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Opening Extract from...

Undertow

Written by Elizabeth Heathcote

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UNDERTOW

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Quercus

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To Nev, Ben and Franny

Chapter 1

Paula had every light on in the kitchen. It was nearly June but gloomy, raining and cold, miserable weather even for England. She would have been happy to stay indoors all day, but the dog was getting restless and he'd have to be walked. She pulled on her wellies and cagoule and went back to the cloakroom for a scarf.

It was half-term and the children were watching TV, still in their pyjamas at twelve. Paula's dad was upstairs fixing the light in Cheyenne's bedroom. She shouted up to let him know that she was going and then put her head round the living-room door. 'I'm taking the dog out,' she said. 'Granddad's upstairs.'

The children were side by side on the settee, a blanket pulled over their knees, their bodies barely touching. They didn't look up.

'Hello?' she said.

'Shh!' said Charlie, her boy, his eyes fixed on the screen.

'Did you hear me? I'm taking the dog out and—'

'Mum! I heard.'

She tutted and closed the door, her lips spelling out what she'd like to have said as she searched for her keys in the pile of scarves and gloves and school books by the front door. Then she heard a shout. 'Wait, Mum, I'm coming!'

Cheyenne, her little girl, came running through.

'You want to? It's raining.'

'I know, Mummy, I want to come with you.'

'Get dressed quickly then.'

Cheyenne scrambled upstairs, still climbing on hands and knees at four. Paula smiled after her and picked up the dog's lead without thinking and of course Roxy heard and went wild, bounding into the hall and jumping up at her over and over again, barking and snapping with excitement. The next few minutes were chaos, trying to calm him and to hurry Cheyenne, to get her shoes and coat and hat on with the dog jumping round them. By the time Paula opened the front door she felt frazzled.

The dog tore through the yard and into the street, crazy for the air and freedom. The drizzle closed around him and drove him wilder, as though it harboured spirits that only he could hear. He twisted and leaped and snapped, then disappeared into the mist, around the corner and on to the beach.

Cheyenne ran after him, and Paula set off too, but then she realised she had forgotten the dog's ball. She paused for a minute, watching her daughter run ahead, but there was no road to cross, and Cheyenne and the dog both knew every inch of that beach, so she hurried back into the house to pick up the ball.

When she came out again the street was empty. She ran

round the corner, across the lane that served the old seafront cottages. No one was around so she took the short cut through one of the gardens, with its driftwood bench and tufts of dry grass clinging to the pebbles, then jumped over the low fence on to the beach.

Her steps were loud against the pebbles. She stopped for a minute, squinting through the drizzle for her daughter and her dog, and the weather shrouded her in a perfect silence. She couldn't see any movement, couldn't see anything more than twenty metres ahead.

'Cheyenne,' she called, and stepped forward. Her foot on the stones was too loud in the void where her daughter's voice, or someone else's, or anything normal should have been. She felt the stab of panic that came whenever she let Cheyenne out of her sight, that moment of terror she almost teased herself with before her daughter inevitably appeared again.

'Cheyenne.'

She pulled her hood off to listen better. Moisture gathered on her face.

'Cheyenne.' She ran a few paces. 'Cheyenne!'

The beach fell away here, from the high-tide mark, a slope of pebbles that got steeper in the winter storms, as the sea pounded it into a wall. Her feet sank deep into the loose shingle. She started along the top, not sure which way they would have gone, reluctant to drop down to the harder, sandier ground left by the retreating tide. She could move quicker down there but she could see further from up here.

She forced her feet on. 'Cheyenne!'

The tide was going out below her but the waves were winter waves, as tall as her daughter, crashing on to the beach and dragging everything they could find back with them. How could she have been so stupid? That bloody ball!

It was in her hand still. She was squeezing it tight. This was the last time she would let her daughter out of her sight even for a second.

'Cheyenne! Roxy!'

She heard a bark, to her left, not close. Oh thank God . . . She touched her fluttering heart, her breath slowed a little. How silly of her. She set off after the bark, moving faster through the shingle now so that she was quickly breathless. How could they have got so far so quickly?

