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Opening extract from

Catch Your Death

Written by

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For **Grenouille**

Smell is one of the most powerful triggers of the human memory.

An odour is a portal to the past, instantly transporting the smeller back to some long forgotten time. The conscious mind might be unaware of the memory, but, just as smelling salts can rouse a person from a dead faint, so smell rouses the subconscious and awakens the dormant memory.

DR DAVIDSON WALTER F MACKINTOSH PHD CBE, *Ulwin University, co-writer of the highly regarded textbook,* Nasal Passages

The Abandoned One

THE GIRL OPENED HER EYES AND BLINKED UP AT THE SKY. From where she lay, curled on the pine-needle floor, she could see pure blue, vivid behind a latticework of black branches. Sensing that she was alone, the girl sat up and looked around. She listened for footsteps, voices, but heard no human sound at all, just the hot lazy birds and insects buzzing and zithering. The picnic things were still laid out and a chain of ants was busy deconstructing the leftovers. She picked up the novel which lay where her father had sat, *The Abandoned One – A Thriller*, and she began to read.

But an hour later and almost halfway through, her parents still had not returned. Had there been some emergency? Was her father looking for help? Her mother waving at passing planes? Had they both been devoured by bears or some other wild thing – some terrible beast that lurked in the faraway forest? Or had they simply forgotten her, left her here? Her four-year-old imagination began to run wild, egged on by the pages of the book.

She calmed herself, took deep breaths, inhaling the forest aroma. The scent of the pine was a comfort, reassuring and familiar, and her common sense drifted back to her. She was aware that the most likely explanation was probably the actual one: her parents had gone to the river to fetch water and had got sidetracked.

She waited, stayed exactly where she was, remembering this was the advice given by the yellow survival manual that sat on top of her father's bureau. But time ticked on and night began to fall and no one came back. She stood up and pushed her feet into her boots, tying them carefully, doubling the knot so they would not come undone.

She pulled on her red waterproof mac with its sensible hood, just in case the weather broke – in the wilderness you could never be sure. She took the winding path down to where the river must certainly be, and as she walked she breathed deeply, filling her tiny lungs with pure forest air, and as she inhaled she smelled a smell so delicious, so like perfume, she couldn't help but follow where her nose wanted to lead her.

She left the path and twisted through the dark trees and the tangles of briars and fallen branches, and came to a place where the moon could reach if only the cloud would let it. Ahead

of her was deathly dark, and so it was with great caution that she stepped into black. As she did so, she felt her coat snag on something sharp; she pulled, but it pulled back – the tiny girl now caged in thorns.

Trapped.

She sensed something ahead of her, quite near. Something alive, something dangerous, something bad. The cloud moved, the moon shone and the girl gasped. For barely three feet away, staring at her with the palest blue eyes and the sharpest glistening teeth, was a wolf.

The girl stood very still, watching the beast, its gaze fixed upon her. She waited; she closed her eyes to block it out. Her heart beating fast and her breathing shallow and unsteady. She listened to the creature and heard the same sound, the same panic, the child and the wolf both locked in fear.

Slowly, the girl began to unpick herself from the brambles, pulling the thorns one by one from her legs, twisting out of her little hooded coat until it was all the briars could claim. She stepped out of the thicket and saw what held the wolf; it was trapped in an ugly mouth of iron teeth. Her four-year-old instinct took hold: it told her to free the desperate wild thing and so, picking up a rock, she struck the trap over and over until it gave, and the bleeding paw of the wolf was released.

For a moment the beast looked at the girl, its eyes in hers, hers in its, and for just a second they knew each other's thoughts.

In the distance a voice called out, two voices. 'Ruby, Ruby! Where are you?'

The wolf held her gaze just a second longer. Its beautiful eyes, crystal blue and ringed with violet, gleamed; then it turned and melted into the darkness of the forest.

And the wolf, like a wisp of smoke, was gone.

An Ordinary Kid

WHEN RUBY WAS SIX, she was entered by the Junior Chess Club, known as The Pawns, in a local city tournament. Game one, she found herself drawn against Mr Karocovskey. Not the opponent anyone would wish to be sitting opposite for their very first public game, at least not unless that person wanted to get home early so they could watch *Tiny Toons*. Mr Karocovskey had been a big champion in his heyday and had played chess against many famous Russians. Now he was an old man with a sharp brain, not as sharp as it had been, but he was still a grandmaster and the best chess player in the state.

