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THE CAR IS RUNNING on empty. There's been no sign of a garage for hours, and the petrol gauge is needling into red. I need to get off the road but the fields seem endless, intent on funnelling me along to the engine's last gasp. Even though it's still early the day is arid and hot. The breeze that whips through the open windows only stirs the air without cooling it.

I drive hunched over the wheel, expecting the car to die at any moment, and then I see a break in the green barrier. On my left a track cuts out of sight between wheat fields. I turn off, bumping over the rutted surface, not caring where it leads providing it's out of sight. The track dips down to a copse. Branches scratch at the windows as I edge the Audi into it and switch off the engine. It's cooler in the trees' shade. In the ticking quiet I can hear running water. I close my eyes and lean my head back, but there's no time to rest.

I need to keep moving.

I check the car's glove compartment. There's nothing identifying in it, only junk and a nearly full packet of cigarettes. Camels, my old brand. As I reach across the passenger side for them I become aware of a smell. Faint but unpleasant, like meat left out in the sun.

There's something smeared on the rich leather of the passenger seat, and also on the unspooled seatbelt that hangs on the floor.

The tough fabric is nearly severed at one point, and when I touch it my fingers come away sticky and dark.

My head swims to think I've driven all this way with it in plain view. I want to put as much distance as I can between myself and the car, but I can't leave it like this. Branches push against the door as I get out. There's a stream running through the copse, and my hands are shaking as I soak a cloth from the glove compartment in it. The seat wipes down easily enough but the blood has clogged in the seatbelt's weave. I rub off as much as I can, then rinse out the cloth in the stream. Water flares over my wrists like manacles of glass as I scrub my hands, scouring them with sand from the bottom. Even then they don't feel clean.

I splash water over my face, wincing as it stings the grazes on my cheek, and go back to the car. It's coated with dust from the roads, camouflaging the black paintwork. I use a rock to smash off the UK number plates, then fetch my rucksack from the boot. As I lift it out it snags on the mat covering the spare wheel. There's a glimpse of something white underneath. I pull the mat aside and my stomach knots when I see the polythene-wrapped parcel.

I lean against the car, my legs suddenly weak.

It's about the size of a bag of sugar, but the white powder it contains is far less innocent. I quickly look around, as though someone might be there to see. But there are only the trees, and the background hum of insects. I stare at the package, too tired to process this new complication. I don't want to take it with me, but I can't leave it here. Snatching it up, I cram it deep into my rucksack, slam the boot and walk away.

The wheat fields are still empty of life when I leave the copse. I fling the car's number plates and keys out into the tall stalks before taking out my phone. It's broken beyond hope of repair. Still walking, I remove the SIM card and snap it in two, then throw the pieces into one field and the phone in another.

I've no one to call anyway.

The road's grey tarmac ripples and distorts as the sun climbs higher. The few cars on it hardly seem to move, caught in the heat until they flash past in a sudden blare of colour. The rucksack rides high on my back, my own private monkey. I walk for almost an hour, until I feel I've put enough distance between myself and the car. Then, holding out my thumb, I begin to hitch.

My red hair is both an advantage and a handicap, attracting attention and announcing that I'm a foreigner in one single message. The first lift is from a young couple in an old Peugeot.

'*Où allez-vous?*' he asks, cigarette barely moving.

I struggle to switch linguistic gears. I'm more used to hearing French than speaking it recently, but that isn't what makes me pause. *Where am I going?*

I've no idea.

'Anywhere. I'm just travelling.'

I sit in the front passenger seat, the girl having moved uncomplainingly into the back. I'm glad the driver's wearing sunglasses, because it gives me an excuse to keep mine on. They cover the worst of the bruising on my face.

He glances at my red hair. 'British?'

'Yeah.'

'Your French is pretty good. Been over here long?'

For a second I struggle to answer. It already feels like a lifetime. 'Not really.'

'So how'd you learn?' the girl asks, leaning between the seats. She's dark-haired and plump, with an engagingly open face.

'I used to come over a lot when I was younger. And I'm . . . I like French films.'

I shut up then, realizing I'm giving away more than I intended. Luckily, neither of them seem interested. 'I prefer American movies myself,' he shrugs. 'So how long are you over for?'

'I don't know,' I say.

They drop me off at the outskirts of a small town. I dip into my small fund of euros to buy bread and cheese, a bottle of water and a disposable cigarette lighter. I also buy a baseball cap from an open-air market in the square. It's a cheap Nike copy but it'll keep the sun off me and help conceal my bruises. I know I'm being paranoid but I can't help it. I don't want to attract any more attention than I have to.

It's a relief to leave the town behind and head out into open country again. The sun burns down on the exposed back of my neck. After a kilometre or so I stop under a row of poplars and try to eat some of the baguette and cheese. I manage a few bites and then puke everything back, dry-heaving until my stomach's sore. When the spasms have passed I slump against a tree, feeling so wasted I want to just lie there and give up.

But I can't do that. My hand trembles as I flick a tongue of flame from the disposable lighter and draw on the cigarette. It's the first I've had in two years, but it tastes like a homecoming. I breathe out some of my tension along with the smoke, blessedly thinking of nothing for a few moments.