'Cheyenne!'

Through the drizzle she could see movement, ahead and below her, near the waves. It was the dog – long and flat, down on all fours, then leaping in the air and dropping again. He was playing with something, the way he worried a bucket or a duster at home, a poor domestic substitute for some ancient memory of hunting.

There was no sign of her daughter.

'Cheyenne!'

She ran towards the dog and he bounded towards her, but stopped halfway and twisted around on his hind legs to run back to the same spot. There was something there, some piece of flotsam he was busy with. He was barking at it, calling her over to show her.

It's a person, she thought. Lying face down on the beach.

And for a moment it seemed perfectly natural that a person should be lying on the beach in the freezing drizzle, the most natural thing in the world. But something about the person, the leg, the angle, it wasn't right. And then a wave hit and nudged the leg more askew, and she thought it was a doll. And then she realised it was a body. Someone dead.

She didn't scream her daughter's name. The world screamed too loudly in her ears. She was running but she didn't know it. She was frozen, the muscles in her face and her mouth and her arms and her heart. She didn't breathe. The noise in her ears was deafening. Her brain had seized up. She felt rain again on her face. Her brain sent a message. The body wasn't a child. It wasn't Cheyenne.

She stopped ten metres away. She was shaking. It was a woman, black hair, blue skin, bloated. She had a red bikini on, ripped. She stepped closer. Part of the flesh on the arm was missing. Paula could see bone.

She turned away. How awful. But where was her daughter? 'Cheyenne!' she shouted.

The dog nipped at her hand. He wanted her to throw the ball for him. She was so dazed she did it, threw it up the shingle to the plateau at the top, away from the body, then she started after him, her wellies slipping on the pebbles.

'Cheyenne!'

Roxy disappeared over the brow after the ball, and then his head popped back up, and another dog was beside him. Paula was struggling to run up the steep shingle, digging her wellies in, her panic was slowing her, her tense arms and legs

kept slipping back. The dogs ran past her, back towards the beach.

A man was standing at the top. He was middle-aged, she recognised him vaguely from around but she didn't know him. He had a beard. 'Have you seen a little girl?' she said, clambering up.

He didn't answer. He was looking beyond her. 'Is that a body?'

The dogs were circling the dead swimmer, barking and playing together, chasing each other around this strange totem.

'Yes,' said Paula. 'The tide must have brought her in. Please, have you seen a little girl? I can't find my daughter.'

He looked at her, as though he wasn't quite following. She was touching his arm, she realised. She pulled her hand away. He nodded over to the strip of grass and pebbles that lay at the top of the beach.

And there she was, Cheyenne, sitting down in all this rain, her pink hat bobbing above the grasses. She was staring at the ground, concentrating – playing with the shingle or looking for shells, oblivious.

Paula laughed, relief coursing through her. 'I'm so sorry, I thought I'd lost her. Oh, thank goodness.'

She bent over, exhausted now from running up the slope.

'We should call the police,' he said, and for a moment Paula didn't know that he was talking about the body on the beach, the poor woman down there. 'It'll be that woman who went missing.'

'What woman?'

'At the bank holiday. She went swimming. Hadn't you heard? A woman from London.'

Paula hadn't heard anything. She'd been in with the kids most of the week.

She went to sit with her daughter. She hugged her and praised the picture she had made out of shells. Thank you, God, she thought. Thank you, thank you.

When they got home, Charlie hadn't moved. Cheyenne pulled her wet clothes off and joined him in her pants under the blanket, her eyes fixed on the TV. 'Don't just leave those there,' said Paula, and picked up the wet clothes, took them upstairs to the washing basket. She emptied the pockets of pebbles and shells, and there was a bracelet that she hadn't seen before. Cheyenne must have found it on the beach – it was nice, good quality, made of metal discs and stones, blues and greens. The metal discs had rusted a bit – it was a shame. Paula decanted it along with the other bits and put it into Cheyenne's fairy jewel box.

Sometime around 2 a.m. that night, Cheyenne crawled into her parents' bed, in the middle. Normally Paula would have told her she was too old for this, but tonight she hugged her tight. Shaun didn't stir; he slept through anything.

