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# DON'T YOU CRY

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# 4

## Lucas

Rain dashes into his eyes and mingles with tears and blood, stinging his cheeks and dripping off his chin. The burden he carries seems to be getting heavier by the minute. Sometimes, though, he imagines there isn't anything there at all and his chest swells with panic. This doesn't make any sense. But he stops and checks anyway, peering awkwardly inside the neck of the coat that's sucking in water like a sponge and making him move twice as slowly as usual.

Reaching a brightly lit mini roundabout he stops, disorientated, and has a moment of confusion about which way to go. Right? No, left. It's left here. He's sure of it.

He hurries on but this place is not designed for pedestrians. He is forced to huddle at the side of the slip road, his stomach swooping as a car blares an angry horn, and then he reaches the narrow grass verge. Lucas stumbles along next to the main road, cars roaring past, so close he could stretch out his fingers and lose an arm.

But he welcomes the terror, the biting cold and the pains in his face and ribs. These sensations are too powerful to allow contemplation to creep in. He almost wants to keep



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moving forever but the tiredness is getting to him now. For a second he pictures himself taking two steps to the right and stopping it all, but he knows he can't do it. And it's not just about him, is it?

Not far now. But what will happen when he gets there? Lucas stops for a moment, breathing hard.

This whole thing is a terrible idea.

But it's the only one he has right now so he stumbles onwards.



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# 5

## Nina

Sam. It's the only thought in my head as I run from the room, punishment for my earlier, wicked wish.

I wrench open the front door so fast I almost fall over and am too stunned to react when the cold, wet figure pushes past me.

'Sorry, sorry. I need to come in.'

I rummage in my brain but somehow can't locate the necessary words as I take in the bedraggled woman standing there, dripping onto the wooden floor of my hallway.

It's the waitress from earlier. Angel?

She's wearing a thin raincoat over a short turquoise dress made from towelling-like material. Her long pale legs – knees reddened and scuffed looking – disappear into battered grey ankle boots. She's holding a massive leather handbag – the sort that is like a sack with handles at the top – and a bulging rucksack, which she lowers with a grateful little 'Oof' sound.

'Why are you here?' I say. It's the only thing *to* say, I realize.

But Angel is off, stalking down the hallway with long strides. She disappears into the kitchen so fast I almost have to run to catch up.



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When I get to the kitchen, I see she has picked up a damp tea towel and is now rubbing her face and hair vigorously with it. Pausing to give it a smell, she grimaces. This finally switches me from numbness and shock to the correct response – outrage.

'That's a tea towel!' I say. 'Why are you *here?* What do you want?'

Angel regards me; thick, dark eyebrows raised as though this question is wholly unexpected. She throws the towel onto the table and chafes her arms.

'You said you wished you could do something to thank me?' she says. 'After the whole . . .' she makes an almost comical choking gesture, hand at her throat, eyes boggling.

I can only stare back at her. It seems like the sort of thing Sam did when he was in single digits. I find I'm colouring in shame all over again, despite the bizarreness of this situation.

'But I didn't mean . . . *this*!' I manage to squawk. 'I meant . . .' I fumble for words. 'I don't know what I meant. How did you know where I *live*?'

Angel hesitates and I realize.

'Oh.' I'd told her the address myself, earlier, when she ordered the taxi.

Angel moves smoothly to the kettle on the side and starts filling it with water as though this is the most natural thing in the world. My head is still muzzy with wine and sleep. The right, obvious way to handle this is just out of reach.

I must take control of the situation. Right now.

'Look, Angel.' I try to keep my voice steady. 'It's two o'clock in the morning. I don't know you. You can't just walk into my house and start making tea. Do you understand?'

Angel is suddenly very still. Her face is without expression as she looks back at me. But although she isn't moving,



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a strange energy seems to crackle around her. I have the uncomfortable thought that she is somehow *coiled*. Waiting. Belatedly, I experience a real sense of unease.

She points a long, pale forefinger at me, its nail bitten. When she speaks again, her voice is low and quiet.

'I saved your life. You *said so*. You *said* you wished you could thank me.'

'Yes, but . . .' I manage a short bark of laughter at the absurdity of this logic. 'I didn't expect you to turn up at my house in the middle of the night!'

'I know. But . . . *fuck it*.' Her shoulders round.

My maternal instincts must kick in because I suddenly feel aware of how pathetic she looks. She is shivering all over, soaked from the rain I can hear flinging itself at the windows.

'Look,' I say, 'are you in trouble? Should I call the police?'

'No,' she says, eyes widening. 'Not the police. Please.' She swallows. 'I just need help.'