I finish the cigarette, then get to my feet and start walking again. I've only the vaguest idea of where I am but since I don't have any plans that doesn't matter. I stick out my thumb whenever a car passes, but that isn't often. The roads here are all secondary ones, backwaters where there's little traffic. By mid-afternoon, a Citroën and a Renault later, I've covered less than twenty kilometres. The lifts have all been short, locals travelling to the next town or village, but now even they have dried up. The road is so quiet I can believe the rest of the world has forgotten about me. The only sound is the scrape of my boots and the incessant drone of insects. There's no shade, and I'm thankful for the cap's protection.

After I've been walking for what seems an age, the open fields are replaced by a dense wood of chestnut trees. It's fenced off by strands of old barbed wire, but the broad-leaved branches still offer some respite from the sun.

I carefully ease the rucksack from my sore shoulders and take a drink of water. There's only a couple of inches left. Blood warm, it barely touches my thirst before it's gone. I should have bought another bottle, I think. But then I should have done a lot of things. It's too late to change any of them now.

I squint down the road. It runs arrow straight, shimmering in the heat and empty as far as the eye can see. I screw the top back on the water, willing a car to appear. None does. Christ, but it's hot. I feel parched again already. I take off my hat and push my fingers through my sweat-damp hair. A little way back down the road I remember passing a farm gate. I gnaw my lip, reluctant to retrace my steps. But my dry throat decides me. I've no idea how long it'll be till I reach another town, and it's too hot to go without water.

Picking up my rucksack, I head back the way I came.

The gate is trimmed with the same rusty barbed wire that borders the woods. A track runs from it, disappearing into the chestnut trees. A mailbox is fixed to the gatepost, on which faded white letters spell out the single word *Arnaud*. An old but solid-looking padlock hangs from a hasp on the gate, but it's been left unlocked.

I look once more down the road, but there's still nothing in sight. Mindful of the barbs, I push open the gate and go through. The track slopes gently uphill, then curves down to reveal a cluster of roofs through the trees. I follow it and find myself in a dusty courtyard. A dilapidated old farmhouse stands at its head, half-covered by a flimsy-looking scaffold. Opposite it is a large barn, and at one side a stable block in which is set an ancient,

one-handed clock. There are no horses, but several dusty vehicles are parked in the open archways in various attitudes of permanence.

No one is in sight. A goat bleats from somewhere nearby, and a few hens scratch around in the dirt. Other than them the place could be deserted. I stop at the edge of the courtyard, reluctant to go any further. The farmhouse door is ajar. I go up to its unpainted panels and knock. There's a pause, then a woman's voice answers.

'Qui est-ce?'

I push open the door. After the bright courtyard the interior seems impenetrably dark. It's a second or two before I make out a woman sitting at a kitchen table, a moment longer to see that she's holding a baby.

I raise the empty bottle, hesitating while I marshal my question into French. 'Can I have some water, please?'

If she's discomfited by being disturbed by a stranger she doesn't show it. 'How did you get in here?' she asks, her voice calm and unhurried.

'The gate was open.'

I feel like a trespasser as she regards me. She sets the baby down in a wooden high chair. 'Would you like a glass of water as well?'

'That'd be great.'

She takes the bottle to the sink, filling first it and then a large glass at the tap. I drink it gratefully. The water is icy and has an earthy tang of iron.

'Thank you,' I say, handing her the empty glass.

'Will you padlock the gate behind you?' she asks. 'It shouldn't have been left open.'

'OK. Thanks again.'

I can feel her eyes on me as I walk across the sunny courtyard.

I follow the track up through the wood to the road. It's as

quiet as before. I lock the gate and keep on walking. Every now and then I'll glance back to see if a car is coming, but there's only the sun-baked tarmac. I hook my thumbs under the rucksack straps to take some of the weight. It feels heavier when I remember what's in it, so I clear my mind and concentrate on putting one foot in front of the other.

The drone of an engine gradually detaches itself from the overheated silence. I turn and see something approaching, a dark speck distorted by the heat. At first it seems to hover unmoving above a reflection of itself. Then its tyres stretch downwards and touch the road, and it becomes a blue car speeding towards me.

I'm already stepping out from the shade of the trees when I notice there's something on its roof. Realization comes a moment later. I vault over the barbed-wire fence, snagging my jeans and landing awkwardly because of the rucksack. Without stopping, I plunge into the woods as the note of the car's engine grows louder. When it sounds almost on top of me I duck down behind a tree and look back at the road.

The police car blurs past. I listen for any signs of it slowing, any indication that they've seen me. But the sound of its engine steadily dwindles to nothing. I rest my head against the tree. I know I'm overreacting, that the French police probably won't care about me, but I'm too jumpy to take the chance. And I daren't risk my rucksack being searched.

There's a bitter taste in my mouth. Blood; I've bitten through my lip. I spit to clear it and take the water bottle from my rucksack. My hands are trembling as I rinse my mouth, then take stock of where I am.

The wood is set on a shallow hillside, and some distance away I can see the glimmer of a lake through the trees. To one side of it are the roofs of farm buildings, small and insignificant at this distance. I guess they must be where I asked for water, so I'm probably still on their land.