'That lady on the beach was dead, wasn't she?' Cheyenne whispered.

'Shh. Yes.'

Her daughter lay in her arms. 'I was scared,' she whispered.

'It was a bit scary, wasn't it, the police coming?'

'Not then. Before you came.' Cheyenne started to cry.

It hadn't occurred to Paula that her daughter had seen the body before she had arrived. She'd just assumed Cheyenne had been at the top of the beach, skirted around it.

'What happened to her?' Cheyenne sniffed.

'She drowned in the sea.'

'Couldn't she swim?'

'I don't know, darling. The sea can be dangerous. You have to stay away from the waves unless Mummy's there. Do you promise me?'

Cheyenne nodded.

'She was cold,' she said.

'You touched her!'

Cheyenne started to cry again.

'Shhh, shhh, shhh,' Paula said. 'It's OK, you didn't do anything wrong.' She held her daughter closer. Would she be traumatised by what she had seen?

The woman's name was Zena and she was twenty-nine. There was a picture in the paper – she was very good-looking, slim with long glossy black hair, flawless ivory skin, in the photograph she looked like a model. Paula recognised her, had seen her before in the village. Shaun had pointed her out one day – he knew her a bit from when they were young, she'd grown up nearby and then moved away. Shaun had said hello to her, but she'd blanked him. He'd been stung by that, she could tell, but he'd laughed it off.

It turned out she and her partner had been living around the corner in Shell Road. The paper said that they'd bought

it as a weekend place just a few months ago. Paula could see the house from her garden – an old lady called Iris used to live there and after she died it was empty for a while. Paula knew someone had moved in, but she hadn't seen them yet, she didn't realise it was the same woman. They were down for the bank holiday. The woman went for a swim late afternoon on the Monday and didn't come back. The paper said she had swum from the stretch of the beach next to the bungalow, which wasn't safe – she should have known that, growing up around there. It wasn't protected for swimming – jet skis and boats used that area, plus the tide was strong and there were big waves, an undertow that could be dangerous.

There was lots of talk in the village, about the dead woman, theories about how she had died, rumours that it wasn't just a simple case of drowning, that there was more to it than that. Shaun said it was all nonsense and Paula was happy to agree with him. St Jude's was a gossipy place, everyone liked to have an opinion.

Someone who knew the dead woman from way back said she was a strong swimmer, that she knew what she was doing. Sometimes, Shaun said, it isn't enough.

Chapter 2

Late May, three years later

Carmen dreamed that Nick was making love to her. They were away somewhere, hiding from life in a shabby hotel room. He said they could stay away for months and no one would notice, but that they should move around, he had places he wanted to show her. He was holding her naked body and she was much younger, a teenager again, her whole self moulded around him. She wanted nothing but to be with him, and that feeling of certainty was more powerful than anything in the dream.

She woke abruptly, sweaty, disorientated. The thread of the dream was slipping away already. She had no idea how they had got there, what had come before. Just the feeling was left, her certainty, her arousal.

God. She rolled on to her back. Where did that come from? Tom was asleep beside her, his back to her, clutching his pillow and dreaming his own dreams or more probably not dreaming

anything at all, just oblivious after a long week at work. She pulled herself up so she could see his face, frowning in sleep, as though even here life was a bit of a struggle these days, and she felt the love twitch in her stomach. She felt bad about the dream. Had she betrayed him somehow? She told herself to stop being stupid – it was just a dream, a shadow from her past, stored away in some file in her mind, randomly accessed and mixed with another file and another. She and Nick had never been anything like that in real life, or if they had it was so long ago she couldn't remember.

The room was too hot. It was May, time to turn the heating off. Carmen pulled the quilt to one side. Tom was wearing only his underpants and the skin on his back was pale and smooth, no hair and no slack beneath, his muscles defined from the daily half-hour at the gym in the basement of his office. She rolled on to her side and ran the back of her fingers across his shoulders. He didn't stir, so she did it again, stroked the soft skin, and her desire flared up. May as well put it to good use, she thought, and pulled her cotton nightdress over her head. She lined her body up against his, pressed herself into him and snaked an arm around his body.

