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Opening extract from

Finding Jennifer Jones

Written by

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1

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Kate Rickman looked down at her hands.

Hands that had killed.

She held them flat, palms down. Her hands were pale, a threadwork of veins just visible underneath the skin. The fingers were thin and seemed to tremble as she stared at them. The nails were short. There was no varnish and no rings; no decoration of any kind.

She was standing on the esplanade leaning on the wall. Below her there were families on the beach. They had camped in little groups with wind breakers curved protectively around them. In front of her the sea was restless, shrugging wave after wave towards the shore. Small children were standing in frilly costumes looking down with delight at the frothing water.

Kate heard her ringtone and pulled her phone out of her pocket.

It was a message from Aimee at work.

Kate will you come into work an hour early tomorrow? Be so grateful ☺

Kate looked back to the beach. There was a young woman with a small girl, about three years old. She had her arms held out as if she wanted to be cuddled. The woman was not much older than Kate herself. She was wearing cut-offs and a vest. She was talking into a mobile phone, gesticulating with her free hand. The toddler began to cry and the woman glanced down and grabbed her by one arm and pulled her back up the beach. All the time she continued her conversation on her phone.

Kate turned away from the water, her elbows on the wall. Her hair blew back, some single strands sticking to her face. She licked her lips and tasted the saltiness of the sea.

She thought of the letter she had posted a few days before.

She pictured a sixteen-year-old girl frowning as she read the handwritten pages. Nowadays it was all emails and texts. Why would someone go to the trouble of writing line after line? Had she even read it? Or had she thrown it away as soon as she saw the signature at the bottom?

Jennifer Jones

The sound of a police siren cut through the air. It startled Kate and her eye followed the car as it shunted along the esplanade trying to get past queuing traffic. It swung round the side of an ice-cream van and sped off towards the far end of the resort. Another car followed it rapidly although it had no blue flashing lights.

Then it was quiet, just the splash of the sea and voices calling out. From below, on the beach, was the scratchy sound of someone's radio.

Her mobile beeped again. On the screen she could see the message icon. It was from her probation officer. Sighing, she opened it.

Don't forget your appt this week. Friday 5.30pm

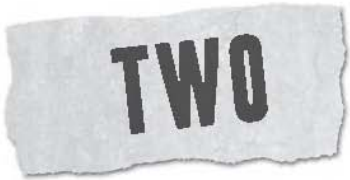
She put the mobile back in her pocket, a feeling of irritation niggling at her. She lifted her face up to the sun, closing her eyes tightly. How many more *appointments* would there be for her? Doctors? Counsellors? Probation officers? Would they ever, finally, let her go?

In the distance, many streets away, a car horn sounded. Kate turned away from it and faced the sea. The water was glittering as if there were jewels floating on its surface. She wished she was out there, immersed in it, only the sound of the surf in her ears.

Instead she was marooned on the shore. She looked at her hands again. Now they were in fists, curled up tight like rosebuds.

A long time ago they had taken the life of a child.

There would never be any freedom for her.



"So, Kate, how have you been?" Julia said.

"Good."

"You missed the last session. I was concerned."

"I did ring and leave a message."

"That's not quite the point."

Julia Masters stared at her. Kate looked away. They were in Julia's office and as usual it was neat and tidy, like a showroom. The desk was uncluttered, with just a computer screen and tiny laptop visible. The photos of her family sat alongside the screen, two boys; Justin and Peter, seven and eight. *Peter is a smashing chess player,* Julia had said, *but Justin is a total bookworm.* On top of Julia's filing cabinet was a tray holding a number of files. One of them, Kate was sure, had her name on it.

"These sessions are mandatory, Kate."

"I'm sorry," she said.

They were not sitting at Julia's desk but in an area of the room that was laid out with armchairs. Julia was sitting in a new chair, Kate noticed. The old one, with its frayed arms and scuffed legs, had been replaced. Kate had spent many hours looking at parts of that armchair, trying to avoid too much

eye contact with Julia, her mentor, part of the probation team who looked after her. *We would like you to think of us as friends,* Julia had said, when Kate first met her a year ago. Her previous probation officer had found a new job in a different part of the country and Kate had been passed on. Julia was her third probation officer.

"Just because it's two and a half years since your release it doesn't mean you can afford to be casual about things. Your visits here are as important as they ever were."

"I know," Kate said. How could she not know with all the reminders that Julia sent?

"So, perhaps we should talk about things in general."

Kate tried to concentrate on Julia's face but after a few seconds her eyes began to wander the room. On the walls were framed photographs of the coast; the groynes on the beach, a boat sitting amid the shingle, a gull perched on a rock. The photos were in black and white and gave the impression of overcast dull days.

"Have you anything you'd like to say?" Julia said, brusquely.

Kate looked back to Julia. She was wearing her black jet earrings. They hung low and swung when she moved her head. Her hair had just been washed, Kate thought, it had that bouncy quality that she noticed from time to time.

