran the local fishery. Karen’s uncle had lost his job for giving Fred

Power lip, and Power had seen to it that he couldn't get other port work. The Mundays never again took on a Power. Until now.

A hush fell over the pews. Girls scented trouble. Fights in the convent were supposed to be out of the sight, if not from God, at least from the nuns. *And never in a sacred space.* Two sanctions equalled a misconduct mark. Karen had three for sins that involved queue-barging for a second pudding, chewing gum in class and not doing her homework.

'Leave it, Freds,' Mags mouthed at Freddy. Karen was off the hook. Freddy Power always did what Mags told her. Freddy moved up for Toni Kemp and was rewarded by a smile from Mags.

Mass progressed in a blur for Karen. Toni Kemp was a Mermaid, which meant they were no longer a select group of three. As Father George lisped through the 'Gloria in Excelsis', Toni approached the altar and Father George passed her a book. *She was doing the second reading.* You only did that if you'd been very good, could read without stumbling or were Margaret McKee.

Karen swiped through her missal to the Letter of St Paul to the Ephesians. Not a confident reader, she slid her prayer card down line by line to follow.

"...This you can tell from the strength of his power at work in Christ..."

Toni had sounded a bit like Karen's idea of God. Surprised by the girl's cool authority, Karen felt a pain as if, like Mr Kemp, she'd got herself stabbed in the heart with a broken milk bottle.

"...which is his body, the fullness of him who fills the whole creation. The word of the Lord."

'The word of the Lord.' Karen had raised her eyes. Toni Kemp was watching her. With the twisted perception of a thwarted adolescent, Karen was convinced Toni had engineered her tragedy to worm her way into Mags's Mermaids.

Karen leant forward in the pew so Mags could see her doing a decade of Hail Marys.

'Holy Mary, mother of God,

Pray for us sinners, now...'

'A-men.'

Caught in the tendrils of the memory, Karen spoke out loud in the bedroom. ‘At least it’s not me whose dad is buried up at Newhaven cemetery.’

Karen had harboured humiliation and the rapier sting of betrayal since the convent. Now she had the perfect means for revenge. That morning in the Co-op, Toni Kemp had not realised she was standing in the sweet section.

When Karen went to the toilet, she didn’t hear the creak on the stairs.

2

FREDDY

Freddy Power loved early shifts at the supermarket. The hour and a half before customers arrived when – if you didn’t count night staff – she had the shop to herself. Her particular domain was the fish counter at the back of the shop. Although it wasn’t why she’d come to Liverpool over twenty years ago – she’d been running away, not running towards – the job was tailor-made for her.

Never overly interested in fashion – at the convent she’d accepted the uniform – now Freddy welcomed the white shirt and black trousers. It made life simple. Shutting her locker, she stepped onto the shop floor. She switched on the fish counter and the oven cooker and like a proud theatre director surveyed the house before the audience arrived. In the fish cooker she caught the aroma of garlic and rosemary from yesterday. At six in the morning the smell was too much for some. For Freddy it heralded the start of a new day.

She admired the sweep of stainless steel reflecting bright overhead lights. Her blank canvas. She envisioned the fish she would arrange there.

Behind the scenes Freddy released the trap in the ice machine and an avalanche of chipped ice shot down into a giant container. She wheeled it through to the counter and hefted it onto the sloping display until it was inches deep in sparkling crystals. Freddy’s hands were numb. She preferred contact with her wares. Working with fish, slippery skin, scratchy scales – dead or alive – was about the senses.

In the fridge room, she drew forward the cage of fish delivered overnight. The plastic boxes of fish and seafood reminded her of the fishery when she was young. Yellow, blue and red, filled with fish that needed gutting, filleting, weighing and bagging. Sarah couldn't understand why Freddy loved every minute of it.

Something lay on the floor and she picked it up. Blue beads and a silver chain. Not much of a Catholic these days, Freddy always kept her rosary in her pocket. Mags had bought all the Mermaids a rosary on the convent trip to Notre Dame when they were fourteen. Toni had said Mags only bought it because Freddy was poor and she felt sorry for her. That wasn't kind of Toni, but as she'd got comatose the night before and had a terrible hangover, Freddy forgave her.

Now she remembered that, as the ferry berthed at Newhaven, Toni had flung her rosary into the sea, declaring at the top of her voice that God was dead.

Chilled by the frozen air, Freddy found herself doing a Hail Mary for the Mermaids, wherever they were now. For Mags.

There was a shortfall on her order of smoked haddock. It was a popular day for making Cullen skink, a soupy stew of haddock, leeks and potatoes. She'd be out of haddock by mid-morning.

Annoyed with herself, Freddy set about arranging her stall. Erica had been on the nightshift so all was shipshape, price labels ready, cutting boards scrubbed. Freddy put the previous day's unsold fish at the front of the cabinet, closest to the customers, to encourage a quicker sale. Smoked fish on their left, then breaded fish, followed by a strip comprising tuna, scallops, sardines and squid. Hake, bass and one of her favourites, bream. Lastly, a delicate arrangement of prawns, oysters and mussels around the bags of samphire and parsley and delineated with lemons. The samphire was imported from Israel. As a kid, Freddy used to pick it from the beach at Newhaven. Getting out early to beat anyone else who knew where to look. She'd sell it to her dad, leaving a ten per cent mark-up for his customers. Frederick Power had encouraged his eldest child's entrepreneurial spirit. She took after him, he used to say. Before he called her a freak of nature and disowned her.

Freddy speared the labels on sticks into the ice. She walked around to the front to consider the effect from the customer's perspective. When they were trading insults, frequently these days, Sarah said people paid no attention to how the fish were displayed. Freddy said Sarah spending her life with murderers and rapists had killed her eye for beauty.

In a terrible American accent Maxine PA'd that it was 'five to take-off'. Freddy was on schedule.

Last but not least, the knives. From her locker Freddy hooked out a bashed-up leather bag. She had bound the handles with a ring of blue gaffer tape, the colour code for fish, to avoid cross-contamination with the meat section, coded red.

The knives had been a coming-of-age present from Freddy's father when she turned ten. They were, he'd informed her, his mark of trust in her. His father had given him the same gift. She was the next generation. She wished he'd let her stick around to prove it.

She wiped the blades of the knives and placed them on the blue cutting board. She retied her overall and adjusted her net cap. She was all set.

Lift off, we have lift off. Maxine's voice crackled over the system. Freddy felt a cool draught. The street doors were open. The first customers were coming her way.

Freddy's phone buzzed. Phones were supposed to stay backstage in lockers, but that morning Freddy and Sarah had had a humdinger of a row.

Today's slanging match was ignited when Freddy found the front door ajar. *All and sundry could waltz in and murder us.* A realistic possibility; a defence lawyer, Sarah had a few unsavoury clients. OK, so no one had waltzed in, but it came on the heels of Sarah shrinking Freddy's best jumper in the hot wash and buying her five more as compensation. Sarah's behaviour meant Freddy never knew if she was coming or going. *Going, perhaps.*

This has to stop, the text read.

Yes, and? Freddy flicked a look for an approaching customer or for Maxine. When Sarah messed up Sarah usually declared they break up and Freddy find a better person than her. Although she knew that this *was* the answer, Freddy would embark on a round of cajoling, making up instead of giving up.

Another text. A photo of Sarah's bags in the hall. The bags were in black and white, the rest in colour. Upset though she apparently was, Sarah had photoshopped the snap. Ever consummate with the wordless threat. If Freddy had been there watching, Sarah's packing would have been a hectic affair of banging wardrobe doors and swearing in French. Sarah spoke French fluently and during arguments would rattle off in it to annoy Freddy.

The bags were Freddy's. A new departure.

Let's talk tonight. Heart thumping with misery, Freddy tried to limit damage. What was there to say?

What is there to say? Sarah fired back.

When they'd got together two years ago, Sarah had declared she was 'in it for the long haul'. She bought Freddy a ring and mooted a big wedding, marquee, band, outfits... Aside from the hard labour implied by the phrase, Freddy was charmed by Sarah's commitment. Used to partners who ran a mile if Freddy suggested they live together, she had embraced the haul, long or whatever. They opened a joint account for bills and discussed getting a pet. Sarah wanted a cat. Freddy liked dogs, so that hadn't come off. Freddy moved into Sarah's big house. Now, pacing behind her array of fish, it occurred to Freddy that the subject of marriage hadn't come up in months.

Freddy was finding Sarah's frequent gifts, the 'date nights' in expensive restaurants, spa weekends, stifling. Her own purse wasn't allowed out, Sarah's Gold Amex covered everything.

Sarah believed Freddy would cheat on her. At first this was charming and Freddy enjoyed reassuring her. Then Sarah became more exacting about Freddy's movements which, although typically limited to the route between the supermarket and the flat, in Sarah's mind involved clubs, bars and hotel rooms. It was no longer delightful to find Sarah lounging by the plant and flower stacks outside Waitrose, ready to squire her home at the end of her shift.

Last month they'd celebrated 'two blissful years'. The words embossed in gold on Sarah's anniversary card. 'Careful what you wish for,' Toni Kemp would have said. Mags too, except she had never wished for what Freddy wanted. Freddy's long haul had become a life sentence.

Her phone buzzed again. Maxine was making her way up the aisle, stopping to direct a man towards the dental section. Hurriedly, Freddy dug her phone out of her pocket.

It wasn't Sarah. The number wasn't programmed into her contacts.

Your mum is ill. Mags x

Freddy nearly dropped the phone on the prawns. Her hands shook. She grew hot. She hadn't heard from Mags for years. Not since everything went wrong.

‘You know better than to be looking at your phone in working hours.’ Maxine wasn’t admonishing. Everyone liked Freddy.

‘Sorry, yes.’ It didn’t occur to Freddy to tell Maxine what the message had said. She was so astonished it was Mags, her friend – was that the term? – from the convent that Freddy hadn’t taken in the words.

‘Got any smoked haddock, Freddy? I’m doing a skink. Friday treat!’

‘You’re in luck, we’re a bit low today.’ Freddy gave Mrs Wild her best smile and snatching up a thin sheet of plastic wrapping, slapped a fillet onto the scales.

All day Freddy sold fish. She exchanged banter with customers, remembered the orders of her regulars (ten oysters for Mrs Parker and her friend, three small pieces of cod for Mr Russell’s elderly schnauzer). Upstairs, she plugged the forward orders into the computer.

