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Central Reservation

Written by Will le Fleming

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CENTRAL RESERVATION

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CENTRAL RESERVATION

Will le Fleming

Xelsion Publishing



Central Reservation

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For Morwenna and Daniel

For Henry

And for Abigail: *lux et umbra*…

February 2001

1

On a grey Thursday morning Holly lay in bed, staring at the ceiling, and wished her sister would die. Five hours later her wish came true.

It would have been harder to deal with, Holly thought afterwards, if it had been the first time she'd made the wish. Having that prayer so swiftly granted would have been seriously disturbing, apart from anything else; and then there would have been the guilt. She felt bad enough as it was. If it had been the first time, she'd never have escaped the sense of responsibility, and that would have been yet another way in which Yvonne kept a hold on her.

In fact she'd been hoping for Yvonne's death for almost a year before it happened. It had started the day after their thirteenth birthday; the day Danny Blake had shown her his penis. Danny had a large head, pale blue eyes, and, in Holly's opinion, confirmed criminal tendencies. He was raw and bony, and seemed to enjoy hitting people in the face, skinning his knuckles against their teeth and chins. He'd never hit her, but for some inexplicable reason he did enjoy telling her she was a faggot, saying it with relish and looking around for approval from his mates. As some kind of twisted birthday present, Yvonne had decided to tell everyone that Holly fancied him. Holly thought she'd never have forgiven her, even if Danny hadn't responded to the news by exposing himself.

He'd been waiting for her at the end of second period. She'd seen him ahead of her in the corridor by the changing rooms and just as she reached him he'd opened his grubby trousers to reveal a tiny wrinkled brown thing like a dry slug. Holly had felt a clear burst of rage at the injustice of a world with Yvonne and Danny in it, and had surprised herself by acting without any thought at all and instead kicking him as hard as she could. His hands had taken some of the blow, but she'd connected well enough to drop him to the ground. His henchmen had whooped and cackled as he'd writhed on the floor. She'd walked away, head down, her heart beating heavily, and found an empty classroom. As soon the door had shut behind her she'd leant back against her hands and begun to fantasise about the death of Yvonne. She'd pictured her being sucked into an industrial turbine, ripped and ground into progressively smaller pieces until she was reduced to shreds no bigger than confetti, a mass of gaudy scarlet scraps to be scattered by the wind.

For a while the rush of it had been amazing. Holly had luxuriated in the sensation: savoured the thick, meaty taste of hatred, felt the false pulse of malice thrum in her palms. Then, with no warning, she'd been hit by the aftermath – a sudden acid surge of remorse. She had never let herself hate Yvonne before. She couldn't hate her twin. It wasn't normal. Not that she pretended to be normal, but even so. Yvonne had stupid nostrils and bright pink skin and was mostly unkind but Holly couldn't want her dead, not really. Could she?

It took her a long time to answer that question. Eventually she'd realised that she didn't want any harm to come to Yvonne, exactly. She didn't want her to eat a poisonous mushroom, or bounce raggedly under the wheels of a car, or slide beneath the slick surface of an icy lake, even though she did picture all of these things happening sometimes. She just wished that Yvonne had never

existed. Or even that either one of them had never existed. Holly thought she could cope with the idea of oblivion. Oblivion was freedom and unknowing and silence and absence. The one thing it wasn't was proximity: the unbearable sense of a togetherness from which there was no escape.

2

The day Yvonne died was cold and wet. Holly had been woken by the rain, and felt the chill air from her open window on her skin as she allowed herself to wish for her sister's destruction. The silent intensity of her plea was broken by the arrival of her mother. Belinda kicked open the door, not to break it down but because her arms were full of laundry, though the way Belinda kicked open doors it was hard to tell the difference. She hurled the clothes onto the floor, yelled, "Clothes!" and marched out.

Holly listened to the noise of her departure echoing in the air for what felt like minutes. Belinda always did everything at top volume, no matter how early it was. Though for her seven o'clock wasn't really early, Holly supposed. In fact there was probably no time that counted as early for Belinda, unless it was the day before. She started the milking at half-past-five every day, and had always been awake long before that, even when Daddy was alive. Perhaps she slept on her feet out there in the dairy parlour, her hands automatically fumbling the clusters onto the line of udders. A somnambulist milker, Holly thought. She loved the word somnambulist.

As usual on laundry day Yvonne came to Holly's room to extract the clothes she wanted from the pile. Holly watched her, head turned on the pillow, the eiderdown by her face damp and warm from her breath. They didn't speak. Yvonne ferreted through the clothes silently, as stealthy as one of the dogs when it had stolen

food from the kitchen and didn't want to be seen eating it. Holly didn't know why, Yvonne must have known she was watching. That was just the way Yvonne did things.

