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That Gallagher Girl

Written by Kate Thompson

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KATE THOMPSON

That Gallagher Girl

AVON

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For Malcolm and Clara

I am not a friend, and I am not a servant. I am the Cat who walks by herself, and I wish to come into your house.

After Rudyard Kipling

Prologue

On the morning of her seventeenth birthday, Cat Gallagher learned how to break into a house. It was fourth on the list of ten things she wanted to accomplish before she was twenty-one. The first three things she had already achieved. She had learned how to sail single-handed, how to play a winning hand at poker, and how to paint with a seagull's feather. She had also learned to conquer fear – although that particular lesson wasn't itemised on Cat's list of things to learn, for she had always been fearless. Apart, that is, from her fear of needles.

The house in question was a showcase that had never been lived in. It was the product of a former economy, a ghost house boasting brickwork so symmetrical and a roof so streamlined it appeared incongruous next to the unfinished structures that surrounded it, their foundations mapping what was to have been an exclusive development of half-a-dozen luxury dwellings. Those houses would never be finished now. The showhouse stood alone and resplendent on a building site that was being reclaimed by bindweed, buddleia and feral cats.

Cat and her half-brother Raoul were sitting on a low wall, sharing a bottle of wine. It had a posh French name and a picture of a French château on the label, but Cat hadn't paid

for it. She'd nicked it from her dad's collection of vintage Burgundy, along with a second bottle from his collection of vintage Bordeaux.

'Cheers,' said Raoul, touching his paper cup to hers. 'Happy birthday, Cat.'

'Cheers.'

'I hope you didn't expect a present.'

'Are you mad? You're as broke as I am,' said Cat. 'Anyway, isn't teaching me the art of breaking and entering more valuable than any old giftwrapped crap? Passing on skills is the new birthday present.'

Raoul was ten years older than Cat. He was a student of architecture at Galway University, and had always indulged his little sister. He had been responsible for teaching her to row a boat and fix a bike chain and skip stones, and now he was mentoring her in the art of housebreaking. Their father, Hugo, had never mentored her in anything much, apart from how to tell the difference between a Burgundy and a Bordeaux.

Cat and Raoul both took after their father in looks. It was said that the Gallaghers were descended from shipwrecked survivors of the Armada, and that they had Spanish blood. Both Cat and Raoul were dark-haired and olive-skinned, with patrician noses and cheekbones like razor shells. Today, Cat's vaguely piratical appearance was enhanced by the fact that she sported a bandana, and a small gold hoop in one ear. Her eyes were heavily rimmed with black kohl, but that was her only concession to cosmetics. Cat had never used lipstick in her life, nor had she ever painted her nails or GHD'd her mane of black hair.

'I wonder what Hugo would say if he knew you were teaching me how to break into houses,' Cat remarked as Raoul upended the bottle into their paper cups before sticking it in his backpack.

'Being a champagne socialist, he'd applaud the fact that I'm encouraging you in the redistribution of wealth.'

'I told you, Raoul – I'm not doing this to steal stuff. I just need to know how to get into places.'

'Why, exactly?'

'I have a feeling in my bones that it's going to be useful some time. My bones tell me loads of things, and they're usually right.'

'When you become a fugitive from justice, you mean?'

'When I become a fugitive from our father, more like.'

'You'll let me know, won't you, when you decide to run away? I'll worry if you don't keep in touch.'

'You'll be the only person I'll tell,' she told him, kissing his cheek. 'You'll be the only person who'll worry.'

Cat drained her cup, then got up from the wall and stumbled sideways as her foot clipped the edge of a pothole and the earth crumbled beneath her boot. 'Yikes! Look at the size of that pothole. I wouldn't like to be negotiating this place at night.'

'Better get used to it. Good cat burglars – excuse the pun – need extrasensory night vision.'

'Let me say it again – I ain't in the business of burgling, Raoul.'

'Never say never.' Raoul took Cat's cup and drained his own before stowing them and the bottle in his backpack. 'Let's go recce,' he said.

Together they made their way along the path that led to the front door of the unoccupied house. It was fashioned from solid oak, and had an impenetrable air.

'Open, Sesame!' cried Cat. 'Bring on the breaking-and-entering master class, Raoul.'

Raoul gave the façade of the house the once-over. 'Okay. Your first challenge is to find out if a joint is wired for alarm.

You're safe with a place like this, because the security system has never been activated. You'd be amazed at how few holiday home owners on the west coast bother to set alarms while they're away.'

'Why don't they bother?'

'Too much hassle if they're activated by stormy weather. There are only so many times you can prevail upon your local neighbouring farmer to reset your alarm. A lot of those boxes are dummies, by the way.'

'So which houses are the most likely candidates?'

'Ones that haven't been lived in for a while.'

'How can you tell if they haven't been lived in?'