At three o’clock Freddy came off shift. She caught the bus two minutes after she arrived at the bus stop and got standing space by the exit door. She stared out through the misted panes at Liverpool, her adopted city, full of promise on a winter’s night. Trembling as if taking the safety catch off a gun, Freddy opened her phone and reread Mags’s message.

Your mum is ill. Mags x

The bus lurched and Freddy was flung against one of the poles. The jarring brought her to her senses. Her mum was unwell. Panicked, Freddy got off the bus a stop early and ran, leaping over puddles and skirting commuters. She must get to her mum. She had to go to Newhaven.

She slowed down in Sarah’s street. How had Mags got Freddy’s mobile number? Had her brothers – or her mum? – asked Mags to contact her? Mags had put a kiss, what did that mean? Freddy looked at the screen as she walked, mining the brief message for meaning. How did Mags know her mum was ill? Were they in touch? Reenie Power had always had a soft spot for Mags, a cradle Catholic like herself. She had disapproved of Toni’s parents converting to get their girls into the convent. Her judgement softened after Toni’s dad was murdered. The irony of Reenie favouring Mags was neon-lit only to Freddy. *Did the kiss mean anything?*

Come now. Freddy had dreamed of Mags writing those words. Except Mags wasn’t imploring. The phrase was conditional. *If you want... come now.*

The only person from Newhaven with her number was Toni. They were only in touch at birthdays and Christmas and not at all in the last year when Toni had left London and joined Sussex Police. She was back in Newhaven. Freddy had forgotten Toni's last birthday, Toni forgot hers, but that was normal. Sarah told her not to bother with Toni, what was the point if she never saw her? Did Toni see Mags? Were they still friends? This idea came with a whiff of betrayal. Mags wasn't in touch with Freddy.

Freddy hadn't kept up with anyone from those days. *Least of all Mags.* Sarah scoured Facebook to see what her exes were doing. *It's important to know how the story ends.* Sarah never posted anything, as a lawyer that would be unprofessional.

Hood up against a rain-soaked squall, Freddy reached the house. A double-fronted affair adorned with railings and a front door with a brass step that some hard-driven maid must have polished in a bygone era. Sarah would employ one now if Freddy hadn't objected.

A Michael Bublé song floated out from the living room. Music Sarah knew Freddy disliked. Sarah would be in there flicking through a magazine, the languorous pose intended to show Freddy she didn't need her. Freddy would plead for a truce. In bed, in the dark, Sarah would be contrite. It was her fault. Really and truly she would change. Freddy could have her own friends. Go where she liked. Freddy would be faithful. Tomorrow was the first day of the best days of their lives.

Freddy stepped into the light cast by the absurdly grand chandelier in the hall. Before the Bublé refrain could worm its way into her brain, she extended the case handle and hoisted on the rucksack. Lifting the case over the brass step, Freddy shut the front door. On the road she flagged down a taxi.

'Lime Street station, please.' Dread for her mum engulfed any elation at finally leaving. Fastening her seat belt, Freddy didn't look back.

3

TONI

‘The trawler is divided into four main compartments. They cover all that’s needed on the boat.’ After a year of being in a relationship with him, Toni had finally asked Ricky for a tour of his trawler. Put off by anything on water, she had to admit it was great to see Ricky talk passionately about his pride and joy, bought with a loan from his family’s fishery. She had agreed today because the trawler was berthed at the mouth of the River Ouse in Newhaven. Surely nothing could go wrong there.

In the distance the swing bridge was lifting. Damn. Traffic would back up on the ring road and she’d be late getting to the police station. A large boat – she wasn’t good on boats – was being led through by a smaller boat. Toni shivered. The weak sunshine that had cast the slightest sense of warmth had been obliterated by dark clouds coming in from the sea.

‘...engine room, cabin, fish hold and the net store where we stow spare netting and nets we’re not deploying. It’s where we do the repairs.’

‘Wow.’ Toni knew Ricky, like all the Powers including his sister Freddy, was a dab hand with a needle. He did his own sewing.

‘There are six tanks, for fuel, obviously, and water. We carry at least a tonne of ice when we go out to keep the fish fresh.’ Ricky was in his element. Water was his element.

‘Wow. Ice.’ Toni whistled. She pictured a gin and tonic. Feeling guilty for this she grabbed his hand. ‘What happened there?’ The tattoo on Ricky’s wrist was smeared with blood.

‘Caught it on a hook.’ He let go of her hand and rubbed it.

‘Careful you’ll make it worse. You don’t want it to go sceptic like Andy’s did.’ Toni had never got the point of disfiguring your body.

‘Do you want a tour?’ Ricky sounded irritated, he hated fussing.

‘I do. So er, you’re up in the, um... cabin?’ She indicated a glassed-in structure on the deck.

‘The wheelhouse,’ he corrected her patiently. ‘Done my time in the hold or on the deck. I keep dry unless we hit a problem. Daniel’s life is in my hands.’ He looked serious for a moment.

‘Yes, of course.’ Toni preferred the police. Give her toughened criminals over raging seas. However, she liked the words associated with the trawler. Beams, goalpost gantry, derricks, gilson lines and topping lifts. ‘Where’s Derek?’ Ricky biffed her for her feeble joke.

Ricky yanked a handle on a metal hatch revealing steps. She followed him down.

Toni was surprised by Ricky’s actual cabin, wood-lined walls, leather-padded bench seats, kitted out with food and medicinal supplies. If the boat was on land, she’d rather like chilling out in it. Although even in port, the creaks and squeaks of the hull and the equipment would make her on edge.

‘You down there, Rick?’ A man’s voice. ‘Need to talk to you about upping our bass order.’

‘Wait here.’ Ricky was up the steps before Toni could say she should go. Sighing, she remembered the swing bridge. No point leaving, she might as well see the rest of the trawler.

A narrow passage ended in a metal door. Sealed, she guessed, to prevent water getting in or out. Ricky was hot on battening down hatches. She’d noticed that what most people used as clichés or catchphrases – full steam ahead, plenty more fish in the sea – were the nitty-gritty of Ricky’s life.

She opened the door and her heart stopped. She was faced with gigantic lumps of metal, a generator, an auxiliary generator, the engine. A puzzle of wires and hoses. Huge pipes, the yellow or red paint stained by rust, snaked above. Narrow pipes ran at her feet. Toni recalled Ricky saying that he and Daniel had to attack the engine with spanners when it stalled in a storm. She could change a tyre but only on solid ground.

The boat lifted and dropped. And again. She grasped a rail. It would be the wash from the boat that had come under the bridge. She became aware of silence. Of no sound above. *Where was Ricky?*

‘Hello?’ Calling out by accident, Toni heard the unease in her voice before she felt it.

Toni wove around the maze of components and machinery. She was nauseated by the rank smell of oil and fish. The massive trawler – Ricky said it was comparatively small – blue-painted hull, derricks and gantries bristling with aials horrified her.

The door was locked.

‘Ricky!’ Toni yanked the handle and panicking, kicked and bashed the metal.

It burst open.

‘All right, hun?’ And suddenly Ricky was holding her.

‘I was locked in,’ Toni mumbled into his chest.

‘You must have pulled the handle up instead of down.’

‘I have to go. I’m already late.’

That afternoon, Toni was relieved to the point of ecstasy when she got to her office with ‘Detective Inspector Kemp’ on the door.

*

The call came in at half past nine. Toni, still working, was spell-checking her report on Newhaven’s latest window-smashing spree and picturing her bed.

Uniform had been first on the scene. Answering a 999 from a dog walker. The man reported a bunch of boy-racers ‘doing silly buggers’ on West Beach. The patrol had found a vehicle crushed against a concrete block. The bunch of kids was just two. A boy and a girl trapped inside the wreckage.

The beach was a desolate reminder of cheery seaside days. A disused refreshment kiosk weighted down by layers of tagging. Tracts of concrete were all that was left of the line of light blue beach huts that had long ago succumbed to fire or were demolished for the drug dens they had become.

Sirens wailed from across the Downs, and the emergency vehicles fanned out. Two fire engines, the patrol car and a plain-wrap mortuary van if the kids didn’t make it to A and E.

The cold air reeked of petrol fumes, and dark viscous liquid pooled around the front wheels. The ground glittered with glass. The Ford’s bonnet was crumpled like a discarded crisp packet. Through cracks in the windscreen, the shadowing shapes of airbags ballooned over the dashboard like the take-home vestiges of a party.

The plate told Toni the Ford – the Grand C-MPV model was brand new. *1.5 EcoBoost, titanium x, four spoke leather steering wheel with silver accents.* A couple of months earlier she’d test driven a black version before opting for a second-hand Jeep Renegade. Ricky liked that she was a woman who knew her cars.

To Toni the damage suggested that the Ford had somersaulted, righted itself then slammed into an anti-tank concrete block meant for the Germans.

Gloving up, Toni ducked under the tape. She felt a flicker of relief to see the liquid was oil. Not that anyone was off the hook, the incident was still deadly. She stopped short. A boy's face was pressed against the driver's side window. *Jesus*, he still had acne. What was he doing in a hi-spec motor?

'My initial inspection of tyre marks indicates a swerve as if the vehicle avoided an obstacle.' The PC's face was ashen as if someone had turned off his life support, and he was remodelling his gelled hair in the style of Stan Laurel as he talked. 'It's odd, though, ma'am.' He hiccupped and looked briefly panicked. Poor sod, it was probably his first fatality.

'What's odd?' Toni knew his face, she scanned for his name. She knew Uniform had a shit job, and she always tried to give them the respect they deserved.

'Swerved into the buffer. Like it was deliberate.' The PC pointed at the block, less a buffer than a bloody great full stop.

'That Coastwatch station isn't staffed after sunset. There's a camera facing the beach that operates twenty-four hours. It's up there.' PC Darren Mason, Toni plucked his name from her overcrowded brain bank, nodded at a building up on the cliffs. She knew that most watch stations had been cut by Maggie Thatcher in the eighties. Gradually, with fundraising – Toni had done a parachute jump and raised a grand with Sussex Police – the stations were being reinstated. On a post at the top of the stone steps up to the pier was a camera. She was pessimistic: 'What's the betting it's broken.'

Paramedics hurtled towards one of the ambulances, the wheels rattling on the concrete.