"About what? Specifically?"

Kate wished Julia could get to the point. Her questions were like nets. She threw them widely.

"I'm concerned that in the past few months – well, six months or so – things haven't been quite so good with you. What's your view?"

"I'm not sure what you mean."

But Kate did know what she meant. Julia was intent on listing her recent failings. Kate wasn't troubled by this. She had done far worse in the past.

"Well." Julia pulled a pad from her bag. "Let me see, I've made some notes."

Kate watched her flick through the pages of a notebook.

"As I said, you've missed a couple of appointments and you missed a random drug test a month or so ago."

"I lost my phone. It was two days before I found it in a friend's house. That's why I didn't come to the drugs test."

"The idea, Kate, as you well know, is that a drugs test is a call that had to be answered and responded to within six hours."

"I lost my phone."

"It won't surprise you if I tell you that it's not the first time I have heard that excuse."

"I came as soon as I found it."

Kate was irked. She'd been telling the truth. She had left her phone in the bedroom of a boy she had met. It was a couple of days before she got it back.

"And the drugs test was clear."

"I don't do drugs. I've told you that," she said, crossing her arms.

Julia frowned. She looked as though she was about to write something down but changed her mind.

"You've turned up for at least two meetings smelling of alcohol. As those meetings were in the morning I'm surmising that the alcohol was consumed the night before?"

"It's just a few glasses of wine. It's not illegal."

"Then there is the time you missed on your course. Your attendance has been very poor this year. Your mentor said he hardly saw you in the summer term."

"I got my work in."

Lately, getting her essays in on time had been a last-minute sprint. Flipping open her laptop, reading her work over rapidly as though it was a shopping list. Then she pressed the *send* button minutes before the university deadline. Once or twice she'd hesitated and thought, *Why bother? What does it matter?*

"Your work was a very low standard. In comparison to previous grades."

"The course is harder than I thought."

Kate pulled a tissue out of her pocket and toyed with it, tearing a strip off from the side. The work wasn't *hard*. She liked the seminars and the tutorials. She enjoyed reading about the distant past, making sense of what happened there. But when it came to getting marks for it or graded she baulked.

"I don't believe you. I think you've given up."

Kate shrugged. What was the point in her trying to explain? Getting a first class degree wouldn't change any of the things that really mattered.

Julia shuffled her papers.

"And the summer job?"

"I like it."

"But at some point you need to start thinking about what you will do next year when you've finished your degree. What career you will decide on."

"I can't think that far ahead. I do know I want to stay in Exmouth. As long as I can get a job that pays my rent I'll be happy."

Kate knew that her answer would disappoint Julia. When Julia first became her probation officer she'd talked about Kate doing a Masters or possibly working as an intern for a large company. She'd even suggested that Kate might think of museum work; a curator or researcher.

"How are you settling on the antidepressants?" Julia said, changing the subject.

"I think they're helping."

Kate thought of the prescription that she had picked up a day or two ago from the pharmacy. Just a slim cardboard box holding two foil sheets of pills. It seemed an odd remedy to the thoughts and emotions that had plagued her. Day after day she used her thumb to pop the pill out of a plastic bubble and then swallow it. It was so small she didn't even need a gulp of water to make it go down.

"You've been on them for what? Nine months?"

It was Julia who had raised the possibility of her taking the pills. At first she had been outraged. *I'm not mad!* she'd said. But Julia had gone on to explain how they might help her manage from day to day. *Lots of people take them!* she'd said. *Probation officers?* Kate had asked.

"I don't feel so anxious all the time. At least I seem to have stopped looking over my shoulder every minute of the day."

"That's good. You do have to move on from that period your life. It was eight years ago. You're a different person now."

Kate sighed. "That's not quite true, is it?"

"What do you mean?"

"I took someone's life away. I'm still that person. Nothing can change what I did."

An image of Michelle Livingstone's red hair flashed in Kate's mind. She pushed it away.

Julia looked uncomfortable. She preferred to skirt around things. A real conversation where things were said always seemed to make her edgy. Any moment now she would mention the time or targets or tell Kate some little bit of gossip just so that they didn't have to float out into the dangerous waters of what Kate actually did eight years before.

"What I'd like us to agree on…" Julia started.

Kate closed her eyes. It was time for plans.

"I'm sorry, Kate, am I irritating you?"

"No, I'm just not in the mood for this kind of discussion."

"Well, you do not have a choice in this matter. Your continuing freedom demands that you accept certain parameters…"

"What freedom? I can't go anywhere without you knowing. I'm not even allowed to have a passport."

"Goodness! You are not *incarcerated*. You are living among law-abiding people. You are a student, you come and go as you please. How much more freedom can you have?"

Julia was clearly exasperated. She closed her pad, resting her hands on it as if to shut away all the troublesome notes she had written.

