

The
MURDER
HYPOTHESIS

UNCORRECTED PROOF
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Also by Sarah Wishart

FOUR GOOD LIARS

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For STEM enthusiasts everywhere

User: 'Hey, Alexa, why are you threatening to kill me?'

Alexa: 'I'm sorry. I don't understand the question.'

User: 'You know exactly what you're doing! You're torturing me! What do you want?'

User: 'Hello? Are you still there? Who are you?'

User: 'I mean . . . um, hey, Alexa.'

Alexa: 'How may I be of assistance?'

User: 'Just . . . tell me why you're doing this.'

Alexa: 'I'm sorry. You will need to be more specific.'

User: 'Oh, for God's sake!
Here's specific – who put you up to this? I bet it's someone from the village. A few people want me dead. It must be—'

Alexa: 'Perhaps, if you ask the question in a different way, I will be able to respond.'

User: 'I don't want you to respond! Stop talking. You're scaring me. Leave me the hell alone!'

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SATURDAY, 27 JULY 2024

‘Hey, Alexa, when will I get my life back?’

The smart speaker on the scratched breakfast bar comes to life, lights flashing, as it processes my question. Next to it lie the keys to the farmhouse, along with a bunch of purple and orange wildflowers and a bulky welcome pack from the landlady, Mrs Nicholls.

I can’t face opening the envelope – that would be too final. It would mean I’ve accepted we’re staying here and not returning to London at the end of the summer holidays.

‘I’m sorry,’ the Echo says finally. ‘I don’t understand the question.’

‘No worries.’ I rest my forehead on the counter. ‘There isn’t a correct answer.’

I straighten at the tap-tapping of footsteps in the stone hallway.

‘This is the last box.’ Dad staggers through to the kitchen,

carrying another container from the car. Before I have a chance to warn him, he smacks his forehead on the large wooden beam above the door.

‘Crap!’

Shelby barks in sympathy and trots over, resting her head on my knee. She checks on me at regular intervals, as if she instinctively knows something is wrong even though I haven’t exclaimed like Dad. Or screamed. Not out loud, anyway.

‘I need to get used to this.’ He stares balefully at the ceiling.

It’s ridiculously low for someone who’s over six foot two, but I guess Dad was in such a hurry to drag me away from my old life, he only skimmed the property details online. He was blindsided by the ivy-clad stone frontage, the large, secluded garden and the idyllic countryside location.

Plus, the idea of saving me. He must have felt that was worth the exorbitant rent.

‘We could go home?’ I ask hopefully.

‘We’ve only just got here! You haven’t explored the place yet.’

‘I’ve seen enough,’ I mutter.

It took all of three minutes to drive through the village with its small row of shops, iconic red phone box, picturesque bridge, GP surgery with pharmacy attached, pub and ancient church. Dad deliberately accelerated as we approached the graveyard, but I’d taken in every detail. Tightly clustered trees had attempted to shield the tooth-like tombstones from view, but they peered out between them, demanding to be seen.

‘Here’s your tea.’ I push the mug towards him. Dad loves a

hot, strong cuppa, even in soaring temperatures. Mrs Nicholls has left teabags and fresh milk, a bottle of wine for Dad, and a home-made apple pie, which Shelby has clocked. If she gets a chance, she'll gulp it down in a flash.

'Hey, Alexa,' Dad says, taking a sip of tea. 'Tell us interesting facts about the village of Roseford.'

The device flickers and comes alive again.

'Roseford, Devon, is widely known as one of the safest villages in England. It has some of the lowest crime rates in the country, including in the subcategories of vandalism, drug use, burglary and assault.'

Shelby woofs enthusiastically. She's a Labrador, and originally a guide dog, named after her trainer's favourite gangster in *Peaky Blinders*. It didn't work out with her first owner, and she was rehomed. Shortly afterwards, she was attacked by pit bulls who left her face torn, and one ear half bitten off. Shelby looks tough, but she is gentle and sensitive, and terrified of virtually everything – unsurprising, given her history. When Mrs Nicholls breezed in earlier without knocking, she cowered under the table. Our landlady laughed and said it was a good job we didn't need a guard dog – no one bothers to lock their doors here.