I let out a long, slow breath as I remember the bracelet of bruises I thought I saw earlier. Her arms are now covered by the tattered sleeves of the raincoat, sleeves scrunched over her hands like makeshift gloves. What if Angel is running away from someone who has been hitting her? I wouldn't be able to forgive myself if I chucked her out into the night and then something bad happened.

'OK,' I say, resignedly. 'Wait here a minute and let me get you some dry things. Help yourself to tea, as you already . . . well, help yourself.'

I hurry out of the room but, in the hallway, I grab my mobile from my handbag under the hall table, and stuff my purse at the back of the drawer in the table. There's something about her that feels . . . off. Not least the way she has come barging into my house like we are old friends. But didn't she save my life? Don't I owe her something if she is in trouble?



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Ian would be furious. He would have kicked Angel straight out the front door again. But Ian isn't here, is he? And there's no Sam at any potential risk. It's just me. I used to be a kind person, who gave money to homeless people before Ian got into my head with his talk of how I was 'only helping them to an early grave'. I'm always saying I ought to do some voluntary work now I have all these weekends with hours tumbleweeding through them. This can be a start. I will let this obviously vulnerable young woman get dry, give her some tea and send her on her way. It's the least I can do after what happened earlier, however strange the circumstances.

When I come back into the kitchen, Angel is sitting at the table.

There's a coffee cup from earlier there, plus some newspapers. Sam's school bag, not yet stowed away since the end of term, takes up the chair at the end. Angel stares down at her phone, a deep groove between her eyebrows that makes her look older. In the café, I thought she was early twenties but now I think maybe she is older, twenty-six or twenty-seven.

I hand her a bath towel and some dry clothes, warm from the airing cupboard. It was hard to decide what to give her, especially in a hurry. But after a quick search through piles of clothes that would never fit, I opted for a soft stretchy dress that's a bit tight on me, one of my hoodies and some thick woollen socks. Angel accepts the pile of clothes with a short nod of thanks.

'I'm so much shorter and fatter than you,' I say. 'But I hope this will do?'

Angel stares down at the clothes for a moment and then begins to undress on the spot, shucking off the dress in one fluid movement. I look away quickly, but can't help



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noticing that she wears no bra. Her small breasts have large, chocolate-brown nipples that are stark against her pale ribcage. She pulls on the dress, which is more like a baggy top on her long frame, then the hoodie. Removing thin, bony feet from the boots, she hops on one foot at a time as she puts on the socks.

I can only wait politely, not knowing where I should place my gaze.

'Thanks,' says Angel and dumps her wet things on the kitchen table. She pulls her hair from the collar of the hoodie and rubs it with the towel. 'Do you have a dryer you can stick those in?'

'Um, no. Sorry, I don't.' I fold my arms in an attempt to appear more assertive but evidently this doesn't work. I'm aware that I'm doing that *thing* – that Carmen picks me up on so often. Saying sorry for something that doesn't require an apology.

'Hang them up for me then,' says Angel. 'Just to get the worst of the wet out.'

I hesitate. How long is she thinking of staying?

I somehow find myself scooping up the clothes anyway and taking them to the short corridor that runs along the side of the house. We use it as a cloakroom and utility room in one and it is filled with boots and trainers, raincoats and household stuff. I hang up her stuff on a clothes horse and hurry back into the kitchen.

Angel is sitting again, now furiously tapping at her phone screen, face scrunched in concentration.

'Are you telling someone you're here?' I ask. 'Is someone coming to collect you?'

Angel holds up a hand to silence me and I now feel a thrill of anger pulse through me. I'm suddenly very tired. This is all too strange. I just want this young woman out of my house now. There is something decidedly off about



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her, even if she is running away from someone bad. The feeling of unease creeps back. Maybe this was a mistake.

'Look, Angel,' I say. 'I need to know what you want from me. You're going to have to—'

Angel gives a sort of rev of frustration in her throat and looks up, her eyes now dark and intense.

'Shut the fuck up, will you?' she says. 'I can't hear myself think.' She dips her gaze back to her phone.

I buzz with outrage at this. I can almost see sparks.

'Look, just because you helped me in the restaurant earlier, that does *not* mean you have any right to come to my house! I'm sorry, you're going to have to go.' I draw a steadying breath for my next salvo and remove my phone from my back pocket. 'Or I'm going to have to call the police.'

'Oh, for fuck's sake!' The volume of her sudden shout stuns me like a slap to the face.

Giving me a dark look, she bends down and rummages in her rucksack. Thank God. She's going to gather her things and leave.

What happens next is such a shock, my brain can't seem to accept what I am seeing.

Angel is pointing a gun at me.

'I'm going to need you to give me that fucking phone,' she says.



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