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BRING ME BACK

Written by B A Paris

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Bring Me Back

B A Paris



ONE PLACE. MANY STORIES

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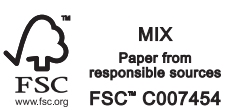
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For Christine, the best sister in the world

TWELVE YEARS BEFORE

Interview: Finn McQuaid
Date: 15/03/2006
Time: 03.45
Location: Fonches

We were on our way back from skiing in Megève. I decided to stop in Paris on the way up as a surprise for Layla, because she had never been there before. We had dinner in a restaurant by the Notre-Dame cathedral and then went for a walk along the Seine. We could have stayed the night there – now, I wish we had – but we were both eager to get home to our cottage in St Mary's, in Devon.

It must have been around midnight by the time we left Paris. About an hour and a half into our journey I wanted to go to the toilet so I pulled off the motorway, into the picnic area at Fonches. It's not a service station, you can't get petrol there or anything but I knew it had toilets because I'd stopped there before,

on previous skiing trips to Megève. The place was deserted apart from the car I told you about, the one parked directly outside the toilet block. I think there were a couple of lorries in the lorry bay on the other side; there must have been at least two, the one I saw leaving and the other one, the one whose driver we spoke to after.

There was an empty bottle of water rolling around the car and we'd been eating snacks on the way up from Megève so I drove past the toilet block and down to the end of the car park where there was a rubbish bin, so that I could get rid of the wrappers. I – I should have just parked outside the toilet and walked down. If I had, then I would have been nearer. I should have been nearer.

Layla was asleep – she'd fallen asleep as soon as we'd hit the motorway, and I didn't want to wake her so I sat for a while, just to relax a bit. She woke up when I started gathering up the stuff to throw away. She didn't want to use the toilet there, she said she'd rather wait until we stopped at a proper service station, so as I got out of the car I told her to lock the doors behind me, because I didn't like leaving her there in the dark. She really hates the dark, you see.

On my way into the toilets, I passed a man coming out and a minute or so later, I heard a car drive off. He was shorter than me, maybe six foot? I think he had dark hair, he definitely had a beard. I was quick in

the toilet, I didn't like being in there, I felt unnerved, as if someone was watching. Maybe it was because one of the stall doors was closed.

As I made my way back to the car, I heard a lorry pull out of the parking bay and I watched it as it headed along the slip road to the motorway. He was driving fast, as if he was in a hurry, but I honestly didn't think anything of it at the time. In the distance I could see the silhouette of our car, it was the only one left because the other one, the one that had been parked in front of the toilet block, had gone. It was only when I got closer that I realised Layla wasn't in the car and I thought she must have changed her mind about going to the toilet. I remember looking behind me, expecting to see her hurrying after me – I knew she'd be as creeped out by the whole place as I was – but she wasn't there, so I got into the car to wait. But the darkness began to get to me so I started up the engine and moved it in front of the toilet block, where there was at least a modicum of light, so that Layla wouldn't have to walk all the way back in the dark.

It must have only been a couple of minutes before I began to worry. It didn't feel right that she hadn't appeared yet so I got out of the car and went into the ladies' side of the block to look for her. There were three stalls, two were empty but the other one had the door closed so I presumed she was in there. I called to her and when there was no answer I put

my hand on the door and pushed against it. It swung open easily and when I saw that Layla wasn't there I hurried back outside and began calling for her, thinking that maybe, after I left the car, she'd decided to go for a short walk to stretch her legs or get some fresh air. But even as I was thinking it, I knew she would never have wandered off, not at night, not when it was pitch-black because, as I said, she hated the dark.

I ran round to the back of the block, in case she was there, and when I couldn't find her I got a torch from the boot and widened my search, taking in the whole picnic area, shouting her name. There was still one lorry in the bay so I went over and called out, hoping to find someone to help me look for her. But there was no one in the driver's cabin and when I hammered on the door no one answered, so I assumed the driver was asleep in the back. I tried hammering on that door too but nobody came and when I took out my phone and realised that I didn't have a signal, I didn't know what to do. I didn't want to leave in case Layla had fallen and was lying injured somewhere, but I knew I wasn't going to be able to find her with only the light from my torch. So I got back into the car and drove as fast as I could to the next petrol station and ran in shouting for someone to help me. It wasn't easy to get them to understand me because my French isn't very good but they finally agreed to phone the local police. And then you came and you spoke good

English and you took me back to the picnic area to help me look for Layla, because I really needed to find her.