I stand up and brush off the twigs and soil that cling to my jeans. My T-shirt is stuck to me with sweat. It's so hot the air seems scorched. I look at the lake again, wishing I could swim in it. But that's not going to happen, and I need to keep moving. Taking another swig of water, I step away from the tree and cry out as something seizes my foot.

I drop to my knees as pain lances up my leg. My left foot is engulfed in a pair of black, semicircular jaws. I try to pull free but the movement sends fresh hurt searing up the length of my leg. 'Jesus!'

I stop moving, sucking in panicked breaths. I've stepped in some sort of iron hunting trap, hidden away in a knotted tangle of tree roots. It clamps my foot from mid-instep to above the ankle, its jagged teeth piercing the tough leather of my boot. They've stabbed so deep into my flesh that I can feel them nuzzling coldly against the bone.

I squeeze my eyes shut, trying to deny the sight. 'Oh, fuck! Fuck!'

But that doesn't get me anywhere. Shucking off the rucksack, I shift to a better position and take hold of the trap's jaws. They don't budge. Bracing my free foot against a tree root I try again. This time I'm rewarded by the tiniest sense of give, but not nearly enough. My arms quiver with the strain as the metal edges bite into my hands. Slowly, I let it ease shut and sit back, gasping.

Rubbing the sore patches on my hands, I study the trap more closely. It's crudely made, lightly ochred with rust but not enough to suggest it's been lying here very long. If anything, the oil on the hinges looks fresh. Worryingly so, in fact. Trying not to think what that might mean, I turn my attention to the chain that tethers it in place. It's short and leads to a wooden spike buried among the tree roots. A few tugs are enough to convince me that I'm wasting my time trying to pull it out.

Sitting with my trapped leg stuck out in front of me, I put my

hand down to push myself upright and feel something wet. The bottle of water is lying where I dropped it, most of its contents soaking into the dry earth. I snatch it up, even though it's already spilled as much as it's going to. Taking a careful sip, I re-cap what's left and try to think.

OK, stay calm. The initial pain has evolved into a throbbing, like toothache, that extends up my shin. Blood is beginning to soak through the leather of my boot. Except for the buzz of insects the sun-dappled woods are silent. I look over at the distant roofs of the farm buildings. They're too far away for anyone to hear me shout, but I don't want to do that anyway. Not unless I have to.

I rummage through my rucksack for my pocketknife. I know it's in there somewhere, but as I search for it my fingers encounter something else. I pull it out and a shock runs through me.

The photograph is dog-eared and faded. I'd no idea it was in the rucksack; I'd forgotten I even had it. The girl's face is almost obscured by a crease, distorting her smile. Behind her is the whiteness of Brighton Pier, vivid against a blue sky. Her hair is blonde and sun-bleached, her face tanned and healthy. Happy.

I feel dizzy. The trees seem to tilt as I put the photograph away. I take deep breaths, willing myself not to lose it. The past's gone. There's nothing I can do to change it, and the present is more than enough to worry about. I find my pocketknife and open it up. There's a three-inch blade, a bottle opener and a corkscrew, but nothing for dismantling iron traps. Jamming the blade between the jaws, I try to prise them open and fall back as it snaps.

I throw the broken knife down and look around for something else. There's a dead branch nearby. It's out of reach but I use a smaller one to drag it closer, then wedge its thickest end between the jaws. The metal gouges at the wood but the trap

slowly begins to open. I apply more pressure, gritting my own teeth as the iron ones start to pull out of my flesh.

‘Yes! Come *on!*’

The stick breaks. The jaws spring together again.

I scream.

When the pain subsides I’m lying flat on my back. I push myself up and fling the stick impotently at the trap. ‘Bastard!’

I can’t pretend any longer that this isn’t serious. Even if I could free my foot I doubt I could walk very far on it. But I’d willingly settle for that problem, because not being able to free myself is far more frightening.

Happy now? You’ve brought this on yourself. Blanking out those thoughts, I try to focus on the more immediate problem. Using the knife’s corkscrew, I start digging around the spike that holds the trap in place. It’s a futile attempt but allows me to vent some emotion by stabbing the ground and tree roots. Eventually, I let the knife fall and slump back against the trunk.

The sun has sunk noticeably lower. It won’t be dark for hours yet, but the thought of having to lie there all night is terrifying. I rack my brain for ideas, but there’s only one thing left I can do.

I take a deep breath and yell.

My shout dies away without an echo. I doubt it will have carried to the farm I went to earlier. I yell louder, in English and French, shouting until my voice grows hoarse and my throat hurts.

‘Somebody!’ I half-sob and then, more quietly, ‘Please.’ The words seem absorbed by the afternoon heat, lost amongst the trees. In their aftermath, the silence descends again.

I know then that I’m not going anywhere.

By next morning I’m feverish. I’ve taken my sleeping bag from the rucksack and draped it over me during the night, but I still shivered fitfully through most of it. My foot throbs with a dull

agony, pulsing to the beat of my blood. It's swollen to above the ankle. Although I've unlaced the boot as best I can, the leather, which is now black and sticky, is stretched drum tight. It feels like a vast boil, waiting to burst.

