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Split Second

Written by Cath Staincliffe

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SPLIT SECOND

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CHAPTER ONE

Emma

They burst on to the bus shoving and yelling; all energy and an edge of menace. Emma felt her stomach cramp, and along with that came a wash of resentment at the likelihood of disruption, the prospect that the rest of her journey home would be ruined by the chavs. Three of them. A girl: pretty, flawless milky skin and dark eye make-up, her white hooded jacket trimmed with fake fur; and two lads, a runty-looking one with thin lips and a tattoo like barbed wire on the side of his neck, and a bigger lad, red hair visible as he swiped his hood back, shaking the snow off. He had freckles and round baby-blue eyes.

The trio swung past the stairs and swayed along the central aisle, led by the big one telling some story at the top of his voice, swearing. The foul language, a sally of ammunition, fell through the air, hitting the passengers, who shrank and tensed. The girl was giggling and echoing half-phrases in a high-pitched squeal.

The teenagers scoured the passengers, waiting for anyone fool enough to make eye contact. Emma prayed none of them would sit next to her. The bus was almost half full, maybe ten people on the lower deck; the back seats just behind her were free. Would they sit there?

They didn't even pay, she thought. And none of them showed a travel card. What was the driver playing at? Why let them on? Couldn't he see they were trouble? He could have just closed the doors and driven on.

Emma tried to think about something else, shifted the bags of Christmas shopping at her feet. Nearly all done; got the ones to take home for Mum and Dad and the rest of the family in Birmingham, just need a couple for the girls at work.

‘Shit!’ The redhead broke off his tale and crowed at the top of his voice. ‘Look who’s here – Pukey Luke!’

He homed in on a mixed-race boy sitting a couple of rows in front of Emma on the other side. Short curly dark hair, skin the colour of toffee. There was a muttered curse by way of reply, then the clap and rustle of scuffling as the boy tried to get up.

‘Going nowhere, pal,’ the big guy said, and shoved him back down then knelt on the seat beside him. The girl and the weedy one flanked him. Now the cornered lad was looking away from the chavs out of the steamed-up window.

The bus clattered to a halt; an old couple got off and a woman with a baby in a buggy got on, wheeling the pram to the space opposite the bottom of the stairway.

‘You ignoring me, wog boy?’

The word hung in the air, resounded around the space. Emma bit her tongue, felt her face heat up. The bus seemed to hesitate, to wait shivering, its panels rattling by the roadside, and Emma wondered if the driver was going to chuck the troublemakers off. But then with a defeated sigh the doors closed and the bus shuddered into motion.

It probably looks worse than it is, she thought. They obviously knew the boy – Luke, presumably. Could just be mucking about; they do that, don’t they, play-fighting and next minute they’re all friends. She didn’t really know what was going on.

‘Talking to you, dickhead.’

‘Tell him, Gazza,’ the girl giggled, egging her friend on. ‘Black bastard.’

Ahead of her, Emma could see the latest arrival bending her head to focus on her sleeping child, an expression of dismay and the tug of anxiety in the way she bit her lip.

Emma's stomach hurt and she felt thirsty, a bit dizzy. Maybe she should say something. But no one else was doing anything. If it really was serious, someone else would say something, wouldn't they? What about the really big bloke sitting near the front, looking like a rugby player? He'd not done anything and he'd got size on his side. Or the group of studenty types, four of them, with long hair and funky clothes. They were just huddled together ignoring it.

What could she say, though? *Stop it*. Something friendlier? *Please leave him alone*. The words sounded pathetic in her head, weedy. She'd look ridiculous. Let alone the fact that the group might turn on her, she could get attacked. People did. What if she asked them to stop; then the boy, the ringleader, she could imagine him swivelling his gaze at her, those big marble eyes set off among his freckles, pushing himself away from the seat, homing in on her. 'You talking to me?' Then calling her names: 'Fat slag, stupid cow, keep your nose out.'

And what about the driver? He'd done nothing. This was his bus, his job; if anyone had a responsibility to do something, it was him.

She could ring the police, report the abuse. But if she did it now, everyone would hear. Besides, they'd probably snatch her phone as soon as they noticed. If the lad kept on ignoring his tormentors, maybe they'd lose interest. No one else was saying anything. Perhaps they knew it wasn't worth it, or that it was just chavs messing about, bored, maybe on drugs too.