Sheena, the latest member of Toni's team, a transfer from Police Scotland, appeared over the shingle as if she'd risen out of the sea. 'The boy in the driver's seat didn't make it. Dead on impact. The girl in the passenger's seat has a pulse' Impassive. Sheena would be proving that, as a Glaswegian, she was way too tough for this shite. Toni was struggling with an instinctual dislike of the younger woman based on her – Ricky said it was a paranoid – belief that Sheena wanted her job.

'Thank you, Sheena.' Toni retreated as if Sheena was actually stepping on her toes. The boy at the wheel would be high on booze and or drugs and showing off to his girlfriend. Life – and death – was too damned predictable.

Fire officers were peeling off the Ford's roof like a tin can. Teams of paramedics from two ambulances hovered with gurneys.

'It impacted at a speed of at least sixty,' Sheena said. 'Suicide by Ford.'

Keen to avoid Sheena's pithy headline patter and keeping clear of the emergency crews, Toni circled the car. A St Jude rosary hung from the rear-view mirror. Last week, Mags had given her a rosary for her new Jeep. Toni resisted saying seat belts were more effective. Neither of the Ford's occupants had belted in.

A dark object lay in the oil. Toni approached and bending down she extracted it. Avoiding drips of oil, she held it to the headlights of the patrol car. A passport. Most likely an ID for a night out, though she supposed they could have been headed for the Dieppe ferry. She examined the pages, grateful that the oil hadn't seeped between the covers. Daniel Tyler. Blond hair, pouty lips, butter-wouldn't-melt brown eyes. Distinguishing feature: birthmark on right buttock. That would have attracted a few laughs. Although, with the looks of a teen idol, Daniel would have ridden them. Sweet sixteen. By that age Toni had done it with Martin Gilbert in the men's toilet of the Hope pub metres from this beach. Back when she was a good-time convent girl and Mags despaired of her. Sixteen was too young to be behind the wheel of a car. It was too young to die.

'We've got the ANPR.' PC Mason joined her. 'The boy wasn't the owner. It's registered to a Karen Munday, 23 Seaport Road, Newhaven.'

Karen Munday. Toni would never forget her first day at the convent. Karen bloody Munday.

'Daniel Tyler works for Ricky,' she blurted out. Since getting back to Newhaven, Toni's past confronted her at every corner. Newhaven was a small town and the Catholic world smaller still. If you were a Catholic girl (or pretending to be) you went to Our Lady of the Immaculate Heart.

Until that morning Toni hadn't spoken to Karen since leaving the convent. In her years at the Met in London she'd almost managed to forget Karen Munday existed.

Toni had gone into the Co-op to stock up on chocolate. She'd glanced to her right as she was taking a Snickers bar. Karen Munday was watching from the end of the aisle.

'Is Karen Munday a friend of yours?' Mason broke into her thoughts.

'Not any more. No, never, not at all.' Darren Mason was looking at her strangely. 'I mean, not since school.' The bullying felt as real as yesterday. Karen nicked stuff

from her bag, shoved her, punched her if they were alone and, a more subtle tactic, stared at her in mass which distracted Toni when she was doing a reading. From the way Karen had fixed on her yesterday in the confectionary aisle, Toni could tell she had clearly still not forgiven Toni for taking her place in the Mermaids.

When Ricky apprenticed Daniel Tyler on his boat last year, it took a while before Toni made the connection with his mother, Karen Munday, who ran the Power family's fish round. Ricky had been sympathetic when Toni confessed – paradoxically she was ashamed to be a victim of bullying – but he had no say in who got employed.

As she took in the wreckage in which Karen Munday's son had died, for the first time in her life Toni felt sympathy for her old enemy. Never in her most darkly vengeful fantasies about Karen had Toni dreamt up this punishment.

Toni longed for them to be wrong. But the address in Daniel's passport matched the one registered to the Ford. Ricky would be in bits, he rated Danny as a skilled fisherman even at sixteen. Toni regarded Daniel's pretty-boy mugshot. She felt winded with sorrow for the life wasted. Rage welled and she imagined accosting Mags:

Tell me exactly for what purpose your God whipped up this carnage? These babies have hardly got going.

Mags would say something about free will...

'Nice-looking lad,' Sheena remarked over her shoulder. 'Shame we can't dish out cautions to this teenager for joy-riding in the family car. Give his mum a ticking off and tell her to take better care of her car keys. Word is you know her?'

'I did once.' *Was it karma?* Toni banished the horrible notion in case it showed on her face.

The Mundays had been the real deal. Cradle Catholics to the grave. Not that the nuns' strictures about sex sank in. Like her mother, Karen was pregnant at sixteen.

Daniel Munday's body was extracted from the Ford, zipped into a body bag and slotted into the mortuary van. Toni's gaze tracked the van along the beach until the turn onto Fort Road.

Toni could have tasked a colleague with informing Karen Munday her boy was dead. But she decided to do it herself.

Recently, with Ricky away more frequently and in a bad mood when he was on shore, Toni had begun to question the wisdom of her move to the coast. She valued

London's anonymity over the seaside town of best-forgotten faces. The answer lay in the darkness beyond the beach. As the crews worked on in comparative silence, Toni caught the hush and push of the tide. She smelled seaweed on the swift breeze. She'd been lured by another kind of siren to the blues and twos. The sea had called her home.

*

Newhaven was at the mouth of the Ouse, a tidal river that ran into the English Channel. One bank was lined with timber-clad townhouses and glass-balconied apartments. The other was untouched by regeneration. Portakabins, breeze-block lock-ups. A down-at-heel pub jostled with a sprawling estate of warehouses.

The town ended with a pebbled beach, the port at one end and Tide Mills, the ruins of a Victorian village, at the other. When the river was rerouted, the old outlet became a graveyard of urban junk, supermarket trolleys, oil drums, car engines, tyres and traffic cones. Stretching away were tracts of coarse grasses hiding treacherous pools of brackish water. Driving towards the beach, Toni shuddered; in the last vestiges of night, it seemed to her that the unforgiving landscape belonged to the dead.

Seaport Road was one of several little streets of flat-fronted houses around the port. Some were boarded up, others curtained with England flags. One was behind rusting vehicles resting drunkenly on perished tyres being slowly strangled by triffid weeds. This area, where an unwanted sofa was as likely to be parked outside as a car, were yet to be snapped up by descending middle classes in search of a bijoux Victorian bargain.

Toni drove past Karen's house and U-turned at the bus garage where, behind a metal stockade, double-deckers had been corralled for the night. She idled for a moment to muster courage. Destinations promised seaside cheer: Brighton, Eastbourne, Worthing, Hastings. Each bus was named for a notable Sussex resident – Dora Bryan, Ivy Compton-Burnett, Virginia Woolf – none of whom, Toni was sure, would be seen dead in Newhaven.

There was a space outside Karen's house, the size of Karen Munday's Ford. Unable to quite fit the Jeep in, she left it nose out.

With twenty years in the job, Toni could do the death knock. This was different. She should have delegated to Sheena. Or better, Malcolm, her DS, would strike the

right note. Grief took people in many ways. Toni didn't fancy finding out how it would take Karen. Lulled by the heated seats, she didn't move.

As the past came back to bite her, Toni couldn't know that only an hour earlier Karen, too, had been gripped by memory.

*

'Give it back.' Toni reached down but the hand had already whipped her bag through the gap under the toilet door.

'Tampons,' Karen chanted. 'Sister Kemp's got her period.' Her name for Toni since her dad died. She heard sniggering. Karen's Minions, Mags called them. Four tough girls who were rather nice to Toni when Karen wasn't there.

Toni could stay in the cubicle until the next lesson. But Karen didn't care about missing lessons. She'd be happy to keep Toni prisoner. Toni pulled the chain and drew back the bolt.

Karen had unbuckled Toni's briefcase. Her dad's case. Everything would spill onto the revolting wet floor. Toni lunged, but Karen was quick. She started singing Take That's 'It Only Takes A Minute'. The Minions tapped their feet. If Toni wasn't frightened out of her wits, she'd be impressed that they could keep time.

'Give it to me.' Toni was furious for her tears. Even when the police officers told them about Dad and made her and Amy drink hot chocolate she hadn't cried.

'Only if you do what I say.' Karen spoke so only Toni could hear.

'What?' *Inside her dad's case was the lock of his hair Toni took everywhere and slept with under her pillow.*

'Make me a Mermaid again. I was one before you. They listen to you.'

'No, they don't.' Then it dawned on Toni that it was true. These days, since her dad, everyone listened to her.

Toni Kemp joined the convent in the second year when friendships were already cemented. She had gravitated to Mags McKee and Freddy Power, but didn't care for Karen who told her that four was a crowd.

Then her dad died and everyone wanted Toni to go round with them and share their lunch boxes. This she often accepted, because, with her dad dead, her mum mostly forgot to pack hers.

One day, Toni had sat with the Mermaids beneath the Mary statue where they hung out. Toni knew they were Mermaids because Karen told her. She'd have got the idea anyway, because they told each other stories about living under the sea away from rules and nuns. Karen made it clear that Toni would never be a Mermaid when she said that she hadn't seen Disney's *The Little Mermaid*. It was all kids' stuff compared to her last school, where Toni had been the official supplier of cigarettes – shoplifting them from Sainsbury's and selling at an attractive discount to the older girls. She wasn't interested in King Triton's creepy relationship with Ariel. She suspected Karen of setting her up. No way would she seriously be a Mermaid.

*

Arms resting on the steering wheel of the cooling Jeep, Toni struggled to recall how the toilet thing ended. Karen had once stuck chewed gum in her bag, but that was another time and another bag.

Opening the car, Toni heard the question as if Mags was waiting for her on the pavement.

'D'you want to be a Mermaid? You, me and Freddy.'

'And Karen,' she had reminded Mags.

'Not any more.' Mags had looked strange.

'OK.' That had changed things. 'Yes. Great. Thanks.'

Karen was forty. Ricky had gone to her beach party – fireworks and a Spice Girls tribute act. Toni could have been Ricky's plus one but, pleading work, had skulked at home watching wall-to-wall *Gilmore Girls*.

Standing on the pavement outside Karen's house, Toni wished she had gone. Were it possible, it might make what she had to do less awkward. Maybe Karen would have gone easier on her in the Co-op.

Ms Munday? Karen. Hi. We've found your car... maybe you didn't know it was miss— Get to the point.

Karen, I'm so very sorry to say that a boy fitting...