He grunted, half awake. 'What are you doing?'

'You want me to stop?'

He grunted again. Of course not.

When they woke for the second time it was nearly ten and they were running late. It was their weekend to have Tom's children; they were due to pick them up at noon and the drive alone would take two and a half hours. They shoved clothes

into bags and Carmen emptied the contents of the fridge into a cool box, and they had to go. The forecast was good and they'd planned to stop over at the beach, the first visit this year. There was no time for breakfast, but Tom was starving and insisted they stop to pick up coffee and rolls from the deli on the corner before getting stuck in the Saturday-morning jams through south London.

'They didn't have any bacon,' Carmen said as she climbed back into the car. Tom was texting. 'Is that Laura?'

'Yes.'

Laura was Tom's ex-wife. He would be texting to tell her they were going to be late collecting the children. 'You are so gutless. Why don't you just call her?' said Carmen.

He laughed, there was no need to explain the obvious. 'What did you get then? Sausage?'

'They didn't have sausage either, nothing hot. Egg and cress, or egg and smoked salmon, which do you want?'

He wanted the egg and smoked salmon of course, but he said she should have it, but she insisted that she felt like egg and cress, and they laughed at their good manners and split them. 'We'll have to buy sandwiches for the beach too,' said Carmen. 'Annoying.'

'Why?'

'It's such a waste of money.'

He laughed and kissed her.

They crawled along. The traffic approaching the Blackwall Tunnel was as bad as ever but Carmen didn't mind. She liked this time, travelling side by side in Tom's Audi, catching up.

They listened to the radio and he told her snippets from his week, gossip from the office, little irritations and anxieties. Evenings were her time, when she told him details of her day, about the people she had spoken to, the stories they had told her, new ideas she wanted to follow up. 'Are you looking forward to seeing the kids?' she said.

He shrugged, yes, of course, but . . .

'What?'

'Laura wants me to have a word with Mel.'

'Why?'

'She stayed out all night without telling her.'

Mel was his oldest, a challenging fifteen. 'Where was she?'

'I don't know. She said a friend's, but for some reason Laura checked and she wasn't there and she won't say where she was.'

'That's not good.'

Tom handed her his empty coffee cup. Carmen slid it inside hers then dropped them down beside her left leg on to the floor, where Tom wouldn't see. He hated rubbish in his Audi, he could be anal like that. 'You'd have thought Laura would call you about something serious like that, not just text,' she said.

'Actually she mentioned it earlier in the week when she rang.'

Carmen had suspected that was the case and she was irritated by it. She remembered Laura calling – they had been watching a DVD in bed. She had paused it, and when he came back up she had asked him what Laura was calling about, and he'd said nothing important. Why hadn't he just told her at the time?

She was about to say something when he said, 'I suppose I'll have to have a word with her.'

'Of course you will, you can't have that.'

Tom looked gloomy. Carmen knew what he was thinking – he saw his children infrequently enough and he didn't want to spend the time telling them off. Mel was hard enough to get on with anyway.

She took pity on him. 'You only need to have a word, it doesn't need to be heavy,' she said more gently.

They cleared the northern suburbs at last and were on the M11, out in open country. It was a beautiful spring day and the blue skies were a balm after months of grey London drear. When they left the motorway they took small roads heading north-east, passed through unspoilt villages with pubs and greens. The skies widened as they crossed into Norfolk, until a few miles later Tom took his hand off her knee to make a right turn. 'Here we are,' he said unnecessarily.

They pulled through a gateway between high brick walls on to a circular drive and Carmen tensed the way she always did as the house came into view, the elegance of the double-fronted Georgian fascia, the stuccoed pillars supporting the porch. In a previous incarnation it had been a vicarage and Tom still referred to it as that, as the vicarage, not Laura's house. To Carmen it bore no more relation to her experience than a set from a period drama, but to Tom of course it had been home for more than a decade.

