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The Angel Collector

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Extract

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Me and Sophie had this song. Well, it was her song but I kind of adopted it too. She'd found it on iTunes or some other download site. An old tune from the 1980s that her mum told her about. The band was called Yargo and the song was all about trying to get to your lover, who was far away. Sophie loved that song. It took a while but it grew on me too and we used to make references to it all the time because it was like our thing. And then she went off and all I had left was that tune. And only in my head because I'd deleted it from my music library when she went. Like an act of revenge maybe. I dunno.

It's called 'Get There' – the song. Sophie's song. And it's swimmin' round in my head right now. Won't go away. I sometimes dream up ways of getting rid of the memory. Like can I cut a hole in my head and get some tweezers and pull it out? Like the way Sophie pulled out my eyebrow hairs when we were in Year 11, pinning me down on her bed and giggling. Calling me a tranny. But I can't forget that song. It won't go away. We made a promise to each other – to always be friends, no matter what happened. I told her that even if she disappeared from the face of the earth, I'd find her. I'd get to her. I just never thought that it would happen.



The rusty padlock hit the ground with a soft thud as the howling wind blew dirt into his eyes. Reflexes closed his eyelids – but too late. Little particles of grit lodged themselves against his corneas, scratching and stinging. He swore out loud and steadied himself, rubbing his eyes. It took a few moments for him to open them again, and when he did they were watering and sore. He swore again.

The cover flap for the lock fell back and he pulled the creaking door open, just enough for him to squeeze through the gap. The vicious smell from inside the outbuilding burned his nostrils as he flicked his torch on. Shining it towards the back wall, he saw her trying to move but restrained by the tape that tied her to the chair. Tied her to him . . .

He edged inside and drew the door shut behind him, bolting it from the inside. The torch threw a long, narrow beam of light and he followed it, towards her. As he approached she wriggled some more, aware of him. He stood for a moment and watched her and he felt thrilled, excited. Ashamed of himself, he set the portable cassette player he was holding down on the filthy floor, biting his bottom lip to stifle the scream he knew was

coming. As he let it pass silently his whole body shook and his eyes tried to turn themselves inside out. He shuddered and let his bottom lip go. Crouching, he turned on the cassette player; music filled cold spaces with warmth. The cold space he was standing in and the cold space in his soul . . .

He walked slowly over to her and knelt in front of the chair, his knees sliding in the human detritus that a body has to cast off. The smell that rose from the floor made him fight back dry heaves and he had to turn his head as the particles in his eyes began to bite again. He closed his eyes and let the music fill his mind and take the bad things away. It took a minute or so, but soon he was calm again; he turned back to her, lifted his hands to her face and pushed the blindfold up onto her forehead. Bright blue eyes looked back at him, full of emotion, sending his mind into a spin. This angel really did love him. She was ready to take her place . . .

When it was over he walked slowly across to the door and stopped for a second to turn back and look at her in the narrow shaft of light. He felt the anger and pain rise in his throat and this time he let himself scream, a deep, guttural sound that let out everything he held inside. He turned and opened the door, wiping his mouth with his forearm. Then he wiped his forearm against his jeans, shuddering when he saw the mixture of saliva and blood that snaked a trail down his leg . . .

One

'You'll find someone else.'

It was one of the last things that Sophie said to me in person. Face to face rather than sent in a text or email. The last time I saw her face before she went off with her friends. She couldn't look at me, didn't see the way I was trying to fight back tears, like a child. Maybe she didn't want to see how much of a knob I was, getting all upset and that. Dunno. She didn't look though. Just carried on speaking.

'Some really cute girl when you're out one night—'

'No.'

'You will – an' we'll get back to the way it was before . . . like family. Before all this complicated stuff started—'

'Is that what I am now?' I spat out, not meaning to sound angry.

'Jit . . .'

This time she did look, right into my eyes. I got all embarrassed, wiped my eyes, looked away. She put her hand on mine. I pulled my hand away.

'I'm *sorry*,' she insisted, but sorry didn't do me no

good. It didn't make things right in my head. And I told her.

'Jit . . . I can't do this if you're gonna be—'

'What?' I shouted. 'A wanker?'

'Don't swear at me,' she warned.

'I'm not swearin' at you,' I replied. 'I'm just . . .'

'Upset. And angry and pissed off – and I'm really sorry but what do you want me to tell you? That I love you like *that* when I don't . . . I can't . . .?'

I stood up, wiped my eyes and looked at her. 'I can't be arsed with this any more,' I told her.

'But we have to sort it out, Jit – before I go—'

'Send me a text,' I said as the waitress who'd brought us our coffees gave me a funny look, like she knew I was being brushed off. Like she felt sorry for me. This thing in my brain started to pound and I glared at her.

'You wanna autograph?' I asked her, instantly feeling like a dickhead.