"What if I went back to prison?"

"What an extraordinary thing to say."

Julia's mouth was open and she glared straight at Kate without seeming to blink. Then she shook her head slowly. Kate suddenly felt flustered and averted her eyes. She looked at the pictures on the wall, feeling the weight of Julia's stare.

"I mean… Well, it could happen…"

It was something she'd thought of for a while. She couldn't deny it. Going back to prison where she was a true inmate, where she wasn't pretending to be another person. Kate folded her arms. She would never make Julia understand.

"I think it's my job to make sure that doesn't happen," Julia said, standing up, brushing her clothes down as though she had somewhere she had to rush off to. "That said, I think we've probably covered enough ground today. We should meet again next week to make up for the missed session. Say Friday again, five thirty."

Kate stared at the new chair. It was smooth and shiny. A replacement for the old one. Just like Julia was a replacement for a previous probation officer.

"And I would just warn you to be careful of saying things about going back to prison. You were in a children's institution. I can assure you that adult women's facilities are a much more unpleasant experience."

Kate didn't answer, just grabbed her bag and stood up.

"Next Friday at five thirty," Julia called out as Kate left the office.

She went straight home after the meeting. The house was empty and she found herself restless, pacing around, starting to make something to eat and then stopping. She was always like this after a meeting with Julia. She thought about having a shower, getting changed, the evening ahead. Sally, her housemate, had suggested they spend the evening in together. Ruth, the other girl who lived there, would be in soon and most probably bring her boyfriend Robbie home with her. They could get a takeaway. They often did on Fridays.

But Kate couldn't imagine herself doing either of those things.

She looked out of the window. The sun was still strong. There were hours of daylight left. She got undressed, opened her drawer, took out her swimming costume and put it on. She pulled on jeans and a top and put her sandals on. She picked up her towel, her straw beach mat and a book. She went downstairs and packed some bread, cheese and fruit. Also a screw-top bottle of wine and a plastic glass.

She needed a swim and some time on the beach. Maybe then she would feel less tense.

She jumped on the bus heading for Sandy Bay, an area at the eastern end of Exmouth beach. The main beach at Exmouth had a gentle curve and flat yellow sand. Sandy Bay had sharp edges and rocky inlets and she liked it better there. She got off the bus and headed for the coastal path which started to take her upland and past the caravan and mobile home parks. She passed by families who had packed up for the day and were heading back to where they were staying.

The beach was not too busy. There were a few families left and some young teenage boys playing a kind of makeshift handball. She found a place to sit and unrolled her straw mat and unpacked her towel. Then she slipped off her jeans and top and headed for the water. She ran a few steps, the shingle biting at her feet, and then took a dive, plunging in.

She hardly had time to gasp because the momentum carried her swiftly deep underwater where it was black and there was no sound, as if both ears were stuffed with cotton wool. She surfaced moments later, shaking her head, her wet hair streaking her face. She trod water and found herself rising

and falling. There were no waves but the sea was undulating, seesawing.

She swam out, twenty, forty, fifty strokes. Now the beach looked small and she felt like she was in the middle of an ocean. She lay on her back and looked up at the sky. There were vapour trails across it and the sun was low. She closed her eyes and felt the water holding her up. She could do anything here and no one could stop her. She swam out further, feeling the water temperature lower. Glancing down she fancied she could see the depth increasing, miles and miles of life and vegetation beneath her. She felt precarious, like she was hanging over the top of the unknown.

She flipped over and headed back towards the beach, her strokes taking armfuls of water and flinging it behind her. In moments she was touching the bottom, her toes feeling the thick wetness of the shore.

She dried herself and sat on her straw mat looking out to sea.

It was gone seven o'clock but still warm enough to sit there in her wet costume so she started her picnic and drank some wine. Across the beach some girls were playing. They were wearing their swimsuits with T-shirts over them. They were lined up and singing like a girl band, one of them pretending to hold a microphone. When they finished their song they laughed and elbowed each other.

The sight of them made Kate smile.

It made her think again of the letter she had sent. So far there had been no reply. Had she expected one? She'd taken a chance sending it at all. Every part of her knew that. It was part of the conditions of her release that she should never

contact any of the people involved in that terrible day eight years ago. Julia had reiterated this from time to time. *Under no circumstances must you make any contact either physically or by any other means with a person or persons involved in the events at Berwick Waters.*

Kate thought of the names of those involved.

Lucy Bussell; Michelle's parents – Donna and Frank Livingstone.

But Kate had had things she needed to say so she had written *Dear Lucy* and signed it *Yours, Jennifer Jones.*

She started to pack up her stuff. She decided to walk further up the coastal path and find a place on the top of the cliffs to sit and watch the sun go down. She had her book and the rest of the wine and some fruit.

She'd have a solitary picnic.

She spent a lot of time alone; it suited her.