That was the statement I gave to the police, sitting in the police station somewhere off the A1 in France. It was the truth. But not quite the whole truth.

PART ONE

ONE

Now

My phone rings as I'm walking through the glass-walled foyer of Harry's impressive offices on London Wall. I turn and check the time on the digital display above the receptionist's desk; it's only four thirty, but I'm impatient to get home. It's taken months of perseverance to get Grant James, the famous business magnate, to invest fifty million pounds in Harry's new fund and I'm ready for a celebration. As a thank you, Harry has booked dinner for me and Ellen tonight at The Hideout, the best restaurant in Cheltenham, and I know she's going to love it.

I glance impatiently at my phone, hoping it's a call I don't have to take. The caller name comes up as Tony Heddon, a police detective based in Exeter. We first met twelve years ago when I was arrested on suspicion of Layla's murder, and we've become good friends since. There's a curved steel bench to the left of the reception area so I walk over and put my briefcase down on its metallic seat.

'Tony,' I say, taking the call. 'Good to hear from you.'

'I'm not disturbing you, am I?'

'Not at all,' I say, noting that he sounds serious, the way he always does when he calls to tell me that an unidentified woman's body has been found by the French authorities. Guessing how awkward he must feel, I decide to plough straight in. 'Has another body been found?'

'No, nothing like that,' he says reassuringly in his soft Devonshire accent. 'Thomas Winter – you know, your ex-neighbour from St Mary's – came into the station yesterday.'

'Thomas?' I say, surprised. 'I didn't think he'd still be alive after all these years. How's he doing?'

'Physically he's pretty good, but he's quite elderly now. Which is why we don't want to give too much importance to what he said,' he adds, pausing. I wait for him to carry on and while I wait, my mind analyses what Thomas could have told them. But then I remember that before Layla and I left for our holiday in France, before she disappeared, Thomas only knew us as the happiest of couples.

'Why, what has he said?' I ask.

'That yesterday, he saw Layla.'

My heart misses a beat. I lean my free hand on the cold metal back of the bench, trying to process what he's just told me. I know he's waiting for me to say something, but I can't, so I leave him to fill the silence.

'He said he saw her standing outside the cottage and that when he went to speak to her, she ran off,' he goes on.

'Because it wasn't her,' I say, my voice neutral.

'That's what I suggested. I reminded him that twelve years have passed since he last saw her but he said he'd know her after fifty. She was wearing a hood thing over her head but he was adamant it was Layla. Something about the way she was standing, apparently.'

'But he didn't speak to her.'

'No. He said, and I quote, "I called her name and she turned her head, but when she saw me, she ran off." He said she went towards the station but the ticket office was closed at that time and we can't find anyone who saw a woman waiting for a train. There's no CCTV so we're none the wiser.'

I search for the right response. 'You don't really think it was Layla, do you? Not after all these years.'

Tony sighs heavily. 'I'm inclined to put it down to Mr Winter's overactive imagination. I thought you should know, that's all.'

'Well, thanks, Tony.' I want to hang up but it seems too soon. 'When are you retiring? September, isn't it?'

'Yes, just another couple of months to go. Not too sure what I'll do with myself, though.'

I grab onto this. 'You can start by coming down to see us. I know Ellen would love to see you.'

'I will, definitely.'

Maybe he understands that I'm not up to speaking because he tells me that he has another call to make. I stand for a moment, trying to get things in perspective,

wondering why Thomas thought he saw Layla. I make a quick calculation; we had celebrated his eightieth birthday just before leaving for that fateful holiday in France in 2006, which means Thomas is ninety-two now, an age at which people get easily confused, an age where it's easy to dismiss what they say, or what they think they saw. It can only be the ramblings of an old man. Confident, I take my keys from my pocket and carry on to the car park.

The journey home is unbelievably slow, which isn't unusual for a Friday afternoon. As I drive past the 'Welcome to Simonsbridge. Please drive slowly' sign at the entrance to the village, my earlier excitement over the new deal starts to come back. It was good of Harry to book The Hideout; he said I should go for the venison steak, and I probably will.

