

## Odd People

**I humbly offer you my gift of darkness, tinged with hope. A short story of about 14,300 words, set this Christmas on the British coastline, somewhere near Hastings.**

**A traditional gothic tale for Christmas, with a few modern twists....**

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~Thursday 21<sup>st</sup> December – Day 1~

Using three vehicles for the drive from London had been a mistake. Worse than a mistake, it had been a bit of a nightmare, which had added an hour to their journey. Peter Fudge, known to all as Fudgy, had been his friend since junior school. Fudgy had been at the rear of their three vehicle convoy, driving a rather old Renault van. At one roundabout the van had vanished off their rear view mirrors. Using their phones to direct him back to the right place had proven difficult. Fudgy wasn't stupid, just far too large to shout at, with a habit of being slow on the uptake.

"Keep an eye on him at every turn." He told Becca.

"I will, that's the second time he's zoned out on a roundabout."

Fudgy at the rear in his van, which contained their tools and most of the things they needed for a ten day stay at his great grandfather's derelict old house. The car in the middle, a sporty but elderly Ford, was driven by another old friend from.... Well forever, or so it felt. Actually his girlfriend Marlene was driving, while Brad seemed to be having a nap. Brad Harris, who had been his friend, since all they could do was crap in their nappies and eat rusks.

"Do I carry on for Hastings, or take the Fairlight road?" Asked Becca.

Another sodding roundabout and it looked busy. He almost wanted to call Fudgy and tell him to wake up, but people didn't do things like that to Fudgy. You didn't try to intimidate or bully his friend Peter Fudge, not if you didn't want your face re-arranged. No one bullied Fudgy, ever.

"Carry on towards Hastings." He replied. "I was only seventeen the last time I came here and only remember the route from there."

"Ok. Do we stop for a meal?"

They were already late, the clock on his phone told him it was already 3pm.

"No, it'll be dark by 4ish, we'll carry on driving. The road out to the house is a muddy old track. We don't want to be doing that in the dark."

No good trying to use SatNav, even if his old Vauxhall had one. His great grandfather's place didn't seem to have a postcode, or even a proper address. If the track leading to it had ever had a name, he didn't know it. There was running water, or at least there had been when he'd visited there as a kid. They were taking no chances though and taking enough bottled water to last for weeks.

"Right down to the sea." He said. "Follow the seafront back towards the east and I'll tell you where to turn off."

"Shall I pull up, so you can drive?"

There was no edge to her voice, no implied criticism. That was why he'd fallen for her. If Rebecca Walsh was upset about anything, she told you. Right out and sometimes loudly. There was no sulking or brooding on things with Becca.

"No, best if you drive and I try to remember where the hell we turn off."

They had fallen out about leaving Finn with her mother over Christmas. He was only one year old though and a dilapidated old house with a weird reputation was no place to take a baby. His great grandfather, Thomas Stuart hadn't exactly had a reputation for being normal either. He'd been a

member of a strange religious cult and allowed them to use his house as a church for a while. His mother had a few ideas about Thomas Stuart, passed on down through the generations of his family. "Old Thomas Stuart died at ninety two." She'd told him. "Seriously old for the age he lived in. They do say he was so wicked that even God didn't want him."

Thomas had known some odd people, very odd indeed. He'd been wealthy though, fabulously wealthy according to some. That was why John and his friends were going to spend their Christmas break, tearing up the floors of Thomas Stuart's old house.

"There, the next right." He said.

"Doesn't look too bad."

"You wait until we get to about half a mile from the sea."

The house had been built before the Victorian age, probably built in around eighteen hundred. Even then there was talk of it being built over a far older structure on the site. No one worried about coastal erosion then, the cliffs were a good distance from the house. Now was a different story, the erosion had reached right up the garden wall and the whole house has been condemned when John had been twenty. That was four years before, so the building had to be close to falling over the cliff, taking the Stuart fortune with it, to be washed away by the tides.

"Christ John, if it rains this track will disappear."

"I told you. Luckily the forecast is dry and close to freezing."

"In a derelict house with no heating. Brilliant." Said Becca.

"That's why this army is made up of volunteers lady."

She laughed and he hoped she was still amused by a cold damp house, when it was Christmas morning. The track opened out a bit, as it stopped in front of a rather grand looking house. Three floors, still glass in all the windows. At first glance, it looked like a comfortable bed and breakfast, three stars at the very least.

"The front has been looked after a bit, to deter vandals." He said. "The inside is a total mess."

John got out of the car and walked over to the gate in the low stone front wall. Stone lasts forever, but the wrought iron gate was leaning over at a strange angle.

"Welcome to Hell House." Said Fudgy. "Does this place have a name?"

"Not as far as I know." Replied John. "Just the Stuart place, just off Rosemary Lane."

It took all five of them, to shove the gate to one side, allowing it to fall into the overgrown front garden. The noise of it falling over disturbed some birds roosting in the nearby trees, sending them fluttering up into the evening sky.

"I can hear the sea." Said Marlene. "Can we go and take a look?"

"Yes, there's a path to the right of the house." He replied.

They didn't even lock their cars, there was no one else for miles. The path led out a little from the house, going round a pile of stones that looked like the ruins of another building. Quite quickly they were at the cliff edge.

"The rear wall of the garden has gone." Said John.

"How long until it all goes into the sea?" Asked Brad.

The last letter from the council surveyor had said six months to a year, maybe less if they had a bad winter. That letter had arrived about seven months before, so John had begun to bend the truth a little.

"The council guy says a year or two." He said.

"Pity," said Becca, "it must have been a beautiful house once."

"Imagine that view from your bedroom window." Said Marlene. "Can we get up to the other floors?"

"Dangerous, the timbers have suffered badly from wet rot." He said.

The ocean was like a monster, slowly but surely eating away at the cliff, which supported the old house. The view was still beautiful though, of the grey winter ocean fuming and boiling below them.

"I need food, even if it is cold food for tonight." Said Becca.

"We'll go camping cooker shopping tomorrow." Said John. "Just one night of tinned stuff sandwiches, promise."

"I'll start getting the tools out of the van." Said Fudgy.

Becca Walsh sorted out the tents with Marlene, while the guys carted tools about and argued over nonsense. Three cheap tents with built in ground sheets. Comfortable enough, once you had an inflatable bed under your sleeping bag. They'd hammered the tent pegs into the floorboards. All three tents in one large dining room, which didn't exactly give anyone much privacy.

"There, quite cosy." Said Becca. "If we ignore the rat droppings and damp."

"I'll sleep anywhere after a few glasses of prosecco." Said Marlene.

Brad sauntered in, as though he was on holiday in the South of France, rather than a freezing wreck of a building in the middle of nowhere.

"There is water from one tap in the kitchen." He announced. "Looks clean, but probably safest to use it for just washing and filling up the toilet's water tank."

"Any chance of electric light?" Asked Becca.

John bobbed his head round the door frame, no room seemed to have a door anymore.

"There is wiring, but the house hasn't been connected to the grid since the sixties." He said.

"Yep, probably the eighteen sixties." Added Brad.

"Three habitable rooms and one of them has no glass in the window." Said John. "Think of it as the worst camping site you've ever visited."

They made the sandwiches and created a safe, rat dropping free space on the dining room floor. The two women in the group, turned a sinister room into a decent place for a picnic. The feminist part of Becca hated herself for becoming so domesticated, but the guys had been carting some heavy equipment into the house.

"Oh wow, a picnic." Said Fudgy. "I don't mind living like this for a week."

"We'll get a camping stove tomorrow." Said Becca. "I'm not having spam and pickle sandwiches for Christmas dinner."

"I saw sardine and tomato spread in the boxes." Said John.

"We're saving that for Boxing Day." Said Marlene.

Probably intended as a joke, but no one was laughing. Their friends had agreed to help John in his hour of need, though no one really wanted to spend Christmas away from home. Fudgy maybe, he seemed to view it as a wonderful adventure.

"Anything to drink that isn't wine?" He asked.

"There's some Newcastle Brown getting nicely chilled in the kitchen." Said John. "In the cupboard to the right of the sink."

Becca had to admit that their picnic wasn't a bad way to spend their first evening. They were all still dressed in outdoor clothing, complete with boots. It brought back memories of a school trip to France she'd been on once. Lots of cheap wine and sex, when the teachers were fast asleep. John had even brought a portable DVD player, though the screen was quite small. Everyone had added

their own favourite DVD to a box, beginning in late October. They had enough entertainment to last until spring. Choice was going to be an issue though, everyone wanted to watch their favourite movie.

