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Opening extract from

Return to Ribblestrop

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CHAPTER ONE

Rules about hitch-hiking, when you're a child: rule number one - don't hitch-hike. Rule number two - don't hitch-hike on your own. Rules three, four etc - if you *have* to hitch-hike alone, tell people where you're going, start early, take a phone, keep the door unlocked, and don't, ever ever *ever* find yourself penniless, on the side of a deserted road, in some wilderness you've never been before, without a map, just as it's getting dark.

Millie had broken all the rules.

She was on her way to school. She'd spent her train fare on unbeatable bargains in a duty free shop, and now she was stuck. Her plane had got in early, but getting out of Heathrow had taken hours; she'd finally been picked up by a milk lorry which took her close to Stonehenge. She'd had no lunch, so she smoked several cigarettes. Light-headed, she got into the car of a farmer with an accent so thick she could barely understand him. He had a sheepdog on the back seat and, in a short while, they were off the road bumping over farm tracks. They had to pull over once for a convoy of army tanks, and there was the distant sound of gunfire left and right. The farmer chuckled while his dog yapped, and after some time they came to a little bus stop, and Millie clambered out with relief. The farmer drove off into a field, leaving her to study a weathered timetable. It was the sort of stop that might see one bus a week.

Amazingly, however, a bus did struggle into view within ten minutes. No passengers, just a toothless driver who accepted a box of cigarettes instead of Millie's fare, nodding and grinning. This got her to a main road, and she stood on the kerb wondering which way was west. It was very cold, and the streetlamps were coming on; there was sleet in a spiteful wind. Millie was now frightened.

"You bring this on yourself," she said, aloud.

She thought of her friend Sanchez back on the ranch in Colombia. He would shake his head and say, "Millie, you're crazy."

"This *is* crazy," said Millie.

She had slept rough once before, after someone's party, and it had been a night of shivering in a shed. She dreaded the thought of sitting through a long, freezing night – she wondered if she would survive it. She drew her gold-striped blazer tighter around her. It was good quality wool, at least, so there was some warmth to it. Her hands, however, were freezing: particularly the left thumb, which was extended hopefully at the speeding traffic.

Darkness fell.

Millie was virtually invisible until a vehicle's headlights hit her, and no driver was going to see her in time to stop. The sleet became rain and her blazer soaked it up. It ran down here legs into her shoes, and Millie began to realise just how vulnerable she was. She decided to walk on, but just as she did so a white van shot past, buffeting her in its slipstream. It braked hard, hooting and squealing, and somehow veered left into the lay-by. It hooted again, long and hard, and Millie ran through mud to the passenger door. Peering in, she could see it was crowded with young men; she could hear thumping music and laughter, and she caught a whiff of beer.

A window came down half-way.

"Where you goin'?" said a boy. It was a builders' van, and the men were in paint-spattered overalls.

"Ribblestrop," said Millie. "It's the other side of Taunton, but if you're—"

"Ribblestrop? Hey!"

"She's goin' to Ribblestrop!"

"That's where we're goin', my beauty!" The van revved loudly. "An' we'll get there before you! Yahhhhh!"

The driver accelerated fast into the rain, and the passengers' laughter span away down the road.

Millie swore quietly. She was trembling now and she started to walk, just to keep warm. The mud turned into soaking grass, and her shoes were soon saturated. It was hard to keep upright. She decided she must find a village. Someone would take pity on her, as they did in those sentimental

films where a waif gets taken in by some kindly childless couple, to be given soup by the fire. A large lorry thundered by and Millie nearly fell in its slipstream.

The rain turned into a pelting downpour.

"Oh, why do you take unnecessary risks?" shouted Millie, at herself. "Why put yourself through this, if – in the end – you're just a scared little, weak little, stupid, useless little girl who's scared of the dark?"

She came round a bend. There was a stationary car ahead, with two wheels up on the verge. Millie hadn't seen it stop, but it couldn't have been there long. The traffic was braking to get round it; a car hooted angrily – it was a bad place to stop, especially in this rain.

Millie ran towards it. As she ran, the car shunted forward - it was trying to get off the road completely, up onto the grass. It was a small family car, and she could make out a driver and a passenger. She got to the passenger's window, and stared in, trying to look lost and forlorn. The occupants didn't notice her; they were deep in conversation.

