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Opening extract from

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The Roman Road

It's raining when we come up the hill from school today. A sudden, heavy flash of rainstorm; here then gone. Hannah sticks her school bag over her head and stamps through the puddles.

"Back *home* we never had to walk in the rain. Back *home* someone would've picked us up. In a *car*."

"They wouldn't have just driven down a street to get us," I say. Hannah's always so sure she's right. Talking to her leaves me full of half-finished arguments, dangling fights I know I should have won. If Mum and Dad were here they wouldn't drive down a poksey hill just to save us getting wet. We only got picked up at home because we went to some stupid school miles across town. "We had to wait at after-school club till someone finished

work. And then we had to do shopping. And if it was gymnastics or piano we had to have tea in the car. In a *box*. And—"

"At least *someone* came," says Hannah. "Someone *cared*."

Someone is Mum.

"Grandpa cares," I say, but I don't think she hears me. Hannah is one and a half years older than me, yet she takes up about one and a half million times more space.

The trees in the gardens up the hill rustle, as if they're talking about us. But trees don't talk. I look at them over my shoulder, all rain-dropped and rain-drooped, and hurry after Hannah.

She's pushing open the door to Grandpa's shop. She stands inside and shakes herself, drops of water smattering the bread and the biscuits, leaving dark spatters on the newspapers in their rack.

"I *hate* this place!" she says. Loudly.

I come in small behind her. I don't hate this place. Grandpa and Grandma's shop. It's poky and dark and higgledy-piggledy. It sells a mess of things I've never seen in normal shops, like Eccles cakes and Ordnance

Survey maps and home-made jam, next to ordinary boringables like Coco Pops and Fairy Liquid. There's a misty fridge with milk bottles with JONES and ENTLY written across them in felt tip, in case people go home with the wrong bottle. You can order more exotic things – mangoes or ricotta cheese – if you don't mind waiting for the van, though most people don't, they just go to Tesco's. In one corner, there's a metal grille where the post office used to be and in another are baskets of earthy potatoes and onions. It has a friendly, muddly smell all its own: newspaper and bleach and earth.

Grandma's leaning against the counter, writing in a big accounts book. She looks up when we come in and her face tightens.

"Hannah Brooke," she says. "Have a bit of sense now! Stop dripping all over the floor. Go on," she says, when Hannah doesn't move. "Get upstairs and into something dry."

Hannah kicks the shelf.

"No!" she shouts, and then her face screws up like she's going to cry. "I want to go home," she says instead, ridiculously.

Grandma doesn't fight her, like Mum would have done, but you can tell she's angry. She comes out from behind the till, presses her hand on Hannah's shoulder and pushes her through the door into the kitchen, where Grandpa's mashing the tea and whistling.

"Upstairs," she tells Grandpa. "Clean clothes. Now." And she stalks back into the shop.

Hannah's face twists. It's pink and white with cold, and streaked with blue dye where her bag's run in the rain. You can see the fight boiling up inside her.

"*Go and die in a field!*" she screams at the door and Grandma's back. Then she runs out of the room, up the stairs.

Me and Grandpa are left in the kitchen. Grandpa rubs at his face, just the way my dad does. He breathes in this big breath – I can see his stomach rising, under the faded check cloth of his shirt. It's gone a nasty yellow around his neck and against the cuffs. My dad's shirts are always stiff and clean and white: you button him up all the way to his throat and there he is, locked up safe and going nowhere. But Grandpa Lived Through A War, so he wears things till they fall apart.

"All right, love?" he says now, and I nod.

"*You* don't want me to die in a field, do you?" he says, and I shake my head.

"You shouldn't listen to Hannah," I tell him. "She's always like that. Dad should have put her in an orphanage or something, instead of sending her here. She would have liked that, I expect," I add, virtuous, "since she doesn't want to live here."

Grandpa comes over and pats my shoulder. "Now, now," he says, in an absent sort of way. "No one's going to any orphanage."

