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Opening Extract from...

The Bed I Made

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Chapter One

I was standing on the shingle bank when they towed her boat back in. The last of the sun was slipping below the horizon, pulling the dying day after it, turning the water of the Solent black. On the far shore, two miles away across it, the lights of the mainland blinked on. The lifeboat was coming up from the Needles, its orange decks a bright mark in the gloaming, but the throttled-down rumble of its engine reached over the surface of the sea like a growl. At a distance the hull of the sailing dinghy was barely visible; it bobbed childlike on the wake of the bigger boat.

The stones crunched under my feet as I started to move. Behind me, the wood that reached down to the rough beach had become amorphous, the branches and tangled undergrowth suddenly a dark mass which met the sea's approach with silence. I broke into a run but I had come further than I thought; it seemed a long time before I reached the tarmac path again. I ran through clouds of my own breath, sucking in lungfuls of air heavy with salt and tar and the stink of rotting seaweed.

I had been on the harbour front in the morning when the flare had gone up. At first I hadn't remembered what it was, the rocket's long whistle, the moment's pause before the cracking sound and the streamers of smoke descending through the white sky. A minute or so later, though, a battered blue car raced past and was abandoned on the quayside, the driver's door left open, and a bicycle flew round the corner and was flung down, its back wheel still spinning. Two more men came running from the road by the roundabout. The lifeboat's engine was already roaring and

in a matter of seconds it was gone from the harbour, a skirt of churning water behind it, out into the Solent where it powered up and fled. The people on the quayside had watched until it disappeared from sight. I asked a man outside the lifeboat office which I'd seen on the corner. 'Local woman's missing,' he'd told me. 'Out in her boat.'

I didn't know why it felt so important to be there now when the boat came back in. I left the tarmac path, met gravel as I climbed the slope away from the sea wall, and then, at last, I came out on to the road again, heart pounding in my ears, calves burning with acid. Another couple of hundred yards and I reached the river bridge. There in front of me was the town, scarcely more than a village: the stout stone buildings hunkered down beyond the quay, ready for whatever came at them, the brick chimneys of the George hotel standing four-square and resolute in the twilight. I could see the lifeboat again and heard it slow as it came inside the harbour. Less than a minute later, the engine was cut and silence fell.

It was as if the town had taken an inward breath. Nothing moved. The pavements were deserted, the roads empty of cars. Those parked on the quay waited for the next ferry with their engines turned off. The breeze that had played melancholy music through the rigging of the yachts during the afternoon had died away, and the boats sat motionless on their moorings. Even the seagulls, keening since dawn, were mute now.

As the bridge brought me to the harbour, I made myself slow down. I had no right to be conspicuous here. Instead of following the pavement on to the quay, I kept back by the wooden barrier that divided the ferry lanes from the road. Two of the lifeboat crew were on the pontoon already, the high tide lifting the platform so that their heads and shoulders were visible above the edge of the quay either side of the little boat's mast. Their voices were low, and too far away for me to make out. On the deck of the lifeboat a man in a heavy waterproof jacket paused at the stern for a moment to look down at them, the rope he was coiling hanging in slack loops between his hands. Behind him, the lights in the cabin went out.

There was another man standing on the quay wall directly in front of me. Despite the cold, he was wearing only jeans and a thin shirt. He faced away over the harbour, silhouetted against the sky so that his body was hardly more than a black shape, an absence of light or an intensification of the darkness. He was tall, remarkably tall, and the breadth of his shoulders suggested power but he was gripping the top of the metal railing as if he were trying to keep himself from being blown away by a wind which no one else could feel.

Suddenly he turned. He was crossing the tarmac with long strides, coming towards me. I drew back but the barrier was only knee-high and offered no cover. I was directly in his path. His head was down, his eyes fixed on the ground. I willed him not to see me but, just as he passed, he looked up.

He wasn't much older than I was: perhaps thirty-five or -six. His hair was dark and there was several days' stubble on his cheeks but in the glow of the streetlamps, his skin had a lunar pallor. His eyes were wide open but moved over me without seeing. The rest of his face was blank, as if there were no expression that could reflect what he was feeling, and as he went by, the air around him seemed to tremble with the force of it.

I stood still for a minute or two after he'd gone, listening to the quick sound of his footsteps as they faded, feeling the sweat cooling on my skin.

They had found her boat, I realised, but they hadn't found her.