"We made dinner, we decide." Said Marlene.

Becca backed her up, even threatening to hide the spare batteries for the player.

"Fine, have it your way." Said Brad. "What are we watching tonight?"

"The English Patient." Said Marlene.

John and Brad exchanged a look, but didn't moan. They'd only just got through the credits, when Fudgy came back, carrying two tins of Newcastle Brown and a grubby backpack.

"I found this at the back of the cupboard." He said. "Looks to have a girl's bits and pieces in it."

"Shush, we'll go through it after the film." Said Becca.

The film was over two and a half hours long and a lot of wine had been drunk. Add a general tiredness and everyone forgot about the old backpack, which was probably full of junk anyway. They were all in their sleeping bags and fast asleep by about midnight.

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### ~Friday 22<sup>nd</sup> December – Day 2~

Brad Harris didn't mind not having a shower, though he knew Marlene wasn't keen on letting her body go unwashed for days.

"It doesn't matter if everyone gets a bit smelly."

He'd told her, while using bottled water to brush his teeth. He had already rubbed a damp towel under his arms and round his genitals, which seemed to get the job done. A quick spray with deodorant and he felt ready for the day.

"If you expect to have sex at all while we're here... we need to work out a way to shower." She'd hissed at him. "Cold water will do, maybe hang up a bucket with a hole in it."

All women were obsessed by hygiene, he'd picked up in his twenty four years of life. His experience with the opposite sex wasn't anywhere near as varied or frequent as he liked to imply, but they all seemed to hate being grubby. Brad put his mind to it and had a bucket shower ready and working before breakfast.

"There's still a bit of old lino on the floor in bathroom at the back of the house. No getting splinters in our bare feet." He said. "I put the bucket up on a piece of two by four. Fill it and it pours for about three minutes, easy peasy."

"I remember that room, no glass in the window." Said Fudgy.

"I nailed up a piece of old curtain over the window."

There was no further comment on his home made shower and everyone used it. Becca came back shivering and looking a bit blue, but didn't complain. Breakfast was cereal with milk that had kept fresh enough to use.

"Colder in that kitchen than in my mum's fridge." Fudgy had commented.

Brad caught a glimpse of a near naked Becca, as she dressed to go out and remembered when she'd been his girlfriend. Becca had been his first, though he'd never told her that. Had she guessed anyway? He had been fairly green back then, seventeen and never even seen a girl naked. If she did notice his inexperience, she'd never mentioned it. Then John had come along and swept her off her feet. Brad pushed the resentment out of his mind.

"Come on guys." Said John. "We need a cooker. A proper meal tonight."

The four of them went in John's car, with Fudgy following in his now empty van.

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Marlene French had given up her Christmas break to help Brad's old school friend. She'd been hoping for a little time with her parents, but found herself setting up two camping cookers, in a cold corner of the room where they all slept.

"It'll warm up the room a bit." Becca had said.

Marlene didn't like the idea of the gas fumes where she slept, but saw the logic in using the cooking heat to stay warm. They'd bought two large cookers at a well-known camping equipment store in Hastings. Large and expensive, John had needed to borrow money from them all to buy them and two enormous bottles of gas. There had been a promise of repayment, yet they all knew John was desperate for money. It was after all, why they were spending Christmas digging up floors and exploring cellars.

"Oh tea, the first thing is a proper hot drink."

Said Becca, before going off again, to help with bashing walls and prying up floorboards. Marlene would join in the fun, once she'd made everyone a cup of tea. It had only been one day of cold food and drink, but she already felt like a vagrant. She arrived with a tray full of steaming cups, to see Brad holding Becca's arm, maybe a little too fondly.

"Crap Becs, that is going to leave a nasty bruise." Said Brad.

"Put my girl down." Said John. "It's my job to offer sympathy and fondle bruised limbs."

All said in a light hearted way, but Marlene caught the dirty look John had given Brad. Can you go away with your ex and the person they now screw and not get stressed by it ? Marlene was determined to stay close to Brad and give him no opportunity to rekindle anything.

"Tea, all with milk and we forgot to buy any sugar." She said.

"A proper hot drink at last." Said John.

They took a break and Fudgy took the opportunity to pull out a comb, that had wedged itself between the floorboards. A long handled bright yellow plastic comb, that must have once been owned by a girl with long hair.

"Might be the same girl who left the backpack." Said Marlene.

"The backpack." Said Brad. "We never did look inside it."

"I'll get it." Said Fudgy.

It was old and gritty, dirt falling out as Fudgy undid the zip fastener. As he put his hand inside, a spider ran up his hand and over his arm.

"Christ !" Yelled Marlene. "Those things give me the jitters."

There was a weekend's clothing for a woman in the backpack, as long as she wasn't too fussy. A couple of T shirts, that fell apart as they came out of the bag. Three pairs of knickers, beginning to rot from the damp. Two pairs of jeans that had once been blue. Some socks, an old pair of trainers and a bag containing her toothbrush and bathroom essentials. There was even a small pack of tampons, though the writing on the box had long gone. Fudgy placed everything on the floor.

"She travelled light." Said Brad.

"There's a side pocket." Said Fudgy.

His hand brought out a handful of grit and a plastic card. He rubbed it over his trousers, shaking his head as he looked at it.

"Student Union Card, dated from nineteen seventy eight." He said. "The picture has faded, until it could be any blonde girl. The name can be seen though, Julie Stuart."

He passed the card to John, who took it as though it might bite him.

"It has to be one of your relatives." Said Fudgy.

It was left to Marlene to ask the question.

“Anything you want to share with the class ?” She asked.

Brad smiled and kissed her cheek, but they all wanted to hear why Julie’s bag was hidden in the kitchen cupboard of a condemned house.

“They have to know.” Said Becca. “Tell them John, or I will.”

“Julie was a first cousin, on my father’s side of the family.” Said John. “She came here with two friends, another girl and her boyfriend. That was in the summer of seventy nine and they never returned home. No trace has ever been found of them, any of them.”

“Yeah right.” Said Brad. “I’ve known your family since I was about four and I’ve never heard of Julie, or the mystery about her disappearance.”

“You wouldn’t, no one knew she’d come down here.” Said John. “Three students, come to bust open walls and look for the Stuart treasure. They weren’t keen to let anyone know they were coming here. This place was pretty much as it is now, only the sea was a little further away. My mum only knew Julie had been here, when she came down in eighty two.”

“What did she find ?” Aske Marlene.

“Clothes everywhere, some ripped apart.” Said John. “She thought they’d found something and had a falling out. She and my dad cleared everything up and must have shoved the bag in the cupboard. No one was told the story and Becca is the only person outside the family, that my mum has told about it.”

“Jeez buddy, why didn’t she tell the police ?” Asked Fudgy.

“Yeah, she should have told them.” Added Brad.

“She didn’t want other people to get hurt.” Said Becca. “I’ve talked to her and there was another group of people before the war, who came to dig up the treasure.”

“Let me guess, they vanished too ?” Asked Marlene.

Marlene’s skin was getting goose bumps. She knew the answer, before Becca gave it.

“Yes, then it was five people who were never seen again. She thought if she told the police, the story would get out and others would come here.”

“She didn’t want anyone else to get hurt.” Said John.

“Oh Fuck ! So why bring us to Hell House ?” Asked Marlene.

She stood up, feeling her heart beating far too fast. Her breathing was going crazy too, a panic attack, her first since she was a teenager.

“Fuck ! I’m packing and going.” She yelled. “If Brad wants to stay and play tough guy, great. I’ll walk to Hastings and get a train. Fuck !”

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Peter Fudge couldn’t understand why Marlene was making so much fuss. To him they had the chance for a real adventure over Christmas. No boring week with his dotty relatives, aunts and uncles who only ever turned up for Christmas dinner. Funerals too of course, another of those times to meet in-laws you never knew existed. Fudge hated family get togethers and felt a special loathing for Christmas. He decided to ask a question that everyone had been too polite to ask.

“Why risk coming to this place John ?” He asked. “We all know you’ve been broke since Finn was born, but why are you so desperate for cash ?”

Brad had been in a tussle with Marlene, trying to stop her from leaving. Both of them stopped and waited for an answer.

“Yeah, you knew the dangers.” Said Brad. “Why bring us all here ?”

Becca had gone quiet, simply gazing at her shoes and looking uncomfortable.

“I owe money to Randall.” Said John. “Big money.”