He pulled up in the gravel parking area at the side of the house, which provoked a volley of barking from Riley the Labrador, shut away somewhere out of view. Laura was walking towards them, immaculate as always in pressed jeans and a

Barbour, her short red hair blow-dried close to her head. She showed no sign of annoyance that they were more than an hour late, whereas Carmen knew that in her shoes she would have been fuming and unable to hide it.

Carmen sank lower in her seat. It was no good, there was something about coming here that just reduced her. All that history, all that substance, and Laura – she was such a grown-up. Carmen knew that in part the way she acted was for the children's sake – Tom had explained Laura's insistence that they show nothing but cordiality in front of them, that they always present a united front as loving parents. But everyone knows that you're meant to put the kids first in these situations – how many exes can resist having the odd pop?

Not Laura. Whenever they met, from the very first time, Laura had been meticulous in being polite to Carmen – she always came up and said hello, and how are you, and what are you planning for the day? Only this time she couldn't because Mercy was clinging to her leg with one hand and a fence post with the other and screaming 'I don't want to leave Mummy!' so that Tom had to get out of the car and prise her away. Carmen overheard his brief exchange with Laura – when he would drop the children off, a comment about a friend's wedding next weekend (God, did that mean Laura was going to be there too?) and then Tom was coaxing and pulling the little girl towards the car . . . 'You want to come to the seaside, don't you?'

'I want to stay with Mummy!'

'Don't you want an ice cream?'

'I WANT TO STAY WITH MUMMY!'

Jake shot through the front door as though he was spring-loaded and dived into his seat with a flick of his fringe and a shy half-smile to Carmen, the tinny overflow from his earphones filling the car. Mel was last out, dressed in skinny jeans and a low-cut lilac top that she must have known would annoy Tom. She pushed past him as he tried to strap Mercy, kicking and arching her back, into the booster seat, and slumped into her corner, her hands over her ears. 'Can't you stop her screaming, Dad?'

'I am trying. Do you think you could help?'

'She doesn't want to come, does she?'

'Thanks, Mel.'

Carmen felt better once they were away from the house and back on the road, but the atmosphere in the car didn't improve. Tom was artificially bright as they drove to the coast, asking Mel questions about school and her friends, but Mel was glued to her phone – she fiddled with her long red curls and was monosyllabic. Then as soon as they had laid out the rugs in a dip in the dunes Mel curled up and fell asleep and Tom's patience ran out. 'What's wrong with her?' he muttered to Carmen, and marched off with Jake to play cricket, leaving her to play with Mercy. Carmen didn't mind. She would have liked Tom to ask, Is that OK? but there was no room for these niceties sometimes. Besides, Mercy was a sweet child, just six, and how could you not feel sorry for her? She had been three when her parents split up – she would grow up barely able to remember a time when they were together. Carmen had

heard Tom's friends say that it was Mercy's arrival that broke up the marriage – the unplanned third just as things were getting easier – and though it was never mentioned in Mercy's hearing of course, Carmen believed children can sense these things, be weighed down by them.

'You're not listening!' said Mercy.

'I'm sorry, sweetie, what did you say?'

'The fairies are *over there*!'

'Come on then, show me.'

They played beside Mel's sleeping body until Mercy got absorbed in digging. Carmen leaned back in the sand. There was warmth in the sun for the first time that year and it was delicious against her skin. She wished there had been time to make a flask of coffee; it was so peaceful, just the sound of the spade tapping against Mercy's bucket, the breeze in the dune grass. Out of sight, below on the sands, she heard Tom calling to Jake, 'That was five yards wide!' She leaned forward until she could see the top of his head below her, poised, waiting for Jake to have another go. There was something about the way he was standing, eager for the ball, willing his son to get it right, that tugged on her heart. 'Line your left hand up with the stumps,' Tom shouted. She watched the crown of his hair dip back and forth in anticipation of the shot, impatient for the chance to show off his skills to his son. Why did she find that so attractive? What was it? His lack of self-consciousness? He was so at home in the world, so sure of his place, so confident. It all came so naturally to him – children, marriage, a great job, a nice home, money, the trappings of a good life. He

never questioned that all of this was his entitlement, and he really had no idea it was different for other people. He laughed at her wonder still, that she too could have all of those things.