At first light I try to shout again, but the dryness of my throat reduces it to a hoarse croak. Soon even that is too much effort. I try to think of other ways to attract attention, and for a while become excited at the idea of setting fire to the tree I'm under. I go as far as pawing in my pockets for the cigarette lighter before I come to my senses.

The fact that I was seriously considering it scares me.

But the lucidity doesn't last long. As the sun rises, stoking itself towards a mid-morning heat, I push off the sleeping bag. I'm burning up, and have accomplished the neat fever-trick of being soaked with sweat while I'm shaking uncontrollably. I look at my foot with hate, wishing I could gnaw it off like a trapped animal. For a while I think I am, can taste my own skin and blood and bone as I bite at my leg. Then I'm sitting propped against the tree again, and the only thing biting into my foot is the half-moon of iron.

I come and go from myself, submerged in garbled, overheated fantasies. At some point I open my eyes and see a face peering at me. It's a girl's, beautiful and Madonna-like. It seems to merge with the one in the photograph, racking me with guilt and grief.

'I'm sorry,' I say, or think I say. 'I'm sorry.'

I stare at the face, hoping for a sign of forgiveness. But as I look the shape of the skull behind it begins to shine through, peeling away the surface beauty to show the rot and dissolution underneath.

A new pain bursts in me, a fresh agony that bears me away on its crest. From far away there's the sound of someone screaming. As it grows fainter I hear voices speaking a language I recognize

but can't decode. Before it fades altogether, a few words present themselves with the clarity of a church bell.

'Doucement. Essayez d'être calme.'

Gently, I can understand. But I'm puzzled by why they need to be quiet.

Then the pain sweeps me up and I cease to exist.

London

THE SKYLIGHT IS FOGGED with condensation. Rain sweeps against it with a noise like a drum roll. Our smudged reflections hang above us as we lie on the bed, misted doppelgängers trapped in the glass.

Chloe has gone distant again. I know her moods well enough not to push, to leave her to herself until she returns of her own accord. She stares up through the skylight, blonde hair catching the glow from the seashell-lamp she bought from a flea market. Her eyes are blue and unblinking. I feel, as I always do, that I could pass my hand over them without any reaction from her. I want to ask what she's thinking, but I don't. I'm frightened she might tell me.

The air is cold and damp on my bare chest. At the other side of the room a blank canvas stands untouched on Chloe's easel. It's been blank for weeks now. The reek of oil and turpentine, for so long the smell I've associated with the small flat, has faded until it's barely noticeable.

I feel her stir beside me.

'Do you ever think about dying?' she asks.

2

THERE'S AN EYE STARING down at me. It's black but clouded at the centre by a cataract, a grey fog hung with dark shapes. A series of lines spread out from it like ripples. At some point they resolve into the graining on a piece of wood. The eye becomes a knot, the fog a spider's web stretched over it like a dusty blanket. It's littered with the husks of long-dead insects. No sign of the spider, though.

I don't know how long I stare up at it before I recognize it as a wooden beam, rough and dark with age. Sometime after that I realize I'm awake. I don't feel any compulsion to move; I'm warm and comfortable, and for the moment that's enough. My mind is empty, content to stare up at the spider's web above me. But as soon as I think that it's no longer true. With consciousness come questions and a flurry of panic: who, what, when?

Where?

I raise my head and look around.

I'm lying in bed, in a place I don't recognize. It isn't a hospital or a police cell. Sunlight angles in through a single small window. The beam I've been staring at is a rafter, part of a triangular wooden ribcage that extends to the floor at either side. Slivers of daylight glint through gaps in the overlapping shingles of the roof. A loft, then. Some kind of barn, by the look of it. It's long,

with bare floorboards and gables at either end, one of which my bed is pushed against. Junk and furniture, most of it broken, is stacked against the unplastered stone walls. There's a musty smell that speaks of age, old wood and stone. It's hot, though not uncomfortably so.

The light coming through the dusty glass has a fresh, early quality. I'm still wearing my watch, which tells me that it's seven o'clock. As if to confirm that it's morning the hoarse crowing of a cockerel sounds from somewhere outside.

I've no idea where I am or what I'm doing here. Then I move and the sudden pain at the end of my leg gives an effective jolt to my short-term memory. I throw back the sheet that covers me and see with relief that my foot is still there. It's bound in a white bandage, from which the tips of my toes poke like radishes. I give them a tentative wiggle. It hurts, but not nearly so much as before.

It's only then I realize that I'm naked. My jeans and T-shirt are on the back of a wooden chair next to the bed. They've been folded and look freshly washed. My boots are on the floorboards next to them, and an attempt has been made to clean the damaged one. But the leather is darkened with bloodstains, and the rips from the trap's teeth are beyond repair.

Lowering the sheet, I try to recall what happened between my stepping in the trap and waking here. There's nothing, but now other memories are presenting themselves. Caught in the wood, hitch-hiking and abandoning the car. And then I remember the events that led to me being here in the first place.

Oh, Jesus, I think, passing a hand over my face as it all comes back.

The sight of my rucksack leaning against an old black rocking horse snaps me out of it. Remembering what's in it, I sit up. Too quickly: I close my eyes, fighting a wave of nausea as the room spins. It's only just begun to fade when I hear footsteps

approaching from below. Then a section of the floor gives a loud creak and swings open.