Although they were twins, they didn't look anything like each other. Yvonne often said it was strange, how dissimilar they were, eyeing Holly uneasily. She also often said that this was a good job, and she didn't know how Holly coped. Holly used to feel a deep dull unhappiness when Yvonne made comments like that, but ever since she had allowed herself to hate her, she felt secretly pleased: every act of unkindness was justification, made her feel less evil. Yvonne was right, though, the difference between them was strange. Yvonne was long and willowy with fair hair, lots of it, fine blonde hairs covering her arms and extending out beyond her hairline. Holly was pale and dark and had been short for most of her life though she'd got tall, this last year, nearly as tall as Yvonne. They still looked like strangers though. Sometimes Holly thought that one of them must have been adopted. Perhaps they both were. She couldn't imagine Belinda having babies – little about her gave the impression that she was really a living, breathing organism. Her face was craggy, her hair like gorse, her frame as tough as wood: she was more of an outcrop than a person.

After Yvonne had sidled out with her armful of clothes Holly got up to look at the day. Outside it was just getting light. Drizzle ran down the glass and the line of trees that divided the overgrown garden from the hump of Back Field stood straight and bare in the mist. They lived on a farm about a mile from the nearest village. It was reached by a narrow lane that ran between high green hedges and ended at a five-bar gate. After that the lane became a track, laid with broken pieces of concrete that banged on the bottom of ordinary cars as they lurched along. It was hard to reach the house in anything less than a pick-up, which was one of the reasons they had few visitors.

Holly stood for a minute, shivering, smelling the air. Then she stuck her hand through the window, brought it back in and inspected it. Her fingers were cold and white and her hand was wet. Acting on impulse, she bent her head and licked the rainwater from her palm like a cat. There was a noise at the door, and she turned to see Yvonne watching her. "You're weird," she said, picked up a stray sock, and left. Holly looked thoughtfully after her. There didn't seem much point disputing the fact. Downstairs she could hear Belinda making breakfast. If they'd had any neighbours, they'd have been able to hear Belinda making breakfast too.

"Holly, do you want to do it with me?"

A pause. She knew it wouldn't last long.

"Holly? Do it. You know?"

Holly sighed, and tried to shuffle pointedly even further away from Danny Blake. It was the school's annual outing to the All-County Amateur Rugby Sevens tournament, and he had decided to sit next to her on the coach. Holly had never understood why the whole prep school, all 42 pupils, had to attend a rugby tournament, but it seemed to be the highlight of the year as far as their headmaster Mr Cockburne was concerned. He was standing at the front of the coach, his hairy head bobbing as he talked to the driver. Probably telling him to hurry up in case they missed the first game. Danny snickered in follow-up to his comment and Holly gave him a withering look. At least, she hoped she did. She'd been practising the expression in front of the mirror. Yvonne had caught her doing that, too. She had an uncanny ability to turn up just when Holly was acting in a way that would reinforce her Holly-is-weird theory, which was maturing nicely after 13 years of observation.

"Holly? Do you?" Danny persisted. Holly gazed out of the window with determination. From long experience, she knew they were approaching a critical moment. This had been Danny's subject of choice, on and off, ever since the penis incident. It generally worked, making his henchmen snigger. Today, though, even they had stopped listening. Their lack of response meant he'd either have to abandon or escalate his campaign. The latter was more likely.

She tried to concentrate so hard on the view that Danny would entirely disappear from her perception. They were overtaking a livestock truck, and the yellowing fleeces of sheep were stuck through the slats of the lorry like tufts of stuffing. Count them, Holly told herself, try to work out how old they are, anything. The inside of the truck was too gloomy to give her many clues, though even from what she could see it was obvious they weren't looked after properly: they were packed in, and some liquid was leaching down the side of the vehicle. Good job Belinda wasn't on this coach, she'd probably insist they pulled over and gave the driver a talking-to. They were passing the cab now, and Holly could see his face: rough and stubbly and unkind-looking. Not very different from how Danny would turn out, probably.

From the back of the bus she heard a shriek of laughter. Yvonne's position on school trips was the central seat of the back row, where she held court among the popular boys, an assembly of goons and sport-playing savages. Holly wondered crossly what had prompted Yvonne's shrill mirth. Probably someone telling her that he fancied her. Yvonne said everyone at the school fancied her, and though at first Holly hadn't believed her, the claims were increasingly backed up by practical experience. Holly knew this very well, because after Yvonne's first kiss (Nathan Osgood) she'd come straight to Holly to tell her, and since then it had been a post-snog ritual. She'd skip up, ostentatiously wiping her

face, to tell Holly exactly what they'd done with their tongue, and increasingly, their hands.

Holly didn't enjoy this for lots of reasons. Firstly, Yvonne was unsubtle in drawing out the moral of her stories: that the scale of sexual attractiveness was drawn between her at the pinnacle of desirability, and Holly at the nadir of repulsiveness. Second, the mere fact of Yvonne's success made Holly feel stupid and clumsy and naive. And third, most painful of all, Holly loathed herself for falling victim to the first two. She ought to rise serenely above such quotidian anxieties – quotidian was another of her favourite words – but her flesh was weak, it squirmed under Yvonne's gloating, her stomach knotted with anxiety despite the fiercest instructions from her brain not to care.

Through the coach window Holly could see the marquees outside the stadium where the tournament was held. She looked at them feeling an irrational but complete certainty that life was never going to change. She remembered the moment, because it turned out to be only a few seconds before her life changed forever.