Ruby looked at him across the table. He had a nice face – his eyes, watery and grey, looked like they might have seen the woes of the world. This man knew what it was to yearn for something and struggle to get it.

She could see what he was going to do ten moves ahead. She lost the game skilfully. Mr Karocovskey was very generous about his win; he smiled kindly, shook her hand and thanked her for being such a challenging opponent. He was a gracious winner, a good sport.

Seventeen-year-old Kaspar Peterson smirked. He wasn't surprised she'd lost: he didn't see there was any way this squirt of a six-year-old girl was going to win against a champion – she wasn't going to win against anyone. Ruby Redfort challenged Kaspar to a game. He casually accepted.

She beat him in five easy moves. He was an ungracious loser, a bad sport.

Ruby had been reluctant to beat old Mr Karocovskey; she had no such qualms about thrashing Kaspar Peterson.

Some several years later...

Chapter 1.
A positive mental attitude

'THE ONLY THING TO FEAR IS THE BLUE ALASKAN WOLF, which by the way doesn't exist.'

These words were spoken by Samuel Colt, a former special agent turned environmentalist. Now he had taken up work as a Spectrum survival trainer. He was a tall, well-built man, getting on in years, but still in good shape, the kind of guy you wanted to have on side, the kind of guy you would be relieved to have show up, and the kind of guy you would hope to see standing on the horizon if you found yourself lost – unless, of course, he was the reason you had tried to get lost in the first place. If so, your heart might sink more than a little.

Colt had a large grey moustache and shoulder-length hair. He wore a wide-brimmed hat, and clothes that gave him the look of a trapper – he wouldn't have looked out of place had he travelled back in time a hundred years. He had seen it all and survived it all and he knew what he was talking about. There

was nothing unfriendly about Sam Colt, a little straight talking perhaps, but never cruel.

'Cruelty has no place in the wilderness. You sometimes need to be single-minded, tough as an old lasso, but you don't gotta be cruel.' He believed in that. 'You don't kill unless you have to and if you have to you make it quick.'

'Blue wolves you don't gotta concern yourselves with,' he continued, 'but regular wolves? Be prepared for those fellas. My best advice: avoid them. You don't seek 'em out, you don't feed 'em, you don't pet 'em, you don't look 'em in the eye. That goes double for bears; bears are a whole lot more trouble than wolves and wolves are trouble enough.'

'Who's going to be dumb enough to feed a bear or a wolf?' whispered trainee Lowe.

'You'd be surprised,' said Colt.

Samuel Colt, among all his other fine attributes, had very acute hearing and trainee Lowe was somewhat taken aback.

'You don't clean up after a meal, that's feeding; you're leaving a trail from him to you and, I assure you, you don't want to do that.'

'But what if you do run into a pack of wolves?' asked trainee Dury. 'What then?'

Today was a theory day and the trainees were indoors, taking

notes and asking questions. There was a lot of studying to do, though Colt's job was mainly to teach the practical stuff. He preferred that: being outdoors was natural – inside, not so good.

Sam Colt scratched his head and sighed. 'If you should find yourself in this predicament, then there are a few ways you might handle things.' He scanned the trainees to see who might know. 'Redfort? Give me two pieces of good advice.'

Ruby leaned back in her chair. 'If you're able to, you wanna get up a tree pretty darned fast, but don't count on the wolves leaving you to enjoy the view; they've been known to sit it out, waiting for people to come down. Crocodiles behave the same way, though if you have a wolf on your tail then you're unlikely to have a crocodile after you, so I guess you can tick that worry off your list.' She paused before adding, 'Only run for it if you're certain you're gonna reach that tree before the wolf reaches you. Running gets it all charged up – brings out the hunting instinct.'

Colt nodded. 'That's correct.'

Ruby knew all this stuff from the many survival books she had read over the years. She had written up some of these survival tips, the ones she considered particularly useful, in a pea-green notebook Most of them she now knew off by heart and, as Colt went through the various dos and don'ts of outdoor survival, Ruby found herself mentally replaying what she had learned.