“Randall McAvoy you mean ?” Asked Fudgy. “Everyone knows you don’t borrow from him. Randall is a crazy guy who enjoys busting people up.”

“I heard it was Randall who did Woody’s legs.” Said Brad. “Put him in a wheelchair for a year.”

“Stop it !” Yelled Becca.

Becca was actually crying. Crap, things had to be bad.

“Yes, I borrowed money from Randall McAvoy.” Said John. “Finn needed all the usual baby stuff and Becca needed time off to look after him. My job wasn’t working out as well as I hoped, so I borrowed a little to see us through.”

Fudgy had said all along that selling cleaning products door to door was a mugs game, but John hadn’t listened. He kept quiet though, no one likes being told they’re an idiot.

“How much do you owe ?” He asked.

“I only borrowed enough to pay for the essentials.” Said John. “Finn’s room needed decorating and he had to have a crib and nappies, all the usual stuff.”

“We didn’t realise how much Randall charged on top.” Said Becca.

“Now Buddy, at this moment.” Said Brad. “How much does Randall say you owe ?”

“Fifteen grand and he wants it repaid by the end of January.” Said John.

“That makes such a difference, you should have told us.” Said Marlene. “I thought you hoped to find enough here to buy a Ferrari or something.”

That lifted the gloom a little, even Becca laughed.

“That does make a difference.” Said Brad. “We all know what Randall is capable of.”

“He threatened me too.” Said Becca.

“Anyone want more tea ?” Asked Marlene.

They did and nibbles, which they’d bought in Hastings. Marlene stopped talking about leaving and joined them in systematically pulling up floorboards in each downstairs room.

“There is a hidden cellar somewhere.” Said John. “If we take up all the floors, we must find it eventually.”

Fudgy suspected they were also likely to find the remains of Julie Stuart and her friends, though he kept that to himself. By the time they settled down to a cooked meal, everyone had bruises and cuts from tearing up rough wood and bashing in walls. They took it in turns, to pull splinters out of hard to reach places.

“To think I used to get bent out of shape over a busted nail.” Said Marlene.

Becca had brought along a large first aid kit, though it looked like they might have to buy more dressings in Hastings. The movie for the night was Foot Loose, agreed on unanimously. Everyone was fast asleep in their tent by just after one in the morning. Fudgy did have a dream though, about a blonde girl talking to him. He put it down to too much beer and finding Julie’s belongings.

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### ~Saturday 23<sup>rd</sup> December – Day 3~

Another morning in Hastings, buying a few essentials and topping up their stock of bottled water. John wasn’t that keen on a morning in town becoming a regular part of their schedule, there was too much work to do on the house. His friends were an army of volunteers though, so he didn’t feel able to crack the whip. Fudgy seemed to read his mind.

“I work better after a few beers the night before.” He’d told him.

Essentials to Fudgy, seemed to mean another dozen tins of Newcastle Brown. Becca had got him to look for fresh bread though and he had a carrier bag full of fresh crusty rolls.

“Sweet are the memories that never fade.” Muttered Fudgy.

"What did you say?" Asked John.

"Sorry, something I dreamt last night." Said Fudgy. "This blonde girl kept saying that phrase and a few other things that I don't remember. Ignore me, too much beer before bed."

"Sweet are the memories that never fade." Said John. "Love makes memory eternal"

"That's it." Said Fudgy. "Is it a famous quote or something?"

"I'm not sure." Said John. "I have seen it before, used to wonder who the grave belonged to. That inscription is on a gravestone in the ruins next to the house."

"I must have seen it, when we went to look at the sea."

"I doubt it, the ruins block it off. You need to be right on top of it."

At one time all his friends had been modern logical people. Any idea of the supernatural would have been considered some kind of mental aberration. A few days at the house, with its strange reputation, had changed all that.

"Are you really saying I was given a clue from beyond the grave?" Asked Fudgy.

"Not sure, but looking the ruins over can't hurt. I was going to try there anyway, if we found nothing in the house."

Marlene wandered up, carrying the largest packet of crisps that he'd ever seen. She must have seen him looking at it.

"Well, it is Christmas." She said. "You both look serious, what's the problem?"

"No problem." Said Fudgy. "I just had a message from the dead.... Probably."

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Becca was pleased that Brad had volunteered to help her cook lunch, though she did suspect he had ulterior motives. A group lunch was going to be part of their routine, even John could see that. He'd made a comment about making the most of the daylight, before they left Hastings. He'd deserved a rude reply, but everyone was in a good mood.

"Chill buddy, it's Christmas." Brad had told him.

Now she was cutting carrots into chunks, while Brad did what she thought was well within his culinary expertise. She had him stirring a pan full of soup. Tinned soup of course, about three tins of vegetable soup.

"I know John is stressed." Said Brad. "When we work, we really work hard though. The amount we got done yesterday afternoon....."

"He knows and he's not ungrateful." She replied. "But Randall has threatened to break his legs and he's threatened me."

"Could you move away? Somewhere out of London?"

"Where to? Moving costs money and we don't have any."

Silly really, letting stress make her careless. The carrot turned from orange to red, as her blood coated it.

"Shit! Can you get me a plaster?"

"Ouch that looks bad, hold your hand up." Said Brad. "It helps stop the bleeding."

Becca wrapped some kitchen towel round her finger and waited for Brad to dig about in the first aid tin. He brought her a plaster about two sizes too big, but she used it anyway. For some reason, she found herself being hugged by Brad and enjoying it.

"It's all been a bit too....."

"I know." Replied Brad.



She was about to push him away, but Marlene entered the room and saw her in Brad's arms. Fucking house with no damn doors ! An innocent hug that would have ended in seconds. Now Marlene began to shriek at Brad.

"You bastard ! I knew it, knew you still fancied her."

There were only three rooms fit for habitation, four if you counted the one toilet that still flushed. Everyone was within earshot, everyone came to see why Marlene was shouting.

"What's happening ?" Said John.

Fudgy looking into the room too, everyone was there. The lack of privacy that had been a bit of a joke, was now intolerable.

"I caught them both at it !" Yelled Marlene.

"No, I cut my finger and Brad helped me get a plaster."

Becca held up her finger with the ridiculously large plaster wrapped round it.

"Brad was just comforting me." She said.

Oh Crap, the wrong word. Why did so much go wrong if you used the wrong word ? John grabbed Brad and shoved him against the wall, covering then both in plaster dust. Brad shoved back and for a moment it looked like a real fight might kick off. Becca thumped John on the shoulder, shoving herself between them.

"I love you John, stop it !" She yelled. "I was about to push him away. For fuck Sake ! We have a child at home."

The wild gleam went out of John's eyes, though they did both stand and glare at each other for a while.

"Any more of that shit and you'll be sleeping in your car over Christmas." Said Marlene.

"My van would be warmer, further off the ground." Said Fudgy. "My mum threw me out for a while last winter and..... Ok I'll shut up."

Everyone laughed and the dark mood lifted. That guy thing happened, one of the things she'd never understand. John smiled at Brad and thumped him on the shoulder and they were ok again. One minute mortal enemies, the next best friends again. If she lived to be a thousand, she'd never understand men.

"What's for lunch ?" Asked John.

"Bloody carrots by the look of it." Said Marlene.

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Lunch had become a time for wine and rebuilding bonds, or so Becca had whispered in his ear. John was just glad when all of them were armed with tools and looking at the gravestone.

'Sweet are the memories that never fade.'

'Love makes memory eternal.'

It said on the stone, though centuries of sea air and bad winters, had made it quite difficult to read.

"I used to wonder who'd been buried here when I was a kid." Said John.

"It sounds romantic." Said Marlene. "Bound to be a woman."

"Or a guy buried by a grieving wife." Said John.

Too much, he could see them looking at him. To think, he'd almost mentioned his fantasy when he was about ten, of an heroic knight being buried beneath the stone.

"I'm not sure if I fancy digging up a cemetery." Said Fudgy. "It has to be bad luck or something and probably illegal."

John would have lied if he needed to, but there was no need. One of his aunts had given him a little history on the ruins near the house. Now dead, Aunt Alice had been over ninety when she'd given him the information.

"It was a rectory, the church it served was claimed by the sea long ago." He said. "No one knows who was buried here, but it isn't a cemetery or a churchyard. It's also the only grave, which makes it even more interesting."

"Anyone bring a flashlight?" Asked Becca. "There's a hole behind it, a deep one."

Fudgy was wearing a tool belt, though no one had dared to tease him about it. He produced a slim flashlight and aimed it down the hole.