'He's shitting himself,' the runty one cackled.

There were two women in front of Emma: middle-aged, dressed up well against the weather. Now she saw them exchange a glance, share a tiny shake of the head, caught the muscle in one woman's jaw tighten with disapproval. Shocking, dreadful, but what can you do?

There was a sharp crack and a tremor through the floor as the one called Gazza kicked the seat next to his quarry. Emma startled.

'Hah,' yelled Gazza. Another thump. 'You want a kicking? That'll sort you out,' he shouted at the boy at the window. 'You dirty nigger.'

The woman in the aisle seat in front of Emma pressed the bell, and she and her friend got to their feet, made their way to the front, standing near the driver as they waited for the lights to change. The large windscreen wiper was pushing slushy snowflakes in an arc across the glass. One of the women peered at the driver, but the man, grey hair, grey complexion, stared steadfastly ahead. She coughed; the driver glanced into his offside wing mirror and drove the bus across the junction, drawing in to the kerb with a whoosh of brakes. The doors folded back, letting in the cold air and a swirl of snow as the women got off. The bus moved on.

'I'll do you,' the bully said, his tone intense with pent-up rage. 'I'll have you. I've got a knife. Tell him.'

'He has,' barked the runty one. 'He'll shank you.'

'He'll cut you,' threatened the girl.

The air hummed with tension, the prospect of danger. Emma felt her neck burning, a band of pain around her head. They're just boasting, she thought, winding each other up. It'll all fizzle out in a minute. Just playing macho, aren't they? The passengers were mute, the atmosphere thick with shame and fear. They all sat cocooned, eyes cast down or out of the window.

The girl giggled. 'He's shaking, Gazza. Look at him.'

The bell dinged and the red bus-stopping sign illuminated. A lad stomped down from the upper deck, hair down to his shoulders, zipping up his olive-green parka, one of those bright woolly hats on with ear flaps.

‘Knobhead.’ Gazza slapped Luke; the boy’s head banged into the glass.

The lad in the hat saw it; he flushed, moved down the bus. ‘Leave him alone.’

Gazza turned. ‘Or else? Fuck off.’

But the young man wasn’t cowed; his face darkened with outrage, ‘Just leave it.’

With a malicious snort, Gazza swivelled out of the seat and lunged at him, pushing him back and on to the lap of an old Asian man with bags of shopping.

Luke seized the distraction to leap into the aisle and run to the doors as the bus drew in to the stop.

‘Get him!’ Gazza roared, and the three of them scrambled after Luke. Pandemonium. Shouts of outrage and curses as they spilled off the bus.

The lad in the hat righted himself and followed at speed.

Emma felt sick. The doors closed, and she saw the woman with the baby shake her head at an old man on the disabled seats at the other side. But still no one spoke.

Emma looked out of the window as the bus drove away, tyres hissing on the wet tarmac, and saw Luke trip and recover and dart into a garden. The kids were close on his heels and the one in the hat behind them. It was the first house with lights on and there was a car parked at the side. Luke would be able to knock on the door, get help.

Should she ring the police now? And say what? There were some youths on the bus shouting abuse and making threats and now they’re chasing this lad? It

would be hard to make the call on the bus with all the noise and people earwiggling, and by the time she got home there wouldn't really be any point. And they'd probably tell her they'd look into it but it wasn't like anything definite had really happened. Well – one slap and the insults. It wasn't up to her, really; perhaps the driver would report it when he reached the terminus. Maybe he'd not done anything because he knew it wasn't actually worth reporting.

The bus trundled on and she sat, just like the rest of them, isolated and dumb, wanting to be anywhere but there.

Louise

'Brilliant!' Louise clapped as her daughter's voice faded along with the backing track. 'Dead good!'

Ruby was flushed, her brown eyes glittering, a sheen on her face from the exertion making her coppery skin glisten.

'Yer nan'd be proud of you.' Louise got up from the sofa, ready for a cup of tea.

'You always say that.' Ruby switched off the sound system.

