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AIDEN

I DON'T HEAR about Lizzie until the police knock on the front door. I'm just in from training, caked in mud, and the shower is running, the bathroom full of steam. I'm about to peel off my soaked shirt when Mum calls up the stairs.

'Aiden, can you come down here?'

There's something weird about her voice – it's sort of restrained and polite, kind of like her phone voice. That wouldn't be that unusual; in the three years since we moved here, I've heard her use her phone voice a lot. Everyone uses phone voices in Abbots Grey. It's a phone voice kind of place.

But this is not her phone voice at all. It's a voice I haven't heard for a long time.

She sounds scared.

I turn off the shower and go down. As I pass the mirror on the stairs, I catch a glimpse of myself – hair crusted with mud, face bruised from a collision last week with Wellsy, our left-back. Rain bats at the window and the October sky is streaked with Halloween orange.

They're in the living room, two of them: a guy and a woman. They're both in suits, and both looking uncomfortable on the

edge of the sofa closest to the door. I can't blame them – the sofas aren't very welcoming; big white square things with hardly any cushioning. Kevin, my stepdad, has weird taste in furniture; in fact, the whole house is pretty devoid of soft edges.

Mum is standing by the window, chewing at the edge of one of her nails. She does this when she's nervous and my heart starts to thump. The woman's radio stutters and she flicks the volume right down to off.

'Hi, Aiden,' the guy says. He's tall, blond and big; wide shoulders, massive hands. Eyes small and silverish. He looks at me and he doesn't smile. 'We need to talk to you about a friend of yours.'

'Okay,' I say. I don't feel nervous, only curious. None of my friends are the type to get into trouble with the police – that's why I like them. I look from the policewoman to Mum and back again. I want to sit down but I'm too filthy to go anywhere near the white sofa.

'Aiden, I'm DS Mahama and this is DCI Hunter,' the woman says to me. 'We need to ask you if you've spoken to Lizzie Summersall today? Online or in person?' She has smooth dark brown skin and short black hair tied back in a ponytail. Her eyes have purplish bags underneath them. 'Or yesterday?'

I shake my head. 'Lizzie? No.'

'When was the last time you saw her?'

I have to think about this. 'I think she was in assembly on Thursday.' It's now Sunday. 'Is she okay?'

'Lizzie's missing,' the bloke – Hunter – says. 'We've been looking through her laptop and you two exchanged a lot of messages.'

‘We used to be close,’ I say, but I’m having trouble concentrating. *Lizzie. Missing.*

‘Used to be?’ Hunter cocks his head at me, like a dog. ‘Until when?’

‘I don’t know.’ Suddenly I don’t know what to do with my hands. ‘We had a lot of lessons together last year.’

‘But you’re not as friendly now?’ Mahama asks.

‘No.’ *Why am I sweating?* ‘We’re not in the same lessons any more. Not since we started A Levels.’

‘Aiden, do you have any idea where Lizzie might be?’ Mahama’s voice is soft, friendly. If it’s meant to reassure me, it doesn’t work.

‘No.’ My hands are doing weird things of their own accord now. I kind of want to sit on them. ‘Like I say, we’re not close or anything. It was just –’

‘Yes?’ Hunter pins me with his stare.

‘I don’t know,’ I say. ‘We were just flirting, I guess. For a while.’

‘Just *flirting?*’ Mahama frowns, like it’s not a word she’s heard before.

Mum gets up suddenly from her perch on the windowsill. ‘Excuse me, but is this an official interview?’

She’s still using her phone voice, but she’s got her arms folded and she is not smiling. In Abbots Grey, this is pretty much as hostile as it gets. Both the cops know it, and they aren’t smiling either.

‘Not at all, Mrs Kendrick,’ Hunter says. ‘We’re just making Aiden aware of the situation, is all. We’re letting all of Lizzie’s friends know, in case anyone’s heard anything from her.’ His eyes slide to me, and he gives a faint smirk. ‘There is a possibility

we'll request Aiden's presence at the police station for a more formal chat. Just so we can get all the facts down on tape.'

'Well, please do let us know if that's the case,' Mum says, moving towards the door. 'As you can see, Aiden really needs to get in the shower, and I need to get dinner on.'

It's an expert dismissal, totally polite and totally impossible to refuse, and I feel so grateful to my mum, so protected, like I'm five years old.