An arm pushes the trapdoor back, and then a woman steps up into the loft. I've seen her before, I realize; at the farmhouse with the baby. Which settles the question of where I am, if not why. She hesitates when she sees me.

'You're awake,' she says.

It takes a moment to register that she's spoken in English. Strongly accented and a little halting, but fluent enough. Feeling rough stone behind me, I find I've backed myself up against the wall. One hand has gripped the sheet into a sweaty knot.

I make myself let go. She stops a little way from the bed, which I've realized is just a mattress lying on the floorboards.

'How do you feel?' Her voice is low and quiet. She's wearing a sleeveless shirt and well-worn jeans. There's nothing threatening about her, but the sluggish computer of my brain seems stalled. My throat hurts when I try to speak. I swallow, try again.

'My foot . . .'

'It was badly cut. But don't worry, it's all right.'

Don't worry? I look around. 'Where am I?'

She doesn't answer straight away, struggling either to understand the question or formulate her answer. I repeat it, this time in French.

'You're at the farm. Where you came for water.' Her voice is more fluid in her own language, but there's still a hesitancy about it, as though she's vetting herself before she speaks.

'Is this . . . it looks like a barn?'

'There's no room in the house.' Her grey eyes are calm. 'My sister found you in the woods. She fetched me and we brought you here.'

I have a fleeting image of a girl's face, then it's gone. None of this is making sense. My head is still so muzzy that I'm not sure

how much of what I remember is real or delirium.

‘How long have I been here?’

‘We found you three days ago.’

Three *days*?

There are vague impressions of pain and sweat, of cool hands and reassuring words, but they could just be dreams. I can feel panic bubbling up in me again. I watch anxiously as she takes a twist of tissue from her pocket and unwraps a large white tablet.

‘What’s that?’

‘Only an antibiotic. We’ve been giving them to you while you were unconscious. You’ve been feverish, and the wound’s infected.’

I glance at the tent made by my foot under the sheet, all my other fears suddenly relegated.

‘How bad is it?’

She picks up a bottle from by the bed and pours water into a glass. ‘It’s healing. But you won’t be able to walk on it for a while.’

If she’s lying, I can’t tell. ‘What happened? There was a trap . . .’

‘Later. You need to rest. Here.’

She holds out the tablet and glass. I take them, too confused to think straight. But there’s an air of quiet reserve about her that’s strangely calming. She could be a year or two either side of thirty, slim but with a fullness of breast and hip. The dark hair is cut straight above the nape of her neck, and every now and again she tucks one side back behind an ear in a gesture that seems more habit than affectation. The only striking feature about her is her eyes, which, above the tired-looking shadows, are a dark and smoky grey.

I feel them on me now, solemn and unreadable as I swallow the tablet. I wash it down with water, first taking only a sip, then gulping it as I realize how thirsty I am.

‘More?’ she asks, as I finish. I nod and hold out the glass.

‘There’s fresh water in the bottles by the bed. Try to drink as much as you can. And if the pain gets bad take two of these.’

She holds up a bottle of tablets. On cue my foot begins to throb, the pain only a shadow of its former glory but there all the same. I try not to show it, but there’s something about the calm grey eyes that makes me think I’m not fooling her.

‘How did you know I was English?’

She answers without hesitation. ‘I looked in your passport.’

My mouth is abruptly dry, regardless of the water. ‘You went in my rucksack?’

‘Only to find out who you were.’

Her expression is grave without being apologetic. I try not to glance over at the rucksack, but my heart is thumping harder in my chest.

‘I have to go now,’ she tells me. ‘Try to rest. I’ll get you something to eat soon.’

I just nod, suddenly anxious for her to leave. I wait until she’s gone, the trapdoor lowered behind her, then drag my rucksack over. Relieved of its weight, the rocking horse nods backwards and forwards. I open the rucksack and plunge my hand inside, feeling nothing except clothes. Then, just when I’m convinced it’s gone, my fingers encounter a crinkle of plastic.

I don’t know whether I’m relieved or sorry.

The package doesn’t seem to have been disturbed. It sits heavily in my hand, its solid weight like an accusation. I should have got rid of it when I had the chance. Too late now. I wrap it in a T-shirt and tuck it back at the bottom of my rucksack, covering it with the rest of my clothes. I check that my passport and money are also still there. They are, but as I put them back my fingers touch a square of glossy card.

Not wanting to, but unable to help myself, I take the photograph out again. There’s a pain lodged under my breastbone as I look at the girl’s face smiling in the sunlight, and on impulse

I grip the photograph's edge to tear it in half. But I can't do it. Instead, I smooth out the crease and put it back into the pocket.

Suddenly I'm exhausted. And more confused than ever. The woman didn't really tell me anything, especially not why I'm in a barn instead of a hospital. Belatedly, something else registers. After the woman closed the trapdoor there was another noise, the solid *thunk* of metal on wood.

The sound of a bolt being shot into place.

My bandaged foot throbs as I swing my legs off the mattress. Ignoring it, I stand up and almost fall over. I lean against the stone wall, waiting until the loft has stopped spinning, then try taking a step. My foot shrieks under my weight and I pitch forward, grabbing onto the chair and causing something to rattle hollowly inside its base. It's a commode, I realize, noticing for the first time the pressure in my bladder.