The door was open.

'Karen?' Toni edged inside. 'Anyone home?'

Switching on her Maglite, Toni revealed a poky lounge. Leather sofa, mismatching armchair, massive wall-mounted telly above a flame-effect gas fire. A half-eaten box

of Maltesers lay on the sofa. There was a pet cage on a table by the window. Here too the door was open, the cage was empty. Toni fastened it shut although the horse – hamster or whatever – had bolted. No water bowl, food dispenser empty. Toni mentally stored the observations and continued into a galley kitchen.

‘Hello? Karen? Police,’ she called. ‘Are you OK?’

A pan of stew was on an induction hob. Toni brushed the steel with a knuckle, already mindful of leaving prints. It was warm. The stew had been heated some while ago and, going by the full pan, no one had taken a helping.

‘Karen, it’s me. Toni Kemp.’ *Like it would be good news.* She mounted the stairs. The main bedroom was empty. The untidiness was not the kind Toni constantly fought in her flat when she was too tired to hang things up. The room looked ransacked. Twisted and tumbled bedding, a pillow lay at her feet on the floor. Pieces of broken glass were scattered by a bedside shelf, the dark patch on the carpet signalled a spilt water glass.

Karen Munday was slumped on the toilet, trousers and knickers around her knees, her head against the wall. She didn’t stir when Toni approached.

‘Karen.’ Toni knelt down by the toilet brush. She put a finger to Karen’s neck. She felt warm. *Like the stew.* No pulse.

Karen Munday would never know her son was dead. Crazy it occurred to her that Karen’s boy died on the same beach where Karen had danced under a silvery moon to the Spice Girls.

Punching 999 into her phone, Toni flipped through possibilities: heart attack, stroke, drugs? Were the deaths linked?

As she called it in, Karen took a closer look at Karen’s body. It was none of the above. There were marks on her throat.

Karen Munday had been murdered.

MAGS

‘Newhaven Public Library. How may I help?’

‘You didn’t see my text.’ Ricky sounded accusatory.

‘We’re not allowed phones at work,’ Mags said.

‘Couldn’t you keep it on silent?’

‘It’s not about being quiet, these days libraries are noisy creative spaces, it’s so that—’ Mags stopped. Cut Ricky some slack, his mother was dying.

‘Andy said could you come. Now.’ Ricky sounded as if he was pleading.

‘Is Freddy there?’ Since she’d texted Freddy the morning before, while convinced she wouldn’t come, Mags was watching for her.

‘You’re kidding me. She doesn’t know.’ Pause. ‘Was it Toni who told her?’

‘No. Tell Andy I’m on my way.’ Mags hurriedly replaced the phone before Ricky asked if she’d told Freddy. Lying would be a gift for the devil.

Twenty minutes later, having told her boss she didn’t feel well – true, after last night’s brandies, she had a headache – Mags was with Andy Power as he made tea in his mother’s kitchen.

‘I’ll do that. You go up to Reenie,’ she said again.

‘Glad of the excuse, to be honest.’ Andy filled the kettle to overflowing. ‘I can’t take much more.’

Andy was the eldest brother. Since Fred Power’s death twenty years ago, Andy had taken the reins of Power’s fishery aged just eighteen. Ricky, four years Andy’s junior – Toni called him her ‘toy boy’ although at thirty-four Ricky was grown up – had joined from school. Toni maintained Fred Power’s death had strengthened his iron grip on his sons.

‘Not long, the nurse said.’ Mags could say this to Andy. She was careful around Ricky. The last to leave home and super-protective of his mum, Ricky dissolved if she as much as hinted that Reenie wouldn’t survive her latest illness.

‘Yep.’ Andy was checking his phone. The fishery was essentially twenty-four/seven. ‘Ricky’s going out on the boat tonight.’

‘Not if Mum’s like this.’ Ricky had a habit of sneaking up. Unfair, Mags remonstrated with herself. He had a light step.

‘No, of course.’ She touched her crucifix.

Ricky had been reading Reenie *The Little Mermaid* from the Kindle on his phone. He said she responded. She’d read it to him when he was young. At the convent, Mags had got the impression from Freddy that Reenie only read it to her eldest child. It was their thing, Freddy used to say.

‘Doubt she knows.’ Andy mashed the teabag against the side of Reenie’s ‘I ♥ Lourdes’ mug. ‘It’ll be fine if you go out. Mum would want us to keep the business going.’ He handed Ricky a mug of tea.

The brothers exchanged a look that Mags didn’t understand. She was intruding on a family’s grief.

‘That’s Mum’s.’ Ricky chose another mug. ‘Don’t bother for me.’

‘You need to get several hauls in tonight,’ Andy repeated. He began cleaning the counter with the dishcloth. ‘We’ve got orders to fulfil.’

‘Maybe not tonight?’ Mags knew she should keep her mouth shut, but Ricky would never forgive Andy – *or her* – if Reenie died while he was at sea. ‘I was wondering, should I call...’ she clasped her crucifix, ‘if we should tell Freddy?’ At the convent it had usually been Toni who sought permission to do something she’d already done. Her head was pounding. She must have what Toni called a stalking hangover; you woke up thinking you’d got away with it and as the day progressed it caught up with you. This one was fast overtaking.

‘No!’ The brothers rounded on her.

‘Over my dead body.’ Ricky seemed to blanch as he heard himself.

Mags changed the subject. ‘Did you manage to speak to Danny about Karen’s fish van?’

‘*Shit*,’ Ricky snapped, his face to the ceiling. He’d agreed to remind Karen, via her son Danny, not to sound her horn in Reenie’s street.

‘Karen’s due.’ Facing Freddy would be bad enough, Mags didn’t want to deal with Karen Munday again. Last week had been excruciating.

‘Reenie’s ill,’ she’d told Karen, although she must know.

‘*I forgot*.’ Karen had pantomimed horror and handed over a bag of fish. ‘Forty quid please. And make sure Andrew reimburses you! He can be a slippery customer.’

Mags had given Karen two twenties from her purse.

‘Please could I have a receipt?’ *Why had she asked that?* She’d never ask Andy to reimburse her.

‘I don’t do them. Too much faff.’ Karen sucked her teeth as if with regret. Tipping back her baseball cap, Karen had asked carelessly, ‘You ladies still Mermaids?’

‘No, we’re not.’ Mags had been firm.

‘You hear anything from Fred-er-rica?’ Karen had freighted her question with disdain. ‘She’ll want to say goodbye to her mum.’

‘Freddy doesn’t know Reenie’s ill.’ Mags had regretted saying this. The less Karen knew about Freddy the better.

‘No way!’ Karen looked genuinely shocked. ‘What, she doesn’t know? That’s not good.’

‘I expect her brothers have told her.’

‘They hate her. I’m surprised you haven’t. You’re her friend. Isn’t that the job of a Mermaid?’ Karen’s sarcasm failed to mask her hurt. Mags had felt herself redden.

Andy was holding out the tea – the Lourdes mug – to her.

‘Don’t worry, I’ll handle Karen when she turns up.’ Andy pushed off the kitchen counter. ‘It’s my fish. That reminds me, I must pay you for last week.’ Andy peeled forty pounds from a roll in his trousers. ‘You’re a saint the way you’d cared for Mum, but don’t be out of pocket.’

Accepting the money, Mags took a sip of tea.

They trooped up the stairs. Crossing herself, Mags took the dressing table stool in a corner. She prayed it would be soon, the family was suffering. The brothers kept vigil either side of the bed, clasping their mother’s hands. The only sound was Reenie’s ragged breathing.

Mags listened for a taxi. *Surely Freddy would not come?* Watching the wisp of a woman in the bed, Mags felt herself redden. Luke said, *...even sinners love those who love them.* It was too late to say sorry, but Mags had accepted Karen was right. It had not been good to leave Reenie’s eldest child unaware that Reenie was gravely ill. Now it was Freddy’s choice if she came or not.

Ricky’s knuckles were white, he was gripping Reenie’s hand too tight. Andy glanced at his watch. He’d be fretting about getting back to work.

Mags's challenge was to love her enemies. She'd go into the church on her way back to the library. She'd have to get back to her own work, she couldn't wait for Reenie to die.

The second hand ticked on. It was faster than Reenie's hard-won breaths. *In. Long gap. Out. Long gap.* Like a pump, in the last throes the body returned to basics.

What would that new priest say if he heard what you and Freddy Power got up to? Like Toni had, Mags should move far away from anyone who remembered. Toni had come back.

The buzz of a phone. Ricky scowled across at Andy. No mobiles at the deathbed had been Andy's rule.

'It's Kirsty. Must be to do with the kids.' Andy let go of his mum's hand and without a backward glance trotted downstairs. Reenie hadn't cared for Andy's wife – she'd been sniffy about her boys' girlfriends. As for Freddy...

After a moment, muttering about fish orders, Ricky kissed Reenie's fingers and went after Andy. Mags took Andy's seat and, hesitating, rested her fingers on Reenie's hand. The old woman's skin was cold. Suddenly, Reenie's eyes snapped open.

'Reenie, it's me, Mags.' Astonished, Mags said the obvious.

'Do what I—' Reenie squeezed Mags fingers with surprising strength for a dying woman.

'Reenie, I—' Mags made to get up. She must fetch Andy and Ricky. Reenie's fierce stare stopped her.

'Fred...' A clattering gasp. *Silence.* Another gasp. *Silence.* Yawning silence.

Nothing.

From the kitchen came low angry voices. Had Karen come? Almost dreading meeting Karen more than the news that she had to break, Mags crept into the living room to give herself a breathing space. For some weeks, the boys had been irritable and snappy with each other, they were beyond stressed. Mags' own parents had died five years ago in the same week. Her father of heart failure while her mother was under anaesthetic for a minor operation from which she never awoke. Mags had been spared prolonged sick bed visits.

Sunlight filtered through the turquoise and emerald plastic strips stuck on the window. Someone had turned on the lava lamps, they glowed green and blue. Muted light from a blue lampshade mingled with the aquarium's pink heat light. With its

shell-patterned carpet and fish wallpaper, the room had always resembled a seabed grotto. The blue-tinted mirror over the fireplace finessed the subterranean effect. Toni always said Freddy got her dream of living beneath the sea at Reenie's knee.

That statue of Mary hadn't been on the window sill when Mags had last been there. Was it her own statue? In a panic, she snatched it up. But although the cheap plaster figure was hollow, the empty cavity was furred with dust.