"It's not natural." He said. "I can see flagstones. Quite a way down though, we should move the gravestone."

Easier said than done, it was large and heavier than it looked. Rather than moving it, they made do with toppling it over and shoving it to one side. The hole was now big, just about big enough to crawl down, if anyone was daft enough.

"Picks and shovels." Said John. "We need to widen the hole."

"I have some in the van." Said Fudgy

"I'll help." Said Brad.

John was just left with the two women, who he'd never understand. Before lunch Marlene had looked likely to throttle Becca, yet now they were friends again. Marlene was actually volunteering to brush the dirt out of Becca's hair. No, if he lived to be a million, he'd never understand women. Quite quickly they had picks, shovels and far better lighting.

"I'll use the pick for a while." Said Fudgy. "Then you guys shovel the loose stuff away."

An hour later, they were looking at a wide entrance, to what was obviously a manmade underground passage. There was a drop at the start though, a good six feet onto hard flagstones.

"Getting down is ok." Said Brad. "Getting back up will be fun though. We could dig around the hole a bit more."

"I have some ropes." Said Fudgy.

Once again Fudgy and Brad went to the van, which seemed to hold anything a modern day Indiana Jones might need. John had noted that ropes had been plural and assumed Fudgy had brought an assortment. When they arrived, the ropes looked strong and inspired confidence, as long as it was someone else actually using them.

"Still looks a long way down." Said Becca.

"We should dig the hole out more." Added Brad.

Fudgy just sighed and looked disappointed in their lack of courage.

"I'll go, though I might need help being pulled out." He said.

He lowered an electric lamp first, connected to one of his thin ropes. Fudgy went next, easily dropping the six feet, landing on his feet.

"What do you see?" John called down to him.

"Hang on."

They waited, listening to the ocean waves, pummeling the base of the nearby cliffs. Fudgy was gone for a while, long enough to cause concern.

"Another five minutes and I'll go down and look for him." Said John.

Crap, friends looked after friends, of course they did. He was still relieved when they heard Fudgy calling up from below.

"I found something."

“What ?”

“I’ll throw it up. Don’t drop it, it’s probably fragile.”

John caught the object, without taking in what he was catching. Quite heavy and round, he showed it to the others.

“Oh, he had to find a fucking skull.” Said Marlene.

“We’ll need to call the police.” Said Becca.

“It’s probably hundreds of years old.” Said Brad.

“It doesn’t look that old to me.” Said Becca.

John turned the skull around in his hands and it didn’t look that old to him. Not that he was an expert, but he’d seen a few TV shows, where eager young people, dug old crap out of the ground. The skulls they sometimes found, hadn’t looked as fresh as the skull he held.

“Hey people. I could do with a hand here !”

Poor Fudgy, forgotten in the excited awe of finding a human skull. They helped him out just in time, four thirty and the daylight was going. No one really wanted to pull up more floors, so an impromptu early finish was called. They all congregated round the camping stoves, as Fudgy made cheese on toast.

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Brad was trying his hardest to be attentive to Marlene and ignore Becca. It wasn’t just his current relationship at stake; he’d been friends with John for as long as he could remember. He found it hard to forget though, how Becca had melted into his arms. He hadn’t imagined it, he knew he hadn’t. He had his arm round Marlene and like the others, he stared at the skull.

“We have to call the police.” Said Becca. “It’s a human skull guys.”

“Old though, bound to be old. Has to be.” Said Brad.

It should have been their DVD time, but no one seemed keen to simply ignore Fudgy’s find. Wine and beer had been drunk of course, which probably gave Marlene her courage. She picked up the skull and looked at its bottom. She grunted and moved it about, getting it right under one of their electric lights.

“Crap !”

Brad could see her shudder, as she put the skull back on the floor.

“What ?” He asked.

“It’s not empty.” She replied.

“Ewww.” Said Becca. “That’s it, we have to call the cops.”

Fudgy picked up the skull, using his flashlight to look in the bottom, through the hole where the skull had once connected to a spine. He pulled a few faces and actually sniffed it.

“No smell and it’s not goeey in there.” He said.

“Enough Fudgy, I’ll loose my dinner.” Said Becca.

The skull was placed on the floor once again, with all of them looking at it.

“Call the police and it’ll cause trouble.” Said John. “We’re in a condemned building, digging up the floor. Oh and by the way, we dug up a gravestone and found a skull underneath. If nothing else, the cops will send us packing.”

“My mum will kill me.” Said Fudgy.

“We need to vote on it.” Said Becca. “Put your hand up if you want to call the police.”

“I’m not being told what to do !” Yelled Marlene. “If I want to call the cops I will. If I want to go home I will.”

Brad knew she was scared, he'd seen her react the same way a few times. People reacted differently to stress and Marlene tended to become loud, very loud.

"A vote makes sense babe." He said.

"I'm not voting ! It's all shit."

"Alright Marlene, your views are noted." Said John. "I agree with Becca, we vote. Hands up if you want to call the police about the skull."

Brad now understood why votes were usually done in secret. Only one hand went up, Marlene's. Everyone except him gave her the stink eye, until she lowered her hand.

"Fine, but if I want to go home, I'll go." She said.

"And miss turkey cooked on a camping stove." He said, hugging her.

She giggled and he felt the tension coming out of her. It had been a rough day emotionally, for all of them.

"Can we watch a movie now ?" Said Fudgy. "How about Alien, a night with Sigourney."

"Pervert, you just like seeing her in her knickers." Said Marlene.

"Who doesn't ?!" Asked John.

Fudgy dug through the DVD box, while everyone refreshed their glasses.

"The tunnel, we forgot the tunnel." Said John. "How far did it go Fudgy ?"

"About ten yards, before being blocked by a cave in. It was heading straight for the house."

"Probably leading to the hidden cellar." Said Becca.

"If it is.... That will bring it in right below our feet." Said John. "It looks like we're moving our tents in the morning."

"Oh, I like this room." Said Marlene.

He laughed with everyone else, though Marlene looked mystified. Luckily the film started, before he had to try and explain.

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#### **~Sunday 24<sup>th</sup> December – Day 4~**

Peter Fudge was woken by a hand squeezing his throat. He was still half asleep, when the fist struck his cheek.

"What have you done with her ?" Shrieked Brad.

Why were they fighting in the back of his van ? Brad took another swing and Fudgy was awake and angry. He shoved Brad off him, throwing him out of the van like a toy. No one got away with hitting him, no one. There were still tools in the back of the van and Fudgy picked up a large metal crowbar, as his weapon of choice. Brad came at him, so he brought the crowbar back like a club.

"No ! Stop it you idiots." Shouted Becca. "What the crap is going on ?"

"He did something to Marlene." Said Brad. "Her top is in his van."

What the hell ? There it was, the tight yellow jumper that showed off her assets so well. As a few memories came back, Fudgy sat on the ground. He still waved the crowbar at Brad though.

"Yeah, she was here." He said. "Though if you try to hit me again, you'll be on hospital food for a while."

John came running out of the house, still doing up the belt on his jeans.

"What the hell is going on ?" He asked. "Why all the shouting ?"

"Marlene has gone, this arsehole did something to her." Said Brad.

Fudgy waved the crowbar again, while frantically trying to remember the previous evening. Brown ale and prosecco were a bad mix, especially if you wanted a clear head in the morning.

"We just cuddled for a while." He said. "Marlene was upset and needed comforting."

“So why is her top in your van ?”

Why indeed ? Fudgy cringed as he remembered her taking it off, before the kissing turned into quite a lot of fondling.

“Ok, we made out for a while, but that was as far as it went.” He said.

“Has Marlene left then ?” Asked John.

“Some of her things are gone.” Said Brad. “He knows where she is, he’s done something to her. Fucking weirdo.”

Fudgy walked towards Brad, intending to bash his skull in. He would have, if Becca hadn’t stood in his way.

“Stop it ! This isn’t helping !” She yelled.

He tended to agree with her and dropped the crowbar, before sitting on the ground again. On top of the hangover from hell, Brad seemed to have loosened one of his teeth.

“When did you last see her ?” Becca asked him.

“I don’t know, honestly. We kissed for a bit and fell asleep.”

John went back into the house bringing out the holdall that held Marlene’s clothes. He unzipped the top and put it in front of Brad.

“What’s gone, how much has she taken with her ?” He asked.

“I’ve already looked, just the clothes she must have put on to see Fudgy.”