But that will have to wait. It's obvious I'm not going to get far, but I can't go back to bed until I know. Supporting myself on the dusty furniture stacked against the walls, I lurch over to the trapdoor. There's an iron ring set into it. Gripping onto an old bureau, I take hold and pull. There's a slight give, then it sticks fast.

It's bolted.

I fight down a fresh surge of panic. I can't imagine any reason for me to be locked up here, at least nothing good. But there's no question of trying to force the bolt. Even if I could find something to wrench it open, just getting this far has taken everything out of me. I use the commode, glad of that small relief, then collapse back onto the mattress. I'm coated with a greasy sheen of sweat, and my head and foot are both throbbing.

I take two painkillers and lie back, but I'm too fretful to sleep. My foot is starting to quieten when there's a soft noise from the trapdoor. There's a grating whisper as the bolt is eased back, then with a creak the hatch swings open.

It's someone else this time, a girl. I haven't seen her before, but as she lowers the trapdoor the play of light on her face strikes a discordant note of memory. She's carrying a tray, and smiles shyly when she sees I'm sitting up. I hastily drape the sheet over my groin, preserving my modesty like a Renaissance nude. She lowers her eyes, trying not to grin.

'I've brought you something to eat.'

She looks in her late teens, strikingly pretty even in a faded T-shirt and jeans. She's wearing pink flip-flops, and the sight of them is both incongruous and oddly reassuring.

'It's only bread and milk,' she says, setting the tray beside the bed. 'Mathilde said you shouldn't have a lot just yet.'

'Mathilde?'

'My sister.'

The other woman, of course. There isn't much of a resemblance between them. The girl's hair is lighter, almost blonde, and hangs to her shoulders. Her eyes are a paler shade of her sister's grey, and the bridge of her nose has a slight bump where it's been broken; a minor imperfection that somehow adds to the whole.

She keeps darting quick looks at me, smiling all the while. It puts engaging dimples in her cheeks.

'I'm Gretchen,' she says. It isn't a French name, but as soon as she says it I think it fits. 'I'm glad you're awake. You've been ill for days.'

Now I understand why she looks familiar: the Madonna-like face from my delirium wasn't a hallucination after all. 'You're the one who found me?'

'Yes.' She looks embarrassed but pleased. 'Well, it was Lulu really.'

'Lulu?'

'Our dog. She started barking. I thought she'd seen a rabbit. You looked dead at first, you were so still. There were flies all over you. Then you made a noise, so I knew you weren't.' She

gives me a quick look. 'We had an awful time getting you out of the trap. We had to prise it open with a crowbar. You were struggling and yelling all sorts of things.'

I try to keep my voice level. 'Like what?'

'Oh, just rambling.' She goes to the other side of the bed and leans against the rocking horse. 'You were delirious, and most of it was in English, so I didn't understand. But you stopped when we got your foot out.'

From the way she talks there might be nothing unusual about the situation. 'Who's *we*?'

'Me and Mathilde.'

'Just the two of you? You brought me up here by yourselves?'

'Of course.' Her mouth forms a playful moue. 'You're not so heavy.'

'No, but . . . How come I'm not in hospital? Didn't you phone for an ambulance?'

'We don't have a phone.' She doesn't appear to see anything odd about it. 'Anyway, there was no need. Mathilde knows how to look after wounds and things. Papa was out with Georges so she didn't want to— Well, we managed by ourselves.'

I don't know what she was about to say or who Georges is, but there are too many other things to think about. 'Is Mathilde a nurse?'

'Oh, no. But she cared for Maman before she died. And she's used to looking after the animals when they hurt themselves. The sanglochons are always squabbling or cutting themselves on the fence.'

I haven't a clue what a sanglochon is and don't care. 'You didn't even fetch a doctor?'

'I've told you, there was no need.' She sounds annoyed. 'I don't know why you're getting so upset. You should be grateful we looked after you.'

This whole situation is becoming more surreal, but I'm in

no position to antagonize anyone. 'I am. It's just . . . a bit confusing.'

Mollified, she perches on the rocking horse. Her eyes go to my face. 'What happened to your cheek? Did you fall when you stepped in the trap?'

'Uh . . . I must have.' I'd forgotten the bruising. I touch it, and the soreness sparks memories that set my heart thumping. I drop my hand and try to focus on the present. 'The trap didn't look very old. Any idea what it was doing there?'

She nods. 'It's one of Papa's.'

I don't know what shocks me more, the casual way she admits it or the implication that there are more of them.

'You mean you *knew* about it?'

'Of course. Papa made lots. He's the only one who knows exactly where they are, but he's told us whereabouts in the woods we need to be careful.'

She pronounces it *p'pah*, two soft expellations that push out her lips. The diminutive sounds more reverential than childish, but I've other things on my mind right now.

'What's he trying to catch? Bears?'

I've a vague notion that there might still be brown bears in the Pyrenees, even though that's nowhere near here. I know I'm clutching at straws, but it's the only halfway innocent explanation I can think of.

Gretchen's laughter kills even that faint hope. 'No, of course not! The traps are to stop people trespassing.'