Freddy and Mags had each bought an icon of Mary in Paris on a school trip. Freddy had given hers to Reenie.

'...why didn't Toni ring me?' Ricky's raised voice suggested it wasn't the first time he'd asked. No Karen, Mags decided with faint relief.

'I guess she wanted me to tell you. Away from Mum.' Andy was placating his brother.

'Tell me what?'

'Keep it cool, mate, but Danny's dead.'

'What do you mean?' Ricky shouted.

Mags hurried in. 'What's going on?'

'What do you mean, what do I mean? *For God's sake.*' Andy glanced at Mags and shook his head. He looked pale.

'Who's Danny?' Mags went cold as she guessed who Danny was.

'Danny Tyler, Ricky's apprentice on the trawler. Seems he's crashed his car and died.' Andy smacked a hand on the tap. 'Bloody waste.'

'Danny doesn't have a car.' Ricky would be snatching for proof Andy had it wrong. If Andy was pale, Ricky's face was stark white. *Neither man needed this right now.*

'He stole Karen's Ford.'

'Karen Munday's son?' Mags whispered. That was why there'd been no fish van. Karen would be coping with the terrible news that her boy was dead.

'No question it was suicide. There was a witness,' Andy said. 'He slammed into concrete on the beach.'

'*Crap.* Why kill himself? I'd just made him permanent crew.' Ricky bit at the side of his hand.

'Listen,' Mags said. 'Andy, Ricky—'

‘My guess is Daniel found Karen in bed with her new man. It’s always been Danny and Karen. Suicide by Ford, Toni said.’ Andy shot a glance at the ceiling, perhaps recalling his own mother.

‘I’m calling Toni.’ Ricky was prodding at his phone. ‘She’d never have said that.’

‘Ricky, stop please,’ Mags shouted. ‘Both of you.’

From the living room behind her, Mags heard the bubbling of Reenie’s fish tank.

The blank sorrow on Andy’s and Ricky’s faces said they knew their mother was dead.

FREDDY

Freddy got to London too late to catch a train to the south coast. She booked into a hostel in Victoria for backpackers who were clearly on one long party. Sarah claimed Freddy could sleep through a riot. However, the raucous belting of 'Down Under' had her cycling around the narrow bed until around five. Eventually dropping off, Freddy was woken by a text at 10.58 a.m. *Where are you? Mags?* No. Sarah had launched her ninety-ninth making-up campaign.

Ignoring it, Freddy flung herself through the shower, dressed and reached Victoria station in time for the 11.47. Freddy had been so intent on the journey that it wasn't until the train was passing above the backyards of south London terraces that she let herself think how her mum would greet her. What would it be like? She fretted in a corner seat. She wasn't heading to some tear-jerking family reunion. Her mum had had over twenty years to get in touch. Toni had always known Freddy's address and number. What if her mum told her to go? She couldn't bear that.

When the train stopped at Clapham Junction, Freddy couldn't bear it. Her mum hadn't asked for her. Mags had texted. It wasn't a request.

Your mum is ill. Mags x

Her mum could not be ill. *She could not die.* Freddy stumbled off the train. She stared at a heap of croissants in the window of a refreshment bar, utterly directionless. Mags hadn't actually asked her to come. She'd said 'if'. Freddy didn't want to say goodbye to her mum. She wanted more than anything to say 'Hello'. The croissants and aroma of fresh coffee reminded her that she hadn't eaten since the chicken wrap on the King's Cross train. Freddy was about to go in when a man, dashing for the train, jolted her shoulder; he shouted an apology. As if caught in his slipstream, Freddy chased after and clambered back on board the train as the whistle blew.

It was two thirty by the time Freddy reached the little house which, for her first eighteen years, was her home. She bit back emotion at faint footprints in concrete from where her dad had replaced the coal hole cover. She'd been seven and Andy had

been five. She had thrilled with excitement as first Freddy then Andy (he'd been scared) placed their feet onto the damp cement. Freddy knew why Andy had been scared. Their dad was always much harder on him.

The plain wood front door needed a varnish. It looked smaller than in her memory. Freddy trembled. She heard her father's voice.

You will leave this town and never return. I can't even look at you, the sight makes me sick. Your mother lay with the milkman to get you. You're damaged goods. A freak of nature.

A sporty Mazda with spoilers was at the kerb. Who was visiting? She forced herself to step up to the door. Her dad was dead. He was not there. She imagined a home-coming.

'Hi Mum. It's me. Let's tuck up on the couch and watch The Little Mermaid.' The line belonged in Disney; it was saccharine. Reenie had watched the film to escape. She had taken her little girl with her under the sea and left her forever disappointed with real life.

Someone opened the door.

'I came as soon as I got the text.' Freddy gaped at the thickset man in T-shirt and jeans, a scar like a lightning flash pale against his unshaven chin. Was he the owner of the Mazda?

'You're twenty years too late.'

'Ricky,' Freddy gasped. The last time she'd seen her youngest brother he was thirteen. 'I can't believe it's you.' She stared at the tattoo on his bare forearm. The last time she'd seen Ricky he'd been too young for tattoos.

'Why the hell not? This is my home.' Ricky slapped the edge of the front door.'

'You're still living here.' Not really a question, hadn't been old enough to leave home when she'd last seen him.

'Of course not, I meant it's where ...what text?' Ricky demanded.

Mags hadn't told Ricky she'd sent her message. *Her mum had not asked for her.* Freddy felt a crushing pain. She could have expected her dad to be unfriendly – or worse – but never Ricky.

'Andy texted me.' *Jesus.* Ricky had only to ask Andy to know it was a lie.

'Why did he do that?' In her day, even with their dad making Andy's life a misery, for Ricky his older brother's word had been gospel. Not any more, it seemed.

‘So that I could spend time with Mum?’ Mustering outrage she didn’t feel, Freddy barged past Ricky and dumped her case in the hall.

Fred and Reenie Power stayed living in the cottage even when the fishery took off and they could afford something bigger. All the same, in the years she’d been away Freddy had imagined her lost home as vast, with high ceilings and spacious rooms. The aquarium endless. A toddler, her tiny fingers had picked at the shells in the carpet pattern.

The living room had shrunk. On Freddy’s walk from the station a watery sun had penetrated streaks of grey but inside, her mum’s coloured windows and lamps illuminated the room like an underwater cave. The statue of Mary – with the space in which Toni had made Freddy smuggle a multipack of Gauloise cigarettes back from France – was still in the window. Calling herself lapsed, yet Freddy had wished she’d remembered Mary when she’d left that day.

‘You can turn around and leave.’ Ricky followed his sister into the front room. He stood in front of the fish tank as if she might try to take it.

Freddy breathed in smells that were in her DNA. Stale cooking, wood polish, washing powder and cosiness. Most of all, she had remembered that. Too cosy when her mum kept the on heating into summer for the small animals. She drifted through to the kitchen where her mum had always been when Freddy got home from school.

That you, Freddy love?

‘She’s not here,’ Ricky said.

‘Hey, Freddy.’

Toni Kemp. Long glossy hair swapped for a shorter, cool, copper’s cut, the jeans and sweatshirt she’d lived in beyond the convent replaced by black jacket and trousers. Freddy’s best friend from then, if you didn’t count Mags – *you did count Mags* – was grown up. Awkward, Freddy stepped forward but she stopped when Toni didn’t reciprocate. Ricky stood close to Toni as if he was now guarding her.

‘Thanks for being here, Tone.’ *Mags must have asked Toni to be there for her. Where was Mags?* Freddy glanced past Toni to the door, she was expecting Mags.

‘Freddy. I’m afraid your mum has died.’

The statue of Mary seemed to pale to nothing in the fusty gloom. The aquarium pump grew deafening, the noise all around her.

‘No. No. No.’ Freddy put her hands up as if the ceiling was coming down on her. *I can’t even look at you, the sight makes me sick. You’re damaged goods. A freak of nature.*

‘It was very peaceful. She didn’t...’ Toni trailed off.

‘Andy shouldn’t have texted.’ Ricky sounded on the verge of a tantrum. Freddy had forgotten about them. Ricky’s ‘terrible twos’ had lasted for years.

A creaking. Freddy looked up. It came from a cage beside the aquarium. A hamster was galloping on its wheel, going at a rate of knots. Freddy felt a flicker of happiness at the sight of it. *Her mum still had her small animals.* She still had the fish. Freddy treasured the times they went down to the pet shop and chose another species and a new ornament for the aquarium. Only ever Freddy, not the boys. She and her mum divided feeding between them and every Christmas they added another ornament.

‘Toni isn’t here for you,’ Ricky snarled.

‘Not now, Rick.’ Toni took his hand. ‘Darling, it’s Freddy’s mum too.’

‘When did she...? When did Mum...?’ Saying the word ‘Mum’ made Freddy choke. She forced herself to breathe. She needed Toni to let go of her brother’s hand. Why was she on Ricky’s side? Freddy was being stupid. Did she think her brothers would care about her?

‘At 10.49 this morning.’ Ricky let go of Toni and folded his arms. Triumph mixed badly with his own grief.

When she had got Mags’s message Freddy had been taken up with the fact that Mags had texted, not the urgency of her text. Mags had texted at six a.m yesterday. If Freddy had left work then and there she’d have made it in time to see her mum alive. *Mags had not made it seem urgent.*

‘Andy shouldn’t have messaged you at all.’ As if Ricky could see Freddy’s thoughts cross her face. She’d forgotten her lie about Andy.

The doorbell rang. The same Dalek *drrrr* of her childhood. But nothing could comfort Freddy now.

Hushed voices. *Mags.* Freddy’s heart punched her ribs.

‘Hello, Frederica. I gather you’re Reenie’s eldest.’ He reached out a hand. ‘I’m Father Pete. Frederica, I’m so *very* sorry for your loss. Reenie was a special woman. Such a loss.’

Freddy burst into tears and fell into his arms.

*

When Toni had told Freddy that her mum had died, it hadn't occurred to Freddy that her mum's body was still in the house. Reenie Power lay upstairs. When Father Pete suggested Freddy say her goodbyes, she'd nearly rushed out of the house. Ricky's angry face made her hold fast.

'Yes, that would be good, thanks.' Refusing Father Pete's offer to accompany her, Freddy plodded up the stairs. She'd have liked Toni with her, but Toni was with Ricky on the couch, sitting close like she'd arrested him.