'Jemmy the mail box and have a look at the postmarks on the envelopes. The dates will tell you. If you find bills it's a bonus, because they're unlikely to have been paid. Unpaid Eircom Phone Watch bills mean that the joint's no longer being monitored.'

'Isn't there a battery backup on those systems?'

'If the bills haven't been paid, the Phone Watch people are under no obligation to let the home owner know that their batteries need replacing.'

Cat moved along the side of the house, and set her palms against a picture window, pressing her face close so that she could peer through. With the sun bouncing off the glass, it proved difficult, but she could make out an expanse of timber floor and walls painted in a bland shade of cappuccino.

'Why are people so careless about protecting their properties, Raoul?'

'It's a sign of the times. A decade ago people were reckless when they bought their second homes. All that money being thrown at them by the banks made them buy into an unsustainable lifestyle, and now they can't sell it on.' Raoul shaded his eyes with a hand, and squinted up at the roof, where a

seagull was eyeing him suspiciously. 'The tax on second homes was a disaster for the property market on the west coast. The owners resent every penny they're obliged to spend on a place they can't afford to maintain, so they just don't bother their arses. They're not going to throw good money after bad – look at the state of this place.' He indicated the garden with an expansive gesture. 'Once upon a time the lawn would have been mowed every month to keep up the showhouse façade. It hasn't been done for a year, by the look of it.'

Cat turned and surveyed the quarter acre of garden. The grass was thigh-high, the flowerbeds thick with weeds. Dandelions were pushing their way up through the golden gravel that covered the path to the front door, and to judge by the wasp activity immediately overhead, a nest was being constructed in the eaves.

'Keep an eye out for unkempt gardens and "For Sale" signs,' Raoul told her. 'The properties that have been on the market for more than a year are the ones you want to target.'

'How can I tell how long they've been on the market?'

'Go to Daft.ie and see how much the price has dropped. The bigger the bargain, the more desperate the seller, and the further down the listing, the more obvious it is that nobody's been interested enough to view. These are generally the babies that have been languishing with no TLC.' Raoul gave her a shrewd look. 'Now, tell me. How do you think you're going to get in here?'

'Not through the front door, that's for sure.'

'Top marks. And not through the front window, neither. Let's have a look around the back.'

They made their way to the rear of the house, where the door to a utility room was located. A look through a small window to the left of the door told Cat that there was access

to the kitchen from there. Pulling a pair of latex gloves from her pocket, she slid them on. 'Do I smash it?' she asked Raoul.

'Tch tch, Cat! How inelegant. Think again.'

'Cut the pane with a glass cutter?'

'No, darling. You'd need suction pads, you could cut yourself, and you don't want to leave samples of your DNA splashed around. Take a closer look.'

Cat ran a finger over the edge of the window. It was beaded with varnished teak, in which plugs of matching hardwood were dotted at regular intervals.

'What's underneath those?' she asked. 'They're camouflaging something, aren't they?'

'You could be right, Kitty Cat,' said Raoul. 'What do you think they might be camouflaging?'

Cat turned and gave him a speculative look. 'Nails?'

'Have a gander.'

Raoul reached into his backpack and handed her a narrow-bladed chisel. Inserting it into the fissure between the plug and the main body of the wood, Cat found purchase and prised out the fragment of teak. Underneath was the slotted crosshead of a screw. Setting to, she methodically removed each knot of wood, then set down the chisel.

'I guess I need a screwdriver now,' she said, pushing an unruly strand of hair behind her ear. 'But a regular one won't do the job. The screws are too close to the glass.'

'That,' said Raoul, 'is why I have one of these.' Reaching into his backpack again, he produced a Z-shaped tool and handed it to Cat.

'A right-angled screwdriver?'

'Go to the top of the class. I'm not going to help you, by the way. You're going to have to learn how to do this on your own.'

'Why did they fit the screws on the outside of the window?' she asked, taking the screwdriver from Raoul and inserting the bit in the crosshead of the first screw. 'It would make a lot more sense to fit them inside.'

'You're inviting serious problems if you fit them on the inside. The rain streams in.'

Cat smiled. 'This is so simple, it's stupid.' She started to unscrew the beading from the glass panel, frowning a little in concentration as she manipulated the bit. Once she got to the final couple of screws, she held the window in place by leaning her shoulder against it. Then she prised away the strip of wood, dropped the screwdriver, and went to lift the glass from its frame.

'Wait,' said Raoul. 'You'll need proper gloves for this. Here.'

Taking care not to let the glass fall, Cat slipped her hands into first the right, then the left glove, and turned back to her task.

'Voilà!' she said, as the double-glazed panel came away. 'Access all areas!'

With great care, she leaned the pane against the exterior wall before setting her palms on the sill and hoisting herself up.

'Wait!' said Raoul. 'Take your boots off. You don't want to leave footprints.'