That feeling lasts until she shuts the front door behind them. We watch the panda car reversing down the drive. We watch Hunter watching the house the whole way. And then my mum turns to me, her eyes cold and hard.

'What the hell have you got yourself into?' she demands.

I MET LIZZIE on my first day at my new school, St. Agnes's – Aggers as we all call it, and not affectionately. It was a Tuesday in September, but the end of September, which meant term had already started and I had to stand up at the beginning of each class and be introduced, be the New Guy. Nobody spoke to me; everyone was talking about me.

I was sulking, because the way GCSE subjects were grouped at Aggers was different to my old school and I'd ended up with the choice of drama or RE for my final subject, neither of which interested me at all. I went for drama in the end, thinking that if I worked hard enough in the others, my drama grade wouldn't matter anyway.

I guess that's why I wasn't paying all that much attention when I went into that class and the teacher, Mrs Husveld, with her big crazy cloud of red wavy hair, made me stand at the front and introduce myself. Lizzie says she was in my group that first day, and that we had to take a story from a newspaper Husveld (Hussie, as everyone called her, and that *was* affectionately) gave us, and act it out, but I don't remember any of that.

I *do* remember a time a week or maybe two after that, when Hussie gave us all a soliloquy to read. They were all Shakespeare, and she gave Lizzie one that was Ophelia from *Hamlet*. I hadn't paid Lizzie much attention before then; she's small and pale – a bit, you know, mousy, I guess, and pretty quiet in class. But when she stood up and started reading, everyone got really quiet. The drama studio is painted totally black, and with a single spotlight on her she didn't look mousy, she looked... gold. Like she was made of gold. She read, and her voice wasn't loud – Ophelia's not exactly a shouter, I suppose – but it filled up the studio and I swear nobody was even breathing as they listened. I can't remember most of the lines, but I remember the last one, and I remember the way it carried through the room, the sadness in her voice.

*'Oh, woe is me,
T'have seen what I have seen, see what I see!'*

She looked up, and she smiled, and everyone clapped. I clapped too, and I smiled at her, and I thought to myself, *This girl's full of surprises.*

THE POLICE CALL first thing the next morning to 'invite' me to the station for a 'chat' that afternoon. They say three o'clock, which means I have to leave history early. I don't tell anyone why except my teacher, Dr Radclyffe, but someone must overhear because before I've even got down to my car, people are texting me.

Well, *person*, not people: Scobie, my best friend.

Whole class talking about you instead of Hitler, it says. **Hope it goes ok.**

Great. That's just great.

I drive to the station and I remember what Mum's told me. *You've got nothing to hide. Just help if you can.*

I'd prefer it if she was here next to me, saying it in person, now she's calmed down about it all. But after he insisted this morning, it's Kevin who meets me outside, hands in his pockets in a catalogue pose that's supposed to say 'relaxed'.

'Alright, mate,' he says, and I nod. He's always called me 'mate', ever since he first came round to the house to meet me, the third time he took Mum out on a date. It doesn't sound right in his posh accent, but it isn't annoying like it might be

from someone else, because it's always been obvious that's exactly what he wants us to be. Friends. 'Don't be nervous,' he says now, and he claps me on the back in a pally way.

'Just want to get it over with,' I say. 'I don't even know why they want to talk to me.'

'Okay. Let's see what they've got to say.' He ushers me towards the door.

The police station is a little building, white stone and black door, an old-fashioned streetlight outside. Just like everything in Abbots Grey, it's charming and fake, dressed up to hide what's underneath.

The man behind the desk has a big, jowly face like a bulldog's. He types something into his computer with one stubby finger, a mug of builder's tea in the other hand. The mug has a blue teddy bear on it and the words 'World's Best Grandpa'.

'Kendrick?' he says, and I nod. 'Take a seat.'

The chairs are blue plastic, the kind we have at school. It's just a small waiting room, with two seats either side and a payphone on one wall. Opposite us is a noticeboard made of cork. There are only two notices on it: one advertising The Policeman's Ball, a fundraiser for the hospital in King's Lyme, the next town over. The other is a poster about Legal Aid. As if anyone in this town can't afford a lawyer.

'How was school?' Kevin asks.

'Weird,' I say, which feels like an understatement. 'Everyone's talking about Lizzie.'

He nods. 'Everyone in town, too.' He looks at me. 'Sorry. You must be worried about her.'

I look at the noticeboard again. 'You think she's okay?'