Freddy knew every whorl and knot in the banister, the painted over dent on the skirting board. Outside the door she lost her nerve and it was only to infuriate Ricky that she eventually twisted the handle and went in.

Someone had lit a scented candle, but for Freddy it didn't disguise the dull odour of the disease that had killed her mum.

The woman in the bed was a stranger. This woman was older than her mum's sixty-six years. Thinner, the shape beneath the sheet inconsequential. Her mum would be down the town, getting romances from the library, veg at the market stall.

Freddy recognised the wedding ring. Not bought when her parents got married and lived on a shoestring. Freddy had been ten when her dad said they should renew their vows. The fishery was successful, he could afford white gold.

'You can't renew something you've lost,' her mother had grouched to Freddy before the ceremony. The only proper glimpse Freddy ever got into her mother's thoughts about her marriage to Frederick Power.

Cancer had eroded the plump cheeks, and without her false teeth, her chin met her nose. The hands with crabbed fingers were the colour of alabaster. Someone had placed them like a saint on the duvet. Her mum's hands had never been still. Reenie Power equated doing nothing as collusion with the devil.

Tentatively, Freddy touch the ringed finger. It was cold. Stiff like a twig. She should have come straight to the house yesterday.

Freddy knelt on the carpet and her eyes screwed up against tears she couldn't risk, whispered a prayer.

'Eternal rest give unto her, O Lord, and let perpetual light shine upon her. May she rest in peace. Amen...'

When Freddy got up, her mum's features made sense. She felt a punch in the chest. Her mum was dead and they never made it up. Freddy crossed herself and her own face twisted with pain as she stooped and kissed the unyielding forehead.

When Freddy returned to the front room, Father Pete was leaving. She was politely non-committal when he invited her to pop into the church any time during her stay. 'If you want to talk or simply to pray.'

Toni and Ricky were still on the couch so Freddy saw the priest out. On the doorstep he clasped her hand and, like a magician, palmed her his card. *Jesus, it was business cards now.* Freddy accepted it although no way would she be praying in the church, and worse still *talking* with him.

'Thanks for coming, Toni.' Freddy hovered in the doorway. Gripping the handle on her case, she waited for Toni to say she'd leave with her. *Why hadn't Mags come with Toni?* Freddy could answer that herself.

'She's not here for you.' Ricky was up like a coiled spring. As a kid he'd kicked and flailed like a fireball when he hadn't got his way. Her mum said he was a Power while Freddy and Andy were Lynches. Reenie had believed her side of the family were a cut above.

'Ricky don't,' Toni murmured.

'I want to go to the funeral,' Freddy said.

'No. Bloody. Way.' Ricky's chin jutted. Freddy felt a glimmer of warmth for the little boy she had looked after.

'Freddy will be there if she wants.'

Everyone turned. Andy pushed shut the front door, a bunch of keys in his hand. Twenty-two years telescoped. Freddy might have seen her favourite brother only yesterday. She knew the very bones of him.

'All right, sis?' Andy rested a hand on her shoulder and Freddy tensed against another tearful collapse.

Andy was bronzed even though it was early spring. His weathered features would be from foreign holidays, not night fishing – like their dad, he hated the sea. He wore jeans and a blue fleece jacket with Power Fisheries within a fish-shaped logo. Fred Senior never bothered with 'fripperies'.

'Mum didn't want it,' Ricky stormed.

‘It’s up to us. Freddy has the right to pay her respects.’ Andy edged around Freddy so that he was blocking Ricky. Did he think Ricky would hit her? Freddy felt her stomach shrivel.

‘So, our c-word of a sister dumps us in it when we’re kids and thinks she can waltz in now and pick up where she left off?’

Ricky’s voice was rich as chocolate. Sarah had just joined a choir – their resolution to have separate hobbies – and ridiculously, Freddy pondered that he’d be a great baritone.

‘Why the hell did you tell her?’ the baritone demanded.

Shit. Freddy froze.

‘Because she’s our sister.’ Andy didn’t miss a beat. Freddy felt his fingers tighten on her shoulder. It had always been her and Andy.

‘I’ll go.’ Freddy nodded at Toni. *You coming?*

Toni didn’t move. She had an odd expression. Guilt. What was she guilty about? The question had barely formed when she saw Ricky coil his arm around Toni’s waist like a boa constrictor.

She’s not here for you.

Darling, it’s Freddy’s mum too.

Toni wasn’t there to support Freddy. How could she have known Freddy was coming? She had come with Ricky. Toni was *with* Ricky! Although Freddy knew it was unreasonable, she felt betrayed. Deeply and profoundly betrayed. She picked up her suitcase and left.

A Volvo estate was parked behind the Mazda. Andy was less ostentatious in his choice of car than their little brother. The Mazda expressed a side of Ricky that, leaving before he could drive, Freddy couldn’t have seen. Flashy and fast.

‘Hang on, Freddy.’ Andy caught up with her. ‘Listen, ignore Ricky, he’s upset.’

‘He’s right. Mum didn’t ask for me. Me being here is not what she wanted.’

‘Mum never knew what she wanted. It was always Dad’s gig. *I want you here.*’ Andy hadn’t contradicted her. ‘Where are you staying tonight?’

‘I hadn’t...’ Was Andy going to invite her? Freddy had no idea of his circumstances. Ricky had referred to their mum’s house as his home. Did Andy live there too?

‘There’s a Premier Inn opposite our house in Lewes. Reasonable rates. I’ll come in later and see how you are. I’d drop you now, but I’ve got to wait for the undertakers.’

Can't leave it to Ricky.' Andy gave her a peck on the cheek then suddenly he was hugging her.

Freddy let go of the case and put her hand on his back. She had missed him.

'Welcome home, Freddy.' At the front door, Andy turned. He brushed his forehead with the back of his hand and Freddy saw how utterly exhausted he was. World weary. She could only guess the strain their mum's illness, and her death, had put on him. She hadn't been there for Andy when he needed her.

'Who texted you?' Andy asked.

'Mags,' Freddy told him.

At Newhaven Town station, Toni eyed a bunch of boys in ratty school uniforms, ties loosened and shirts untucked, clustering like heroes right at the edge of the platform. They hooted at some crude teenaged joke, tweaking crutches and doing high fives. Four girls leant on the waiting room wall with expressions of contempt. 'Wankers,' said one. The others nodded. Not convent girls, Sarah – in a Freddy's-childhood cyber-stalking session – had discovered that the convent had closed: cuts or something.

The girls might have been her, Mags and Toni. Karen too. Freddy felt a twinge of regret for what had not been. Where would this scornful quartet be in twenty-years' time? Regret became envy for the girls they had all been. The Mermaids were long gone.

Freddy boarded the Lewes train and found a seat away from the kids. Andy hadn't invited her to stay with him. She was welcome, but not that welcome.

Before her courage born of nostalgia ebbed, Freddy sent a message to Mags.

Can we meet? Fx

Outside the train window, the silhouette of Lewes Castle rose above the curve of the Downs. The town of Lewes itself was nestled in a dip between the hills, a sketch of rooftops visible through threads of rain-laden mist.

MAGS

Can we meet? Fx

The text was in her phone in the staffroom, but the words had wormed their way into Mags's head. Trembling, it took three goes to swipe the audiobook's barcode. She'd apologised to the woman – her library card said she was Mrs Barker – the heating had packed up hence the staff were in their coats and scarves. Mags saw Mrs Barker spot her hands shaking; she'd have Mags down as a functioning alcoholic. Elderly, grey hair stiffly set, Mrs Barker gave the stack of books she was borrowing proprietorial pats. Her strong resemblance to Mags's late mother didn't help the headache. Maureen McKee had drummed it into Margaret that *Wine was for Communion*.

Mags taunted herself with a rerun of the brandies she'd drunk the night before. The first downed in one, the others in rapid sips in an attempt to obliterate everything. Her statue of Mary glowed white and recriminatory from the alcove. In bed, Mags had tossed and turned – she had imagined Karen Munday standing over her demanding reinstatement as a Mermaid. Or Mags would burn in Hell. When it wasn't Karen, Reenie Power was filling her with secrets.

It's all I ask, Mags, love...

Then, that morning, Reenie had died.

Returning to her flat at lunchtime, Mags had found her copy of Mother Julian's *Revelations of Divine Love* open on the duvet. She must have resorted to it to ward off the ghosts. In a quavering voice Mags had read aloud from a passage: “Everything other than the cross was ugly to me, as if much crowded with fiends...”

As if Julian herself had spoken, Mags was soothed. It wasn't up to Reenie. And now Reenie was dead. Mags's duty was to God, not Andy or Ricky. Or Freddy.

‘What needs doing?’ Edward was the part-time librarian recently transferred from Lewes who had too many cigarette breaks and not enough initiative.

‘Have you finished the audit of the inventory?’

‘No.’ His expression implied that the task bored him.

‘Maybe do that?’ Mags wrinkled her nose at the reek of smoke from his latest cigarette. It took her back to the convent when Toni and Freddy would slink out of the convent garden after having a fag. They thought Mags didn’t know. Mags should have minded their duplicity, but Toni and Freddy’s ability to be what Sister Agnes called ‘rascally’ impressed her.

‘He needs a rocket up his backside,’ Mrs Barker remarked with pursed lips.

Mags nodded vaguely. She had taken Freddy’s number off Toni’s phone one time when Toni was in the loo. She’d never used it. Until yesterday. With Julian beside her, Mags had texted, *Your mum is ill. Mags x*

In her flat earlier, Mags had knelt by the alcove and prayed to Mary for forgiveness. Had she opened a can of worms?

Returning to work, she’d processed parking tickets and loans and drifted between the stacks, more of a zombie than Edward. Toni would tease her that paracetamol couldn’t touch a Stalking Hangover. Mrs Barker was speaking.

‘Sorry, pardon?’

‘Bad behaviour catches up with you.’ Mrs Barker’s eyes glittered.

‘I don’t see it as bad.’ But she did *How could Mrs Barker know?* Mags had taken life into her own hands. Her teeth chattered. She gripped the counter.

‘I was looking at *Breakfast*, doing my list of chores. Ned had his coffee. Suddenly there’s Newhaven. *Where I live*. Police swarming everywhere.’ Mrs Barker tapped her intended loans. ‘One lad dead. A girl fighting for her life. When I was young boys were tearaways. Apple scrumping, chicken and knock-knock ginger. Not stealing cars. That poor girl’s parents.’ As Mags processed each volume, Mrs Barker placed it into her tartan wheelie trolley. ‘Well, I never...’