Cat undid the laces on her boots, pulled them off and dropped them on the muddy ground below the window. Then she twisted around, slid her legs through the empty frame, and eeled herself into the house.

'How easy was that!' she crowed, and her words came back to her, bouncing off the smooth plaster walls of the house that would never be sold, never be lived in. 'Come and have a look, Raoul.'

He followed her through.

Both utility room and kitchen were equipped with state-of-the-art white goods. The kitchen floor was marble, the work surfaces polished granite. The adjacent sitting room boasted a gas fire and a panelled alcove in which to house a plasma screen. Beyond the sitting room, beyond doorways that accessed study, den and conservatory, carpeted stairs led from the light-filled lobby to bedrooms and bathrooms above. Upstairs, the walk-in wardrobe in the master bedroom was nearly as big as Cat's room in Hugo's house.

She wondered what it must be like to live in a house like this. Would you live a life here, or a lifestyle? Would you curl your feet up on a suede upholstered sofa while aiming a remote at your entertainment suite? Would you microwave a ready meal from a top end outlet while uncorking a chilled bottle of Sauvignon Blanc? Would you cuff an infant lovingly when he or she trotted mud onto your marble tiles before reaching for your eco-friendly floor wipes?

Hugo's house was so very different. Hugo's house stood all alone in the middle of a forest, and was like something out of a Grimm's fairytale. It was dark and tumbledown with a cruck frame and exposed beams and a roof that slumped in the middle. Having settled comfortably into its foundations over the course of three hundred years, Hugo's house listed to starboard, and had crooked windows and wonky stairs and worn flagstones. Hugo had refused to compromise the character of his house by introducing twenty-first century fixtures and fittings: his fridge was clad in elm planks, he cooked (when he could be bothered to) on an ancient Rayburn. There was no television, no broadband and no power shower. People described Hugo's house as 'quaint'. But they didn't have to live there. Cat had never been able to call Hugo's house home.

She had returned there when she was fourteen, after her

mother – Hugo's second wife – had died of uterine cancer. Paloma had left Hugo and the Crooked House some years previously, taking Cat with her to Dublin, where they had lived until Paloma's untimely death. Back on the west coast, the teenage Cat, bereaved and isolated, had found it impossible to make friends. Her accent singled her out as being different – that and the fact that her eccentric father was now living with his third wife.

Cat hated school. Hugo had tried the boarding option, but she just kept absconding, and running away to Raoul's bedsit in Galway. When she was expelled from boarding school, she mitched from the local secondary so often that Hugo made a pledge to the authorities to home-school his daughter. But Cat shrugged off his half-hearted attempts. How could you have faith in a teacher who sloshed brandy into his morning coffee and smoked roll-ups while he recited Shakespeare and Seamus Heaney in maudlin tones? The answer was – in Cat's case – you didn't. You gave him the finger, and went off in search of boats to sail, or cloudscapes to paint, or – the very activity she was presently engaged in – houses to break into.

And neither the authorities nor her father seemed to give a shit.

Cat strolled across the pristine oatmeal carpet of the showhome's master bedroom to a big dormer window that looked out over the building site. How many houses like this might there be all over Ireland languishing unfinished, waiting for someone to occupy them? She reckoned she could have her pick of thousands. To the east, inland, ribbon developments straggled Dublin-ward along the sides of the roads. To the south, the landscape was dotted with unoccupied holiday homes. To the west, an expanse of ocean glittered diamantine.

'Look, Raoul!' she said, turning to him as he followed her through the door. 'You can see the cemetery on Inishcaillín from here.'

Inishcaillín was where Cat's mother, Paloma, had been buried. The cemetry was on the summit of a drowned drumlin, and Cat would occasionally take a boat out to spend a day on the island, talking to her mother, undisturbed by anyone since the island was uninhabited now. Paloma's grave was surrounded by dozens of graves of victims of the Irish famine, all with their headstones facing west towards the Atlantic, that they might see in the setting sun the ghosts of all those loved ones who had fled Ireland for America a century and a half ago. It was a desolate place, whipped by raging gales that came in from the ocean, but it had been a place that Paloma had loved like no other, and that was why Cat had insisted she be buried there. When she was a little girl, she and her mother used to take picnics over to the island, and swim in the more sheltered of the easterly coves. They'd explored the abandoned village, too, making up stories about the people who used to live there, and had once even pitched a tent and stayed overnight in one of the roofless cottages.

'Do you miss her still?' asked Raoul.

Cat turned to him. 'Of course I do. But I hate her too, in a way, for leaving me alone with that bastard and his whore.' She saw Raoul raise an eyebrow. 'What's up?' she demanded. 'You know how I feel about them.'

'Cat, Cat, you drama queen,' he chided. 'Sometimes you talk like something out of Shakespeare.'

