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SAL

Written by Mick Kitson

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SAL

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Chapter One

Snares

Peppa said 'Cold' and then she went quiet for a bit. And then she said 'Cold Sal. I'm cold.' Her voice was low and quiet and whispery. Not like normal. I started to worry she had hypothermia. I saw a thing about how it makes you go all slow and quiet. So I felt down and her back was warm and her belly was warm. Then she went 'Stop lezzin us – ya paedo.' And then I knew she didn't have hypothermia.

But it was cold. The coldest night since we came here. I knew the wind had turned to the north from my compass and the shelter faced southeast because west is the prevailing wind here. So the wind was coming in the top where we'd laid on the spruce branches. Peppa didn't have a hat. I was going to make her one once we'd snared rabbits. But I hadn't put the snares out yet. I pulled off my hat and pushed it down onto her head.

'Is that better?' I whispered in her little ear. But she'd gone back to sleep. I was awake now and I started worrying for a bit. I used to time worrying by the clock on my phone. I did ten minutes most mornings, but it had gone up in the past few weeks because there was a lot to work out and

plan before we ran. I was going to guess the time. I could feel it was nearly dawn. There was no light but I could feel something. I can nearly always tell what time it is. I don't know how but it used to be important to know it. Because for instance Maw and Robert used to come back at just after 11.00, and after I'd fitted the lock on Peppa's door I used to make sure it was locked and she was inside asleep just before they got back.

They didn't even know I put the lock on it. Didn't know I'd nicked a mini drill-driver and two chisels from B&Q. I snipped the alarm tags off with a nail clipper. I bought a sash lock in the big ASDA and watched five YouTube videos before I fitted it. They didn't even notice the wee holes I drilled for the key, the paint on the doors in our flat was all scuffed and knocked anyway. Then Peppa had the key. Robert couldn't get in if he tried. He never tried. If I'd put a lock on my door Robert would have kicked it in and woken Peppa. He wouldn't have woken Maw because when she was drunk and she passed out you couldn't wake her.

And he hadn't started going in Peppa's room then but I knew he would soon because he said he would and Peppa was ten and that was when he started on me.

So I thought I'd have ten minutes worrying. I knew it would start getting light soon. In the SAS Survival Handbook it says you should make a body-length fire along a lean-to shelter and then build a barrier behind it from sticks to reflect the heat. I hadn't done that yet because I wasn't sure this was where we were staying just then. But it was alright. It was a little flat raised bit above the burn and there were big birches all around. We'd tied the tarp up to two of them to make the shelter. The tarp was camouflage brown and beige and bits of yellowy white like for deserts. But it worked

because I ran back away from it into the wood and looked down between the trees and you couldn't see it.

Except you knew someone was there because I could hear Peppa yelling 'Sal . . . come and get a look at this!' It was a toad and she stroked it and I said 'It's poison on its back to stop predators eating it.'

And she said 'I'm not going to eat it Sal. Can you eat it? I don't want to eat it. I'm gonna build it a house.' And then she made a little house out of flat stones and pebbles and put the toad in it. She said it was called Connor after a boy she liked at school.

I worried about fire and people seeing it, not so much in the day but at night. If your wood's dry there isn't a lot of smoke from a small pyramid fire, it's just smoky if the wood is wet or too new. And also the wind blows it away. And also we were in the Last Great Wilderness in the UK and we were exactly eight miles from the nearest human habitation and roughly four miles from a forestry track and five miles from a road. I chose this place very carefully using an Ordnance Survey map I nicked from the library where they have all the Ordnance Survey maps of the British Isles. We were exactly half a mile into the forest behind a ridge that runs up towards the top where it is just under 3,000 feet. In fact another twenty-eight feet and it would be a Munro and there would be all climbers and wankers in cagoules going up it.

There are no trees at the top but according to the map there is a stone circle. The hill is called something in Gaelic and when I asked Mrs Kerr she said it was pronounced Magna Bra. Magna Bra. I told Peppa and she wanted to go there because I told her Magna means big in Latin and she was delighted and skipped about going 'Big Bra . . . big bra'. She is a dirty-minded wee bastard and she wants to watch her swearing.