SURVIVAL SUGGESTION #7:

✖ *Dealing with dangerous wildlife*

1. WOLVES

☛ **SURVIVAL RULE 1:**

Keep a clean camp. *Wolves have an exceptional sense of smell: they can smell prey from up to 1.75 miles.*

☛ **SURVIVAL RULE 2:**

Keep a fire burning. *Wolves don't like fire.*

☛ **SURVIVAL RULE 3:**

Do not run. *Unless you are sure you can run at over thirty miles an hour (no one has yet).*

☛ **SURVIVAL RULE 4:**

Stick with the group. *Wolves are less likely to attack if you are in a large group than if you are alone, so don't wander off by yourself.*

'There are many theories about these creatures,' Colt continued. 'Some say, in places where they've been aggressively hunted, wolves remain wary of man, preferring to avoid any human interaction at all. Others say that the wolf is a ruthless predator and will attack if it gets any opportunity. Either way, it don't matter. My advice is the same: keep away from wolves and try to make sure they keep away from you.'

Ruby was thinking back to her own wolf encounter a long time ago on Wolf Paw Mountain: she had not followed any kind of advice, but had done the very worst thing as far as the textbooks were concerned, yet she had lived to tell the tale – how, she had no idea.

Unlike the other trainee agents, Ruby Redfort was not sleeping over at Mountain Ranch Camp. This was due to the fact that, unlike them, she was still attending Junior High. This made her task a little more complicated than anyone else's: she was still expected to make it to class each school day, get her homework in on time and show up every afternoon for survival school.

To make it more complicated still, no one, not the school, not her family or friends, was aware that she had been recruited by the secret agency known to only a few insiders (and a handful of evil geniuses) as Spectrum.

The division Ruby worked for, Spectrum 8, was run by LB, a woman who took no nonsense and no prisoners. She was not someone who tolerated mistakes or stupidity, and mistakes as far as LB was concerned were stupidity. For this reason it was credit to Ruby that, even though she had made more than one or two errors in her short Spectrum life, she was still an agent who had lived to tell the tale (had there been someone she was authorised to tell it to).

It wasn't easy, but Ruby Redfort wasn't going to complain about it – all she had ever wanted was to work for a secret agency, not just as a code breaker, but as a field agent, out there facing danger and experiencing adventure. She had a lot of tests to take before this dream would become a reality and she was determined not to blow it.

So, every day, Ruby left school, dropping by her home before heading to a secret location where she would get picked up by a Spectrum agency helicopter and dropped at the mountain camp. Every evening the helicopter would take her home again.

That night, after she had got home and changed back into her regular clothes, jeans and T-shirt (this one bearing the words ***trust me, I'm a doctor***), Ruby went downstairs to the kitchen to grab some dinner.

Her mother frowned a little when she caught sight of the

T-shirt, but decided to let it go. 'Your hair looks nice honey,' she said.

'How was school?' asked her father.

Ruby shrugged. 'Oh, you know, schooly.'

'Did the *Evening Bark* arrive yet?' asked Brant.

'I don't know, I didn't notice,' said Ruby.

'I'll go see,' he said. Brant Redfort went to the front step to pick up the evening newspaper, the *Twinford Hound* (the Redforts always *referred* to it as the *Evening Bark* because it tended to be full of loud and sensational news).

Brant walked into the kitchen, reading the paper, his brow a little furrowed.

'Bad news?' asked Sabina.

'Warning of forest fires,' sighed Brant. 'The mountains and canyons are tinder dry and unless we get some rain the chances of the forests going up in flames are high.'

'Oh dear,' said Sabina, 'I don't like the sound of that, not one little bit.'

Brant's face brightened. 'Hey honey, you're going to like the sound of this.'

'Oh yes?' said Sabina, sitting up in her chair as if she needed to really concentrate.

'Melrose Dorff are having a launch.'

'Oh fabulous!' exclaimed Sabina. 'What are they launching?'

'The Lost Perfume of Marie Antoinette 1770,' said Brant. 'It's French.'

'Oh, French, I like the sound of that!'

'Didn't I tell you that you would? Not that a whole gallon of perfume could smell better than you do,' he said, sniffing Sabina's neck.

'Oh brother!' muttered Ruby.

Brant continued reading: "Madame Swann, perfumer to the rich and tasteful, famous for her discerning nose, has brought her recreation of Queen Marie Antoinette's exclusive perfume from Paris to the West Coast. Let Them Smell Roses, *the Lost Perfume of Marie Antoinette 1770, will be launched at a fabulous soirée where attendees will also be able to view some of the ill-fated Queen's most precious jewellery. An exciting announcement will be made on the night – it will be strictly an invitation-only event."*

Sabina looked forlorn and then puzzled. 'But why haven't we been invited?' she said. 'I mean we usually are.'