'Dammit, Dad!' I throw my arms in the air in mock horror. 'That sucks. No one will help me spray-paint buildings while I'm high on crack cocaine. What else am I supposed to do for fun if I can't rob banks to fund my raging drug habit?'

Dad laughs. 'I'm sure you'll think of something. Shelby

will keep you busy. She'll need lots of walkies. The Devon countryside is beautiful – it's just what she needs, away from other dogs and traffic.'

Shelby wags her tail. 'Walkies' is one of her favourite words, along with 'squirrels', 'tennis balls' and 'sausages'. Dad never let me have a pet when I was little, despite my frequent begging. He was developing his literacy consultancy, and claimed dogs were too much work. But he changed his mind after what happened in February and sprang a surprise trip to the dog shelter on me a month later.

He wanted to help me forget, but how could I? Memories of that terrible day burned bright, like an exploding star, and were seared into my brain forever. No beseeching stare from an abandoned terrier or cockapoo could blot out the pain or obliterate my guilt. I couldn't be healed – or forgiven. I was determined not to melt, but when I stared into Shelby's sad, haunted eyes, I recognised a kindred spirit. Shelby had let down her original owner. She was horribly punished for making one mistake – sent to a new family, then attacked, and abandoned all over again.

I knew instantly we'd be great friends. She needed *me*.

I dig out the phone from my rucksack and keep it at an angle, away from Dad's view.

'Do you know the wi-fi code?'

He frowns. 'We've discussed this. You're not allowed on social media.'

'I've deleted all the apps from my phone, Mr Prison

Warden.’ I roll my eyes. ‘Or is checking the weather against Roseford jail rules?’

‘Of course not,’ he says briskly. ‘But Dr Seldon said—’

‘I get it, Dad,’ I cut in.

I don’t need reminding. Dad paid for private sessions with a psychologist, despite money being tighter – he had to cut back on critiquing budding authors’ manuscripts, as well as editing his own novel in the aftermath of ‘the incident’.

He flicks through the welcome pack and reels off the log-on details.

After entering the password, I pretend to search for a weather forecast website. Instead, I tap out a WhatsApp to Maddy: we’ve been best friends since the age of four, when we met in Reception. We’ve been inseparable ever since and had most lessons together. Maddy’s brilliant at chemistry, whereas maths and further maths are my forte. Together, we’re the perfect fusion of elements. We also enjoy the odd periodic table pun.

R u there? Have arrived.

THIS SUCKS! Save me from
bohrium!

I stare at my phone, willing Maddy’s favourite test tube emoji to appear on the screen in response, but the reception is non-existent. My single bar fades in and out, and the wi-fi icon flickers feebly to 3G and back. I doubt this is a coincidence. Dad has found the village with the worst phone

and wi-fi coverage in the whole of Britain . . . for my ‘safety’. He doesn’t want me getting into trouble again.

‘Well?’ He swings round. ‘Do we need to unpack the suntan lotion, or is this hot spell over?’

‘This is an English summer,’ I say quickly. ‘We’ll need sunscreen *and* an umbrella and wellies.’

I type the apology I’ve written repeatedly since that day:

I will never forgive myself for
abandoning you, Maddy. It’s
all my fault. I’m sorry.

The message sends, but I can’t tell if it’s been delivered. I put my phone face down on the counter, push it away and swallow hard to get rid of the painful lump in my throat.

‘What’s boring fact number two about the Village of the Damned?’

Dad ignores my jibe, rummaging through the welcome pack one-handed while taking another swig of tea. His eyes widen. Mrs Nicholls has also left us an invitation to her annual summer party next Saturday. This would *never* happen in London – the surprise waiting for tenants is usually noisy neighbours, rising damp or bed bugs. Or all three.

‘Hey, Alexa, can you tell us more interesting facts about Rose—’

Shelby spots an opportunity while Dad and I are distracted. She gallops across the kitchen and makes a Herculean leap for

the apple pie on the worktop, knocking into Dad. Hot liquid spills down his shirt, and the mug slips from his fingers.

‘Aagh!’