Millie tapped on the glass. Still they didn't look up – they were engrossed in a map, and appeared to be arguing.

She tapped again, louder, and frightened eyes turned to meet Millie's. The glass came down two inches.

"I'm sorry to bother you," said Millie. "I'm stuck – I need help."

"Pardon me?"

It was the passenger who spoke. He had a soft, Irish brogue.

"I said, I'm stuck," replied Millie. "I missed my bus. Could you give me a lift to the next town?"

"Open the window!" said the driver. His voice was louder than the passenger. It was broad Irish again, but fierce and bad-tempered. "Get the blessed thing down, Doonan, and ask him the way!" He was leaning across his passenger, peering up at her. Millie saw that he wore a dog-collar. She closed her eyes briefly and rejoiced.

"We're trying to get to Taunton," called the driver. "We missed our road and Doonan's led us way off the beaten track. We're both new to this, and—"

"I think we left the A30 by mistake," said Doonan. "There were some road-works—"

"I know the way to Taunton!" lied Millie. "Could you give me a lift?"

"Oh no, we don't pick up a hitch-hikers," said the driver. "There's no reason for hitch-hiking, not with all the trains and buses. If you give a lift to one, then suddenly it's everyone and his mother saving their bus-fares and taking advantage."

"I'm so cold," said Millie. "The bus didn't come, and I'm stranded."

A car behind hooted loudly.

"Oh, for the love of God, Doonan, we're still in the way!"

"We *could* take her to the next town, Father," said Doonan. "It's a wild night for a young girl to be out on her own."

The driver leaned forward as far as he could, and stared harder at Millie. He had a lobster-red face under a bald, flaking cranium. The nose was big and hooked, and the eyebrows were thick white, over tiny black eyes. A huge truck revved behind them, and sounded its horn, long and ferocious. The noise was like a gale and the car rocked from side to side.

"Very well, get in," said the driver. "Hurry, now!"

Both men struggled to open the back door. There were suitcases over the seat, but Millie was inside in seconds, shoving her own bag in hard. "We'll get you to the next town, but I'm not sure - oh, look at this mad fool, Doonan! Alright, alright!"

The truck behind was still blaring its horn. It had levered itself out into the oncoming traffic, which had come to a halt, and was inching past.

"Put your flashers on, Father," said Doonan.

"Doonan, if I knew where the blasted things *were* I'd have put them on long ago. Is the child in?"

"Yes!" shouted Millie.

"So steamed up I can't see…where's the damned indicator? Oh!"

The windscreen wipers had been chugging away evenly, now they doubled their speed. The car shunted forward once more, bounced down from the kerb, and stalled. There was a new flurry of furious horns, and someone was yelling.

“Do you think this is the right direction?” said Doonan. He had to twist himself round in his seatbelt, and Millie saw that he was young and friendly, with a spray of pimples. His eyes blinked under pale lashes, and he seemed to be panting.

“Damn and blast!” cursed the driver. “If we can’t get this louse of a car started, we’re in trouble! Say your prayers, both of you.”

“You know, you really shouldn’t be hitch-hiking,” said Doonan. “You meet strange people, and—”

“Damn and blast, she’s dead as a door-nail!” The driver turned the ignition again, and the car coughed hysterically.

“Hold your foot flat down, Father,” said Doonan. “I think she’s—”

“I’m doing exactly that! Start, damn you!”

The engine roared into life, for a racing-car start. There was a furious knocking under the floor, so Doonan had to shout to be heard. “You say you’re going to school? It seems a bit late to be starting off—”

“Boarding school,” said Millie. She raised her voice over the screams of second gear. “It’s the other side of Taunton, and I’m supposed to be there by six. It’s called Ribblestrop Towers.”

A startled look came into the young man’s eyes. He clutched the headrest, and stared harder. “You didn’t say *Ribblestrop Towers*, did you?”

“Yes. You’ve probably heard of it because of what went on last term. It was in the papers, and a TV station came down—”

“Not Ribblestrop Towers, surely! The house owned by Lady Vyner?”

Millie was nodding.

“Father, listen to this!”

