

THE SCREAM OF THE WHISTLE



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For Mum and Dad.

*Thank you for the stories, the steam trains,
the magic honeypots and the treasure hunts.*

Love you always x



ONE

When they pulled into Melbridge, Ru's bravery almost crumbled to dust.

It was even worse than she'd remembered.

They'd only been once before, but she didn't like it when she was six and she *definitely* didn't like it now she was twelve. Just as then, thirteen identical houses stood locked together in a row, weather-beaten and broken. Ghosts of the long-dead railway village, made from stone as grey as storm clouds. Most of them seemed too rotten to be upright, let alone lived in.

'Good job Gram normally comes to ours,' she muttered to her brother as they got out of the car. He ignored her.

'You going in, folks?' Mum staggered past, crumpled under the weight of their cat, Grizabella. 'Or

are you planning on sleeping out here?’

Maybe I'd prefer it, Ru thought. But she smiled with her teeth and gave two thumbs up. ‘In a minute. Just . . . taking it in.’

‘Suit yourself. And remember not to ask about Gram’s hippy stuff. It makes her go bizarre.’

Bizarre was an understatement for this whole place. There was a strange taste in the air – bitter and acrid, like charred hair. Little Hampton this definitely wasn’t.

If Ru had allowed a sad thought to creep in just then, she’d be desperate to go home. Desperate for the games cupboard that stretched to the ceiling and the glass doors thrown open to their wild, overrun garden. But all that was gone now, replaced by the memory of Dad’s wave wilting like a dead plant as they turned out of the drive and left him behind.

It was a good job she was staying positive.

Challenge: Shake it off, Ru. Get your head back in the game.

A defiant chin in the air, Ru followed Mum up the path into the only house lit up – Gram’s cottage – making a mental note to superglue the headless gnome outside the door.

NO PLACE LIKE GNOME was carved beneath his boots.

On second thoughts, maybe she'd leave it.

Inside was a cluttered chocolate box full of knick-knacks. Incense and dried lavender, ticking clocks, battered books and saucers of garibaldi biscuits. 'Dead-fly biscuits,' Mum called them. Tasted like it, too.

Gram flicked a distracted hand in the air as Ru came in. She was bent over a remote control, showing Mum how to work the TV.

'And you press the red button to turn it off, Martha. The *red button*. You got that?'

'So that's the green button, Ma?' Mum caught Ru's eye with a twinkly smirk.

'No, Martha, the red bu . . . look, let's start again.'

Ru popped a garibaldi absent-mindedly into her mouth and then swiftly spat it out again, wiping crumb mush on to a napkin.

'Ooh, and I'll just grab the WiFi password.' Gram headed up the stairs, the lace cobweb of her dress disappearing round the bend. 'It's new. Have you heard of WiFi, Martha . . . ?'

Mum's eyes followed her, before swerving

anxiously back to Ru. ‘I know, I know. This is only temporary. We won’t be staying here for long. We’ll get a place back in Little Hampton as soon as one comes up.’

One of two places, came Ru’s sneaky, stinging thought. *Homes split in half like a broken heart*. She pushed it far, far away.

‘It’s fine!’ She beamed in the way that Mum liked. ‘More than fine. It’s exciting.’

Mum ruffled her hair as she went past, and Ru’s red mane puffed into the shape of a fireball. ‘There’s my Rubes,’ Mum smiled. ‘Guess I’d better tell Gram the WiFi router isn’t in the bathroom.’

As soon as Mum had ducked under the stair beam, a snort rumbled from the doorway. Irritation spindled, and Ru threw a withering gaze at her brother.

‘Hey, that was almost a word. Does it hurt to do something other than grunt?’

With a waft of cheap aftershave and the wail of guitar music, Sam pulled his earbuds out and glared at Ru. ‘Nope. Does it hurt to be so delusional?’

‘Don’t know what you’re talking about.’

‘Come on,’ he whispered gently, sounding almost

human. ‘You’ve got that Games Night glint in your eye. The house has been let. Dad’s clearing out tomorrow morning. There’s no going back, Rubes.’

Ru held fast, despite the wobbling of her insides.

‘Shows how much you know.’ She gifted him an angelic smile. ‘I always win Games Night, don’t I?’

‘Yeah, but . . .’

‘And I’ll win this. It all happened too quickly at home, but now I’ve got time to plan. I’ll get Mum and Dad back together by the end of the week.’

She didn’t like the look Sam gave her. Too big-brotherly.

‘Whatever.’ He slipped the earbuds back in and disappeared into the shadows like an annoying vampire. ‘It’s your funeral.’