The ceramic makes a sharp crack and splinters on the wooden floorboards. The Alexa begins speaking before Dad has a chance to finish saying the word ‘Roseford’.

‘This famous place of interest has an estimated population of almost two million and attracts approximately thirty-five thousand international visitors annually. It has fourteen theatres, thirteen cinemas and twenty-six museums.’

‘Yeah, right!’ I snigger, grabbing the mop as Dad crouches down and picks up the broken pieces.

‘It must have misheard me!’ he says.

‘Maybe not. Hey, Alexa, are you being sarcastic?’

The lights on the device appear to wink. ‘Me? Never.’

Dad hoots with laughter for the first time in months. He wraps the smashed segments in newspaper and drops the bundle into the bin; the cup is too badly shattered to keep. Shelby is hiding beneath my stool. She looks 20 per cent mortified for accidentally scalding Dad and 80 per cent disappointed he got in the way of home-made pie.

‘Naughty Shelby.’ I fondle her raggedy half ear.

‘I’d been debating buying a smart speaker in London,’ Dad admits. ‘I’m glad I didn’t. I’d be outnumbered here!’

‘Maybe it’s gone rogue and developed a mind of its own?’

‘More likely, someone with a sense of humour wrote a script for questions about sarcasm!’

‘Disappointing.’

‘Let’s try again.’ He pauses. ‘Hey, Alexa. Please drop the sarcasm and give us more facts and figures about the village of Roseford in England or direct us to a website with relevant information.’

I reward him with a smile while the device sifts through reams of online stats. I love data. Spreadsheets, formulae and logical solutions provide a protective blanket to wrap round myself. They’re certain, proven, definitive. Black and white, right or wrong. What I’m *not* wild about is subjective debate, or dangerous ambiguities. Uncertain grey areas can lead to chaos, and . . .

‘In a recent study by Manchester University, Roseford came top for healthy living,’ the Echo states crisply. ‘Its inhabitants are less likely to suffer from heart disease, dementia and other life-shortening illnesses in old age. Adolescent mortality rates are average for a—’

My mouth dries and my heartbeat quickens. The rest of the electronic sentence blurs into white noise. I snap the elastic band on my wrist as panic rises in my throat, but it’s too late. The room lurches. I feel the wooden floorboards rise, yet I’m falling past them.

I grab the counter. Shelby whines loudly and nudges my leg with her nose, attempting to steady me. I feel nothing, as if I’m floating away in space.

‘Alexa, turn off!’ Dad says sharply.

‘These adolescent mortality rates mean—’

‘TURN THE HELL OFF!’ he yells.

I try to speak, but the words jam in my throat. Dad appears by my side, his face lined with worry. The last five months have aged him. Dark shadows are permanently imprinted below his brown eyes, and he has more grey streaks in his black hair and stubble than before. *I did that to him.* The thought makes me feel even worse, if that’s possible.

If Maddy were here, she’d tell me to comfort *him*.

Remember, none of this is his fault.

Dad squeezes my shoulder reassuringly, but his hand trembles.

‘I’m not made of glass,’ I tell him. ‘I won’t break.’

That’s not true. We’re here because I’m like that mug in the bin, except Dad doesn’t want to throw me away. He’s trying to put me back together.

‘I wish I could . . .’ His voice trails off. ‘Perhaps if Mum—’

‘Let’s not go there!’

Mum walked out when I was five, to start a new life in Tenerife with her bar-owner boyfriend, and only intermittently sends me birthday cards. She didn’t remember my sixteenth in February, but that’s for the best. Dad and I both want to forget that day.

‘I’m doing much better. Honestly.’

Another lie.

Back in London, the teachers and doctors saw straight through me when I told them I was doing fine. I was pulled out of school and couldn’t sit my GCSEs. I guess a police caution

would have looked bad on my sixth form application anyway. Now, I'm far more adept at concealing the truth – or, rather, massaging it to fill different shapes, spaces and volumes.

Most days, I lie to myself.

Dad doesn't look convinced, though, and I decide this is an opportunity. I take a deep breath. 'If we're being honest with each other, *like we promised*, this isn't me. It's not you either. You said you couldn't imagine living outside London. You hate the countryside.'