But at night you could see the fire glow from a way off. Not on the tarp side but on the other side. So I thought if I build the barrier they talk about in the handbook it would block the light at night from the east. I don't know what way they'd come if they came out here and looked for us but they might come from the east. The motorway is east of us and they'd use that if they came out here. But I don't see how they can or how they'll know we are here.

I decided after my worry to make the barrier today and then set snares. We had got enough food for another two days I thought. Or three if I don't eat and Peppa does. So we needed to start trapping and hunting. I had Robert's airgun. It was short and you pump it up. It shot .22 pellets and I got two tins of them. I wouldn't let Peppa use it yet in case she shot herself or me by accident. But I am a good shot. I practised in the hall of the flat and I worked out the way to adjust the sight for the parabellum at longer ranges. I watched a YouTube video about it too, three days before we left. On seven pumps it can go through a bit of 9mm plywood. I brought it there in a zip-up hockey stick case I found in the school changing rooms.

It was getting light. In October here, that means it was just about 7.20 a.m. Peppa slept on in the bag and I hauled myself out so as not to wake her. The leaves that had fallen were light yellow and they shone as the daylight came through the trees. The birch trees shone too. Birch is white and it would be good for the barrier because white reflects light and heat. I blew the embers back and fed in some little sticks with burny ends. I'd put a stack to dry on a flat stone overnight too, and once it took I built a pyramid over it. It hissed and smoked and I got the steel frame and put it over and then put the little kettle on it to boil. We had teabags and UHT milk and sugar in tubes from McDonald's. Loads of them.

The sun was up now and it was bright through the trees and steam was lifting off the wood floor in little white wisps. There were wee sparkles of frost on the leaf edges and twigs and the wind had dropped so the smoke went straight up between the trees. It was still, just the wissshh sound of the fire. Then I could hear birds and squawks of crows. Nothing else. No rumble of a road or traffic or wheels. No banging or bleeping. No telly. Nobody shouting.

I had four snares made from twisted wire with little gold rings where the wire made a noose and green cord to a wooden peg with a notch in it. You set them in runs where rabbits went and left them overnight. I had seen it done on YouTube on a survival site. It looked easy and the rabbit was dead when you went back. But I wouldn't mind killing one. I had never killed one. Or anything apart from Robert.

It said you should bury them for a few hours to get human smell off them, so I scraped back the leaves and got them out of Peppa's backpack and covered them up. I bought them in a fishing tackle shop in town with the money I got from one of Robert's cards. Robert always had cards when he came back from wherever he went off to. I used to nick them when he was asleep drunk.

The thing about Maw and Robert was they never noticed anything. If something changed or moved they didn't even know. I knew where everything was in my room and the rest of the flat. I knew how many cups we had, how many spoons. I knew how much milk there was and how much washing-up liquid. I noted it all the time. I'd done it from a baby. I noticed what things were and where they were and I noticed when they moved or changed or went. Maw and Robert didn't see anything.

Maw was worst. Even her cans – she never knew how many she had left. I did. I used to hide them and she'd not

even notice there were only two instead of three in the fridge. Sometimes if she just had two she was alright. I noticed that years before so I'd hide a couple and just leave her two and when she came round and wanted one I'd say you've only got two left. And she'd go, I thought I had a four-pack, and I'd go, you must've drunk them. And she'd say aye. When Peppa started nicking her fags she didn't notice either.

Robert noticed nothing either, because he was mostly drunk or on weed or both, and even though he stared really hard and long at things he never noticed if something was missing or if I'd moved something or bought something. Robert's eyes were always half closed like he was squinting and they were always red from weed and bevvy. The little bit of the white you could see was yellow.

The tarp and the hunting knife and the kettle frame and even Peppa's walking trainers all came in the post, all got on Amazon and all with the nicked cards Robert brought back with him and kept in the bedside drawer. I was careful when I was nicking the cards or lifting his wallet. Once he was out of it, lying on the sofa, and I tried to pull it out of his back pocket and he half woke up and grabbed me and went 'I'll cut your fucking hands aff' and then he flopped back asleep and I got it then.