A minute later I'm pulling up in front of the house, nothing much to look at from the outside maybe, but once inside it's my haven, and the garden, my sanctuary. In a normal world Ellen would be standing on the doorstep, as impatient to see me as I am to see her. More often than not, roused from whatever illustration she's working on by the sound of the tyres scrunching on the gravel, she opens the door before I'm out of the car. But not now. And today, it seems ominous.

I tell myself not to be stupid, that she doesn't always open the door, that if I'd phoned ahead to tell her the good

news, of course she'd be waiting. But I'd wanted to tell her face to face, I want to see her telling me how clever I am rather than just hearing it. I know how it sounds but it isn't that I have a huge ego, more that pulling off this deal is a career highlight. A result like Grant James is such an adrenalin rush. It even beats the high I get from outsmarting the markets.

The sound of my key in the lock doesn't bring her to the door. It doesn't bring Peggy, our red setter, either, which is even more unusual. Instead of calling out, I go in search of Ellen, a flicker of worry making itself felt. As I push open the door to the sitting room, I see her curled up in one of the armchairs, wearing my blue denim shirt, which she continually pinches from my wardrobe. I don't mind, I love to see her in it. She has her knees pulled up to her chest and the shirt pulled down over them, like a tent.

My silent sigh of relief at finding her there is checked by the way she's staring unseeingly out of the window, her eyes on a distant past. It's a look I haven't seen for a while but a look I know only too well. It explains why Peggy – always sensitive to Ellen's mood – is lying silently at her feet.

'Ellen?' I say softly.

She turns her head towards me and as her eyes come into focus, she scrambles to her feet.

'Sorry,' she says ruefully, hurrying over to me, Peggy following more sedately behind her, her age showing. 'I was miles away.'

'I can see that.'

She reaches up and kisses me. 'How was your day?'

'Good,' I say, putting my news about the contract on hold for a moment. 'What about yours?'

'Good too.' But her smile is just a little too bright.

'So what were you thinking about when I came in?'

She shakes her head. 'Nothing.'

I put my finger under her chin and tilt her head upwards so that she can't avoid my eyes. 'You know that doesn't work with me.'

'It really is nothing,' she insists.

'Tell me.'

She gives a small shrug. 'It's just that when I came back from taking Peggy for a walk this afternoon, I found this' – she puts her hand into the front pocket of the shirt and takes something out – 'lying on the pavement outside the house.'

I look down at the painted wooden doll sitting in her palm and a jolt of shock runs through me, quickly followed by a flash of anger, because for one mad moment I think she's been rummaging around in my office. But then I remember that Ellen would never do such a thing, and concentrate on chasing the red mist away. Anyway, hadn't she said that she found it on the pavement outside the house?

'Someone must have dropped it,' I say, as casually as I'm able. 'A child, on her way back from school or something.'

'I know. It's just that it reminded me—' She stops.

'Yes?' I prompt, preparing myself mentally, because I know what she's going to say.

'Of Layla.' As always, her name hangs suspended in the air between us. And today, because of Tony's phone call, it feels heavier than usual.

Ellen laughs suddenly, lightening the moment. 'At least I have a full set now.' And of course, I know what she's referring to.

It was Layla who first told me the story, of how she and Ellen both had a set of Russian dolls, the sort that stack one inside the other and how one day the smallest one from Ellen's set had gone missing. Ellen had accused Layla of taking it but Layla denied that she had, and it had never been found. Now, thirteen years after I first heard that story, the irony strikes me because, like Ellen's little Russian doll, Layla went missing and has never been found.

'Maybe you should put it on the wall outside, like people do with dropped gloves,' I say. 'Someone might come looking for it.'

Her face falls and I feel bad, because it's only a Russian doll. But coming on the back of Tony's phone call, it feels a bit too much.

'I hadn't thought of that,' she says.

'Anyway, I'll be able to buy you as many Russian dolls as you like now,' I say, although we both know that isn't what this is about.

Her eyes grow wide. 'Do you mean . . . ?'

'Yes,' I say, lifting her into my arms and spinning her around, noting – not for the first time – how much lighter she is than Layla was. Tendrils of chestnut hair escape her short ponytail and fall around her face. Her hands grip my shoulders.

'Grant James invested?' she squeals.