She says it as though it's all perfectly normal. I look at my foot, unwilling to believe it even now. 'You're not serious?'

'The woods are our property. If anyone goes in them it serves them right.' Her manner has cooled, become haughty. 'What were you doing on our land anyway?'

Hiding from a police car. It's starting to seem the lesser of two evils. 'I needed to pee.'

Gretchen giggles, her temper vanishing. ‘Bet you wish you’d waited.’ I manage a weak smile. She considers me, running her fingers over the rocking horse’s coarse mane.

‘Mathilde says you’re a backpacker. Are you here on vacation?’

‘Something like that.’

‘You speak French very well. Do you have a French girlfriend?’

I shake my head.

‘An English one, then?’

‘No. When can I leave?’

Gretchen stops stroking the horse’s mane. ‘Why? Are you in a hurry?’

‘People are expecting me. They’ll be worried.’

The lie sounds unconvincing even to me. She leans back, bracing her arms on the rocking horse so that her breasts push against the T-shirt. I look away.

‘You can’t leave yet,’ she says. ‘You aren’t well enough. You almost died, you know. You should be grateful.’

That’s the second time she’s said that: it almost sounds like a threat. Behind her the trapdoor is still open, and for a moment I consider making a run for it. Then reality kicks in: running isn’t an option at the moment.

‘I’d better get back,’ she says.

The rocking horse nods violently as she stands up. Her jeans mould themselves around her as she bends to lift the heavy trapdoor. She makes more of a production of it than is strictly necessary, and the quick look she shoots my way as she straightens makes me think it isn’t accidental.

‘Can you leave the hatch open?’ I ask. ‘There’s no air up here.’

Gretchen’s laugh is light and girlish. ‘Of course there is, or how could you breathe? You’d be dead.’

The trapdoor settles shut behind her. Even though I'm waiting for it, I still flinch when I hear the bolt slide home.

I don't remember falling asleep. When I wake the loft is dusky and full of shadows. Tilting my watch to catch the light, I see that it's after nine. I listen for some sounds of life outside, but there's nothing. Not a whisper, not so much as a bird or insect.

I feel like the last man on earth.

The tray of food that Gretchen brought is still by the bed. There's a wine bottle filled with water, a bowl of milk and two chunks of what looks to be home-made bread. I'm surprised to find that I'm famished. The milk is cool and thick, with a strong taste that makes me think it might be goat's. I dunk the bread in it, convinced it won't even scratch the surface of my hunger, but whoever prepared it knew better than I do. After a few mouthfuls my appetite withers and dies. I push away what's left and lie back.

Sated for the moment, I stare at the darkening roof beams as my foot throbs like a metronome. I can't decide if I'm a prisoner or a patient. I've obviously been well looked after, and if the farm's wood is full of illegal traps that explains why they didn't want to risk taking me to a hospital.

But after that my reasoning takes a darker track. I'm still locked in a barn, and nobody knows I'm here. What would have happened if I'd got worse? And what happens when I'm recovered? Are they just going to let me walk out of here?

Sweating and fretful, I toss and turn on the lumpy mattress, trying to get comfortable. At some point I drift off to sleep again. I'm back in the copse, scrubbing at the bloodstains on the seat-belt. They won't come off, and the belt is thumping against the seat. It's getting louder, and then I'm awake and in the loft, and the thumping is coming from the floor. There's time to realize

that someone is coming up the steps, then there's the screech of the bolt being drawn and the trapdoor is flung open.

It falls back with a bang. A man stamps up the last few steps, carrying a lamp and a hunting rifle. He's in his fifties, thickset and barrel-bodied with iron-grey hair and a seamed, sun-dried face. Right now it's set in angry lines. The rifle isn't pointed at me but it's held in such a way I can see he's thinking about it.

I back up against the wall as he clomps over the boards. Mathilde hurries up the steps after him.

'Don't! Please!'

He ignores her. He stops at the foot of the bed and glares down at me. The yellow glow from the lamp forms a cavern of light around us, throwing the rest of the room into darkness.

'Get out,' he snarls. There's an aura of suppressed fury about him, a barely checked desire to drag me from the bed.

Mathilde takes hold of his arm. 'At least let him stay till the morning—'

He shrugs her off without taking his eyes from me. 'Get out,' he repeats.

I don't have much choice. I throw back the sheet, pretending to be unconcerned about my nakedness. Hopping over to the commode, I sit down while I get dressed, trying not to wince as my jeans drag over my bandaged foot. There's no way I can force it into a boot, so I cram the damaged one into my rucksack with the rest of my things. That done, I precariously stand up.

The man – I'm guessing he's the father – jerks the stock of the rifle towards the trapdoor. 'Go on.'

'All right, I'm going,' I tell him, trying for a scrap of dignity.

And I want to; I'm just not sure I can make it across the loft. I pause, gathering all my strength for the long trek across the room. Mathilde's face is expressionless, as if she's isolated herself from what's going on.

He takes a step towards me. 'Move.'

I'm in no condition to argue. Gripping the aluminium frame of my rucksack with both hands, I push it in front of me, using it for support. The distance to the trapdoor is covered in a series of slow, painful hops. Mathilde and her father follow. In the light from his lamp I see Gretchen standing on the steps with the baby. Amazingly, it's still asleep, slumped bonelessly across her shoulder. But her eyes are wide, and she looks scared as she moves out of my way.