The only thing he did keep his eye on was me. 'Alright ma darlin'?' he used to say. He once said I was his daughter to a guy in the chippy. I wanted to say 'Ah'm fuckin not' but he was giving it the big man and had his arm around my shoulders and going 'This is ma lassie Sal.' If I'd said anything he'd make it worse later so I just shut up and stared at the guy.

Peppa woke up and said 'Is Connor still there Sal?' And I went over and lifted the stone on his house. And he was.

It was nice and damp under there for him in the leaves and muck. Peppa said 'Brilliant!' and jumped out of the sleeping bag and started putting on her shoes. They were £84 on Amazon and they've got Vibram soles which are the best for walking and climbing.

Peppa can run faster than anyone in the world I think. She has got really long legs and she looks like wind running along. She was faster than any boy at school, even boys older than her. In fact she does everything fast. She is either still like a stone or going really fast. She eats fast and she talks fast.

And Peppa will eat anything, and she is ALWAYS hungry. When we were wee, we were hungry a lot because Maw was out or drunk or we had no money and Peppa used to go to other flats round the close and ask for food. She learned to eat anything, not like most kids who hate salad and only want chips.

But Peppa used to beg chips at the chippy and ask kids at school for food. And teachers. And in the end I told her to stop and I had to get her food because if they told, the social would come round and take us. The social took kids all the time and they always split them up. So I didn't say anything to anyone and Maw warned us we'd get took and split up. So I nicked food for her a lot, and I got her bags of salad and carrots and once some beetroot in a plastic bag that was cooked and she loved it, and she stopped begging food and nobody told the social on us.

And when Robert started on me he said if I told, even if I told Maw, we'd get took and split up. He said Peppa would get fostered and adopted by Africans because she is half an African and I'd get adopted by old people and we wouldn't be together. And that is never going to happen.

So it is good for surviving if you will eat anything like

Peppa, but not if you are hungry all the time like her. And she said 'Ah'm starving Sal' and I gave her some Dundee cake and four belVita biscuits and I said 'We're gonna snare rabbits' and she said 'To eat?' and I said 'Aye', and she said 'Good.'

She had a look at Connor under the stones and picked him up and he sat in her hand and she talked to him. She told him her name and my name and where we came from and why we were in the woods. Then she put him back in his house and got her Helly Hansen on.

Rabbits don't hibernate and there are loads in the Galloway forest and they mostly live in warrens at the foot of hills and slopes where there is scrubby ground cover and grass. Grass is the thing they eat most and not carrots or lettuce like Peter Rabbit on the telly. It was autumn and most sites said they would be active and you had to look for runs in the grass to set the snares. I had never set a snare or gutted a rabbit or skinned one but I had seen it done loads of times on YouTube.

I got the snares out from the leaves and mud and put them in the pocket of my coat. I had my knife in a sheath on my belt.

We walked down from our shelter along the burn and climbed over it on rocks and then up a slope where the trees were thinner and there was grass and ferns. Peppa ran. The ferns were turning brown but they still stuck up high and she was lost in them and then I'd see her red hair shoot by in a gap. I watched the ground looking for runs. There were paths there made by animals and I saw prints of deer in the mud and other prints I needed to check later in the SAS Survival Handbook. We walked up until it came level and then beyond was another long slope down towards the loch right at the bottom. Peppa tore down the slope and I

wanted to stop her from frightening anything but when she was running like that you couldn't stop her. I had seen her tear away like that before, leaping over logs and fern stumps, running and swift and smooth like she was on wheels. Then she stopped dead halfway down and shouted 'Sal!'

I came down towards her where the trees had thinned out, mostly old birch and oak, some with big branches thicker than me that hung down to the grass. She was by a big grey rock that poked up out of the grass. And she was pointing down in front of it. 'Look' she said.