Kevin looks down at the floor between his pristine Converse. He has about twenty pairs, which he wears with everything: suits, chinos, jeans. It's like his thing. His I'm-young-cool-and-an-internet-millionaire thing. 'I'm sure she is, mate.'

Even though Kevin's a nice guy and he's been good to me, I suddenly want my dad. It's kind of embarrassing, like I'm seven not seventeen, but I do. I want to be back in London with him, not here in this waiting room with its ticking clock and its chemical clean smell.

'Aiden Kendrick,' a voice says. I look up and it's the guy cop from the other day. He smiles like we're old friends.

'Kevin Cooper,' Kevin says, getting up to shake his hand. 'I'm Aiden's stepfather.'

'DCI Hunter. Come this way, please.'

He shows us into an office; a normal, plain office with a desk and chairs and a potted plant in the corner. Not like the interviews you see on *EastEnders* or anything like that; there's no mirror, no steel furniture. There *is* some kind of recording machine on the desk, though.

'You've already met DS Mahama,' Hunter says. 'She'll be sitting in on our conversation today.'

Conversation. Not interview. That's kind of reassuring. Mahama gives us a friendly smile, also reassuring.

'Please, take a seat,' Hunter says. Phone voice.

I sit down, glad now that Kevin is with me. He leans back in his seat, relaxed and professional, like we're here to discuss a new website or app. It makes me relax too.

‘So, Aiden.’ Hunter laces his fingers and rests his chin on them. It’s a weirdly delicate movement; it doesn’t suit him – his meaty jaw resting on big, hairy-knuckled hands. ‘We want to talk to you about your relationship with Lizzie.’

‘It wasn’t a relationship,’ I say. ‘We were friends.’

‘Aiden,’ Mahama says. Her voice is soft and calm. ‘Let me say, before we go any further, that you are not a suspect. We just want to find Lizzie. Any help you can give us would be really great.’

It hits me again. *Lizzie is missing*. ‘I want to help,’ I say. ‘But I don’t know anything.’

Hunter looks down at a file in front of him. From my position on the other side of the big desk, I can’t see what’s in it.

‘You and Lizzie talked a lot online, particularly between January and July of last year,’ he says, after a while. ‘You want to tell us how that came about?’

I think of Lizzie in the drama studio lights, gold and quiet and surprising. ‘We had drama together,’ I say.

Three pairs of eyes look at me. It’s clearly not enough of an answer.

‘We worked on the summer show together,’ I say. ‘Twice. We helped each other learn our lines.’

‘They were quite intimate conversations,’ Hunter says. He looks as though the only thing he’s been intimate with is a bench press. ‘Or, as you say, *flirting*.’

I look down at the floor, and I see Kevin’s Converse twitch, just a little. Nervous. I don’t reply.

‘So, why did all the flirting stop after July?’ Hunter asks. He looks sideways at Mahama and I feel, for the first time,

really afraid. They're reading something into this, something that isn't there, and I don't know what to say to make it go away.

'It was the end of school,' I try. 'We didn't see each other every day, so I guess it fizzled out.'

Hunter looks at me for a long minute, his bloodshot eyes locked on mine. I don't know what he's searching for, and I don't know if he finds it.

It's Mahama who breaks the silence. 'Aiden,' she says, 'have you heard Lizzie mention friends she met online before?'

I shake my head, happy to break away from Hunter's gaze. 'No. Never.'

Now, they're both studying me. 'Has she ever talked about leaving Abbots Grey?' Hunter asks, and I want to say, *Why are you asking me, you've got it all there in front of you*, because it feels so exposed, so private. But instead I just look down at the floor and think.

'She talked about drama school a couple of times,' I say. 'She wanted to be an actress.'

'Like her sister?' Mahama asks, and Kevin scoffs. We all look at him.

'I wouldn't call that acting,' he says, looking a bit embarrassed.

'That's the only time?' Hunter asks, after a beat. 'She just talked about leaving to study after A Levels?'

'Yeah,' I say, and I'm not sure what they're getting at.

'She never talked about running away?' Mahama says. 'Or going to meet someone?'

I shake my head.

‘Officers,’ Kevin says, still using his It’s Business voice, the one I hear him using on the phone to any of his hundreds of employees. ‘Is this a case of running away? Or something more serious?’

‘I’m afraid,’ Hunter says, ‘we’re not currently at liberty to say.’