“I can’t barely see the road, Doonan – we’re steaming up. Nor can I find… third blasted gear…”

“But listen, Father, listen to this! This child is on her way to Ribblestrop Towers! Now is that not the Lord’s doing?” He looked back at Millie, and laughed. “We’re going there ourselves! This is Father O’Hanrahan, the new Chaplain. And I’m Brother Doonan, I’m just a trainee. We’re on our way to that very place!”

The car picked up speed, swerving madly as the driver wiped a vision hole through the mist on the windscreen. Oncoming lights were also swerving and hooting and it occurred to Millie that she’d exchanged rain and discomfort for danger of a more lethal kind.

“This is remarkable,” prattled Doonan. “You see, Father O’Hanrahan wrote to the headmaster, offering to help out with the chapel. He’d heard about the monks, you see.” He laughed. “I might be your teacher! – I’m trying to get a little work-experience – I failed my exams so the college had to let me go.”

Millie raised her eyebrows and tried to smile.

“Oh, but what a fantastic coincidence!” laughed the boy. “Maybe it’s my map-reading skills after all!”

“It’s the guidance of God, Doonan,” said Father O’Hanrahan, heavily. “Ask her if she’s met the Brethren. They’ve had that vow of silence for some time, but she might have *seen* them round the grounds.”

“I hear they’re a very devout order,” said Doonan.

“Do you know the little chapel?” interrupted the driver. He turned round in his seat and peered at Millie. “What’s your name, child?”

“Millie,” said Millie.

“There’s a little chapel, Millie, with a crypt. Have you been down to it?”

“No.”

“Can you *get* down? I heard it had been bricked up, so I was saying to Doonan that our first job is to get all that sorted. Have you been down yourself?”

“No.”

“Have you spoken to the Brethren? They’re still there, aren’t they?”

“Yes, but you hardly—”

“There’s a walking ghost, too, so we heard,” said Brother Doonan. His eyes grew round with excitement. Millie guessed his age as about seventeen.

“Yes,” she said. “The ghost of Lord Vyner, but you don’t actually *see* him—”

“That’s what we heard!” cried the driver. “That’s the very one: a soul in pain, carrying secrets and sins, slipping around the place. I’ll be putting that fellow to rest, that’s one of my first duties.”

“Father O’Hanrahan is an *exorcist*,” said Doonan. “Do you know what that is?”

“I saw the movie,” said Millie.

“It’s a gift that the Lord put in my hands,” said Father O’Hanrahan. “I don’t keep count of the demons I’ve dealt with, and I take no credit. If I can wrestle a soul from Satan, then it’s to the glory of God. And this Lord Vyner character, well! A violent past, as I understand it, it’s not surprising he can get no rest. That’s what I told your headmaster: you can’t run a school with a walking ghost! The school needs a chaplain it can trust.”

The car picked up speed and Father O’Hanrahan laughed. “Oh, yes - the Lord is certainly with us today!” he cried. “Goodness knows what would have become of this girl if we hadn’t been passing. What’s her name again?”

“Millie,” said Millie.

“Well, Minnie. I hope we can rely on your total and unconditional help after this. That chapel needs to be looked after, and we’re going to need all the hands we can get. Is it true that some of the children are heathen?”

“Father, I don’t think they allow that word anymore—”

“I’m asking the *child*, Doonan - don’t tell me what I can and can’t say! Is there’s a living faith, Minnie? Will I get resistance or co-operation?”

“There’s no faith at all that I’m aware of,” said Millie. “The only time anyone prays is before a football match, and that’s because we’re desperate.”

“Well,” said Father O’Hanrahan. “If that’s the case, I think we should say a prayer right here and now. And you, Miss Minnie: you should open up your proud heart and find it in your proud self to thank God for this deliverance – or you’d still be on that road, prey to any passing madman.”

“What do you think, Millie?” said Doonan. “Do you have a favourite prayer?”

“I don’t believe in God,” said Millie. “I’m an atheist.”

Doonan stared.

“*What* did she say?” said Father O’Hanrahan.

“She said she doesn’t believe, Father.”

“Then our work has surely started. Will you take the wheel a moment, Doonan? I’m going to say a few words and make this fool mindful of her salvation.”