Crap, he looked and felt guilty, yet he hadn’t hurt Marlene, he was sure of it. He liked her and had never hurt a woman in his life. Men was a different story, but only those who deserved it.

“She talked about leaving a lot yesterday.” Said Becca. “She probably decided to walk to the station.”

“But it’s miles and why leave her bag ?” Asked Brad.

“It is heavy.” Said John. “She could have walked there in time to get the first train up to London.”

“I’m going to the station, are you coming ?” Asked Brad.

“She’ll be halfway to London by now.” Said Becca. “Wait a few hours and call her mum.”

Brad was having none of it. He got in his car and with a lot of tyre screeching, he hurtled up the track and away from the house.

“Do you think he’ll be back ?” Asked Becca.

John just shrugged at her and Fudgy hoped it was the last they’d seen of Brad Harris. Yes he’d made out with Marlene for a while, but they had both been drunk. Brad was just taking it far too seriously. John picked up Marlene’s bag and they walked into the house.

“Don’t think that because I’m the only girl, that I’m going to do all the cooking.” Said Becca.

“No problem, my scrambled eggs are legendary.” Said Fudgy.

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John gathered up Brad’s things, while Becca dealt with Marlene’s. The bags went in the back of Fudgy’s van, until they either heard from either of them, or took them back to London.

“And now we are three.” Said John.

“We’ll probably get more done.” Said Fudgy.

Becca looked upset by the comment, though he could sympathise with it. Gone was the guy who’d made a move on his girl and good riddance.

“They did generate a lot of drama.” He said.

“I suppose, but it sucks being the only girl.”

They were experienced floor destroyers by now and had learned a few things the hard way. Once the tents had been taken down, they began using crowbars and a pick on the old wooden boards.

The hard learned lesson had been to leave areas of boards in key places. There was a three foot deep cavity below the boards, full of building rubble and spider's webs.

"Seems almost sacrilege to take a pick to these boards." Said Fudgy. "They must be hundreds of years old."

"It'll all be in the ocean soon anyway." Said Becca.

John felt it too, guilt from treating his ancestral home so badly. The broken boards went into the underfloor cavity, far easier than carrying them outside. They made good time and had removed half the floor in the room, before stopping for lunch.

"I'll do burgers, quick and easy." Said John.

No one complained that his burgers were a bit overdone. They rested for a while, though the constant cold drafts discouraged too much sitting around.

"Brrr... I'll put our tent up in what's left of the kitchen." Said Becca.

"My van is warmer than this place." Said Fudgy. "I'll give you two a bit of privacy and sleep out there. I expect to watch a DVD and get drunk with you both though."

"Of course." Said John. "I'm just glad Brad left his DVDs behind."

"Oh, you guys." Said Becca.

John used the pick this time, while Fudgy eased up boards with the crowbar. They'd added another three long boards to the pile in the floor cavity, when they heard Becca scream. John got to her first, relieved that she looked unhurt. Maybe the place was getting to him, but after Marlene vanishing, he was simply glad to find her still there.

"Oh, sorry, I must be getting jumpy." She said.

"We all are, what happened?" He asked.

"I was just trying to make it all look nicer." She said.

It did, the old kitchen only had half a floor left, but there was lino on the floor and the only tap that worked. Becca had put the stoves against the wall and cleaned the floor. Cosy wasn't a word he'd have used about most of the house, but the kitchen did look cosy. Women had that knack, every room he'd lived in for a while tended to look like a bear lived in it.

"I put the DVDs in the cupboard and heard a woman wailing, right behind me."

"Did you see her?" Asked Fudgy.

"I think so, though now I wonder if it was just this place, affecting my imagination. I saw a blonde girl in blue jeans and a red T shirt. She put her hand out, so I screamed. I felt her touch me though, or thought I did."

"She probably wants her skull back." Said Fudgy.

"Bastard." Said Becca.

They cleared half the floor in their old bedroom before dark and Becca had gone into the kitchen to heat up a few tins in a pan. They were all becoming less fussy about their food, as the end of day fatigue set in.

"Do you want one of us to stand guard?" He'd asked her.

"No, I probably imagined it anyway."

There was a wonderful smell coming from the kitchen and they were about to down tools for the day, when John pulled up a board on the other side of the room. No cavity below him, something was down there, something painted green. He jammed his head into the gap, effectively cutting off his own light.

"I need your flashlight Fudgy."

"Found something?"

“No promises yet, but it looks like a trapdoor.”

One more board had to come up, to reveal a trap door, set in a brick surround and painted green. A rusted chain and padlock ran through several metal rings on the doors.

“We’ll break it open in the morning.” Said John.

They let Becca decide on the film and had their usual wine and beer, while watching Drive Angry. Brad hadn’t returned, by the time they climbed into their sleeping bags at about midnight.

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### ~Monday 25<sup>th</sup> December – Day 5 – Christmas Day~

There had been no official ban on using mobile phones; they all had family who might have emergencies. Fudgy had told his mum he was going abroad, just to make sure his phone didn’t ring ten times a day. Becca had tried to avoid using her phone too much; they had come there to get a job done. Still, she was surprised to realise her phone had been turned off for two days. Before leaving the tent that morning and while John was still waking up, she turned on her phone.

“Oh Christ ! Turn your phone on.” She said.

No good, he had his head turned away from her and looked likely to fall asleep again. She thumped him on the shoulder.

“Seriously John, Brad has been stirring things up. Turn your phone on.”

Every message arriving made her phone buzz, and there were a lot of messages, from quite a few of their mums. Why always mums ? Not one single message from a worried dad.

‘Becca, are you alright. Brad was here looking for Marlene...’

And so it went on, for message after message. John’s phone made a wolf whistle sound as each and every message arrived on his phone. John woke up far quicker than usual and without coffee.

“Brad has been a complete dick.” He said. “He says Marlene isn’t at home, so he’s reported her missing to the police.”

“He went round to see my mum and worried her sick.” She said. “And he dropped Fudgy right in it, accusing him of having something to do with Marlene vanishing.”

“She enjoys the drama, probably hiding somewhere and loving all the trouble she’s caused.”

There were messages from people she didn’t even know. It was obvious that Brad had given her number to a lot of anxious people. Ridiculous, Marlene was a twenty five year old adult, not a kid.

“Her family must realise she’s a drama queen.” She said. “What the hell is wrong with them ?”

“Brad stirring things up is the problem.” Said John. “He even went round to see my sister.”

“We need coffee.” She said. “I’ll do it.”

Fudgy appeared, while she was putting instant coffee in three cups. He was looking quite pale and worried.

“I guessed you’d be up too.” She said. “Lots of texts from an angry mum huh ?”

“Brad is telling everyone I murdered Marlene.” He said. “My mum reacts to the phone ringing the way most people would react to World War III. You can imagine how she is now. I might have to live in the van for a few months.”

“Don’t worry Fudgy, we’ll vouch for you. Brad has worked himself and our families up into a frenzy. I’ll let my mum wake up properly before I call her. She’ll settle everyone down.”

Crap, it was still only seven thirty on Christmas Day. Most years she’d still have been in bed, listening to the wonderful sound of peace and quiet, as the whole world took a day off. No peace for them though, as she heard John shouting down his phone.

“No Brad, you had no right to call the police.....”

John was still in their tent, though most of the conversation was loud enough to penetrate through the canvas. Then the conversation seemed more calm, before a smiling John appeared for his coffee. "Good news?" She asked.

"Did you tell him he's a complete dick?" Asked Fudgy.

"Yes and Yes." Replied John. "Brad decided to report Marlene missing, at about four this morning. The police told him they tended to want a next of kin to report a missing person case. Marlene's mum obviously knows her daughter very well, and didn't think there was a need to get the police involved."

"I bet he's spitting blood." Said Fudgy.

"You haven't heard the best bit." Said John. "The cops said they will inform the local coast guard to watch out for her."

"Ahoy there Marlene." She said.

The tension went as they laughed, though all three of them were likely to have awkward conversations with their parents. Especially Fudgy, who'd told his mum he was going to Mustique for ten days. A nasty thought made its way past Becca's relief.

"I don't suppose Marlene is really injured and lying in a ditch somewhere, is she?"

"No, she'll be hiding at a friend's house and enjoying giving us all some grief." Said John.

"Is Brad coming back?" Asked Fudgy.

"No, he asked me to bring his stuff home."

So now there was definitely only three of them. Becca felt almost relieved, Brad had been a temptation. She loved John and Finn, but.....It was a good thing Brad was out of their lives, perhaps forever.