Soon Mercy got bored and said she wanted to paddle, and Carmen roused herself and they scrambled down the dune. 'We're walking to the sea,' she said to Tom. 'You want to come?'

'I do,' said Jake, and dropped the ball.

'What about the cricket?' said Tom.

'I want to go in the sea, Dad.' He peeled off his shirt and threw it up on to the grass.

'You can at least pick this lot up before you go.'

But Jake was already on his way. Carmen raised her eyebrows at Tom – it must just be something about me – and set off after him with Mercy. When she looked back Tom was brushing sand off the stumps. 'You should have helped him,' she said to Jake.

Jake shrugged.

The sands were vast at low tide, wet and shimmering in the spring sunshine. They walked in silence. Jake was thirteen, on the cusp of adolescence, taller than Carmen already, striking with his mop of red hair, lean and muscular and shy. She felt shy too – she got along with him by teasing him when they were with the others, but when they were on their own she never really knew what to say. He started playing with Mercy, swinging her and then lifting her into the air. Mercy loved it of course, and laughed, and Carmen laughed too and he threw the little girl higher, swung her harder as she came down. 'Careful,' said Carmen. Then Mercy cried out – he'd tugged her

arm, he was pulling too hard. 'Stop, Jake, you're hurting her,' said Carmen, but he did it again, threw her even higher, and Mercy started to cry.

'Jake!' said Carmen.

She saw him waiver, ready to ignore Carmen and carry on, but then he put Mercy down, a little too hard. 'Baby!' he said, and ran his awkwardness off into the distance.

By four, the young sun had lost its warmth and they gathered everything together and clambered back through the dunes to the car park. Everyone was tired and they drove in silence around the coast road to St Jude's, where they would spend the night. Tom parked outside the mini-market on the village green and without discussion they all piled out of the car and scattered across the shop. Tom and Mercy went in search of milk and eggs, Jake headed for the sweets and Mel for the magazines. Carmen crouched at the far side of the checkout to look over the front covers of the Saturday papers. A middle-aged woman, overweight and wheezing, hefted a basket on to the counter. 'How are you, Nim?' she said to the guy serving.

'Fine, Mrs B. Sick of these roadworks.'

'I know. What is the story there?'

The barcode reader beeped as the man checked items out of the woman's basket into a plastic carrier, and their chatter went on, but then there was a pause in the flow that felt unnatural and Carmen found herself sneaking a look at the pair. They were locked in unspoken dialogue, the woman indicating with her head to the other end of the shop, where Tom and the children were now clustered together. Then, as the little group

turned and moved towards them, Carmen stood up and the shopkeeper and the woman looked embarrassed.

For a moment Carmen felt angry, then she felt unsettled. It wasn't the first time something like this had happened. What were they talking about? She told herself they were probably just being judgemental about them coming from London, second-homers. She wasn't used to the tight spotlight of a place like St Jude's.

They paid for the groceries, piled back into the car and drove the hundred metres to the bungalow. The children went into the front room and the TV blared into life. Tom carried the bags in while Carmen set to work in the kitchen. She had unpacked the chiller bag and the groceries and was pouring boiling water into the teapot when he came up behind her and nuzzled her neck. She turned her body into his arms and they kissed, softly at first and then properly, tongues caressing. She was the first to pull away, conscious of the children next door. 'Later,' she said. 'We need to eat. What do you fancy? I could do some pasta.'

'How about fish and chips?'

'Really?' She smiled. He always wanted fish and chips when they came here.

'I'll get them in a bit,' he said.

'No, I'll go now.'

'You sure?'

She nodded. 'I fancy the walk.'

St Jude's had not been gentrified like some of the villages on this stretch of coastline, it was a bit of left-behind English

seaside and Carmen felt she could breathe here. The sea was at the end of the road and she walked that way back to the village. It was getting late and night anglers were setting up their gear on the shoreline, sinking into camp chairs with blankets and flasks and cans of live bait, waiting for dusk. She dawdled watching them, enjoying being alone. Then there was a queue in the chip shop so that it was three-quarters of an hour before she got back to the bungalow, the hot food bundled inside her jacket.

