

TOO LATE, NATE

Nathan May guides his Volvo down a narrow, potholed road winding eastwards out of the sleepy Cornish hamlet and brings it to a halt outside his uncle's whitewashed cottage. He takes an envelope out of his inside jacket pocket, pulls out the single sheet of paper and reads it. Then he sets his jaw, switches off the engine and steps out of the car.

He passed many childhood summers here, fingers of sunshine caressing him as he lazed on the lawn, Uncle Jasper entrancing him with wondrous voices - Black Jack Dark, Henry Loveheart, One-Eyed Mumble - Nathan's eyes full moons, his mouth agape, as he listened to spirited tales of ancient pirates, all a product of Jasper's fecund imagination as Nathan would later discover. How his uncle made those stories come alive! With eyebrows dancing, ears wagging, magical words tripping over each other, he segued from villain to hero to buffoon and back. As he teetered on the edge of his teens, the stories lost their shine for Nathan. Impatient to escape his uncle's presence, he would interrupt Jasper and make up his own ending. A dark seed had planted itself: a seed that would germinate and take root deep in his childish mind and flourish in his adult conscience.

The rusty gate screeches on its hinges when he opens it. The front lawn, once painstakingly mown, is now starred with crab grass and crazed with yarrow. Daisies and plantains have reclaimed the gravel path leading to the cottage. An unruly Russian Vine trails silky tendrils over mossy eaves. Where order once ruled, disarray now dominates. When he reaches the front door the strong scent of cat urine snags his nostrils. He pauses, slips the letter back in his pocket. Then grips the tarnished lion's head knocker and raps three times on the door.

He hears the shuffle of feet. Metal grates as a key struggles against worn lock pins. The door inches open, sticks. Nathan is tempted to put his shoulder to the sun-bleached wood, making full use of his seventeen stones. Then, with a noise like chalk scraping across a blackboard, the door yields.

Nathan clenches his fists. Unclenches them. *Old man, you're going to regret what you've done*, he says to himself.

A face peers round the door: hollow cheeks, bone white with stubble; red-rimmed eyes bleeding tears; strands of lank grey hair, brushed across a mottled pate. Not the lambent face Nathan has trapped in his mind.

'Yes?'

'Jasper? It's me, Nathan.'

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The eyes narrow, widen, narrow again. 'Nathan? Nathan who?'

'Your nephew, Nathan May.'

A hand reaches out, knuckles like bleached shells, forefinger crooked. 'Come closer.'

Nathan inches forward; his nostrils catch the smells of surgical spirit and sour milk.

'What do you want?' growls Jasper.

'We need to talk.'

'Talk? What about?'

'I've some sad news. Mum's dead.'

A shadow falls on Jasper's face then dissolves. 'I see . . . Come in.'

In the stone-flagged hallway Nathan is not greeted by the remembered perfume of efflorescing freesias. Now it stinks of neglect, a state of affairs the finicky relative he once knew well would never have tolerated. A thick layer of dust covers every surface; like dead skin, paint flakes off the walls, exposing scabrous plaster. Nathan trails his aged relative as he shuffles along the hallway, Jasper pausing now and then to hawk into a balled handkerchief.

Unwashed plates, tea-stained cups, forks and spoons litter the kitchen table. Beneath it, copies of the *Daily Mail* cover the floor. A jumbled pile of unwashed clothing lies on a flimsy chair placed next to a cooker smeared with grease. Jasper grasps the arm of an antiquated rocking chair, winces, grips his stomach and slowly lowers himself. Nathan recognises the chair; a cold finger traces his spine. Whenever the rain driving off Bodmin Moor chased them in from the garden, Jasper would recline on it and encourage Nathan to sit on his knee.

The rocker creaks as Jasper leans back and crosses his arms over his chest. 'Dead? When?'

'Two months ago. Quite suddenly. One minute, she was fine, the next . . . the next she wasn't.'

'Did she suffer any . . .'

'Pain? The doctors thought not.'

'I'm sorry. I know you were very close.'

'Not as close as you.'

'I'm sure that's not true. We hadn't seen each other for years.'

'But you and Mum . . . you were really close at one time, weren't you?'

Jasper's eyebrows knit. 'What do you mean?'

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The letter in Nathan's pocket burns his heart like a branding iron. After his mother's funeral, he felt the urge to tidy her house. At the back of the wardrobe in her bedroom he came across a small metal box. Guilt counselled not to remove the lid. Curiosity argued it could do no harm to a departed soul. Curiosity won the day. Inside the box he found a bundle of yellowed letters. When he discovered who had written them his interest intensified. At first, he tried to convince himself the letters were part of some sick joke. Then he reread them, slowly, to grasp fully their nuances. When he understood the reality of what they contained his muscles locked, a knot formed in the pit of his stomach and he fought waves of nausea.

