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Blood Tracks

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1 THE LIFT

Gina waved goodbye to her friends as she dashed from the shelter of the sports centre into the torrential rain. Nearing her dad's car, she could see that he was engrossed in a conversation on his mobile.

She reached the door of the Fiesta and lifted the handle, but it didn't open. She tried the back door but all the snips were down, denying her access.

Gina rapped on the window. "Dad! Let me in, will you? I'm getting soaked out here!"

Without even looking at her, Martin Wilson raised a hand, signalling to Gina to wait. As he continued his call, Gina peered in at him, outraged. She watched the muscles in her father's face tense; his expression was stony and then suddenly agitated as his lips formed rapid words that she couldn't hear, his eyes flashed once towards her and then he was back in his conversation.

Gina banged on the window, glaring at him. She squirmed as the rain began to trickle down the back of her tracksuit top; her trainers were soaking up the puddles like a sponge. Her thick black hair was plastered to her cheeks by the lashing rain. She watched her dad switch off his phone and look across at her, apologetically. He snapped the door open.

"Thanks a lot!" Gina said sarcastically as she plonked herself down in the passenger seat. "Who were you on the phone to? Couldn't you have just let me in? I nearly drowned out there."

"Sorry, love. It was business; I needed to concentrate."

"Well," Gina said, "it doesn't seem fair, you being all dry and warm, and me soaking." She started to shake herself like a dog coming out of a lake, her long curls spraying her dad with water.

Gina waited for his mock outrage, but instead her dad just gave a weak smile, put the headlights on and started up the engine.

"You're a right laugh tonight," Gina said disappointedly. "Are you okay?"

"It's nothing. I'm just tired."

"Well, aren't you going to ask me how I got on at training?"

He shook his head, as if trying to clear it of some obstruction. "Yeah, of course. How did you get on?"

"Well, I'm glad you asked because I've only gone and

smashed my personal best!" Gina grinned with pride and looked at him expectantly.

"Good," her dad replied, without taking his glazed eyes off the illuminated road.

"Good?" she said indignantly. "It's a bit better than good. You should have been there to see me. You would have loved it. I ran the fifteen hundred in four minutes fifty. That's seven seconds off my PB. Coach said he's going to let me run for the county. He said, if I put in the work, I could easily make it into the under-sixteen squad."

When there was no answer, she shoved his arm. "Are you even listening to me?"

"That's great, Gina. Really great." Her dad's voice was monotone.

"Yeah, but we'll have to up our training, Dad," she continued excitedly. "What do you reckon? Can you come out with me *three* times a week? I know things are busy at the warehouse and it's getting dark about four, but maybe if you ask Uncle Tom, he'll let you off early? He owes you loads of time – all those extra hours he has you doing."

"Umm," her dad replied.

"I thought you'd be chuffed," Gina said. She felt deflated, but then her eye was caught by the large, rectangular box on the back seat of the car. She twisted round to investigate.

"Wow!" Gina said, impressed. "Is this for Danny's birthday? He's been going on about wanting a tropical fish

tank for ever. At least he'll shut up now. Hey, Dad, the box is open, did you know? Have you checked everything's in it?"

There was no reply but Gina carried on regardless.

"Well, I hope Danny doesn't get bored of it after a few weeks. You know what he was like with the goldfish. He never fed it, then he'd panic and put a ton of fish flakes in. Ugh, remember that poor fish floating on the top of the bowl? It looked like someone had used a bike pump on it."

She stared at her dad's blank face.

"Why aren't you listening?" she shouted in frustration. "You know Danny will probably kill any fish you put in there!"

"Yeah," he said, staring straight ahead. Gina wasn't convinced that he was even focusing on the road. He seemed to be on autopilot, though it did cross her mind that right now her dad might agree to anything.

"By the way, Dad," Gina chirped sweetly, "you don't mind if I go into town on Saturday with Becky and a few mates? We were thinking of going ice skating and then for a pizza. Is that all right? Maybe you could you drop me off, *and* pick me up later? And maybe I could have a couple of weeks' pocket money early – or better still, you could just give me the money. Go on, Dad, please?" She gave him a dazzling, toothy smile, but he still seemed a world away from her.

