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He didn't see her; but he heard her voice. It came whispering on the dusk like a dark, dreamy echo: a young girl's voice, so light it was like hearing the voice of a spirit in the trees of Buckland Forest behind him; yet it was coming from the direction of The Grange. He stared at the old house and listened again; then realized with a start that it was the sound of weeping.

He looked at the others. Skin and Daz were still staring over the wall towards the house. Speed was slumped on the ground, eating a doughnut, his fat stubby fingers covered in sugar and jam; but he looked up. 'Luke? You OK? You look kind of funny.'

'I'm fine.'

It was obvious none of the other boys had heard the voice. Speed had turned straight back to his doughnut and the other two hadn't even glanced round. Their eyes were fixed, as they had been for the last hour, on the front door of the house, Daz's ferrety features twitching but Skin's dangerously still and his face as fierce as fire. Luke hesitated, then spoke again.

'Can anybody hear anything?'

'Speedy burping,' said Daz, not looking round. 'But that's nothing new.'

Luke frowned. The girl's voice seemed so clear now. Why couldn't the others hear it? He inched closer to the wall and peered over. Before him the garden of The Grange stretched away with its great untended lawn and flowerbeds and broken-down sheds, and beyond that, over

to the left, the house itself, tall and gaunt in the failing light.

'Any sign of Mrs Little?' called Speed from below the wall.

'Not yet,' said Skin.

'Maybe she won't come out tonight.'

'She will.'

'You can't be certain she's going to come out. I mean, she hardly ever leaves the place.' Speed took another bite from the doughnut. Skin flashed an angry glance at him, then turned back to the house.

'She'll come.' He narrowed his eyes to slits. 'She always goes to the village shop on Friday evenings and she'll do the same tonight. Just watch.'

'Well, she'll have to hurry up,' said Speed. 'Or it'll be closed.'

'It's late-night opening. She's got time.' Skin stiffened suddenly. 'There she is. Keep still and get ready to duck if she looks this way.'

Luke held himself rigid and watched as Mrs Little emerged from the house with her shopping bags, closed the front door behind her and made her way towards the gate. Daz shook his head. 'That is one seriously ugly old woman.'

It was true. She had to be the most repulsive-looking woman Luke had ever seen. She was certainly the most unpopular person in Upper Dinton. It was hard to believe there could ever have been a Mr Little, not that anyone in the village knew anything about him. They didn't know much about her either, except that she'd lived at The Grange for about two years, all by herself, and that if anyone came near the house, she snapped at them and told them to get lost. It was as though she hated everybody in the world, especially fourteen-year-old louts, as she clearly saw them.

But now it was payback time. Now they were going get their own back for the times she'd mouthed them off. Because Mrs Little was rich. No one knew exactly how rich but it was obvious she was loaded. The Grange was the most expensive property in Upper Dinton, a beautiful old house, set apart from the rest of the village and with a great walled garden stretching right up to the edge of Buckland Forest—you had to have plenty of money to buy a place like this. But it wasn't money Skin was after.

It was the box. Money would do, too, of course, if there was some lying around, but what Skin wanted—to the point of obsession—was the box he'd seen the old woman holding that time he peered through the window to check the place out. There had to be something really valuable inside it, jewels probably. Not that he'd seen any; but that didn't matter. Whatever was inside, it was worth going for. The way she'd cradled the box and looked about her as she checked the contents, like a miser guarding her hoard—even if it wasn't jewels inside, it had to be something pretty important to Mrs Little, so it was worth nicking for that reason alone.

'She's going,' murmured Daz.

Luke watched the old woman's figure disappear up the track towards Nut Bush Lane, then turn down it in the direction of the village. He felt Skin's eyes upon him. 'Right, Luke. Over to you.'

'I don't know if I want to do this any more.'

'Sure you do.' Skin looked him over. 'We've been through this. You want to be part of the gang. And we want you to be part of the gang. But we need to know we can trust you. We need to know you've got the bottle.' His eyes hardened. 'Because if you haven't, we don't want you and you can clear off back to your piano playing and your music lessons.'

Luke looked back at the house and again heard the sound of weeping. Skin's voice came darkly back. 'You're either for us or against us, Luke. And you don't want to be against us. If you get my meaning.'

Luke stared into Skin's eyes and it was like looking at two black flames. Close by, he sensed Daz and Speed watching his face. He bit his lip and tried to shut the weeping from his mind.

'OK,' he said.

'Good boy,' said Skin.

They scrambled down to the track and ran along beside the wall as far as the gate. Skin stopped suddenly and glanced quickly round. All calmness was gone now; his face was as keen as a hunting dog's. From the forest end of the track came the sound of horses' hooves.

'Quick!' he said. 'Round the side of the house!'

They climbed over the gate, sped round the building to the back, and waited, pressed against the wall. The sound of the hooves grew louder as they approached the house. Luke peeped round the side of the wall.