But why not? If Dad could send us here, he could send us anywhere.

I go through the back door of the shop, into the hall and up the narrow stairs. The shop is part of Grandma and Grandpa's house, so all of their rooms are muddled: the kitchen is downstairs, next to the storeroom, but the living room is upstairs. At night, when I lie in bed, the light from the television flickers against the landing wall, and studio laughter plays across my dreams. Everything is darker here, and older. Nothing matches, so you'll have our old settee from Newcastle next to a high-backed red chair with feet like a lion. There's a dark wood bookcase, with

glass doors, where Delia Smith and Dick Francis sit beside ancient cloth-bound books with gold and silver printed up the spine.

The room I have here was Auntie Meg's when she was my age. It's got horrible yellow wallpaper and a grown-up picture of a tree, and a yellowy sink in the corner that doesn't work. Some of my things are here – my old bear Humphrey, my best books, my art things. But nearly all of my stuff is still at home, because we're not staying here for ever, just until Dad gets things Sorted Out.

Whenever that is.

I take dry clothes out of the wardrobe – blue jeans and my soft yellow jumper – but I don't put them on. I wrap my arms around them and stand by the window looking out over the garden. The rain is rat-a-tat-tat-ing on the roof and streaming down the windows. The trees are roaring with the wind in them, more like they're fighting now than talking.

"Listen!" Mum would say, if she was here. "There's a night with a devil in it."

It wouldn't be a bad thing – the devil in the night – but something exciting. Mum loved thunder-and-rain-storms. If she were here now, like if we were staying

with Grandpa and Grandma because it was a holiday maybe, we'd all go out and jump in the puddles. Even Hannah would, probably.

It's not dark yet, but you can tell that tonight isn't going to be fun. The sky is full of anger and the trees are raging like they want to kill someone. Standing here alone by the window, I almost believe in a devil in the rain.

Inside, the house is full of fighting too. I can hear Hannah next door, crying. I can hear Grandma downstairs, her voice high and angry, and Grandpa, murmuring at her.

I put on my dry clothes and climb into bed, pulling the funny old-fashioned quilt-and-blanket over my head. I get my book out and read, trying not to listen to the loneliness of being alone in a house full of noise. I'm reading *Three Cheers, Secret Seven,* which is Secret Seven book eight, so when I'm done I'll only need to read six more and I'll have read all the Famous Five and Secret Seven books there are.

Outside, the rain falls quieter now.

It's getting dark.

"Molly? Are you there?"

Hannah is standing in the doorway, still in her wet clothes. There are two wet patches on her shoulders where the water's run off her hair and on to her jumper.

"Come on," she says. "Quick – before they find us."

"What are we doing?"

"*Shhh.*" She clutches my arm and pulls me towards to the edge of the bed. "We're going home. We're running away."

This is so surprising that for a moment I can only blink at her. This is way more my sort of thing than Hannah's. I've read loads of books about people running away. Hannah only reads *Girl Talk* and *Top of the Pops Magazine*. She'll have no idea what to do.

"Hey," I say. "Ha*nnaah*. Stop *pulling*. We need to pack. Sleeping bags – and food – and a knife – and toothpaste—"

"Where d'you think we're going?" says Hannah. "The Arctic? We don't need any of that stuff. We'll just walk to Hexham and get the train."

There's a big map of Northumberland up on the landing. Hannah and I count off the miles to Hexham on the old Roman road.

"Seven – eight – nine – ten. Ten miles! We can walk that. Come on!"

She drags me downstairs. I want to argue, but I don't want Grandma to hear. Tonight isn't a night to be running away. It's dark and furious outside.

"We can't walk ten miles," I say. "Ha*nnaah*. That'll take ages. It's *miles*. Can't we go in the morning?"

"We're going *now*," says Hannah. She tugs on my arm and I nearly fall.

"What about Grandpa? What'll he do when he finds we've gone?"