This was an understatement: the Redforts always were.

'Don't worry sweetheart,' said Brant, 'I'm sure there'll be a logical explanation. Maybe they haven't mailed the invitations yet.'

'I hope you're right Brant. I don't know what I'd do if I didn't get invited to this particular launch party.'

Ruby rolled her eyes, but said nothing.

After she had wolfed down her supper, she went back up to her room. She was keen to do more reading before she turned in for the night. She had been studying hard for the past weeks – reading everything she could, absorbing it, digesting it and living by it.

What she didn't know was that it was precisely this rigid adherence to the facts she had learned and the rules she had made that was going to lead to her downfall.

Chapter 2.
The whole foraging deal

ON DAY SEVEN SAM COLT BEGAN BY TALKING ABOUT BASIC SURVIVAL SKILLS.

'Anyone want to tell me the two most important things needed in order to survive out in the wild... other than water?' They had spent the first week mastering the skill of locating water, how to ensure the water was safe and how to make water when there was none.

'Fire and shelter,' said Ruby.

'Correct again Redfort. Fire is your friend, except when it gets out of control. You have a responsibility never to let your fire get away from you. Forest fires you can't always prevent, but you can ensure your campfire doesn't cause one.'

Ruby didn't need reminding about this warning. It was:

IS IT POSSIBLE TO EXTEND THIS (ideally 3) AS I CAN'T MAKE THE SURVIVAL FORMATTING WORK on a page turn

SURVIVAL SUGGESTION #1:

✖ *Basic Skills*

2. FIRE

☛ **SURVIVAL RULE 5:**

Only build a fire in a place where you can keep it contained.

'Once you've found the right place to *build* your fire,' Colt went on, 'and once you've secured the surrounding area, tinder is what you'll be needing next. Basically, you wanna find stuff that burns real easy and real quick. Tree bark, dried grass, paper – even cotton from your clothing if you're desperate – all make good tinder. Or you could crush up pine cones or birds' nests. Next on the list is kindling, then slow-burning fuel, meaning logs. Once you have all your materials lined up ready, all you gotta do is set fire to 'em... easier said than done.'

He smiled and walked towards the door. 'Since making fire is just about the most important skill you need, you better get practising.'

The trainees all followed Sam Colt outside and spent the rest of that day trying to make a spark. As Colt had warned, it was 'easier said than done'. All in all, it took about a week to master fire.

Day fourteen, after school, and Ruby was sitting in the kitchen of Green-wood House, the Redforts' stylish, modern Twinford home, making herself a little snack. The toaster pinged and up popped her two slices of toast: both were the bearers of unhappy news. Unlike most people's toasters, Ruby Redfort's doubled as a fax machine and was capable of delivering important messages from Spectrum when you had just sat down to eat a delicious snack.

Ruby picked up the toast. The message was grilled into one side.

The first piece said:

'Foraging: one hour from now.'

The other said:

'Don't spoil your appetite.'

Ruby had been waiting for this day to arrive with a particular

sort of dread. Having done some reading up on foraging, she couldn't say it really appealed to her. She looked at the clock: she still had forty minutes before she needed to head off, still time to ask Mrs Digby's expert advice on the subject.

Mrs Digby had been with the Redfort family since before Ruby was born and with Ruby's mother's family forever or thereabouts.

'I know all there is to know about mushrooms and toadstools, which ones will kill you and which won't,' Mrs Digby said.

'You know a whole lot about the wild Mrs Digby, that's for darn sure.'

'The Digbys have always lived off the land and have always had it hard. We had it hard when we sailed over with the Mayflower and we've had it hard ever since, years and years of hardship and years of living off the free stuff that nature provided, no matter how disgusting, which it's not unreasonable to say since it certainly can be at times.'

'Just how poor were you Mrs Digby?' Ruby asked this question not because she didn't know the answer, but because the housekeeper enjoyed telling her.

'Not a bean to rub against another bean,' Mrs Digby confirmed. 'Which is why we had to forage. Mostly it was a cornucopia of goodness, but occasionally it was enough to turn a sailor's stomach.'

Mrs Digby was an excellent cook (though not a fashionable one) and she knew how to rustle up a supper fit for a president from 'a dried-up onion and a pile of leaves', if that's all the ingredients there were.