'Who is it?' whispered Skin.

'Miranda Davis and her dad,' he said, watching the two riders disappear from view in the direction of Nut Bush Lane.

Speed chortled. 'Luke's girlfriend.'

'She's not my girlfriend,' said Luke.

'Oh, yeah? I've seen you two yakking at school.'

'Shut up!' said Skin. 'We've got things to do.'

He led them further round the back of The Grange and stopped on the lawn. The house now looked sleepy in the half-light; the curtains were drawn across, both upstairs and down, and there were no lights on that Luke could see. Skin pointed to the nearest window on the ground floor. 'That's the sitting room. That's where she was when I saw her with the box. Only I was looking in from the

other side. I managed to climb up the wall by the track and see over.'

'Maybe that's where the box is now,' said Daz. 'In the sitting room.'

'Doubt it. She'd keep it somewhere out of sight if it's really valuable. But we can check the room out. See if you can find a gap in the curtain to look through.'

Daz ran over, found one at once and put an eye to it.

'Bit of a weird place,' he said. 'Full of funny ornaments and stuff.' He went on peering through the gap. 'And it's really dusty in there. She doesn't do a lot of cleaning.' He gave a snigger. 'At least Luke'll feel at home. It's got a grand piano. He can play us some classical music while we're looking round.'

Luke ignored the sneer.

'Any sign of the box?' said Skin.

'No,' said Daz.

'Let me try.' Skin walked up to the window, squinted through the gap for a few moments, then spoke again. 'No, can't see it either. Doesn't matter. We'll have a better look round once we're inside.' He straightened up and turned. 'Right, it's time for Luke Stanton to deliver.'

Luke felt all eyes fix upon him. Skin walked up and put an arm round his shoulder. 'Come with me, Lucky Luke. I'll show you something me and Daz spotted from behind the wall while Speedy was gobbling his doughnut and you were staring into space.' He led them further round the back of the house and pointed upwards. 'There.'

Luke followed the boy's eyes, half-expecting to see a weeping girl, but instead he saw a drainpipe running up the wall, and two open windows, one a skylight in the roof, the other a window on the first floor below it.

'Now we've made it easy for you,' said Skin. 'Since it's your first job. And you've got to admit it's a doddle. She's even left you a nice metal drainpipe.'

Luke put a hand out and tested it. It seemed firm enough and Skin was right: it wasn't a difficult climb. Even the others could probably manage it, apart from Speed, obviously. But Luke knew well enough that this evening was not about testing the others; it was about testing him; and, of course, getting the box. Skin nodded towards the drainpipe. 'Off you go, then.'

Luke hesitated, looking from face to face. Skin took a step closer. The flames in his eyes now seemed darker, deeper, hotter; yet his voice was as cool as a knife. 'I said off you go, Luke. We're counting on you. We need you. You can climb better than any of us. Better than anybody I know. Do this one right and there'll be other jobs. Nice easy jobs, just like this one. No danger, no fuss. Stick with us and we'll all benefit. You wanted to join the gang and have a go at Mrs Little—here's your chance. So get going. And remember what I told you—don't hang about once you're in. Just let us through the front door and we'll do the rest.'

Luke ran his hand over the drainpipe, feeling more and more reluctant to get involved; yet he knew he had gone too far now to draw back from this; and refusal would bring terrible consequences. Everyone knew what Skin could do. He started to climb. It was a relief to leave the others below, yet somehow he felt more frightened than ever now. What would he find inside this spooky old house? He reached the level of the first-floor window and stopped for a moment, clinging to the drainpipe. From below came a scent of honeysuckle; from above, once again, the sound of weeping. And it seemed more desperate, more urgent than ever.

Who was this girl? And where was she? And why was she crying? He went on clinging to the drainpipe, trying to think and at the same time fight his old familiar doubts. What if this weeping were just his imagination? He knew

his hearing was acute, much more so than most people's, and that he heard things long before others did, but he also knew that he heard sounds that no one else seemed able to hear at all; so much so that he was starting to suspect that they were just part of his imagination. And maybe this weeping girl was his imagination, too. Whatever the truth, he knew he had to go through with the break-in. The retribution Skin would exact for failure would be worse than anything a weeping girl—real or imaginary—could do to him. As if to prompt him, Skin called out from below. 'Go on, Luke! Get a move on! Even Speed could have got in by now!'

Luke glanced back at the window. It was a little further from the pipe than it had seemed from below but he should just be able to make it. He stretched out his left foot and positioned it on the window ledge, then caught hold of the window frame and pulled himself across so that he was crouched on the ledge, square-on to the window. Through the opening he could see a small study with a writing desk and a swivel chair, and shelves covered with grotesque figurines that seemed to shriek at him as he peered in. Again he heard Skin's voice, now spitting with impatience.

'Get a move on! We're wasting time! Go down and let us in!'