I push the rucksack right up to the trapdoor's edge. Anger and humiliation have got me this far, but I don't know how I'm going to get any further. The clean clothes are already sticking to me. I can smell my own body, the stink of illness in my sweat. Lowering myself carefully, I sit on the edge of the trapdoor and slip my arms through the rucksack's straps. Then, sliding forwards, I grope with my good foot for a step and put my weight on it. Holding onto the lip of the trapdoor, I feel a sense of triumph as I hop to the next step down. I've barely chance to register the quick footfalls behind me before something thumps into my back and I fly into the darkness.

The breath bursts from me as I tumble to the bottom of the steps. I crash into bottles, scattering them across the floor in a tuneless jangle. I lie where I've fallen, stunned and breathless. The rucksack's dead weight pins me down. I try to push myself up, and then someone is there helping me.

'Are you all right?'

It's Mathilde. Before I can answer her father comes down the steps, the light from his lamp glinting off the scattered bottles. Behind him I can make out Gretchen in the shadows. The baby has woken and started crying, but no one seems to notice. We're on a wooden gallery, a platform midway between the loft and what I guess, beneath the shadows, is the ground. I shrug free of Mathilde's hands and grab a bottle by its neck, struggling to my feet to face him.

'Keep back!' I yell in English, my French deserting me. I raise the bottle warningly, my injured foot clamouring as I totter for balance.

The man reaches the bottom of the steps, the centre of the yellow aura thrown by the lamp. His hands tighten on the rifle as he gives the bottle a contemptuous glance, then starts forward again. Mathilde steps between us.

'Don't. Please.'

I'm not sure which of us she's talking to. But her father stops, glaring at me with silent venom.

'I was trying to leave!' I shout.

My voice is unsteady. The adrenalin has left me weak and trembling. All at once I'm aware of the cool heft of the bottle in my hand. I sway, nauseous, and for an instant I'm back on a dark street, with another scene of blood and violence about to replay itself.

I let the bottle drop. It rolls slowly across the dusty floorboards and bumps against the others with a muted chink. The baby is still howling, struggling in Gretchen's arms, but no one says anything as I lurch towards the next flight of steps. Almost immediately my legs give way and I collapse to my knees. I'm nearly weeping with frustration but I don't have the strength to get up. Then Mathilde is there again, sliding her arm under mine.

'I can manage,' I say petulantly. She doesn't take any notice. She eases me back against a wooden beam before turning to her father.

'He's in no condition to go anywhere.'

His face is made hard by the lamplight. 'That's not my problem. I don't want him here.'

If not for your trap I wouldn't be, I want to say, but nothing comes out. I feel dizzy. I close my eyes and put my head back against the beam, letting their voices swirl around me.

‘He’s a stranger, he wasn’t to know.’

‘I don’t care, he’s not staying.’

‘Would you rather the police pick him up?’

The mention of the police makes me lift my head, but the warning doesn’t seem to have anything to do with me. In my febrile state it seems that they’re locked in some private contest, adults talking over the head of a child who won’t understand. Probably they don’t want the police to know about the traps, I think, but I’m too tired to wonder about it for long.

‘Just let him stay for a few days,’ Mathilde’s voice pleads. ‘Until he’s got his strength back.’

Her father’s answer is a long time coming. He glares at me, then turns away with a contemptuous snort. ‘Do what you like. Just keep him out of my sight.’

He goes to the steps. ‘The lamp,’ Mathilde says, when he reaches them. He pauses, and I can see him contemplating taking it and leaving us without light. Then he sets the lamp down and descends into the darkness below without another word.

Mathilde fetches it and crouches next to me. ‘Can you stand?’

When I don’t respond she repeats it in English. I still don’t say anything, but begin to heave myself up. Without asking, she takes the rucksack from my shoulders.

‘Lean on me.’

I don’t want to, but I’ve no option. Beneath the thin cotton, her shoulder is firm and warm. She puts an arm around my waist. Her head comes to my chin.

Gretchen moves out of the shadows as we reach the bottom of the steps. The baby is still red-faced and teary, but more curious now than upset.

‘I told you to stay in the house with Michel,’ Mathilde says. There’s the slightest edge to her voice.

‘I only wanted to help.’

‘I can manage. Take him back to the house.’

Stone Bruises

‘Why should I have to look after him all the time? He’s your baby.’

‘Please, just do as you’re told.’

Gretchen’s face hardens. She brushes past us, her flip-flops slapping angrily on the steps. I feel rather than hear Mathilde’s sigh.

‘Come on,’ she says, wearily.

She supports most of my weight as we go up the steps and over to the bed. It takes for ever. I collapse onto the mattress, barely aware of her going away again. A minute later she’s back, carrying the rucksack and lamp. She sets both by the bed.

‘Your father didn’t know I was here, did he?’ I say. ‘You didn’t tell him.’

Mathilde is outside the lamp’s circle of light. I can’t make out her face, don’t know if she’s looking at me or not.

‘We’ll talk tomorrow,’ she says, and leaves me alone in the loft.