'Never turn your nose up at an edible mushroom. They might look like pixie furniture, but I've always told you Ruby: eat your mushrooms and you won't go far wrong – full of protein is what they are. That's why all these vegetarian types go cuckoo for 'em.'

Ruby checked her book. 'You're not wrong. It says here, mushrooms are rich in most vitamins, especially B and C, and they contain nearly all the major minerals, particularly potassium and phosphorus.'

Mrs Digby was a little surprised and, in her own words, tickled that Ruby was taking an interest in the theory of food and cookery, though she would have been more tickled if Ruby would take on the practical side too.

'Since you're so interested in cooking all of a sudden, how about you take over stirring this pot,' said Mrs Digby, 'while I read the funnies for five minutes?'

Ruby checked her watch. Still thirty-nine minutes before she had to be at the helipad. She rolled her eyes and got stirring.

Back at camp, some hours later, Ruby was busy trying to concoct a stew out of some unappealing roots and some ugly-looking fungi – Colt assured her none of it was poisonous; it was important to get this right since if you got it wrong you might wind up as extinct as the Blue Alaskan wolf.

'I hope you all have understood the need to be getting au fait with roots and berries and wild growing things,' said Colt. 'Things you might not ordinarily want to put under your nose, let alone on your tongue.'

Ruby wriggled slightly in her seat; for all her research, one of her least favourite things about survival training was the whole eating deal. She wasn't particularly crazy about chowing down on roots and foliage, nor did she like the idea of resorting to grubs when desperation struck. During the hours of training, she longed for her CheeseOs and her Slush-pops, but what she yearned for more than anything was her banana milk, hard to find in the wild.

Today she had spent several hours foraging and several more trying to work out what to do with this unappetising harvest. Now the meal was as cooked as it was ever going to be, she closed her eyes and raised her fork to her mouth.

'Redfort, I'm guessing you don't know the difference between a toadstool and a mushroom... or perhaps you're done with surviving?' The voice was one Ruby recognised from her dive training in Hawaii.

'Holbrook, if you're trying to get your hands on my chow, you're outta luck buster.'

'You call that supper Redfort? I'd sooner boil up my socks than chow down on what you've cooked up.'

'I'm sure they'd taste good 'n' cheesy,' said Ruby.

Despite the way they spoke to each other, they actually got on like a forest fire.

Ruby didn't poison herself with her stew, though she couldn't help feeling that Holbrook's socks indeed might have been less disgusting. Even the cube of Hubble-Yum she spent the next hour chewing on couldn't quite eradicate the taste of that stew.

She was relieved when the helicopter dropped her home late that night and she could raid Mrs Digby's larder. She found a tray of fresh-baked cookies with a note from the housekeeper that read: hands off kid.

The following day's challenge was to build a shelter. Colt spent the morning trying to impress upon his recruits just how important it was to keep warm and dry when out in the wilderness.

'You get yourself soaked to the skin, and cold as an iced-up

river, and you're exposing yourself to all kinds of trouble. You need to build a shelter and get dry. The act of building the shelter will keep you warm. You don't get warm and dry and you're nigh on likely to get sick, and if you get sick in the wilds that makes you vulnerable and when you're vulnerable you have a pretty fair chance of dying.'

His manner was gruff, no frills, which didn't matter because survival didn't require frills.

'Knives, flashlights, matches, waterproofs, they're all frills,' was something Colt might say.

Holbrook and Ruby teamed up for the shelter building; they also worked together on the canoe hollowing: both disciplines took a lot of concentration, not just energy but skill. Once they were done, they took the new canoe out on the lake to see if it would float; it did.

'You know what Redfort? I take my hat off to you – you're not the sap I thought you were gonna be,' laughed Holbrook.

'I guess that's lucky Holbrook, because you're a deal more feeble than I'd expected and I hadn't expected much.'

This was when Holbrook decided to roll the canoe and dunk them both in the lake. It rolled without any trouble and though Ruby was kind of mad at him for getting the better of her she couldn't help being sort of proud that this incredible boat had been created with her own two hands – with the help of Holbrook of course; she had to concede that.

Ruby Redfort had always been sure of her mental abilities, but had not realised she could turn her hand to other more practical skills. Right now, sitting soaked through in her hand-carved canoe, she felt like the world was her oyster.

It was a good feeling. But not one that was going to last.