'*Jit!*' I heard Sophie shout as I ran out of the door and into the crowds in Leicester city centre.

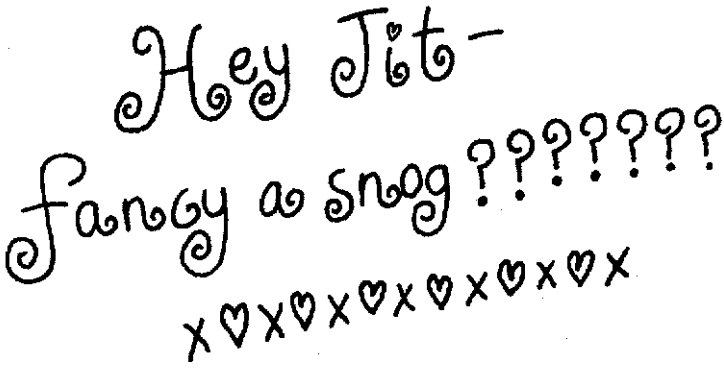
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Year 9

Sophie's note, dated 21 October:



Sophie's email, dated 23 October:

The least you could do is reply, young man. It took me ages to pluck up the courage to write that note. I had to have a stiff brandy to get the nerve and you don't even reply. What's the matter – are you shy? I was only kidding about the snog anyway. I thought we could be friends though – lol!!! I even told my dad about you – he smiled. By the way, in case you were wondering, I got your email address from Sharon Culverwell in 9TM. She really fancies you. Can't see why though. Your legs are too skinny. Check out the link below for a really funny joke . . .

Two

Sophie's mum, Imogen, answered the door. Her hair had turned grey overnight; back in the previous July, when she first found out that Sophie had vanished. It was eight months on from that night and now her hair was lank and greasy and clumps of it had fallen out.

'Jit? Let me put my hat on,' she said, looking embarrassed.

I stood where I was in the rain, waiting to be asked in.

'What are you doing?' asked Imogen, adjusting the black cap.

'Er . . . you didn't say to come in, Mrs Davis.'

She gave me a funny look. 'Since when did that matter? And why are you calling me Mrs Davis?'

The truth was I wasn't sure whether I was doing the right thing. So I didn't feel ready to step over the threshold and tell her what was on my mind. She was going to do one of two things. Tell me that I was crazy and to get out. Or tell me to call the police. And I wasn't about to waste my time with the second one.

Not after eight months of nothing but empty promises and failed investigations.

'Well . . . ?' she asked, looking impatient.

I stepped into the hallway, let her close the heavy wooden door and followed her into the huge kitchen. She sat down at the round table and I stood leaning against a run of cupboards, just like I always did.

'I was marking a load of essays,' she told me.

'I'm sorry – I can come back another time . . .'

Sophie's mum smiled at me. It was a genuine smile but it was tired and worn and broken too. 'Sit down, you daft sod . . .'

I walked over to the table and took a chair, looking down at a copy of the *Independent* that was open at page seven. There was a story about a missing teenager called Kylie Simmons and someone had ringed parts of the text in black ink.

'Stephen did that,' Imogen said quietly.

'What?'

She nodded at the story about the missing girl.

'Oh . . .' I replied, my thoughts immediately turning to Sophie. I wondered if that's what had made her dad, Stephen, notice the story about Kylie Simmons. It must have done, I told myself.

'He's upstairs,' continued Imogen.

I nodded, looking around the room. The light coming in through the window was tinged with pink. Outside the clouds had darkened and the plants appeared to glow. Something seemed to be leeching the light from the sky. I looked across the table to an alcove

that was inset with three thick wooden shelves. The middle one had a few photo frames on it and my gaze stuck on the one furthest to the left. It showed Sophie, with her mum and dad. They were standing in front of a marine centre in Florida, drenched in water and sun-tans, laughing and holding each other. In the next frame along was a picture of Sophie arm in arm with her best friend, Jenna, taken in a city centre bar. To the left of the picture was a hand holding a fag and a San Miguel. It was my left hand.

'Have you seen much of Jenna?' I asked, not knowing what else to say and prompted by the photo.

Imogen nodded. 'She was round here the other day – said that she'd seen you at some club. With a girl . . .'

I looked at her and felt a tear well up. I looked away quickly.

'So . . . who's the lucky lady?' asked Imogen, doing her best to sound happy.

'No one,' I said. 'Just a girl, that's all . . .'

She gave me another strange look and then asked me if I'd eaten. I shook my head, hoping that she wouldn't lecture me. Knowing that she would.

'But you need to eat properly,' she told me. 'You're in Year Twelve now – all that hard work uses up energy.'

'It *would* be hard if I found it difficult,' I told her.

'It can't *all* be easy, surely,' she said, getting up and checking on a pot that was sitting on the cooker.