It was rabbit holes, three of them with droppings all around. And when I looked I saw more, some of them were further back up towards an oak tree and the holes were covered by fringes of grass. There were nine of them in total, some were disused with no droppings and some had fresh dark mud in piles outside where they had been digging out. I could see runs going away from the holes, little lighter-coloured dents running along in the grass. They mostly went down the slope towards the loch. The further you got down the greener and thicker the grass got and less trees and ferns.

'It's a warren' I said.

'Set the snares then' said Peppa.

'You can't set snares by the warren, they'll go round them. Bear Grylls said you have to walk away from the warren along a run and set the snares away.'

'I saw that one Sal and he didn't even get one! He had to buy a rabbit to cook. Wanker' she said.

She was right but he still knows what he is on about because he was in the SAS and he has survived everywhere and he jumps into bogs and frozen lakes even if he doesn't need to. But he is a wanker but that is probably because he is posh and English. Most of the survival people on telly are

posh and English like Ray Mears and Ed Stafford and most posh English people are wankers. But I had got a Bear Grylls knife off Amazon and it was brilliant, the same one he used, with a full tang.

'Don't call Bear a wanker Peppa' I said.

And she went 'Wanker' again and ran off down the slope.

I picked a run and followed it through more brown bracken, I kept looking back to the rock and approximately fifty metres down I came to a bit where there was just grass and it was that velvety thick bladed grass that is light green and the run went straight through the middle of it. Then I heard Peppa shout 'Rabbit!' and she was running back up to me chasing one. It smashed up through the ferns and into the clearing where I was with Peppa almost on it, but it turned sharp when it saw me. Peppa had the face on she always has when she runs, like she is biting her bottom lip and pushing her tongue out under her lip. When the rabbit swerved she tried to change direction and she was going so fast she toppled and rolled into the bracken and it cracked and hissed. 'Bastard' she said.

I said 'Run up to that tree and get some twigs' and she took off towards the oak. You need twigs to hold the snare open on the run and you have to set it a hand's width above the ground so it is in line with the rabbit's head. I got the first snare out and rubbed a bit of mud on it to mask the human smell but rabbits don't have a really keen sense of smell like rats or moles, they have good hearing and they communicate by thumping the ground to warn each other. They also have good eyesight so I wrapped long strands of grass around the shiny brass to make it more camouflaged.

Peppa ran back down with the twigs and I pushed them into the ground and set the snare open across the width of the run and then hammered in the peg with the butt of my

knife. Peppa said 'Will that get one?' and I said 'Aye it will. We'll have to leave it overnight, but it will get one.'

And I believed it would because if you believe something will happen then it does, so you have to be careful about what you believe will happen. I believed that I would stop Robert and make Maw safe for nearly a year and then I did.

We set three more snares, one on the run we'd followed further down and then two more on another run that went parallel to the loch at the bottom. Then we went out wide of the area where I thought the rabbits were so we didn't scare them back down the slope to the loch.

Peppa said 'Let's go down to the loch' and she started running down through the ferns and trees towards the water. I tried to estimate how far I was from the loch in metres. I estimated it was seventy metres, and I knew my stride was ninety centimetres because I had measured it. So I worked out that if I took seventy-seven strides going straight down it was more or less seventy metres. (You divide 7,000 centimetres by 90 and that is approximately 77.7.) This is one of the things I learned to do, estimate distance, and I am good at maths and I know times tables and how to divide in my mind. So if I need to I can work out how far away something is or how long it will take to get to me and that is important for survival. I did seventy-seven strides straight down and got to the lochside and the little beach of flat stones and the water was about fifty centimetres from where I stopped so that wasn't bad.

The loch was long and turned a corner so from the beach you couldn't see the end like you could up on the slope. Trees came all the way down to the water all around except on the bit we were. There was a little beach and because of the angle of the slope behind me I estimated the

depth to be about a metre and a half deep three metres out, but you can't really tell for sure because there could be holes or gullies in the rock under the water which would make it deeper. It was flat calm and still. The north breeze had dropped from the morning and the water was like a sheet of glass or highly polished steel. You could see it was yellowy brown in colour but clear quite far out because there had been no substantial rain in this area for close to three weeks. I had checked every day before we came.