'Cos it's true.' Louise had spent half her childhood applauding her mother, who'd made a living as a singer, fronting a twelve-piece band and crooning ballads or belting out show tunes. She'd spent the other half of it pining for the woman off criss-crossing the ocean singing for her supper on the cruise ships. Now she was here cheering on her daughter; the musical gene, the exhibitionist gene, had skipped a generation.

'Did Dad sing?' Ruby asked quietly.

Louise paused in the doorway to the kitchen. It had

been ages since Ruby had spoken about her dad Eddie, who'd died suddenly at the wheel of his taxi when Ruby was only four years old. Heart attack.

'Yeah, he did, he loved it. Couldn't hold a tune for toffee, though.'

Ruby grinned.

Louise went on, 'He'd sing hymns and football songs. Didn't matter to him which. He'd sing to you – d'you remember?'

Ruby shook her head, disappointed. Four was so young to lose him, Louise thought, so few memories to cling to.

'What did he sing to me?'

'Hymns and football songs,' Louise said wryly.

Ruby laughed, then swung round to face the mirror on the wall. 'What about my hair?' Her voice now leaking frustration. In the gene stakes, she had won her dad's Caribbean features: dark brown eyes, a wide nose and full mouth and tightly crinkled hair that she regarded as a total nightmare. They spent a small fortune on hair products: relaxing treatments, straighteners and the like. Louise, of Irish descent, with blue-white skin, wore her own wavy dark brown hair scooped back in a barrette. She saw little of herself in either of her children. Though they both had her fingers, thin and spidery, and her large feet.

'You could get it plaited, cornrows, like before.'

'Then I'd be stuck with it.'

And we'd be sixty quid worse off, Louise thought. But she didn't want to play that card now. Ruby was auditioning for stage school. She had wanted to act, to sing and dance all her life. Every spare penny, the precious few they had, went on ballet and tap and modern dance lessons, leotards and pumps. Now fourteen, Ruby was stunning, slender and gamine, with Eddie's high cheekbones, her teeth naturally white and

straight. She moaned about being flat-chested, but all Louise saw was her beauty. And her drive, the ambition that Louise supported to the hilt.

‘In a bun, then? Like it is but higher?’ Louise suggested.

‘A chignon?’

‘Whatever they call it. Or wear something over it.’

‘A paper bag,’ Ruby slung back, and they both cracked up laughing.

‘One of those . . .’ Louise put her hand above her head, waggled her fingers.

‘A fascinator.’ Ruby curled her lip.

‘You’ll have to decide soon,’ her mother cautioned. ‘First week of January – and if you do want it styling, some places will be closed over the holidays. Now – I need a cuppa.’

‘Get us a hot chocolate?’

Louise raised an eyebrow.

‘Please.’ Ruby curtsied. She began to practise one of her dance steps, the furniture around the edge of the room juddering as the floor shook.

‘Watch the china,’ Louise said.

‘Cheek. Where’s Luke?’

‘Out,’ Louise answered as she walked into the kitchen.

‘Where?’

‘God knows,’ she called out. ‘I told him to be back by eleven.’ She filled the kettle. She peered through the window. It was snowing. Maybe they’d have a white Christmas.

‘I don’t know why you bother.’ Ruby came into the kitchen.

Louise didn’t reply. She switched the kettle on. ‘When we get the tree up, you’ll have to practise upstairs.’

‘My room’s too small.’

‘Use mine, then.’

‘Cool. When are we getting it?’

‘Tomorrow,’ Louise said. ‘Carl’s bringing one down.’

‘Is it big?’

‘Big enough.’ She got the drinking chocolate out.

‘That means it’s titchy.’

‘Wait and see.’ Louise smiled. She’d paid for a six-footer. It would look great. And she was off Christmas Day.

Carl was at the agency with her, home help, social care. Closest thing she had to a boyfriend, but she kept it casual. She liked the company, someone to share a meal or a laugh or a bed with, but nothing more serious. He was a nice bloke, a bit dim, but well-meaning, sociable. Polish. The agency work was crap money really, but for Carl it was way more than he could make back home. The job itself was okay: cleaning, shopping, feeding, changing, a lot of listening. Some of the people Louise had been calling on for years, knew more about them than their own families did. But the agency was always trying to screw as much as they could from you.

