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Plot Night

I didn't notice the men at first.

Dad was late so Mum had got the bonfire going and the flames had already set fire to the guy's ripped jeans and the wisps of straw sticking out from its charity-shop jumper. It sat on a perch of piled-up wood with its grinning plastic mask, Dad's old tie dangling round its neck like a noose.

The smells of smoke and sausages and singed baked potatoes wafted about in the cold air, making my mouth water. Mum and my big sister, Hannah, stood behind a table at the other end of our huge garden, dishing up hot chocolate and cake to practically the whole village. I picked the people out in the bonfire light while I munched toffee from a paper bag – a group who worked at the hospital where Mum's a nurse; a few of Hannah's sixth-form college friends off her journalism course; my best mates, Sasha and Josh, grabbing food. I smiled to myself

as Josh's paper plate collapsed, sending him sprawling to catch rolling cakes, and Sasha bending forward with the giggles.

That's when I saw the two men. I wondered who they were, standing side by side in long, dark coats, hats pulled low, covering their faces.

"Welcome, everyone, to our new home!" Mum called over the crackling fire.

"Bit of a cold night for a house-warming, isn't it?" someone shouted, and everyone laughed. Everyone except those two blokes, the miserable things.

I pulled my scarf tighter. Everything was always late in our family. It had taken us months to get around to having a house-warming party for big old Foxglove Cottage, which we'd inherited off Great-Auntie Hilda, together with her dog and all her Second World War junk. Then Dad'd had the idea to combine the house-warming with a Bonfire Night party, which he said was symbolic. Hannah had said yes, it was symbolic of being a cheapskate, but why worry if *Remember, remember, the tenth of November* didn't have quite the same ring to it, and while we were at it why not celebrate Nathan's birthday as well since it was only three days away. But Dad had given me a wink and said there'd be something extra special all of its own for my birthday, because it's not every day that you turn thirteen.

Where *was* Dad? I stared round the garden. Mum had roped Sasha's dad into doing the fireworks, and he was

getting ready to set them off, which didn't really go with his posh accountant's coat. I didn't want them to start yet. Dad and I always watched the fireworks together.

A cheer went up as flames burst over the guy.

"Here, Nat."

Dad was back at last! He handed me a lit sparkler, his warm hand over mine. Stars splashed from the sparkler's tip like a magic wand. He had one too and I felt my mouth crack open in a grin and together we wrote our names fast in the air: NATHAN – LEON. LEON – NATHAN. Then round and round we went in a faster and faster, brighter and brighter, fizzing, spinning eye that was still there when I blinked.

I laughed and looked up into Dad's face and he smiled at me, but I saw he was out of breath, and there were dark circles under his eyes. He'd been at work a lot recently. Back late from his commute to London. Too many deadlines. I squeezed his arm and chewed more toffee, the chunks bunging up my mouth like sweet cement. A rocket whizzed up. It sprayed coloured light against the nearly full moon with a gunshot thud. Glowing straw floated through the air as the guy's mask sizzled and melted away.

I glanced across at the two men. They seemed to be staring in our direction. Dad was looking at them too, the sparkler a spitting stump in his hand, and his face had gone all serious and I felt my heartbeat speed up. I looked at the men more closely, at their coats and their hats and

the gloved hands curled in fists at their sides. There was something weird about the way they were standing there, not moving. Just watching. Watching us?

"Dad," I managed. "Who are those. . ."

"I thought I had more time," Dad muttered to himself, cutting me off. He stood with his back to the bonfire so he glowed all around the edges. He came close to my ear. "Nat, I've got to tell you something. Something important."

I smirked. "Taping our conversation, are you, Dad?" I chomped, my mouth still full of the toffee, because that's what Dad did, on his flash new touch-screen phone. Taped all his conversations, like he was 007 or someone. He might have a desk job at the Ministry of Defence, but if you asked me he took the Special Services stuff a bit too far.

"This isn't a game, Nat." I stopped smiling. Dad's face had gone an ashy colour, like he was ill. "I've run out of time."

The men were moving towards us now, through the clumps of people, and Dad was tracking them out of the corner of his eye, but he didn't turn his head and he was speaking very low and very fast. "You've got to follow Lily's trail, Nat. Without evidence we've got nothing." His eyes glistened in the light from the bonfire. "Follow Lily's trail. She lived in this house." He had hold of my arm. "Promise me, Nat. Please. You won't have long. I'm sorry to put you through this. I should have told you things

before. . ." I felt his fingernails digging into me. "I found something out. It has to be our secret. Promise me."

But I couldn't say anything back because my jaw was stuck together with the toffee, so I just nodded like an idiot.

"Don't tell anyone either, Nat, I need you to promise that as well. Not even your mum or Hannah. The more people who know, the more dangerous it is. You can't trust anyone else either, you hear me? Don't trust anyone."

I breathed fast in the bitter air. "OK," I spluttered. "But what's going on?"

"I'm innocent, Nat. Remember that."

Somewhere nearby a little kid was crying. The frosty grass made shadows like teeth in the moonlight. The men were close now; too close to say more.

"And you'd better do your history homework, Nathan!" Dad let out a loud bellow of a laugh, but his eyes were boring into me. "Don't ruddy try and hide it like you did the last time!"

He shot me a look and I stared at him, forcing down the stupid toffee. Dad never calls me Nathan. And he never swears at me. Never.

But I didn't get a chance to say anything back because then the men were between me and Dad, talking to him, but I couldn't hear over the firework bangs. One had hold of Dad's arm. I tried to get closer, but they pressed me away. Both of them had hold of Dad now and I pushed forward to get to him but he shook his head at me. He let

them lead him off as if he accepted it. I followed, stumbling on half-eaten toffee apples and plastic cups dropped in the mud. Nobody seemed to be noticing anything, only the exploding fireworks, and I wanted to shout for help, shout for Mum, but all I could do was try and keep up with Dad and the two men.

People gasped and as I glanced back I saw the bonfire rise up and the guy collapse into the flames. I got round to the front of the house, out of sight of the party, and the men pushed Dad into a waiting car as the engine revved.

For a tiny second our eyes met and I saw the secret message there. *Remember,* Dad was saying. *Remember what I said.*

There were sounds of laughing and clapping from the garden. The door slammed and it had tinted glass so I couldn't see in, and the car lurched off fast down the lane, sending beams into the sky like searchlights, and my throat was all squeezed tight with panic like I was going to choke.

And Dad was gone.