"I need breakfast." She said. "Not your legendary scrambled eggs Fudgy." She said.

"Yeah, something less..... Chewy." Agreed John.

"Oi, oi."

"Sorry Fudgy, it was nice not to be the delegated cook every day." She said. "I know it's not festive, but how about waffles, with a poached egg on top?"

"Brilliant." Said Fudgy. "What is there for Christmas dinner?"

"It'll taste better if you don't know the ingredients." She said. "I'm improvising."

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John made his calls to anxious relatives, surprised at the effectiveness of just hearing his voice. Of course Marlene hadn't been murdered, he's told them, even her own mother knew she was over emotional.

"She'll turn up and the coast guard have been put on alert."

Middle aged people had a greater respect for authority, mention of the coast guard was met by something approaching awe. Becca was the last to end her calls to anxious loved ones.

"Is your mum going to work her magic?" He asked.

Becca's mum had been a social worker once and she'd been a volunteer with the Samaritans. She knew how to handle agitated people.

"She's going to call everyone." Said Becca.

Only Fudgy seemed to have had an unpleasant call home and asked about borrowing their sofa.

"No problem, but I have to feed Finn in the middle of the night." She told him. "And the place looks like a nappy warehouse."

"I'll sleep in the van for a while."



It felt like the whole morning had been taken up with Brad's shit stirring, but as John looked at his watch, it was only just after ten. They were ready to explore whatever they found under the trap door. All three of them, Becca seemed as keen as the guys on pulling up enough floorboards, to get a proper look at the trapdoor.

"The chain might be difficult to cut." Said Becca.

It was rusting, but still looked solid, a lot of heavy steel links. The padlock looked impassable, it shouted expensive and impossible to force open.

"We should have brought a hacksaw." Said John. "We'll need to chisel out the whole frame from the brickwork."

"A pair of enormous bolt croppers would cut that chain." Said Fudgy.

"Do we have any?" Asked John.

Fudgy simply smiled and went to his van, returning with the biggest pair of bolt croppers, John had ever seen. Burglars tool, he'd never met anyone who had a legitimate use for 'fuck off size' bolt croppers. Fudgy had to grunt a bit, but the chain was cut through fairly easily, the trap door opened. Becca was the first to aim a flashlight into the hole.

"Looks like a seven foot drop, maybe eight." She said.

"So Fudgy, does your van have a ladder in it?" Asked John.

"No. I saw one though, up on the first floor."

Fudgy was gone, returning quite quickly, with a ladder that had to be about fifteen feet long.

"Must be old and it's been exposed to the weather." Said Fudgy. "Looks strong enough though, no missing rungs."

"They used to make stuff to last in those days." Said John.

The ladder made it easy to get down to the concrete floor, a good eight feet below the floor of the house. The ground looked dusty and the air had an odd smell to it.

"Not nice, like socks that need changing." Said Becca.

"We're missing something." Said John. "My great grandfather was supposed to have worked in the basement. He had desks, chairs and several heavy pieces of furniture, according to my mum. You couldn't get all that down a ladder."

"Hopefully we'll find the main entrance as we explore." Said Fudgy

"We'll need a torch each and a couple of crowbars." Said John. "I'll get them."

He'd found the lights and a few other tools they might need and was back at the ladder, when he heard Becca scream. Again, he was pleased to see her still there, even if she did look distressed.

"We explored a bit and I saw her again, the blonde girl." She said.

The tunnel had been properly constructed, bricks which had even been plastered over. The plaster was beginning to fall away in places, but the construction looked safe. Becca was stood in front of an open door, which led off the main corridor. She pointed.

"She was there, her face covered in blood." She said.

"I saw her too." Said Fudgy.

"Did she do anything?"

"No, just looked at us for a few seconds and vanished." Said Becca.

"Come on then, looks like an invitation to go this way." He said.

It was obviously the main way in, a set of wide and well-built stone steps at the end of the corridor, leading up to a blank wall.

"There must be a switch or something." Said Fudgy.

"Here, by your left hand." Said Becca. "No, John's left hand."

A wrought iron lever, which was quite hard to spot in the light from their flashlights. John pulled the lever, while the other two pushed the wall.

"This hasn't been opened in decades." Said Fudgy.

It made screeching noises, as they pushed the hidden door open. Finally the door dug into the floorboards when it was about three quarters open. That would do though, there was more than enough room to walk through.

"It's our shower room." Said Becca.

"No wonder no one ever found it." Said Fudgy.

A whole section of wall had come away, an old wash basin coming with it. A tiled wall, complete with plumbing, hiding a hidden door.

"At least we don't have to use the ladder again." Said John.

They explored the tunnels and found the corridor blocked off by a cave in, probably caused by the constant concussion of waves against the cliffs. There was more of the skeleton belonging to the skull on the ground. The larger bones were still in places, but the smaller bones looked a little gnawed.

"Ewww rats have been at her." Said Becca.

"You're assuming this is the late Julie Stuart?" He asked.

"Seems likely."

No one suggested calling the police, not yet anyway. They left the skeleton and explored, finding a metal door with a strong lock, which meant the end to their exploration of the underground tunnels. Fudgy prodded the edges of the doorframe, smiling at what he found.

"It'll open," he said, "with a little encouragement from a sledge hammer and chisel."

"Tomorrow though, not today." Said Becca. "It's Christmas day and we will have a sit down dinner. I am determined and will fight you both if I have to."

"Fine." Said John, laughing. "Be nice to have an early finish and a glass of wine."

"Becca is the boss." Said Fudgy.

They did have one thing to do before eating though. They used Brad's sleeping bag to lay out the skeleton, reuniting it with its skull. It was then carried upstairs and placed in one of the rooms that hadn't yet been destroyed. It wasn't exactly a place of rest, but better than being left in a rat infested tunnel.

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Becca Walsh put a lot of care into making her improvised Christmas Dinner. She kept the two boys well away from the cooking stoves and succeeded in creating an air of mystery.

"Seriously Becca, what are you going to cook up?" John had asked.

"You'll know soon enough."

They had wine and a fairly clean floor to sit on. Not a traditional family table to sit around, but watching *The Great Escape* on DVD, added a nice touch. With the sound right down of course, they all knew the script by heart.

"He'd never get the bike to jump that fence." Said Fudgy.

"It's a classic scene in the movie Fudgy." Said John.

"Yeah right."

Both of them had cleared their plates and asked for more. She had to admit that her concoction had tasted pretty good.

"I'm full Becca." Said Fudgy. "Great dinner, better than my mum's cooking."

"I prefer chicken to turkey anyway. If it was chicken?" Said John. "Come on then, tell us what we just ate?"

She was still a bit nervous about telling them, though it had tasted delicious.

"We don't have a fridge, so I bought a few tins, from the pound shop in Hastings." She said. "They had whole chicken breasts in gravy... tinned."

"Dinner for a quid." Said Fudgy. "I don't care, it was great. Did I mention that my mum cooks turkey until it tastes like boot leather?"

"Every Christmas Fudgy, every Christmas." Said John.

Becca held up the huge empty tin, which could have fed an entire family. She'd actually bought three of the tins, expecting to have to feed Brad and Marlene too. The tin was covered in writing that was completely unreadable to her and the guy who owned the pound store.

"Good food, people come back for more." He'd told her.

"What's that?" Asked John.

"The tin your dinner came in." She replied. "A pound shop tin, but even the guy in the store doesn't know where from. He knew it was chicken in gravy though."

"Hey, well done Becca." Said Fudgy.

John looked a little surprised, but raised his wine glass.

"To Becca." He said. "Who cooked a dinner better than Fudgy's mum and all for a quid."

They touched glasses.

"And a few sprouts and potatoes we had anyway." She said.

Wine did what it's good at, making people relaxed and mellow. After The Great Escape, they watched The Thing, which probably wasn't the best choice and made her wish they could close the door to the basement. To take her mind off it, she stood up and clicked the camera icon on her phone.

"A picture, we must have a picture." She said.

"We agreed no pics." Said John.

"Not for Facebook." She replied. "To send to mum, so she can see we're alive and well on Christmas night."

The boys held up their glasses and grinned, as she took the pic. Fudgy then took a picture of her and John. She brightened the pics a bit and trimmed the edges, before showing off her expertise.

"Hey, not bad for crap lighting." Said John.

"Can you send them to my mum too?" Asked Fudgy.

She did and to a few other anxious relatives. They were all in their sleeping bags by one in the morning, looking forward to knocking down the metal lined door and getting into the hidden basement. The sound of a woman crying woke Becca at about four, but she put it down to a dream.