Louise looked back out at the garden. Some of the snow had settled, on the grass and the shed roof, but the path was gleaming wet. Be nice if it did stay. Course, it caused problems, people falling and fractures and buses not running, but it looked lovely.

‘Or a wig?’ Ruby said. ‘Like a dead bright colour, yeah? Red, like my shoes.’

Andrew

He thought he heard something over the noise of the shower. Banging? Perhaps Jason had forgotten his key. More than likely. Andrew tipped his head back, let the

water play on his face. In fact it was unusual for Jason to remember his key. A dreamer. It drove Val round the bend, her son's lack of focus, his apparent ineptitude.

'Is it a boy thing?' she'd demanded of Andrew one day when Jason was about six. Still struggling to tie his shoelaces, still forgetting his book bag, his games kit, his permission slip, to brush his teeth, to turn the television off.

'He's just made like that, I guess,' Andrew said.

'All I do is nag,' she complained. 'And if I don't, nothing happens.'

'He's only little.' Andrew pulled her to him, kissed her. 'D'you want me to nag?'

She shook her head, still exasperated.

'Maybe he'll never be the world's most organized person, but he's bound to get a bit better.'

'You think?'

'I hope.'

But Jason's absent-mindedness had persisted; his relationship to the practical, physical world had never become one of mastery or precision, though he was skilled in other areas. He could play any instrument he picked up, despite never having had a lesson in his life; he'd overcome his moderate dyslexia to get four A levels and a place to study geography at Durham.

'Geography!' Val had exclaimed when Andrew told her Jason had been talking about it. 'He can barely find his way home from school without a sat nav. He's no sense of direction – in either sense of the word.'

'He loves geography, though,' Andrew had said. 'Remember all those maps we used to make?' Pieces of lining paper scrawled on with felt pens: islands littered with treasure troves and hazards; sharks and sinking sands, whirlpools and stingrays. Staining the paper with used tea bags, singeing the edges with the kitchen

matches and setting the smoke alarm off, rolling them into scrolls, tied with broken shoelaces.

‘He liked maps because you did,’ Val said.

‘Maybe. Does it matter? It’s good to know there’s something he wants to do – and his marks have been great.’

‘Yes.’ She softened, gave a rueful smile. ‘I just worry about him, that’s all,’ apologizing, acknowledging the tension she brought to the discussion, that for all his charms, her child’s flaws still irritated her, made her feel impatient and then guilty.

Jason had seen it through, taken the offer from Durham, got his grades and moved into halls twelve weeks ago. The house had been deadly without him, ghostly without the trail of debris, the piles of laundry, the racket as he moved about the place, heavy-footed, clumsy, big-boned. Now he was back home for Christmas. He’d gone to the pub tonight, to catch up with his mates from school, the group scattered to universities around the country.

Andrew turned, let the jets of water drum on his back, inched the temperature control up a notch. He bent for the shower gel.

‘Andrew! Andrew!’ Val braying at the bathroom door. Was there a leak? The shower flooding into the kitchen below? Her voice frantic, furious. For a moment he wondered if he had done something wrong, or failed to do something, but what would merit such fury? He stopped the shower. ‘Get out here!’ she yelled. ‘There’s a fight outside. Jason’s there!’

He almost slipped stepping out of the shower, swiped a towel down his front and across his back, pulled on clothes from the floor, his jeans and pullover, the wool itchy against his skin. He hurried downstairs, where he could see the front door open, Val just inside, the phone

in hand, her voice urgent, shaky as she gave their address and then shouted to Jason.

Andrew went past her on to the front lawn. Jason was tussling with a boy, dragging at his sleeve; on the grass beside them lay a figure, curled small. Two people waited at the gate, yelling: a girl in a white coat and another bigger lad in a hoodie, popping-out eyes. Andrew ran forward, yelling too. The boy wrenched himself free from Jason, leapt over the prone figure and ran. Andrew went after them, screaming, his heart thumping fiercely in his chest, fury red at the edges of his eyes. He lost his footing on the slippery pavement, he had no shoes on, and went over, his shoulder and hip hitting the ground hard. He scrambled up but the trio were already near the junction and he saw them veer off. He'd never catch them now.