Gina narrowed her eyes in concern. She leaned across

and felt his forehead with the palm of her hand. "Well, you don't feel too hot or anything, but you *must* be coming down with something. This is like sitting in a car with a zombie."

She fell silent, her eyes focused on her dad, willing him to smile or speak, but the only sound was of the squeaking windscreen wipers and the hot air blasting around the car, fighting back the steam that was misting up the windows.

Her dad indicated right at a sign for a no-through road.

"Why are we going down here?"

He didn't answer.

None of the street lamps, dotted along the cracked pavements, were working. They bumped slowly along the cobbles, past rows of derelict, boarded-up houses. Beyond, unseen in the darkness, was an old bridge over the railway line and a little way after that the street petered out.

"Planet Earth, calling Dad." She was trying to sound playful but tension riddled her voice. "You've gone the wrong way."

He pulled over onto the pavement, turning off the headlights but keeping the engine running.

"What's up? Is there something wrong with the car?" Gina asked.

"No," he said, looking into the blackness. "I just need to answer a call of nature."

"What! You're going out in this, to have a wee? Can't you just hold on till we get home?"

"No…I can't. You stay in the car, put the radio on, don't go anywhere."

"Put the radio on? How long are you going to be?"

But he didn't answer. Instead he suddenly turned to her and clasped her hands between his callused palms.

"I love you, Gina, you know that, don't you?" he said earnestly, his eyes locked on hers.

As she searched her father's pensive face, she saw herself reflected in him more sharply than ever. She was looking at the same dark, feline eyes, the same thick, black eyebrows. Her skin was caramel, whereas his was a deep brown, but she'd inherited his bow-shaped mouth, his wide cheekbones and strong jawline. All the features that left people divided over whether Gina Wilson was unusually attractive or just the wrong side of handsome for a girl.

Gina let out a nervous laugh. "Oh my God, Dad! What is wrong with you tonight? You're freaking me out!"

He gave Gina a weak smile. "I'm sorry. How about we go for a run tomorrow?"

"Okay then," she beamed. Wriggling her hands free, she noticed his palms were encrusted with dirt. She tutted. "Your hands are filthy and your overalls are even worse! Honestly, Dad, what are you like? Get going, will you? I want to get home."

He picked up his phone, put it in the pocket of his work overalls and opened the door to the driving rain.

Gina watched as he was quickly consumed by the darkness. She pressed various buttons on the radio, hoping that music would shake off her unease. She found a song she liked and, slouching down in the seat, put her feet up on the dashboard and proceeded to untie her trainers and peel off her soggy socks. She wriggled her damp, puckered toes, letting the hot air dry them. Her hands beat out the rhythm of the song on her legs as the windscreen wipers swished back and forth like a frenetic metronome.

She groaned, remembering that she had a science project due in the next day. She always waited until the last minute to get her homework done. Usually she'd panic and end up throwing herself on her dad's mercy. He'd always give her a hand to look answers up and find all the worksheets she'd lost, but there was no way she could ask her dad to bail her out tonight, not when he was acting so weird. And there was no point asking her mum. Mum's thoughts on the matter were very clear.

"You're too soft on her, Martin," Clare would lecture. "Gina's fifteen, not five. It's her own fault if she leaves everything until the last minute. Just let her get into trouble. It's the only way she'll learn."

Another song started on the radio.

"What's he doing? He's been ages."

Gina contemplated going to find him but now that she'd just got dry, she didn't fancy venturing outside in the dark and the wet. Instead she leaned over to the steering

wheel and pressed down on the horn, emitting two long blasts of protest. “Come on, Dad!” she pleaded.

She slumped back in her seat, and heard her phone beep from inside her tracksuit pocket.

That’ll be Mum wondering where we are.

But it was *Dad* that flashed up on the screen. She clicked on the text and her stomach muscles clenched as she stared at the message.

Forgive me. Dad

She hit the button to silence the radio. “Dad?”

Her eyes scanned the blackness outside as panic rose in her. She strained her ears but all she could hear was the squeak of the windscreen wipers and the rain pummelling the car. But then, seconds later, came the ear-piercing sound of train wheels, sparking and squealing along a track in a desperate attempt to stop.