The letters' contents demand an explanation, but his mother would not be able to provide it. His father died years ago, victim of a massive coronary infarction. That leaves only Uncle Jasper, his mother's brother, the person Nathan hoped he would never meet again. During the following weeks curiosity met with a new adversary: reluctance. They growled at each other. They skirmished. Once again, curiosity triumphed.

Nathan plucks out the letter and throws it in Jasper's lap. 'Read that.'

'Can't. My old eyes don't see too well any more. All I see is a sea fret.'

'Then I'll read it for you.' Snatching back the letter, Nathan unfolds it. "My darling Jasper, how I miss you. I can't wait until I see you in June, although I fear it will be without Nathan this time. For some reason our son refuses to come with Ronnie and me. I suppose it has something to do with his age, exerting his independence. Ronnie tries reasoning with him, but without success. He says you can't force a fifteen-year-old to do something he doesn't want to, although I have argued with him on this point. I know he does his best, but it must be very difficult when Nathan isn't his own child. I suspect there may be some deeper reason, but boys at that age can be very secretive, can't they? You would not believe how he has changed since we visited last. He is almost as tall as you, and wakes up with a dark shadow on his face. It's almost uncanny, but it's like having you around the house when you were his age. Although the world forces me to endure living without your company, he is a constant reminder of my love for you. Anyway, with or without him, I'll be there. I can't wait to see you again. Imagine, a whole week together! I love you forever, Tess."

The letter slides out of Nathan's hand, spirals to the floor. His mother wrote that letter close to twenty-five years ago, the last time he saw Jasper, when he gave in to his mother's pleading, pain lancing through her when he said he never wanted to see his uncle again.

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A tic flutters in his eyelid; hot threads curl around his neck. How could his mother deceive his father? How could she deceive her son? So many lost years, her knowing Nathan would never think to question his genes and he fearful of exposing Jasper to family revulsion.

‘You don’t deny it, then?’ he spits at Jasper.

Jasper shrugs his narrow shoulders, turns out his hands. ‘Deny it? What would be the point? ‘You’ve read the letter. Besides, why should I deny it?’

Nathan pinches the flesh above the bridge of his nose, incredulous at his uncle’s indifference. ‘My God, you were in a sexual relationship with . . . I can hardly bring myself to say it . . . *your own sister!*’

‘Your father knew all about Tess and me.’

‘What?’

‘I said your father was fully aware of what was going on.’

‘Don’t lie to me.’

‘It wasn’t how it appears.’

‘No? Then how was it?’

Jasper runs his hand over his face. ‘I’ll tell you, though you might not like what I say. Tess wasn’t my sister, not exactly. Technically speaking, she was my stepsister. Her father was my mother’s second husband. When they married, Tess was four years old, the same age as I. We grew up together, became inseparable. Then, one day, we fell in love,’ he snaps his fingers, ‘just like that. When we were eighteen, her father died of pneumonia, my mother following not long after. Left on our own, we faced a daunting prospect. We discussed how we would cope. We knew we could never marry. It wasn’t illegal, but society would have ostracized us, treated us like pariahs. Tess came up with the solution. Ronnie was my best friend and she suggested she marry him. Ronnie agreed. After the marriage, Tess and I continued to see each other secretly for a short time. Then Ronnie’s firm moved him to Leeds and we only saw each other on the odd occasion when they came down to Cornwall. In those days the phone and letters were the only means of communication. Neither of us liked the phone, so we took to letter writing. As the years rolled by, her visits and letters grew more infrequent. Although I refused to admit it to myself, I sensed something in Tess had changed. It had. Not surprisingly, she had fallen in love with your father. The one you hold in your hand is the last letter she wrote to me. You—’

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Jasper's body folds. He clutches a hand to his mouth, attempting to stifle a fit of coughing that wracks his body. Then he presses his free hand to his chest, and, throat rattling, sucks in a deep breath. His eyes pin Nathan's. A tear rolls down his cheek.

'You broke your mother's heart, son. She wanted to tell you about us when you turned sixteen, but before she could you switched me off like a light. All those years, Nathan, and not once did you bother to visit me.'

Nathan's mouth opens, closes. *Should I let go my demons? Tell him what I felt when he used to pat my bottom, run his fingers through my hair? Say I pretended to be asleep when his face peered round a crack in the door, staring at me, making my skin crawl? Admit I found his intrusions too familiar, too creepy. If I had known then what I know now, his affection would have seemed so natural, so fatherly. Yet how could he admit it to me knowing I might turn on my own mother and spurn the man who raised me as his own?*

Jasper's mouth twists into a sneer. 'I suppose you're thinking, "Why did she never tell me?" Would you have understood? I doubt it. As a child you were inclined to jump to conclusions, finishing my stories for me. God knows what you might have done. That's why your mother never told you.' He grunts, raises himself off the rocker, hobbles over to a drawer in the kitchen table and reaches inside. In his hand he grips a bundle of letters, which he places on the tabletop.

'These are her letters to me. Read them and then maybe you'll know what she missed. What you missed. Then come back here and ask forgiveness over my grave. The doctors have given me three months to live.'