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Buried Thunder

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Tim Bowler

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Tim Bowler

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For my mother and father
with love

'All things truly wicked start from an innocence'

Ernest Hemingway

1

The body was lying in a thicket—a woman of about thirty—and Maya wouldn't have noticed it at all if she hadn't tripped over a root and rolled up against it. She scrambled back to her feet and stared down. The figure lay motionless, dusk settling over it. From a distant part of the forest came the sound of Tom calling.

'Maya!'

'Tom!' she called back.

But she knew he couldn't hear her. She'd shouted repeatedly but his voice had continued to move further from her. He was clearly heading back to the village. He tried once more, even so.

'Where are you?'

That was the trouble. She didn't know. She didn't even remember how she'd ended up here. Something must have made her run away from Tom and cut into the trees, yet her mind was a shadow. She had a ghost of recollection.

Something on the path, something yellow.

But that was all.

She didn't shout back this time. She knew there was no point; and besides, she now had a bigger problem. She looked down at the body. She had to check this out, however scared she felt. There was just a chance this woman was alive. She took a slow breath, then knelt down.

The ground felt hard and bony. She peered at the body,

wary in case it suddenly moved, but all was still. She inched nearer, the dusk thickening around her. Even this close it was hard to make out the figure clearly, but gradually the image defined itself.

A curvy form, chest and stomach still, so too the face. Eyes shut. A blue dress, the colour just discernible in the fading light, and a low neckline. The woman seemed to have come from a party. There was no sign of an injury.

Something glinted in the darkness, a pendant nestling in the woman's cleavage: a horseshoe emblem on a slender chain. A lock of hair fell over it and then was still. Maya clenched her fists. This woman was surely dead.

And yet . . .

'Are you alive?' she said.

Her voice sounded small in the darkening forest. There was no response, but from somewhere near came a rustling sound. She whirled round and peered into the gloom. The rustling stopped and silence fell once more.

She could feel herself starting to panic. She thought of her mobile back at home. Not that it would help much here. She had no idea how to describe where she was. She'd barely found her way round Hembury village in the few days since the family moved here. The forest she didn't know at all.

The rustling came again.

Then faded as before.

She stood up. She had to find the path home, raise the alarm, and somehow memorize the way to this place, so that she could describe it to the police. She looked about her and straightaway found the perfect marker: a huge beech tree, clearly damaged. Even in this poor light she could see that two of the lower branches had been cut off and a third was supported by a cradle of ropes from above.

She looked back at the body on the ground.

'I'm going to run back home,' she whispered. She had no idea why she was talking to this woman. 'I'm going to find Mum and Dad, and they'll call the police. I'll run as fast as I can. You won't be on your own for long.'

It was then that she heard footsteps.

Not heavy. Quite the opposite. They sounded stealthy. She crouched, her eyes moving fast. This didn't have to be dangerous. It might even be someone who could help, someone who might miss all this and walk straight past if she didn't call out or show herself.

But she stayed where she was and said nothing.

The footsteps drew closer. She edged behind an oak tree and waited. Closer, closer, slow footsteps—then suddenly they stopped and silence fell once more. She stayed behind the oak, her ears straining.

But all she heard was a rustle in the leaves above her that died as she craned her head round to look. The foliage was still, as though it had never moved. She turned and gazed back at the dead woman.

Still lying in the same position, but something looked different. Then she saw it. The head had tilted to the side, the long hair falling away, and the eyes were now open; and underneath them—like a third eye—the horseshoe pendant was shining in the darkness.

Maya stared. She wanted to run so much, but she found she couldn't move. The pendant went on shining, and something in the dead eyes seemed to shine too. She swallowed. This was madness. She had to break free.

She slipped from behind the oak and crept towards the edge of the thicket. The dusk was now so heavy it was hard to see anything clearly, but somehow she made out the way to go. She stole forward, watching, listening.

Here was the clearing. She remembered stumbling into

it on her mad rush here. To the left was the damaged beech tree; to the right the deeper, denser folds of the forest. It was hard to believe she'd crashed through that, yet remembered so little of it.

But that was the way she had to go. She knew that much at least. The path home lay somewhere in that direction. She took a deep breath and set off across the clearing—only to freeze once again.

A second body was lying before her.

Straight ahead.

She made herself creep closer. She had to check this out too. She knew it. She couldn't just run past, however much she wanted to. It was a man this time, and like the woman, clearly dead. She knelt beside him. No movement in the stomach or chest. The eyes were open but they were vacant.

Once again, there was no sign of an injury.

She was trembling now. She forced herself to study the body. The police would ask questions. They'd want a description. She tried to take in what she could, muttering what she saw into the silent air.

'Man about thirty-five, suit, tie, white shirt, red hair . . .'

She stopped, looked again. But there was no mistake. The darkness was draining all colour from the body, yet something red still clung to the hair.

'Red hair,' she went on, 'and . . . and a silver watch.'

Something was moving over to the right, a shadow among the trees at the top of the clearing. She narrowed her eyes and stared; but the shadow was gone and all was gloom again. She tried to stay calm, make herself think.

There were probably lots of paths back to the village but she didn't know them. She had to find the way she'd come, and that meant heading for the trees, whatever else lay in that direction; and she had to go now. She set

off across the clearing, walking fast.

She wanted to run. She wanted to burst through the trees and away from this place, but she knew she had to resist. All her instincts told her that the moment she broke into a run, panic would take over. A fast, steady walk was what was needed. Yet even as she walked, she felt a pressure to look back.

She ignored it. She had to scan the trees, watch for danger, find the path, get away. She mustn't look back. Just keep walking, walking, walking. She strode on, step, step, step, but still the pressure grew. She stopped, breathing hard, and turned.

The man's body was still visible, lying on its back, but as with the woman, the head had tilted to the side and the eyes were shining in the darkness. She turned and hurried on towards the trees—only to freeze yet again.

The shadow was back, directly in front of her. The features were hidden, the form blurred, but there was no mistaking the figure standing there, back towards her, bent over a third body stretched upon the forest floor.

She stared, and as she did so, she saw the figure stiffen, as though it had sensed her, and straighten, and turn towards her. But she saw no more. She was running wild, blundering through thickets, coppices, tawny shrubs.

She had no idea where she was going. All she knew was that she was crashing through branches, brambles, foliage. She heard shouts. Some were hers, some were not. She couldn't catch the words.

They came again, somewhere near. She thought of the shadow and raced on. The shouts continued but she was hardly listening now. All she wanted was to run, run, run. But she didn't know which way to go. Then she saw it. Straight ahead.

She stopped, gasping, and peered into the darkness.

Before her was a wall of trees—and something else. Two yellow eyes, watching her; and now a head, and a body. Then she saw what it was.

A fox.

Recollection came streaming back. She'd seen a fox earlier, perhaps this very one. She remembered it now. It had been on the path and she'd followed it into the forest, leaving Tom behind. But why had she done that? And why had she forgotten about it till now?

'What do you want?' she heard herself say.

The yellow eyes closed, opened, closed again.

And in the space where they had been, she saw a narrow path through the trees.

She tore down it, screaming. But here were the shouts again, and they were closer than ever. She ran on, on, the voices growing louder—and then she fell. She saw leaves, branches, the trunk of a tree, the face of the forest floor as she tumbled upon it.

And a shadow leaning over her.