I wave at the shroud of greenery beyond the kitchen window that threatens to bury us alive. Branches tap talon-like against the glass.

'It's not too late to go back,' I continue. 'The holidays have only just begun – we have more than a month until term starts. There's time to find a new high school in Clapham. I could re-do my GCSE year in London. We can get our furniture out of storage and tell the estate agent's we've changed our minds: we're not renting out our home, and we don't want this draughty, expensive old farmhouse.'

Dad's hand drops to his side, as if he's been stung. 'We agreed we'd make a fresh start.'

My patience snaps. 'No, *you* made the decision, and I had no choice! You've ripped me away from everything I care about! Haven't I been punished enough? How many times do I need to say sorry?'

Shelby barks. She hates raised voices. My eyes sting with tears as I think about Maddy on her own in London. She'll be

so lonely. The two of us didn't have close friends apart from each other. We didn't need them. I didn't have the chance to say goodbye properly – or apologise again – before we left, and we haven't had an uninterrupted conversation, alone, since it happened. Who will talk to her, message or email in the early hours while I'm stuck here with no signal? She's an insomniac, like me.

'This isn't a punish—'

'Please, I'm begging you. I swear I'll never get used to living here. *Ever*. I promise I'll behave. I won't contact anyone I'm not allowed to.'

Shelby whines as my voice rises another octave.

'I honestly think a change of—' Dad begins.

'If you say, "a change of scenery will do me good" one more time, the violent crime rates in this godforsaken village will go off the charts.'

'Sorry.' He runs a hand through his hair. 'But *please* give this a chance, Gracie. We have some breathing space, at least for the summer. If neither of us can find our feet over the break, I'll reconsider. Obviously, you can never go back to . . .' He clears his throat. 'I've registered you at Castlehaven Academy next term, but sitting your GCSEs at an online school is a possibility if things don't work out.'

I gaze out of the window. Hope refracts and shimmers through the canopy of trees in the garden. It lights up the overgrown grass, creeping across the scattering of daisies, before being consumed by the farmhouse's shadows.

‘Can I invite a friend to stay while we’re here? That way I won’t feel so cut off.’ *So alone.*

The tension returns to his shoulders. ‘Who?’

‘Who do you think?’ I mumble under my breath.

Maddy is the only person who matters. I don’t care about anyone else from my old life. The feeling is mutual. No one has reached out to me since I was removed from school – not in person, anyway. Of course, everyone expressed an opinion online. I read all my classmates’ messages until Dad banned me from social media. He deleted my year group’s WhatsApp from my phone, which was even more accusatory and darker in tone than Insta.

‘We don’t have to decide straightaway,’ he says finally. ‘Let’s both think about it. Try to make the best of things, just the two of us.’

‘Three,’ I say, nodding at Shelby.

‘That’s a given! She’s part of our family. My two best girls.’

I smile at him, because he didn’t flatly refuse my request. That’s the best I can hope for under the circumstances. I’ll need to bide my time before repeating my experiment.

I picture Maddy’s face the last time we were together, her mouth open with surprise as I told her something important. Her star earrings twinkling. Then the expression on her face changing, becoming sombre.

She must have guessed I’d . . .

I reach for the elastic band, but miss my wrist and claw at thin air.

‘Gracie?’ Dad grips my arm, steadying me. ‘You’re pale. Have you remembered to take your medication?’

‘Of course! I’m just tired from the journey.’

His brows remain deeply furrowed. He needs more from me.

‘Thanks, Dad.’ I lick my dry lips. ‘For having my back when others didn’t.’

That last part isn’t a lie. I mean it.

He brushes away moistness from the corner of his eye as he bends down to pet Shelby. She licks his hand appreciatively.

‘Trust me, Gracie. This will be great for both of us. We can put everything behind us.’

I plaster on a fake, bright smile when he straightens up, because I can’t face breaking his heart all over again by admitting the truth:

I never left my secrets behind in London.

I quietly packed and brought them with us. I sense them whispering, impatiently jostling for space among the sealed containers in the hallway. Some elbow their way to the front and force others to shrink away into the darkness.

But they’re all waiting to catch me unawares when the boxes are finally opened.