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### **~Tuesday 26th December – Day 6 – Boxing Day~**

John was beginning to dread mornings, they never seemed to arrive without a problem attached to them. Becca had woken early and volunteered to make coffee. She was soon back, obviously agitated.

"Brad came back last night." She said.

"Oh crap! What does he want now? Has he called in the SAS to look for Marlene?"

"I don't know his car is blocking the lane, but there's no sign of Brad."

He hadn't showered or had his coffee. John didn't mind a bit of drama, as long as it was polite and didn't arrive before ten or ten thirty. He pulled on the clothes he'd been wearing the day before and

followed Becca. There was Brad's old Ford, with the go faster stripes on the side and plastic spoiler bolted to the boot lid. It looked like a throwback to the seventies, but Brad loved it.

"Why would he arrive and not talk to us?" Asked Becca.

"You did call everyone and tell them he was acting crazy."

Fudgy almost fell out of his van, still trying to put on a grubby Ariana Grande T shirt.

"It's a bit early guys, keep it down a bit." He said.

"Brad is back, or at least his car is." Said John.

"I thought I heard a car pull up in the middle of the night." Said Fudgy.

"What time?" Asked Becca.

"Threeish, I think. I just rolled over and went back to sleep. He must be here..... Brad!"

They all joined in, shouting his name, over and over.

"Brad !..... Brad !..... Brad !....."

No answer, just the sound of gulls and waves hitting the cliffs.

"He's probably gone to help the coastguard." Said Fudgy

"I didn't even think he was that into her." Said Becca.

"Neither did I." Said John. "He can be a bit intense though, about life in general."

John walked down the lane to Brad's car, opening the unlocked door.

"He left the keys inside. I'll move it, so it isn't blocking the lane."

He moved the car to line it up with Fudgy's van, exactly where Brad had parked on their first day at the house.

"He'll have to come and talk to us, if I hang onto his car keys." He said.

"Anyone fancy my legendary scrambled eggs?" Asked Fudgy.

"Why not? Let's live a little dangerously." Replied Becca.

Fudgy left them to look after breakfast, while he claimed first use of their cold shower. Brad vanishing like that kept troubling him, as he washed. They had left the door open to the basement and Brad was curious to the point of being nosy.

"Idiot." He muttered. "Never watch The Thing in a ruined house, ever again."

He chuckled at his own joke.

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Becca said a silent thank you to her father, as she put on the tool belt Fudgy had lent her and filled it with essentials. Her father had taught her a lot about DIY, to the point where she felt comfortable using most common tools. Always dads showing kids how to do that stuff she'd noticed, never mums.

"Are you guys ready?" She asked.

"Just about." Said John. "We can take one of the proper lighting arrays down there, but the power packs will run out in a day, maybe less. As we've no way of recharging them, we'll then be left with just flashlights. We need to find something, today."

"Can we buy more power packs, charged ones?" Asked Fudgy.

"We've spent all we can." Answered John. "We've Finn to worry about."

There were times when she knew why she loved John so much, enough to give him a son. It hadn't been a mistake, as her mum kept telling people. She had deliberately stopped taking the pill, though even John hadn't known that for nearly six months into her pregnancy. He hadn't been angry at all.

"We'll cope." He'd said. "In our parent's day, they brought up six kids on a pound a week and still had enough for the bus fare home."

At times like that, she wondered what she'd ever seen in Brad Harris.

"If the lights go out, I'll use my credit card." Said Fudgy. "You two are my oldest friends. Actually you're just about my only friends, now that we all hate Brad."

She kissed him on the cheek, making him blush. She went in front, while the boys followed, carrying a heavy set of lights. They were well equipped and confident about being able to knock down the locked metal door. Down they went into the tunnels, which took them out under the garden. Closer to the sea too, the sound of waves hitting the cliffs was easy to hear. They reached the door and Becca froze, her mind telling her what she was looking at was impossible.

"The door..... It's open." She said.

Not by much, just a gap of about an inch, as if someone was inviting them to follow, if they dared.

"I bet it was that arsehole Brad." Said Fudgy

"What ! Unlock it in the middle of the night, just to annoy us ?" Replied John.

"Who then ?"

Hair on your neck really could stand on end. Becca felt hers rising and she felt her heart beating faster.

"We should just leave and go home." She said. "Right now."

They ignored her, their curiosity overcoming fear. John pulled the door open, aiming his flashlight at the floor beyond the door. The floor their side had many scuff marks in the dust, but only one set of footprint disturbed the dust beyond the door.

"It must have been Brad." Said Fudgy.

"Not alone, with only a flashlight for company." Said Becca. "He was never that brave."

Becca heard the sound of laughter, which seemed go past her and along the corridor beyond the door. She looked at John, knowing he must have heard it too.

"The sea against the rocks, makes odd noises." He said.

"That'll be it." Agreed Fudgy

The boys still carried the lighting array, as they went along the corridor, getting even closer to where the ocean was eating away the cliffs. There were five closed doors leading off the corridor. Two on either side and one directly ahead. No scuff marks in the dust to give a clue, as to where whoever had opened the metal door might have gone.

"Methodical, we need to be thorough and methodical." Said Fudgy. "First door on the left and work our way round clockwise."

"As good a plan as any." Said John, opening the door.

The door was old, very old. The handle fell off the rotting wood, as John opened it. A small room, about the size of a cheap hotel bedroom. There was a rusting bedframe against one wall and a few broken pieces of furniture. It looked as though it had been cleared of anything of value and abandoned.

"I hope every room isn't like this." Said John.

"Be nice to find an old newspaper," said Fudgy, "or any way of knowing how long it's been since anyone was down here."

"It has to be at least a hundred years, probably longer." Said John.

The next door led to a short corridor, with an ornate caved door at the end of it. The door looked imposing and had a large gold coloured pentagram fixed to it.

"This is more like it." Said Fudgy.

"Methodical, remember the need to be thorough." She reminded him. "Try the other doors first."

They did, finding more small rooms, which looked to have once been bedrooms. More broken furniture and rusting bedframes, but nothing of value. They all went back to the door with the metal pentagram attached to it.

“Call me crazy.” Said John. “This looks like real gold.”

Fudgy rubbed an edge with a screwdriver, before agreeing with John.

“Soft yellow metal that looks like gold.” He said. “If it looks like a duck and quacks like a duck, it probably really is gold. Heavy too, probably. With the current price of gold, you may already be able to pay off Randall.”

“Only the best for my great grandfather, Thomas Stuart.” Said John.

The mood changed, as they all prayed the pentagram was made of the real stuff, genuine gold. John and fudgy bashed into one another, in the rush to unscrew it from the door.

“Even the screws look like gold.” Said Fudgy.

“No !”

All three of them heard the woman’s voice. Becca spun round, just in time to see a swirl of blonde hair, before it vanished. She looked at John, using her eyes to beg him to stop.

“It’s for Finn Becca.” He said. “What do we do when he runs out of nappies, or grows out of his clothes ?”

Reluctantly she nodded at him, watching as they removed the pentagram from the door. It was heavy, needing both of them to hold it.

“Jeez John, we found your treasure.” Said Fudgy. “This must be worth twice what you owe, three times maybe.”

There was no way Brad would have left something like that behind. From somewhere deep in her mind, came the realisation that Brad was probably dead and so was Marlene. It was obvious, once she forced herself to admit it.

“We have what we need.” She said. “Please John, we need to go.”

“Without opening the door, are you crazy ?” He replied.

“A little peek won’t hurt.” Said Fudgy.

“You made me a promise last night, to stop at the next locked door.” She said. “For Finn you said.”

“Oh Becca, that is so unfair.”

“You promised and I’m keeping you to that promise.”

Damn Fudgy, he put his hand on the door and it opened inwards, revealing a room that hadn’t been stripped of all its furnishings. John followed Fudgy into the room and despite her misgivings, Becca followed too.

“Wow, your great grand pappy really was some kind of wizard.” Said Fudgy.

“Mum just said he knew some really odd people.” Said John.

A room where everything was covered in the dust of centuries, yet the furniture still gave off an air of opulence. A room before the electric light or the telephone. No light switches on the walls, just oil lamps strategically places. Most of the tables and bookcase had been left to gather dust, but a few at the far end of the room had been protected by dust covers.

“We need the proper lights in here.” Said John.

Like excited children, they rushed out into the corridor to fetch the serious lighting. Becca felt frozen to the spot, terrified of that room, yet not knowing why. She heard John telling Fudgy they’d need bags and getting excited about what they might find.