He pulled himself into the room, glad to be out of sight of the others, but uneasy now that he was inside the house. The sound of weeping was louder than ever and it seemed to be coming from somewhere above him. He tiptoed to the door of the room and put his head round. A broad, unlit landing ran either side of him. To the left were three closed doors and one—half-open—at the end; to the right was a stairway down to the hall and, just beyond, at the other end, a small closed door raised slightly in the wall. Again he saw shelves bedecked with strange statuettes:

figures dancing, figures playing musical instruments, figures pulling faces. He frowned. Best just to run downstairs, open the front door and get the thing over with. Let Skin find his box. As for the weeping—it didn't exist; it couldn't exist. No one else had heard it so it was just his imagination playing tricks, like all the other noises he'd heard—or thought he'd heard—over the years, especially since Dad died.

He ran to the top of the stairs and started to hurry down. A loud sob, somewhere above him, froze him to the spot. He stood there, trembling, and listened. It's not real, he told himself. It's just imagination. Mrs Little lives alone. Everyone knows that. She hates people. There's no one here. He heard another sob above him, so loud this time it was almost a scream. He looked up to where the sound seemed to have come from and tried to picture the outside of the building and what was up there.

The open skylight. It had to be that. The Grange must have some kind of attic room. His eye fell on the little raised door at the far end of the landing and he stared at it, trying to find a reason not to go and inspect it; but he knew he had to. Breathing hard, he climbed back to the landing, walked over to the door and pulled it open. Before him was a narrow flight of steps twisting upwards. He stared at them, his mind a confusion of voices: voices shrieking at him to turn back, let the others in, get away from whatever this was; and other voices, urging him to go up and find out where this weeping was coming from. It might not be imagination. It might be real. There might be someone here, someone who needed his help. Clenching his fists, he started, as softly as he could, to climb.

The steps didn't run far and he soon found himself at the top, facing a small landing with two closed doors. There were no lights on and the air was dusky and grey. The crying was louder now and clearly came from one of

these rooms. He stepped up to the first, braced himself, then turned the door-knob and pushed. It was a small bathroom and someone was obviously using it: he saw towels, a toothbrush, toothpaste, shampoo and other things; but no one was here. He turned to the other door and reached out his hand.

At that moment the weeping stopped.

An eerie silence fell. He stood there, motionless, his hand touching the door-knob. He must have been heard. He'd moved as quietly as he could but the girl must have picked up some sound, perhaps the slight click as he'd opened the bathroom door. Why else would she have fallen silent? And what was she doing now? He listened for some sound of movement. The girl, too, seemed to have frozen, yet he sensed her just behind the door, listening for him, no doubt, just as he was for her. Probably she was even more frightened than he was. He leaned his head closer to the door. 'I won't hurt you,' he whispered. 'I promise I won't hurt you.'

Still the eerie silence. It seemed to go on and on and on, and as it continued, it grew deeper and more frightening. He thought of Skin fuming outside with the others. They would be mad at him by now and wondering what the hell he was doing. And what was he doing? The doubts were coming back and the voice of logic chirping inside his head again: Mrs Little lives alone; everybody knows it; you've heard imaginary sounds before and these are imaginary, too. The room's empty.

But there was an easy way to test this. It just needed a tiny bit of courage. He squeezed his hand round the door-knob and turned. It was locked. He gave a sigh of relief. That settled it. There was no key in the door so he couldn't get in even if he wanted to. And there was no point anyway. Mrs Little might be ugly and unfriendly but she was hardly the kind of person to keep a girl imprisoned in

an attic room. He listened for more sounds behind the door but all he heard now was his own restless breathing. On an impulse, he knelt down and put an eye to the keyhole.

There was no light on in the room but the skylight appeared to be letting in something of what was left of the day. He could see a bed and the edge of a radiator and some drab wallpaper, and a section of some shelves, though, unlike the ones downstairs, these appeared to have nothing on them. Suddenly a face appeared. He gasped. Only inches from the keyhole was a young girl, staring—it seemed—towards him. Nine or ten years old, she looked, with short black hair that seemed to shine. Her eyes were swallowed in tears; and there was a terror in her face beyond anything he had ever seen.

Suddenly he was stumbling towards the steps. He knew he should stay—try to speak to her, try to help, try to do something—but he couldn't. Her terror had mastered him, too. He reached the top of the steps and heard the crying break out again behind him, but it only spurred him on faster. He clattered down to the main landing, raced along it and plunged down the stairs to the hall, the weeping welling over him like a cloud of pain. It seemed to grow louder, the further away he ran. He reached the front door, wrenched it open and saw the others standing there, scowling. Skin cuffed him hard round the top of the head.

'What the hell's the matter with you? You've been ages! Hey! Wait a minute! Don't close the door!'

But Luke took no notice. Before any of the others could stop him, he slammed the front door shut, ran to the gate and vaulted over, then hared off down the track towards the forest. And the weeping ran with him, all the way.