Peppa was balancing about three metres out on a rock she had jumped to from some little stepping stones that went out from the beach.

'Don't get your trainers wet Peppa' I said.

'Alright. Hey Sal I can see fish here . . . wee stripey ones.'

She *could* actually get her trainers wet because they were made of Gore-Tex which is both waterproof and breathable but if water got in over the top we'd have to dry them out on the fire or they would be dangerous to wear for too long and cause athlete's foot and other fungal infections. We had to be careful about infections, I had told her this.

Even wee cuts and grazes, because I only had four Amoxicillin tablets which I found in the bathroom cabinet. In my first aid kit I had plasters, iodine, cotton wool, two bandages, safety pins, scissors, Savlon cream and some anti-depressants called Citalopram 30. I thought they might come in handy if Peppa got depressed like Maw. They never seemed to do Maw any good but that might be because she was drunk so much they probably didn't work. Like, you can't mix antibiotics with alcohol because the alcohol stops the antibiotics from killing bacteria which cause infections. But we didn't have any alcohol and we weren't going to get any, even for medicinal purposes.

I also had some paracetamol and ibuprofen and codeine, which is the best painkiller available without a prescription, in case we got hurt or got a sprain or a twisted ankle or I got my period and got period pain. We did periods in P6 and I am thirteen which is the age they said you mostly started getting them. I hadn't got it yet but planning for potential problems is an important part of survival. Also we could use sphagnum moss, which was everywhere, as an antiseptic on wounds like they did in the First World War.

The wee fish were perch. The loch is called something in Gaelic like Dubna Da and it contains pike, perch, brown trout and eels. We were going to fish for all of these with the rod and reel I nicked off Robert. He most likely nicked it anyway.

It was a ten-foot telescopic spinning rod with a screw reel seat and the reel was a fixed spool Shimano loaded with 10lb line. I had other fishing stuff too. Size 10 and 12 hooks, BB split shot, and some small trout spinners and lures in a plastic pack I nicked from the tackle shop. I also had two pike plugs and three wire traces, which you need for pike to stop them biting through the line.

Robert sometimes went down to the wall in the summer to spin for mackerel and he once brought three back and Maw shrieked and he didn't know how to gut them or cook them and he just stood there waving them about with Maw shrieking and going 'Fuck off with them Robert'.

So I watched a YouTube and then gutted and baked them with salt and me and Peppa ate them while Maw and Robert were at the Fishermen's. And they were lovely and tasted sweet.

The sun was fully up now and it was warm on us and Peppa skipped across the stones to the beach and unzipped her Helly Hansen and chucked it down on the rocks and

then jumped up onto the grass and started pulling at it and overturning wee rocks and stones.

She is nearly as tall as me and she is only ten and her skin is the colour of dark honey and in the sun it looks gold. Her hair is frizzy and afro and ginger and she has freckles. I think she will be very, very beautiful when she is a woman. Her teeth are very white and she loves cleaning them and biting things with them. She bit Robert's hand once when he was hitting Maw and he backhanded her across the room and called her a wee cunt and I jumped on her to stop him hitting her again and he kicked me in the back twice and I had a bruise that went purple then yellow and I was off school again.

I was off school a lot and I worried they'd send the plunkieman to get me to go but they never. Our flat was on the second floor of Linlithgow House. There are three blocks all named after royal palaces on a hill above town and you can see the wall and the sea from the balcony. The other blocks round the court are Falkland and Scone. The entryphone lock was knackered in ours and you just shoved the bottom door with your shoulder. The hall was light blue and smelled of piss and junkies sometimes slept under the first set of concrete stairs going up.

Peppa stopped crying the same time as I did when she was about eight and we neither of us have cried since then. If she is angry she looks down and bites her bottom lip like she does when she is running and if she is sad I make a cradle with my arms and rock her.