“Hurry up you guys.” She shouted. “Getting a bit lonely in here.”

“Sorry, on our way.”

She was there, the blonde girl who was probably the ghost of Julie Stuart. They'd ignored all her warnings and now she was standing behind a dust cover and shaking her head. A solid looking ghost, who didn't flinch when Becca shone her flashlight into her eyes. Julie looked straight at her and shouted a single word.

"Run !"

The boys ran while carrying the lights, both of them looking concerned.

"What's wrong Becca ?" Asked John. "We weren't gone long."

"I never shouted, it was her, the ghost of Julie Stuart." She replied. "We keep ignoring her warnings John. We need to leave here, now."

"Why ? Did she say anything else ?" Asked Fudgy.

"No, she just stood behind that dust cover and shook her head."

"It'll all look less scary with some light on it." Said John.

Fudgy helped him, connecting up power packs and shoving the lights about, so that they'd light the entire room. When John threw the switch, the effect was dramatic. Becca had to shield her eyes from the sudden glare.

"There was more charge in those packs than I realised." Said John. "Now we can have a good look around, starting with that dust cover."

The once dark and threatening room, was now lit up like a building site. Not that the lighting took away her fear. There were clear footprints in the dust, leading right up to the dustcover.

"Did you already take a look at it ?" Asked Fudgy.

"Those aren't my footprints." She replied.

There was no point in telling them to leave the dustcover alone, she realised that. The boys moved to that end of the room, carefully avoiding stepping on the existing footprints. They grabbed a corner each and nodded at each other, before pulling the dustcover away.

"Oh No !" She yelled.

Becca screamed a long deep scream, which seemed to come from her very soul. Not unexpected, that was the tragedy. So many warning, so many relatives saying that John's great grandfather was a bad man, best avoided. The house left to rot, by a family constantly in need of money.

"Now we must call the police." She said.

Two high backed chairs had been placed against the rear wall of the room. In one was the body of Marlene, her head resting at a weird angle. She didn't look too good, her skin yellowing, though the cold weather had probably stopped her body from seriously decomposing. In the other chair was the far fresher body of Brad, looking as if he'd stopped to take a nap. Human or phantom, there was a killer around, probably waiting for just the right opportunity to kill them all. Becca couldn't help it, she screamed again.

"We'll leave Becca, right now." Said John. "I'm so sorry.... You were right."

There was a bag on the lap of Brad's body and it gained her attention by moving. An old cricket bag, though the cloth had gone pale with age. Once green, the bag was now almost white and something was moving about inside it, causing it to bulge out in various places. John reached a hand out towards it, perhaps to pick it up.

"No, the treasure is mine, they told me so." Said Fudgy.

"Who buddy ?" Asked John. "Who told you ?"

Still John's hand reached out, actually touching one of the bag's handles.

"No ! It's mine and mine alone !" Shouted Fudgy.

At that moment, she realised that Fudgy wasn't just their friend anymore. He was at least part something else, that was incredible strong and pissed off. Fudgy didn't even hit John properly, no fists or feet involved. He casually slapped John on his chest, sending him across the room like a broken doll. John hit a desk, tumbling over it, before his head hit a wall, hard. There he lay, her lover, father of her child, probably dead. Yet now she couldn't scream. The thing in the bag moved as Fudgy picked the bag up, probably excited by the violence. All she could think of, was asking the same question John had asked.

"Who are they Fudgy ? The ones who told you the bag was yours."

He smiled and then his head jerked about, looking around the room. Almost as if he was seeing things she couldn't see.

"No, not worthy to know." He said.

Then still him speaking, but with an old man's voice. A voice that sounded evil and full of malice.

"They'd be angry if I told you Becca." He said. "You're just not worthy of knowing."

He moved towards her, smiling as he came. She flinched and pushed herself up against the wall, expecting an attack. The thing that was Fudgy merely smiled and placed the old bag on a desk.

"Not yet Becca, not yet. I nearly forgot something."

No more pretending to be merely a human, the creature picked up the gold pentagram with ease, opening the bag to put it inside. Something in the bag moved as the pentagram didn't quite fit. It was so infuriating, the way the bag was always turned away from her, denying her the chance to look inside. The bag was too full to close, so Fudgy left a slight arc of gold, protruding from the bag.

"Now Becca, now you die." Again the older voice.

"They will then finish the job the sea has started, bringing the entire house down into the ocean." He said. "A terrible accident that took the lives of four young people and left poor Finn an orphan. I'll be back in my van of course, suffering from the ill effects of your one pound dinner. Oh, I'll be so heartbroken when the police arrive."

His hands went for her throat, obviously meaning to throttle her with his bare hands. She dug her nails into his right hand, ripping a piece out of his flesh. Still that infuriating smile.

"Ouch Becca, play nice. Just like Marlene with her moans and groans of pleasure, even calling out my name as my hand slid down her panties. Then her nails trying to claw out my eyes, when I strangled her."

It was no good, he just ignored the damage her nails were inflicting, as his fingers began to squeeze her neck.

"I never really did like you, too.....Too uppity." He said.

She didn't take it in that John had hit Fudgy with his own bolt croppers. She just knew that something had hit Fudgy hard on the right side of his head, making him fall away from her, dislodging his grip on her throat.

"Run !" Said John.

He wasn't dead, though there was blood trickling out of a nasty wound on his forehead. He was pulling at her, but her feet wouldn't move.

"Can you hear that ? We need to run !"

Becca heard the noises and ran. The scream of a house tearing itself apart. Foundations cracking, ancient wooden beams buckling. The house was finally going to succumb to the beating of the waves on the cliffs. It was about to break up and tumble down the cliff. Still John kept pulling.

"He isn't dead, we need to keep running Becca."



They were past the metal door, when Becca risked looking back, shining her flashlight along the corridor. He was there, the creature who had once been Fudgy. The right side of his face looked flattened, the eye that side crushed. He wasn't running that fast, but he was still coming after them, treasure bag in his right hand. John pulled at her again and they ran, along disintegrating corridors and through rooms with cracking ceilings.

"Christ ! Run Becca, or we'll end up in the sea too."

It was impossible, yet there was daylight in front of them. They reached a four way junction in the tunnels and the corridor that had led to the ruined rectory was gone. The tunnel, the ruins, that entire part of the clifftop had gone. Becca could see the ocean, see the rain against a dark sky. Again they ran, though her sides hurt from running.

"No it's mine, everything is mine. Let go !"

She had to stop and look back, seeing the ghost of Julie, pulling the pentagram out of the bag. She looked to be winning, pulling it up and away. For a split second Becca saw inside the bag, saw the treasure Fudgy had been so keen to own. She felt cold and knew there was no unseeing what was in the bag. The sight of ..... That.....Would haunt her for the rest of her life. Julie ran back into the collapsing tunnels, Fudgy pursuing her.

"It's mine, they promised me..... All mine."

"Come on Becca, the whole house is falling apart." Said John.

Julie had saved them of course, causing the thing that had been Fudgy, to follow her back into the collapsing tunnels. A more gentle pull from John, as they ran up the stairs, through their shower room and out of the house.

"Don't stop Becca, not yet."

Through the garden, past the old wrought iron gate, not stopping until they were stood beside Fudgy's van. A rumbling sound had now joined the noises of destruction. The entire house seemed to move backwards and then down, at a terrifying speed. Their tents, the new camping stoves, all the clothes and food.... Gone in an instant. The destruction didn't stop, until all that was left of the Old Stuart House, Just off Rosemary Lane, was the front garden wall. Even the old gate had gone. She hugged John for a while, as if not quite believing they'd survived.

"I'd better call the police." Said John.

While he tried to explain the inexplicable to the local constabulary, she did something a little silly. Becca went to the new cliff edge and looked down. She'd expected to see the bodies of their friends, perhaps Fudgy still fighting the ghost with blonde hair. The sea is deep and ferocious though and had already swallowed the wreckage. All she could see was a few piles of old bricks, just visible above the water. John joined her, looking at what was left of his great grandfather's house.

"I mentioned three deaths." He said. "They'll be here quite soon."

"Not easy to explain." She said. "No ghosts, no old rumours about all the odd people that Thomas Stuart knew. I think it might be a good idea, if Fudgy just went a little crazy."

"And we have no idea why."

She nodded at him and they kissed for a while.

"What was in the bag Becca ?"

"Trust me my beloved, you don't want to know."

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~The End~