She knew something was wrong as soon as she walked in. She could hear the TV but the living-room door was closed, which it never was. She stepped further into the hall and saw Jake in the children's bedroom, sitting on the bottom bunk. She went in – Mercy was squashed up beside him. She had been crying.

'What's going on?' Carmen said.

'Daddy went mad,' sniffed Mercy.

'What do you mean? Jake, what happened?'

'Him and Mel had a row,' said Jake.

'Where is she?'

'I dunno. She stormed off.'

'Where's your dad?'

He indicated next door.

Carmen walked through to the living room. Tom was lying on the sofa, a bottle of beer in his hand. He sat up when she came in and smiled as though everything was fine.

'What the hell happened?' she said.

'What do you mean?'

'The kids said you and Mel had a row.'

'I just had a word with her.'

'Mercy said you went mad.'

Tom pulled a face – oh please. 'I just did what you said, told her off, and of course she didn't like it.'

'What do you mean, what *I* said? You're her dad.' But Carmen could tell he was upset, masking it. 'Did you hit her?'

'Of course not!'

'But you shouted?'

'A bit. I had to tell her. I am her father – she needs to know she can't do this. I just told her that, and of course she didn't like it.'

It was true of course, Mel did need telling. 'Where's she gone?'

'I don't know. She'll be sulking somewhere.'

'It's getting late.'

'She'll be fine.'

'It's dark out there!'

'She's fifteen, Carmen, she'll be fine.'

He was right. Mel was fifteen, nearly a grown-up, and a pain in the arse. But Tom's temper – he didn't lose it often, but when he did it was sudden and noisy and she didn't like it. She didn't like the way he seemed out of control. It was frightening, even for her, but worse for the kids.

'Jake and Mercy are really upset.'

He got up. 'I'll go and talk to them.'

She sat down on the sofa. She could hear his voice in the next room, and then they filed back through, the children

still subdued. Carmen fetched a rug and ketchup and they ate the fish and chips with their fingers, out of the polystyrene trays and paper, sitting on the floor. Tom made jokes and the atmosphere lightened till by the end of the meal the children were laughing.

Later, when they were all settled in front of the TV, Carmen heard the door, but Mel didn't come into the living room. 'Leave her,' said Tom, but Carmen couldn't do that. She slipped through to the children's bedroom. Mel was lying on the bottom bunk.

'Are you OK?' Carmen said.

Mel didn't answer.

'Where have you been?'

Mel shrugged slightly.

'What happened?'

Mel didn't answer.

Carmen sat on the edge of the bed. 'Mel, he's your father,' she said gently. 'He has to discipline you sometimes.'

'Not like that.'

'Not like what?'

Mel rolled over, turned her back to Carmen.

Carmen tried again. 'He loves you,' she said.

'You don't know what you're talking about,' said Mel.

Carmen caught the train back to London the next morning. Tom would spend the day with the children, then drive back early evening. That hadn't been the plan, but Carmen's friend Kath had texted late on Saturday to see whether she fancied

meeting up. Kath's husband, Joe, was a police officer and he worked irregular hours and often weekends. Kath found it tough, especially with a baby, so Carmen decided that for once she would say yes. It was only two hours on the train. She would have lunch with Kath and then have supper waiting for Tom.

Tom was fine about it, said she should do what she wanted, but she still felt bad as she kissed him in the car outside the station, as though she was abandoning them, which was silly of course because everything was fine with the kids again. Even Mel seemed to have forgotten that she was meant to be in a sulk. Still, as Carmen queued for her ticket, she felt a weight lifting from her.

She bought a coffee and a newspaper from the kiosk and walked out on to the platform. The timetable they had at the bungalow for the coastal branch line was out of date and it turned out she had a forty-minute wait, but she would connect with a faster London train at Diss so it would work out much the same. She found a bench in the sun and was quite content. She licked the chocolate from inside the lid of her cappuccino. The top story was a murder, a woman and her children stabbed to death at their home. A man believed to be the children's father was in custody. It was a grim tale and one that was becoming more common. How could you explain it? How could anyone do that?