‘I haven’t seen the news.’ The brandy had made Mags paranoid. Mrs Barker knew nothing. Ginger and chicken? Jamming her cold hands under her armpits, Mags couldn’t contemplate food.

‘A teenager stole his mum’s car.’ Mrs Barker was beside herself at recruiting new blood. ‘He only goes and crashes it on West Beach. Dies instantly. His girlfriend – she’s only fifteen, little mite – is hanging by a thread in the Royal Sussex.’ Tipping into the present tense with the skill of a reporter, Mrs Barker slotted her library card into her purse. ‘My husband says it’s a group mentality. You get a ringleader and the others follow like lambs to the slaughter.’

‘You said there were two.’

‘Double trouble, they egg each other on. It only takes two.’ Confirmatory nod. Mrs Barker was neatening the opening times leaflets. Mags wanted to slap her hand and toss the leaflets up in the air.

It takes two... She heard the song in her head, and allowed herself to be transported for a moment. She and Freddy, dancing to Marvin Gaye in her bedroom, the CD on repeat. They were seventeen. Only five months left at Our Lady before freedom. Fred and Reenie were down the social club. After they’d danced, they’d dropped, exhausted, onto Freddy’s bed.

‘You all right, dear? You’re as white as snow. They should send you home in this temperature. There’s no limit for heat, but when it’s this cold, you’ve got rights. Oh.’ Mrs Barker clapped a hand to her mouth. ‘Did you know those kids?’

‘No.’ Mags didn’t know any kids. Unless she counted Andy Power’s three who she’d seen at communions and at their nana’s house.

‘Well, I’m sorry to spoil your morning, but there we are.’ Mrs Barker didn’t look sorry at all. She brandished the Ruth Rendell audio, *The Best Man to Die*. ‘This’ll cheer me up over the ironing.’

After the heating was restored, Mags remained cold. The hangover was a raging migraine. She alphabetised the books on the returns trolley. She flicked books out and fitted them in the right place with speed: *One Pair of Hands* by Dickens – Monica not Charles; Thomas Hardy’s *The Return of the Native*; three Ruth Rendells and the last two Sue Graftons. She began pushing the trolley around the stacks reshelving the books. Freddy Power’s return to Newhaven was like the native in Hardy’s novel, the traveller coming back to the home from which she’d fled in search of a better life. It was a story that belonged in the nineteenth century.

She rubbed her temples as she returned books to the shelves. She trundled her trolley around to the military history section and stopped with a biography of Napoleon in her hands like a votive text. Pity for Karen at losing her son mingled with the guilt she had never quite shaken off from their childhood. She was the one who had invited Karen and Toni to be Mermaids and who, later, as if from paradise, had expelled Karen. She had played God. It was her fault Karen had hurt Toni.

When she had caught Karen tormenting Toni, she had hissed at her that she was no longer a Mermaid. Karen had not argued. She turned the other cheek. At the door she’d said, ‘See you all later, yeah.’ She had seemed timid.

Mags recalled Mother Julian’s words.

...those who deliberately occupy themselves in earthly business, and are constantly seeking worldly success, find no peace from this in heart or soul...

Mags was desperate for the medieval anchorite to drag her back over the centuries to her own time. To before, when like Judas, Mags had betrayed Karen Munday. And lost all peace in her soul.

Her head pounding, Mags shoved Napoleon into the bookshelf. At the desk she called out, 'The library is closing. Please pack up your things, everyone.'

She looked again at the text on her phone. *Can we meet? Fx*

She should not have sent that text to Freddie. She was still playing God...

FREDDY

After picking over a burger and chips in the restaurant below the hotel, Freddy was in her room. Resting her forehead on the window she gazed down at a car park below.

Her mum hadn't wanted Freddy at the end. Nor had Ricky or Andy asked Mags to contact her. Ricky hated her as much as the day he'd accused her of killing their father. Sarah had said it was a feat since she wasn't there when he'd died. It was enough to Freddy that she'd planned to surprise her dad at his sixtieth party. Nothing Sarah had said could convince Freddy that she wasn't guilty. She had killed her dad.

Now it seemed that Mags had texted off her own bat. This was bad and good. *Mags had thought of her.* But Mags hadn't been in touch since the first text although she knew Freddy's mum had died. She hadn't said how ill her mum was. Why bother to text and not give the full picture. Was she hedging her bets by leaving it to fate. Freddy had been scared that Mags wouldn't reply if she text a reply. Now she felt angry with Mags for leaving it to her, as she always had.. She felt angry for so much.

Freddy wandered from the window over to the bed. The king-size mattress was firm – at least she'd get a good night's sleep for her money. She would have it all to herself. The shower wasn't up to Sarah's multiple power jets. Freddy felt a moment of poignancy that this was her past. She reminded herself that the split was overdue. Freddy was deleting Sarah's hourly texts without reading them. She had ignored her calls. She'd personalised the notifications to avoid the moments of hope that Sarah's texts were from Mags.

Within twenty-four hours Freddy had walked out of her job and left her longest lasting relationship of two years. Her mum was dead.

Becalmed in Premier Inn limbo, Freddy appreciated the anonymous generality of the room. A nowhere place, it cleared her mind. She would not go to the funeral. Ricky might cause a scene. He would say it was hypocritical to be a mourner at her mum's grave when, in the last twenty-odd years, Freddy had never come home. He'd be right. From his vicious greeting Freddy knew that her dad had never told them the real reason why she'd left. He wouldn't be the only one to accuse her of wrecking her

parents' lives. Why was Andy being so nice? Rinsing her teacup under the bathroom tap, Freddy reminded herself that he hadn't asked her to stay with him.

When she left she wouldn't come back. On the train to London she'd let herself concoct a fairy-tale return to her home town. Tears and forgiveness. Love and warmth. The reality had been very different. There was nothing for her in Newhaven.

She was startled by a tap on the door. *Mags?* Freddy peeped through the spyhole. Andy had come.

'All right, Freddy?' Andy Power wore iron-creased slacks and a golfing jumper over a polo shirt. Bare feet in yacht shoes, his short hair was damp from a shower.

Freddy scoped the room for discarded knickers after her own shower. Thankfully, intending now to leave in the morning, she'd packed everything away. Not that it mattered, it was like twenty years meant nothing, her brother was in her bones, they were at ease with each other.

'We caused a stink when they wanted to build this place. The first design was crap, this is more in keeping with the town.' Andy flung himself into the armchair, manspreading, hands behind his head. Casually pointing out the window he said, 'We're over there.'

'Over where?' It was nearly dark. Beyond the room's reflection Freddy saw only the lights of cars parking below and a row of tall houses.

'We've got one of those wharf buildings.' He yawned.

'What, those huge ones?' Freddy remembered Andy had said he lived opposite the hotel. She hadn't supposed he meant literally. She gaped with astonishment at the glass-balconied, clapboard houses designed in the style of the wharves they'd replaced. Their dad had hated show. Success for him had not meant money; like his name, it had meant power. 'You used to say Lewes was for snobs in fancy dress and bells.' Andy had become Rotary Club Man.

'Like Dad always said, I came out with stupid things.' Andy did a bright smile.

'Dad was always wrong,' Freddy told her brother. 'So, the fishery is paying then?'

'We scrape a living against the odds of the politicians.' Andy felt in his back pocket and passed her a card. 'There you go.'

'“Andrew Power, Chief Executive, Power Fisheries.” Brilliant, Andy.' Freddy sat on the edge of the bed. On their second anniversary, Sarah had given her a silver card holder which was still empty. Sarah hadn't packed it in Freddy's case or she could

have put the cards she'd been given today, for a priest and a chief executive. Who knew?

'The staircases in my house are lit under the treads, like the Starship *Enterprise*.' Andy squinted across the car park at his glass palace. 'We've got triple glazing and a dumb waiter.'

'Oh.' Feeling dumb herself, Freddy needed Sarah – she'd be impressed enough to say the say the right thing.

'Sorry about earlier, Mum's illness and death has hit Ricky hard. It's been a long road.' Andy pulled out a vape pipe and flicking it on, sucked on it as if it was his last hope. A scent of strawberry tinged the air-conned air. 'I go out on the trawler with him sometimes, keeps me fresh and Ricky on the straight and narrow. You should come with us.'

'I've got my marine qualifications.' Freddy felt excited at the idea then she came down to earth. 'Ricky would love that. He always was *so* good at sharing. Not.'

Their baby brother had been a pain.

'Do you remember the time we bunked off school? We arranged it in the morning. I sneaked out after dinnertime and met you at the convent.' Andy puffed steam above his head.

'We went to the old Rex cinema.' Freddy grinned. 'I can't remember what we saw but it had to be illegal. I was about thirteen so you were nearly twelve.'

'Yeah, it was. *Titanic*. I was scared out of my wits. Who'd be a fisherman.'

'You never let on.' The treat was meant to make up for their father hurting Andy's arm. 'How did we get in?'

'Through the fire exit. We crept up to the back. It was half empty, no one noticed us. Massive place, over five hundred capacity, shame they knocked it down.' Andy opened the minibar. 'Fancy a drink? They've got Jack Daniel's, is that still your tippie?'

Freddy started to refuse, but decided she did fancy a Jack Daniel's. *Andy had remembered it was her drink*. She watched while Andy prepared it, quelling the fear that any minute their dad might walk in and have a go at him.

How long was Mum ill?' Freddy wanted Andy to say it was quick, her mum was diagnosed and dead within a week. Like the Waitrose customer who never picked up her salmon order. It would explain why no one had told Freddy until yesterday.

‘Five, maybe six months.’ Andy tipped a miniature bottle of Scotch into his glass and then another. ‘She was in hospital a couple of times. At least she got her wish to die at home. Mags was great, I don’t know how we’d have coped otherwise. Mum treated her like a daughter...’ He rapped a tattoo on the arms of his chair as if to scare off the elephant in the room.

‘No one let me know.’ Struggling with tears that, since Father Pete, were close to the surface, Freddy got off the bed and began leafing through the folder of the hotel’s services on the table as if for information pertinent to the stilted exchange.

‘No. Well.’ Andy regarded his vaper. ‘You know how it’s been.’