'That bastard and his ho, then,' she returned, pettishly. 'Let's open the other bottle. I feel like getting drunk.'

Cat had never been able to call her stepmother by her given name. Although Ophelia had been Mrs Gallagher for five years, Cat refused to acknowledge her and had gleefully

shortened her name to 'Oaf'. Stepmother and stepdaughter were barely civil to each other now.

Raoul took the second bottle of wine from his backpack, and started to strip away the foil from the neck. 'You're seventeen now, Cat,' he pointed out. 'Legally speaking, you could leave home, with our father's permission.'

'Sure, he'd give it in a heartbeat.' Cat leaned against the wall, and slid down until she was sitting on the carpet.

'Well, then?'

'Don't think I haven't thought about it. But where would I go – and *don't* tell me I can move in with you because there's no way I'm gonna cramp your style with the ladies.' Raoul inserted the corkscrew and pulled the cork, and Cat smiled up at him. 'I'll never forget how pissed off your girlfriends used to look every time I escaped from the boarding school of doom and landed on your doorstep.'

Raoul laughed. 'It *was* a little bizarre. Remember the night you sleepwalked your way into bed with me and . . . what was her name? It was some hippy-dippy thing.'

'Windsong. I could never keep my face straight when I talked to her. Windsong *hated* me.'

Raoul poured wine, then handed Cat a cup and sat down beside her. 'So let's have a serious think about this. You can't move in with me, and you can't afford to rent anywhere.'

'You're right. There's no way I could afford to live on my allowance. And I can't live without it. It's a catch-22. I may despise our dad, but he doles out the dosh.'

'And he's not going to cut you off, kid. If you do move out, get him to lodge money in your bank account.'

'I don't have a bank account'.

'Not even a savings account?' 'No, and I can't open a current account until I'm eighteen.'

'Get him to send you postal orders.'

Cat gave him a sceptical look. 'To where? Cat Gallagher, no fixed abode?'

'It's dead simple. I used to do it all the time when I was travelling. You set up a poste restante in the local post office, and pick up your mail there.'

Cat made a face. 'Maybe I should get a job.'

'Maybe you should.'

'Ha! Let's face it, Raoul – I'm unemployable.'

'Don't be defeatist, sweetheart. And, hang on . . . I think . . . I *think* . . .'

'Share. I hate enigmatic pauses.' Cat took a hit of her wine.

'I think I might be having a very good idea.' Raoul gave her a speculative look. 'How would you feel about living on a houseboat, Kitty Cat?'

'A houseboat! Wicked! Tell me about it.'

'I have a friend who has one in Coolnamara. He could do with someone to caretake it for him.'

'Are you serious?'

'Yes. His wife's in a wheelchair, and they can't live on a boat any more. Can't sell it, either. And he doesn't want it to rot away on the water.'

'Where is it?'

'It's on a stretch of canal near Lissamore, the one that goes from nowhere to nowhere.'

'Nowhere to nowhere?'

'It was one of those pointless famine relief projects, designed to give the starving locals the wherewithal to buy a few grains of Indian corn back in the 1840s. As far as I know, it was never used for anything. But my mate Aidan had his houseboat transported and plonked down in a safe berth. He hasn't visited it for over a year now, and he'd love it to be given some TLC. He couldn't pay you, but I'm pretty sure he'd let you live there rent-free.'

'Oh, Raoul! I'd love to live on a houseboat!'

'I'll see what I can do.' Raoul picked up the wine bottle. 'Here. Have some more Château Whatever.'

Raoul was as good as his word. Straightaway, he put in a call to his mate Aidan, and sorted Cat out with her brand new home from the place she couldn't call home. And by the time they'd finished the bottle and left the house the way they'd come in and hit the main road, Cat was feeling buoyant and full of hope.

'Bye, Raoul,' she said, as the twice-weekly bus to Galway appeared over the brow of the hill, and drew up by the turn-off to Hugo's house. 'You are my fairy half-brother.'

'Less of the fairy, thanks. I'll be in touch.'

Cat hugged Raoul the way she never hugged anybody else, and watched him board the bus.

'Here,' he said, taking something from his backpack and tossing it to her. 'You may need this.' He gave her a final salute, then the bus door slid shut and he was gone.

In her hand, Cat was clutching the screwdriver she'd used to gain access to the showhouse. She smiled, and turned towards the path that would take her to the house in the forest, the house that she hoped soon to leave. As she passed through the gate and rounded the first bend, a voice from behind her hissed: 'Cat! Cat! Here, Kitty Cat!'

She swung round as they emerged from the trees. There were three of them. They were wearing stocking masks and stupid grins. One said, 'A little bird told me it was your birthday, Kitty Cat. Come here to us now, like a good girl, and let us give you your birthday present.'

Without pausing for thought, Cat aimed the first kick.