As she read Carmen was conscious of someone sitting down beside her. He kept shuffling, and she sneaked a glance – it was a young man, a teenager, wearing a hoodie over black

trousers. Her London radar scanned him in a fraction of a second – no threat. He caught her eye and she smiled as a reflex, then regretted it because it encouraged him to strike up a conversation.

'You had your head stuck in that paper,' he said, as though she should have been talking to him instead.

She smiled vaguely and looked back at the page.

'Must be an interesting story. What's it about then?' He looked over her shoulder.

He clearly wasn't going to be put off. 'A man killed his wife and children,' she said.

The boy pulled a surprised face. 'Why did he do that then?'

Carmen shrugged. Who knows?

'Maybe she was sleeping around.'

Carmen's irritation surfaced at that. 'Are you serious? Do you think if she had slept with someone else then that's OK? To kill her? And his children?'

'I wasn't saying that. I was just saying that perhaps that's what happened.' He shifted in his seat. 'I wasn't saying it was OK.'

Carmen turned back to the paper, pointedly this time. The boy probably wasn't as stupid as he sounded, maybe he just didn't know the right things to say, but she had no more patience for him.

He was undeterred. 'It does happen though,' he said. 'It happened here – a man killed his girlfriend a few years back and people reckon that was because she was shagging around.'

She didn't reply. She kept reading.

'He got away with it too. He made it look like an accident. He was a lawyer from London – that's why he got away with it, we all reckon. He must have known important people.'

He had Carmen's attention now, she was looking at him, and he was obviously pleased by that.

'It's true. He still comes here – he's got one of those bungalows by the beach. He comes for weekends with his kids. Everyone around here knows about it. He's got a new wife now. I reckon she needs to be careful.'

Carmen's heart was thumping. 'What was her name?' she said. 'The woman who died?'

'I don't know, but she was good-looking. She had a weird name, I think it began with a Z. Zara . . . something like that . . .'

'Zena?'

'That's it. Do you know about it then?'

Carmen got up and said something about needing the loo. She gathered the paper under her arm and walked back out to the ticket office and asked for the toilet, but there wasn't one so she walked out into the car park and across to the field on the other side. She leaned against the wooden fence.

It's just gossip, she thought. I should have just laughed it off – told him who I was, that would have made him blush.

There were two horses in the field, two sturdy bays, scruffy with the remains of their winter coats. One kept looking her way to see if she was there to offer him a treat. The field was thick with mud from the winter, a quagmire, not picturesque at all. She willed the horse to come to her – she wanted to

touch it, to put her arms around its neck, but it had lost interest in her.

The station tannoy announced that her train was coming. She walked back across the car park and up the platform, away from the boy, who was still sitting on the bench. She knew he was watching her, but she kept on walking towards the back of the train and boarded there.

Sometimes when Carmen met someone new and explained that she had three stepchildren, that her husband had three children from a previous marriage, she would feel self-conscious and say, 'I have to add here that Tom and his wife had split up already when I met him,' and they would all laugh.

And if she got to know the person better, then at some point she might explain that actually there was more to the story – that there was another woman, a whole relationship, between the break-up of Tom's marriage and the first time that he and Carmen even met. Another relationship. Another love. Not a little fling with someone unsuitable whom he quickly moved on from, but much more. An affair that had started while he was still with his wife, but unlike all the affairs that you read about where the man never leaves his wife, Tom did leave Laura and their children to be with this woman.

And then, six months later, she died, drowned swimming in the sea, while they were staying at their holiday bungalow here at St Jude's.

Her name was Zena. Tom had told Carmen all about it in those first days and weeks after they met – how he had fallen in love with this young woman, how they had bought the

bungalow as a base for seeing the children, how one afternoon Zena left the house to go for a swim and never returned. How days later her body had washed up a mile along the coast.

He'd told Carmen all of that over the course of their first few dates, more than two years ago now, but they had rarely talked about it since. No one talked about Zena any more, no one they mixed with anyway, and the children never mentioned her.

But, it seemed, there were plenty of people who did.