He ran back to the house, the ground cold and wet and gritty beneath his feet. The crystals of snow on the grass squeaking as he went to his son. Jason was bent over, hands on knees, breathless, panting. He swung his head, saw Andrew. 'Dad, call an ambulance.' He was close to tears. 'I think they've killed him.'

'Oh God!' Andrew's phone was upstairs. But Val was already . . . 'I think your mum . . .'

'Call a fucking ambulance,' Jason screamed at him.

Tears started in his eyes, at his son's anguish, at the pathos of the scene. He ran upstairs, grabbed his phone and punched in 999. He hurried back down and the operator answered on the second ring and transferred him to the ambulance service. Val was still talking. 'Three of them, a girl and two boys, they've only just gone.'

Outside, Andrew hunkered down. The boy on the floor was still; his face was bloody and swollen. Andrew's stomach flooded with acid; his heart was still

pounding, and he was trembling. He followed what the voice on the phone said, tried to answer their questions as best he could.

‘I think he’s dead,’ Jason gasped. ‘He was jerking, like a fit.’

Andrew repeated the information for the operator, and listened to her instructions.

‘They’re coming,’ he said.

‘We should do something.’ Jason’s voice was wild with panic. He was batting his fists together. The boy was still; by his head, the snow was pink, like sorbet with raspberry sauce. Flecks of snow landed and melted on his hair, on his poor, poor face.

‘I need to check if he’s breathing,’ Andrew said.

Jason began to cry.

‘Hey.’ Andrew straightened up, folded him into his arms. Felt a tremor ripple through his son. And another. ‘You’re freezing, go in.’

Val came out. ‘Jason.’

‘Mum.’

‘Take him inside,’ Andrew urged. He heard sirens howling in the distance. Coming here, he prayed.

‘No, I’m not—’ Jason began to protest, but Andrew shushed him.

‘Come inside, Jason,’ Val said.

‘I think he’s in shock,’ Andrew told her. ‘He must have seen it all.’

‘Oh, Mum. Mum.’

‘Come on, love. Dad’ll look after him.’ Jason went with her.

Andrew crouched down closer to the boy. He could smell the blood raw on the night air; it made his gorge rise. He put his hand gently on the boy’s chest and felt movement, a slight rise and fall. Yes! Oh, thank God. He scrambled to his feet and ran

to meet the ambulance, aware that neighbours were coming to their gates and others pulling their curtains back, peering out through snowy stencils, their faces illuminated by twinkling fairy lights and the garish pulse of flashier outdoor decorations.

The paramedics wanted Andrew to move away while they assessed the victim, and a police officer asked for Val. Andrew took him inside. Val was coming downstairs with a blanket for Jason. 'He's still shivering,' she told Andrew.

'Sugar,' he said. 'I'll make him a drink. The police want you.'

The officer nodded and introduced himself and asked Val if she could tell him what had happened. He followed her into the front room. Andrew looked in. Jason was white as a sheet; he looked awful, just like he used to before he was sick as a child after an unwise fairground ride, or a long car journey. 'Jason?'

'Dad.' His voice was thick, gluey. Val glanced over, stopped talking. Andrew felt it in the room, a current, electric, biting at the back of his neck, crackling up his spine. He moved towards his son. 'I feel—' Jason slumped forward, his legs skittering on the carpet. There was a dark stain on the back of the armchair, wet, deep vivid red. The same on his parka.

'Oh my God!' Val dropped the blanket and ran to him.

'Jason!' They were both beside him. Then there was blood coming from his nose. Andrew grasped his shoulders, tried to straighten him up. His mind screaming: *What do I do? What do I do? Help, please help.* Sounds colliding around him, shouts, and a paramedic pulling his arms away from Jason. Jason on the floor, on his side, Val weeping. Someone pulling them back, getting between them and their son. *Stab wound.* Who

said it? *Stab wound*. Panic rearing inside him like waves, higher and higher, and he couldn't stay still. Val biting her fist, shaking her head, strands of her blonde hair stuck to her face. Then they were moving him and someone would take them to the hospital. Did they have their house keys? Phones?

Outside it was snowing again, fat flakes pirouetting in the street lights, settling and turning red on the front lawn.