"Who cares?" says Hannah. She lets go of my sleeve and starts rummaging through the coats on the rack. I can hear the radio playing next door in the kitchen, and the hiss of fat from Grandpa frying sausages.

"Hannah?"

"*What?*"

"What about Dad?"

Hannah stops, one arm half-into her jacket.

"What *about* Dad?"

"Won't he just send us back here?"

There's a silence. I look up. Hannah's standing

perfectly still, her jacket still dangling from one arm.

"I don't care," she says, "what Dad does. And I don't care what he says. I'm not staying here any longer." And she pulls open the door, wet wind blowing into the porch, and runs into the night.

I hesitate for a moment. Then I run out after her.

Once outside, the air is wet and cold, and full of the smell and icy spat of rain. The wind blows the hood of my jumper up against the back of my head. My coat's still hanging on the peg, and behind me the door slams shut. We're locked outside.

"Hannah!" I shout. "Hannah! Wait for me!"

Someone answers, but I can't tell from where. To my left, the lane curls out across the fields and up on to the moor. To my right, it slopes down the hill into the village, curving round across the village green and over the humpback bridge, past the church and the school and the little pub with the swinging Full Moon sign with the picture of the man in the moon. Is it up the lane or through the village to get to Hexham?

Hannah would know, but I don't. I go up, out of the village.

It's dark. Much darker than it ever gets at home. No street lights. No torch. I have to feel for every step, arms outstretched in case I fall; I can hardly see where I'm going. I splash straight into a puddle.

"H*annaah*!"

I duck my head, screw up my eyes against the rain and stump up the lane. The wind rushes through the trees, sending the rain back to blow in my face. I stumble and almost fall. It's the devil in the night – the devil in the storm. It's in the trees. I stop walking. I don't want to go to Hexham on my own. I don't even know how to get there. In fact, the further I go, the more certain I am that Hannah's gone the other way.

Or maybe she's gone back to Grandpa's and left me here alone.

It's so pitchy-black and rainy, it's hard to tell how far I've gone. The moon's risen; a silver thumbnail shining through dark, rushing clouds. The lane has narrowed and the trees on the steep banks are closer. They send long, dark branch-fingers looming and roaring over my head.

"I'm not afraid," I say, out loud.

Because now I can hear something coming. Someone. Feet. Feet, running towards me. My heart jumps. Who would be out on a wild night like this? Alone, without a torch? It's the devil – I know it is. I turn and stumble-run up the bank, slipping and almost falling in the mud. I'm not going to make it. I'm going to be in the lane when he comes. My breath comes out in raggedy gasps and I think I'm almost crying. There is something so sinister about the running footsteps – dark noises alone in a black night – that stops my heart. But then there I am, almost in the hedgerow. I grab on to the branch of a hawthorn tree, thorns catching at my jumper and my fingers, and hold my breath.

And here he is. A dark shape, bent and running. It's a man, low and strong. He's so close I can hear his breath catch in his throat.

And then he's past, off down the road to the village. But now I can hear other noises – a horn, then another horn, and another. Coming closer. Horses. Dogs, barking. *Baying*. That's what dogs do, in hunts, when they smell their prey.

The running man has heard them. He looks back. His face is white in the darkness and wet with rain. He isn't wearing shoes, or a shirt. I can see his chest, rising and falling. I can feel how frightened he is. Who is he? Who's chasing him?

And then the dogs are here.

They charge round the corner and pour on to him. They're huge, more like wolves than dogs. He falls, lifting his arms to cover his face. And now the huntsmen are here, black shapes on tall horses. The lead huntsman stops and raises his head, and I have to clench my lips to stop myself screaming. He's got *horns* growing out of his hair, great tall antlers rising up out of the sides of his head. I press myself deep into the hawthorn tree until twigs dig into my back and thorns tear at my jumper. *Don't see me. Don't see me. Don't see me.*

The lead huntsman sits tall on his tall horse. He raises a black hunting horn to his lips and blows, a long clear note.

I squeeze my eyes shut tight.

And . . .

. . . they're gone.

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