'Mostly,' I told her.

'*Mostly?*'

I nodded. 'What you havin' for dinner?' I asked, changing the subject.

'Goulash.'

I smiled. Sophie's mum stirred the stew and then came over and sat down again. She put her hand on mine and sighed.

'It's not getting any easier, is it,' she said, not really asking a question.

'No . . . but there's something I have to talk to you about . . .'

'What?'

I shook my head. 'When Stephen comes downstairs,' I said.

She picked up the newspaper, looked at the story about the missing teenager for a moment and then folded it shut.

'So many stories,' she said absent-mindedly, before scratching at her scalp underneath her hat.

Year 9

24 October

Jit's email, 17.35pm:
that joke ain't funny.

Sophie's email, 17.50pm:
my – what a lengthy and witty riposte. you've sure got a way with words.

Jit's email, 17.58pm:
switch 2 msn – this is shit.

Sophie says:
God – that took ages – well ok – maybe only five mins but you get my point. I had to ask my dad for help. he was well annoyed – hee hee! still here I am – what can I do for you?

Jit says:
you was the one wanted to chat

Sophie says:
it's a good thing you're so cute. what was so bad about the joke?

Jit says:
what joke?

Sophie says:
the one in the email???? are you smoking weed or something?

Jit says:
nah – just tryin to chat to a nex person too

Sophie says:
you really know how to make a girl feel appreciated. see you at school.

Jit says:
only joking!!!!!!!!

Soph01 is offline.

Three

Sophie's dad walked into the kitchen and sat down, smiling at me. He was wearing a pair of black trousers with a white shirt, tucked into them. His hair, as always, was immaculate.

'Hey, Jit.'

'Mr Davis . . .'

He gave me a funny look and asked me the same thing as his wife had at the door. 'Since when did you start calling me—?'

'Dunno,' I replied, cutting him off.

Stephen shook his head and picked up the newspaper I'd been looking at earlier. 'There's a story in this – about another . . . er . . . young woman,' he began.

'Jit saw it,' Imogen told him.

'Why have you been ringing things in it?' I asked, turning the mug of coffee I was holding round in my hands.

'I really don't know,' replied Stephen. 'It feels like I'm doing something maybe – like trying to get somewhere . . .'

'I don't understand . . .'

He looked away and then back at me and there

were tears in his eyes. He put the paper back down on the table before he spoke, folding it neatly in half. 'She's out there somewhere and I want to find her – that's what I keep telling myself – and I need to be doing something. I just thought I might find similarities between this girl's disappearance and Sophie's . . .'

I thought about how close Stephen and Sophie had always been. The way he had doted on her, sometimes so much that I'd felt annoyed and jealous. And I realized how wrong I had been – to think that way. Now I just felt bad for him. For both her parents.

'That's just silly,' commented Imogen.

'I know,' agreed Stephen. 'It's just that I . . . I don't know what else to do.'

'The police told us that she may never come back. We have to come to terms with that – we have to.'

'*No!*'

Only the shout hadn't come from Stephen – it had been me. Sophie's parents were both staring at me. I put the mug down and looked away, towards the photo of Sophie and Jenna. 'She is coming back,' I told them.

'Jit . . .' said Imogen.

'She is – that's what I wanted to talk to you about,' I continued.

'Is there something . . .? Do you know something?' demanded Stephen, his face lighting up for a second and his left eye twitching ever so slightly.

I shook my head. 'Just what you already know. The emails and the text messages that I told the police about . . .'

'So what are you on about then?' asked Imogen.

I gulped down air and looked straight at her. 'I'm going to find her,' I told them both. 'I'm gonna contact some of the girls who were with her at that festival and ask them what happened and see if I can—'

'Jit!'

I jumped slightly because I'd never heard Imogen shout like that. She looked at me with real anger and then burst into tears, running out of the room. Stephen let her go, not responding at all.

'I'm sorry, Stephen . . .'

'It's OK – she's still really sensitive and I don't think that'll change until we find out what happened . . . er . . . if she's . . . er . . .'

'Let me try,' I asked him.

'Try?'

'To find her – I know you think the same way as me. She's not dead.'

Stephen flinched at the word 'dead'. He looked at the newspaper and then at the ceiling. His eye twitched again, this time uncontrollably.

'What are you going to do that the police can't?' he said, asking me something that I'd been asking myself over and over again.

'I don't know but I gotta try,' I replied. 'I can't sleep, I can't work – nothing . . . I have to try . . . I . . .'

I wanted to try and explain what was going on in my head: the way Sophie and me had argued before she went. That last text message I'd received, the one that I hadn't told them about. And that song – playing

over in my head – reminding me of the pact we'd made with each other. I wanted to explain it all, but by then I was out in the pounding rain and running up the street, crying and feeling ashamed.