‘I don’t, actually.’

‘*Sláinte*.’ Andy used their father’s old toast as he raised his glass to her and drank.

‘Cheers.’ Freddy knocked her glass against Andy’s with a little too much force.

‘After you went, it was tough.’ Andy emitted steam out of the corner of his mouth. All he needed was a gentleman’s club, Freddy noted. ‘We were kind of lost without you.’

‘I’m sorry.’ Her mum hadn’t once for asked her. *She had Mags*. Freddy gulped the Jack Daniel’s.

‘So, Mags told you.’ Andy swirled Scotch in the glass. ‘I didn’t realise you guys were in touch.’

‘We’re not.’ *Mags and Toni had said nothing*. The words repeated in her head.

Freddy returned to the bed and propped herself on a bank of pillows. A couple of sips in and she mellowed. She was glad to see Andy. Eleven months apart, they’d once been close. As kids, Freddy had protected Andy. Andy had developed one leg slightly shorter than the other. His right shoe had a lift incorporated to redress the balance. Now Freddy saw it still was. In compensation, Andy had hurtled everywhere. In addition, he’d been clumsy, tripping on his loose shoelaces which when he was very little Freddy tied for him, and bumping into furniture. At school he got vilified for missing football penalties and letting go of the cricket ball too late when he bowled so that it tore the grass feet away and Andy fell on his face. Aside from his leg, Andy was diagnosed as dyspraxic. The neurological disorder explained his clumsiness and reading difficulties. Infuriated by anything that implied imperfection, Frederick took Andy out of school at sixteen and set him to work in the fishery packing and loading and swabbing down floors.

Freddy, netball team captain at Our Lady, led her team into the county league more than once, amassing silverware and her dad's respect. Top of the class, she sat at the front of the room in lessons. She'd left the convent two years after Andy with straight A's and three university places. None of which Fred Senior let her accept. His first-born, and his favourite, Freddy was heir to the Power throne. After Ricky came along, Andy wasn't even the spare.

Freddy had tried to counteract Frederick Power's contempt for Andy by diverting him from taking anything and everything out on Andy. She taught him everything about the fishery that she learned from Fred until the day when her dad had chucked her out of the house. A year later Fred was dead and Andy had, it seemed to Freddy, finally come into his own.

'Please come to the funeral?' Andy asked.

'So that Ricky can rip me to shreds? Not the best idea.'

'The cancer played with Mum's mind.' Andy downed his drink. 'Or she'd have asked you. *Dammit*, Freddy, I won't plead.'

'She didn't want me at Dad's funeral.' Freddy was pushing him. If she kept going, Andy would feel compelled to lie and say she'd changed her mind at the end. Freddy would save them the embarrassment. She'd check out in the morning and go far away from Newhaven.

'That was different. She was in shock. He died at her feet.' Andy swung his legs over the arm of the chair, a relaxed boyhood pose. Freddy guessed it hid that he was tied in knots. She gulped the drink, to divert her from a sob in her throat.

'Funerals are for the living. It's one day,' Andy cajoled.

'I'm lapsed.' Freddy was raising obstacles for Andy to surmount. She wanted him to plead. For decades no member of her family had wanted her. She finished her drink and clambering off the bed looked in the fridge for another. The idea of staying was attractive. As Andy said, it was one day.

'Another?' She held up the remaining little bottle of Scotch.

'Oh, go on. Kirsty's not here to count.' Andy guffawed.

'Kirsty?'

'My wife. We've got three kids – little tearaways – a little girl and two boys, like us.' **Andy beamed.** 'Didn't I say?'

‘No, you didn’t.’ Freddy had even less to say than about his fancy house. She felt stunned by news which in another life would have been joyous. There was even more family from which she was excluded.

‘Kirsty Baxter was at the convent, the year below you. She’s got the same birthday as Mags. That came out last year when they were talking round at Mum’s. First of May.’ Andy held out his glass for a refill, ‘She’s Kirsty Power now. Obviously.’

‘Lovely.’ The girls in the lower years at Our Lady had been a blur. Freddy had never heard of Kirsty Baxter and felt nonsensical outrage that the woman had her surname.

‘What about you? Kids? Married?’

‘Neither.’ Freddy tossed the empty bottle in a bin under the table.

‘Oh, one thing,’ Andy gave his thigh a slap, ‘Mum’s will.’

‘She left a will?’ Reenie Power was a housewife, her earnings had been pin-money. Fred Power had hated his wife having her own business. Freddy was surprised there was a will; Fred Power didn’t put up with anything he didn’t like.

Of course, her mum had inherited the fishery when Fred Power died.

‘The estate is split between Ricky and me,’ Andy said.

‘The estate?’

‘The business and the house.’ Andy sucked on his vaper. Puffing steam into the air, he drank the Scotch in one and lunging across slammed the glass on the tray of tea things. It tilted on a used teabag which Freddy had forgotten to throw away. ‘Mum never got over you leaving.’

‘I didn’t *leave*.’ Her drink tasted sour. Her mother hadn’t left her anything. It was as if she didn’t exist. She didn’t care about the money. All she wanted was a token, something that told her that in the end her mum was on her side. At times, over the decades, Freddy had indulged in wishful thinking that her mum missed her. She never lost the hope that a message would arrive, asking her to come back. Cross with Sarah and astonished by Mags’s message, she now realised she had misinterpreted the text. Her mum had left her nothing.

‘I’m sorry.’ It seemed she hadn’t lost the habit of rescuing Andy.

‘Me too, because obviously that’s that. Legal restrictions and we must respect the wishes of the deceased. Mum.’ Andy fiddled with the tassel on his shoe. ‘Kirsty would kick off. She fights tooth and nail for the kids, she’s like Mum.’

No one was like her mum.

‘It’s better I leave.’ Her outer layer flayed, Freddy stung with hurt. She rearranged the bottles in the mini-fridge. Why had her mum cut her out? She understood about her dad, but her mum? Was she frightened he could get to her from beyond the grave?

‘No. Hey, listen, I’ve got an idea,’ Andy said. ‘We’ve lost our lady mobile fishmonger. Bloody tragedy. She was murdered by her own son. Toni Kemp told Ricky. Dan crewed for Ricky, a good kid, we thought. Seems he got off his head on drugs and strangled her in cold blood.’ Squinting through narrowed eyes, Andy looked out of the window at his house. Every window was lit. To Freddy, in the growing dark, it could be an office block. ‘Total shock. What with Mum. I wonder, would you take over Karen’s round? Until the funeral. Then you’ll want to go. With your experience at the fishery it’ll be like getting back on the bike.’ Almost as soon as the words were out of his mouth, Freddy had the vague sense Andy regretted them. He’d be feeling guilty about the will.

‘Karen?’ Freddy felt the alcohol curdle in her stomach. Lots of women were called Karen.

‘...you could stay at Mum’s.’ Andy clicked off his vaper and got up.

‘You should run it by Ricky?’ Freddy felt sympathy for Andy. As her dad’s favourite and her mum’s only daughter, she had had the edge. Andy had been a cautious boy, he looked before he leapt and being frightened of heights mostly didn’t leap at all. When Ricky had come along, barrelling into danger, afraid of nothing, their dad had loved the bones of him. Freddy couldn’t blame Andy for holding on to what their parents had left him. Anyway, she didn’t want a share in ‘the estate’.

‘Thanks for thinking of me,’ she said. ‘But really, it’s not worth the aggro.’ It hurt to refuse. She was looking through thick glass at the perfect life. Why had she never thought to be a mobile fishmonger? She could have set up on her own.

‘Would you at least stay at the house for the funeral? I’ll sort Ricky.’ Andy rattled change in his trouser pockets like their dad. Fred Power had been reminding them who paid the bills, and himself that he had sway. Andy would be nervous.

‘OK, yes.’ Freddy couldn’t help her mum, but she would do anything for her favourite brother. She would go back to the house on Beach Road. ‘Thanks, Andy.’

When Andy had gone, Freddy took his chair by the window. After a few minutes she saw him, lit by thin lamplight, striding across the car park to his personal castle. She knew it would matter to Andy to have got his own family. Freddy pressed her

face to the glass. She had two nephews and a niece who she'd never even seen in a photograph. She was overtaken by a wave of sadness.

A text from Sarah jolted her mood. *We'll make it work. We're so good together.* Sarah would not give up. Freddy would have to reply. But if she did, then they'd be like the guinea pigs her mum looked after, trundling round and around on a wheel. Making up, arguing, breaking up, making up... With nowhere to call home, it was tempting to slink back. Sarah had wanted all the family Freddy needed. A notion that made Freddy short of breath like a pillow over her face.

Freddy opened Google Maps. Newcastle, Grimsby, the north coast of Scotland. She zoned in on Bristol, the city where her mum had been born, but to which, once she'd married, had never returned. It was a city without an ex. Maybe Freddy could start a fish round there. At the least there'd be a supermarket with a fish counter.

Andy had said he'd drop her Mum's house key into reception on his way to the fishery. 'You're doing me a favour, the house needs looking after,' he'd reiterated outside in the corridor. Fancy Andy talking that way about bricks and mortar, Freddy thought now.

Freddy was filled with the impulse to text Mags again. She opened her phone and pricked with embarrassment when she saw the text she'd sent from the train.

Can we meet? Fx

Mags hadn't replied. Perhaps Freddy could say she'd be staying at her mum's house from tomorrow. Freddy put this, then hastily scrubbed the message as if Mags would read the words without her sending it. Mags might take the message as a hint that Freddy wanted her to visit. Which it was. Freddy's stomach clenched. Mags liked honesty. Or so she'd said. *Please come to my mum's house. I'd like to see you.* Freddy smarted at the words and deleted it. If Mags refused to come, it would be worse than silence after Freddy's earlier text. Freddy tossed her phone on the bed.

Would Andy be angry with Mags because she had told Freddy? She could send her an apology for dobbing her in. More likely, Andy would thank Mags and relate to her how Freddy got there too late. That would make Mags contact Freddy.

Freddy stared over at her phone, praying for it to ring.

It beeped. Sarah again. *I love you.*

It was the first time Sarah had said that. Automatically Freddy made the sign of the cross and, her cheeks wet with tears, muted her phone.

Outside, the car park emptied. A light shone in the top window of Andy Power's house. The rest of the row was dark, yet to be sold. Beyond, the River Ouse flowed fast, black and slick, to the sea.