She shouted 'Sal . . . worm!' and held up a lobworm she'd found. Lobworms are very good bait for perch and brown trout and are unusual in acid soils like the area we were surviving in. Peppa skipped back across the rocks and onto the big stone out in the loch and held the worm over

the water. She called across to me 'See if he'll take it . . .' and she dangled the end of it into the water from her fingertips. I was just going to say there was no point without a hook when there was a swirl in the water and splash under the worm and Peppa shouted 'Bastard!' and looked over at me with her eyes wide and her mouth open. 'He took it! He was a big one Sal. Get another worm!'

For the first time since we came here I missed my phone. I wish I could've filmed her squatting in the sun on that rock in the flat glass water and beaming and looking happy. I decided to remember it there and then in my mind in case it didn't happen again. The sun was in her face and she called across 'Nice here innit?'

And I said 'Aye' and jumped up onto the grass and started pulling tussocks up to find a worm. It took ages and the one I found under a rock was flat and reddish and I don't know what species it was. I jumped out on the wee stones and jumped up next to her on the rock and now she was an expert and she took the worm and went on in a sing-song voice '. . . you just dangle it like this and let the wee fishy see his tail in the water . . .'

I said 'Was he spotty or stripey?'

She said 'Spotty. Gold and big red spots. What's that?'

'Brown trout' I said.

'Can ye eat it?'

'Aye. We can catch them with spinners too.'

'We should've brought the rod. Why does he eat spinners?'

'He doesn't eat them, he thinks they are prey.'

'But they're metal.'

'Aye, but they flash and look like wee fish when you spin them.'

She turned her head and stared at me. 'You know everything' she said.

'Aye, I do' I said.

But the big trout didn't come back so we dropped the worm in down the side of the rock and watched a wee Perch dart out and take it. This would be a good place for fishing and we would come back tomorrow with the rod.

We started back up the slope with the sun high above us. Peppa walked until we came up to the clearing in the bracken where the grass was greenest and thick and we'd set a snare. Two rabbits sprang out of the grass in front of us and tore off up towards the warren and Peppa took off after them. I watched her springing along through the fern with the rabbits, two brown blurs in front of her and their white arses flashing.

Then Peppa stopped dead and shouted back to me there was a rabbit in a snare we set. She went 'Sal. Sal lookit!' and I sprinted up into the clearing.

It was a big long one caught perfect round the throat and bucking and jerking against the cord and the peg. Peppa said 'I chased him in, I saw him go in it. There's blood!'

A dark ring of blood was emerging from the throat where the snare wire was clenched tight like a ball, the blood started spraying and flicking in drops on me as the rabbit bucked and I knelt down next to it. I have never killed anything apart from Robert but I was not bothered about it and this was going to be our first kill surviving and I'd seen it done loads of times on telly and YouTube. I grasped the rabbit round the throat and lifted it tugging the snare peg up. It was letting out a high scream like air hissing. I squeezed the neck and the snare ball and felt warm blood flood out onto my fingers. Then I got its back legs that were kicking and caught them in my other hand and pulled as hard as I could and felt a crack under my fingers round the throat and the rabbit hissed and went stiff and then flopped.

Peppa said 'Fuck me.'

And I said 'Don't swear.' I dropped the rabbit down on the grass and it jerked once when it hit the ground and then went still. It was a big buck. Plenty of meat and a great first snare for us. I felt brilliant.

Peppa stroked its fur. She said 'He's warm. Is it a boy or a girl?'

'Buck or a doe' I said.

'Aye. Buck or doe?'

'A buck. And he's gonna be our tea.'

'I chased him in didn't I not?'

'You did aye. You herded him like the Sioux with buffalo.'

'Did I? Tell me about them.'

'I'll tell you stuff later. Tonight when we go to bed.'

She said 'Okay.'

We walked back up the slope towards the thicker woods and the burn and I held the rabbit by his legs and he was heavy. Then I remembered you've got to de-pee them, so I held him by his head and ran my hand down his side and over his stomach and the pee came out from between his legs in a dribble.