'He did!' I say, pushing thoughts of Layla away. I stop spinning and lower her to the ground. Dizzy, she stumbles a little against me and I enclose her in my arms.

'That's wonderful! Harry must be over the moon!' She wriggles out of my embrace. 'Stay there, I'll be back in a minute.'

She disappears into the kitchen and I sit down on the sofa to wait. Peggy pushes herself between my legs and I take her head between my hands, noting with a heavy heart how grey she's getting. I pull her ears gently, as she loves me to do, and tell her how beautiful she is. It's something I often tell her, too often maybe. But the truth is, Peggy has always represented more than just Peggy to me. And now, because of the Russian doll, it seems wrong.

I feel restless, too full of kinetic energy to sit. I want to go to my office – a bespoke outhouse in the garden – and make sure that my Russian doll, the one Ellen doesn't know about, is there, in its hiding place. But I force myself to be patient, reminding myself that everything is good in my world. Still, it's difficult, and I'm about to go and find Ellen when she comes back, a bottle of champagne in one hand, two glasses in the other.

'Perfect,' I say, smiling at her.

'I hid it at the back of the fridge a couple of weeks ago,' she says, putting the glasses down on the table and holding the bottle out to me.

'No,' I say, grasping the bottle and using it to pull her towards me. 'I mean you.' I hold her tight for a moment, the champagne trapped between our bodies. 'Do you know how beautiful you are?' Uncomfortable with compliments, she drops her head and plants a kiss on my shoulder. 'How did you know that Grant would come through?' I go on.

'I didn't. But if he hadn't, the champagne would have been to commiserate.'

'See what I mean about you being perfect?' Releasing her with a kiss, I untwist the wire and ease the cork from the bottle. Champagne bubbles out and Ellen quickly grabs the glasses from the table. 'Guess where I'm taking you tonight?' I say as I fill them.

'McDonald's?' she teases.

'The Hideout.'

She looks at me in delight. 'Really?'

'Yes. Harry booked it as a thank you.'

Later, while she's upstairs getting ready, I go out to my office in the garden, sit down at my desk and slide open the top right-hand drawer. It's a large antique walnut desk and the drawer is so deep I have to reach a long way in to find

the wooden pencil box, hidden at the back. I take out the little painted doll nestling there. It looks identical to the one that Ellen found outside the house and as my fingers close around its smooth, varnished body I feel the same uncomfortable tug I always do, a mixture of longing and regret, of desolation and infinite sadness. And gratitude, because without this little wooden doll, I might have been tried for Layla's murder.

It had belonged to her. It was the smallest one from her set of Russian dolls, the one she'd had as a child, and when Ellen's had gone missing, Layla had carried this one around with her for fear that Ellen would take it and claim it as hers. She called it her talisman, and in times of stress she would hold it between her thumb and index finger and gently rub the smooth surface. She had been doing exactly that on our journey from Megève, huddled against the car door, and the next morning, when the police returned to the picnic area, they'd found it lying on the ground next to where I'd parked the car, by the rubbish bin. They also found scuff marks, which – as my lawyer pointed out – suggested she'd been dragged from the car and had dropped the doll on purpose, as some kind of clue. As there was insufficient evidence to prove this either way, I was finally allowed to leave France, and to keep the Russian doll.

I put it back in its hiding place and go and find Ellen. But later, when we're lying in bed, our hunger sated by the exquisite dinner we had at The Hideout, our bodies

knotted together, I silently curse the little Russian doll she found earlier. It's another reminder that no matter how many years go by, we will never be completely free of Layla.

Barely a month goes by when we don't hear her name – someone called out to in the street, a character in a film or book, a newly opened restaurant, a cocktail, a hotel. At least we don't have to contend with supposed sightings of Layla any more – Thomas' yesterday was the first in years. There'd been hundreds after she first disappeared; it seemed that anyone who had red hair was put forward as a possible candidate.

I look down at Ellen, snuggled in the crook of my arm, and wonder if she's thinking of Layla too. But the steady rise and fall of her chest against me tells me she's already asleep and I'm glad I didn't tell her about Tony's phone call. Everything – all this – would be much easier if Ellen and I had fallen in love with other people instead of each other. It shouldn't matter that Ellen is Layla's sister, not when twelve years have passed since Layla disappeared.

But, of course, it does.