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The Border Lord

By Kim Curran

CHAPTER ONE

FREAK

Only Megan could find trouble in a place like this.

The town, if you could even call it that, was a serious disappointment. Two rows of ivy-covered houses separated by a dark river. A run-down post office. And a pub called The Dragon. That was it. She was destined to die from boredom.

What had they been thinking sending her here? Megan sighed and slumped over to a bench by the river and sat down. The seat was damp. Reaching into her combats, she pulled out her lighter. With two well-practised clicks, it was alight.

She watched the flame flicker and smiled a half smile. The Zippo was one of the only things in the world she actually cared about. And she was lucky to still have it. Her so-called foster father had found it, assumed she must be a hardened smoker, and confiscated the lighter before locking her in her room. 'Not only is it illegal,' he'd roared into her face before slamming the door. 'For a fifteen-year old girl to be smoking, it is also vulgar, beastly and the top of a slippery slope towards drugs.' When she'd mentioned, in some less-than-ladylike terms, the

stink of smoke on his breath he'd almost hit her.

He'd kicked her out the next day. But not before she'd broken into his room to get her Zippo back.

Megan picked at a red thread of her fingerless glove and introduced it to the flame. It disappeared in a curl of blackened nylon. The tongue of fire hissed. It was starting to rain. Perfect. Just perfect, she thought. She pulled her old, black cardigan about her and glared at the greying sky. Even it was against her. She jumped off the bench and was about to begin the long walk back. When she heard the laughter.

The kids were gathered by the crumbling bridge – a girl, about her own age and two boys who looked a little older. The gang towered over a fourth, smaller boy who was huddled in a ball, whimpering. Megan recognised the scene only too well.

‘Oi!’ she shouted, snapping the lighter shut with a flick of her wrist.

The group spun around and glared at the intruder.

‘Who are you?’ the girl asked with a sneer. Her shaggy, blonde hair stuck to her head in the drizzling rain.

Megan walked over to the riverbank. ‘I’m Megan Fletcher. And I think he’s had enough.’ The group remained menacingly silent. The gurgle of the river and twittering of birds seemed unnaturally loud. ‘You all right?’ Megan asked the kid as he struggled to get to his feet in the swelling mud.

‘He’s fine,’ said the eldest boy. He was dressed in the tough-guy uniform of baggy jeans and a hoodie. ‘From the city are ya?’

‘Yeah, London. I got here last night. But I won’t be staying long.’ I hope, Megan added to herself. This was met with mocking sniggers from the group.

Even the small kid joined in the laughter. Megan regretted ever trying to help him.

‘Suit yourselves.’ She nodded and walked away.

Then he said it.

‘Freak!’

Her body stiffened as the adrenaline took hold. She curled her trembling hands into fists, took a deep breath and turned to face them.

‘What did you say?’ she said, through clenched teeth.

‘Fr-eak!’ the tough guy repeated, drawing the word out, savouring it.

‘Big mistake,’ Megan growled, her dark hair falling into her eyes.

‘You know what I hate?’ he said, ignoring her. ‘Freaks like this comin’ into our town.’

‘Yeah, freak,’ echoed the group.

Megan laughed. ‘You call *this* a town?’

‘You got a problem with it?’ The girl stepped forward, stopping inches from Megan, her mouth curled as if smelling something rotten. ‘Why don’t you go back to where you came from then?’

‘I wish,’ Megan muttered under her breath.

The tough guy spat on the ground. ‘Bloody Londoners, comin’ here, taking over.’

‘Yeah. What does she think she looks like?’ The girl looked Megan up and down, taking in her heavy eyeliner, fingerless gloves and baggy clothes. Megan was used to strange stares. Everything about her appearance, from the jagged shock of scarlet in her jet-black hair to her huge para-boots, said ‘back off’. But now, she’d have to pay for being different.

‘I mean, just look at her hair,’ the girl said, reaching out to ruffle Megan’s

long fringe. Megan slapped the hand away.

‘Yeah?’ Megan said, taking in the girl’s short skirt and tight T-shirt, ridiculous in this cold weather. ‘Well, at least I don’t dress like a crack-whore.’

That did it. The girl took a swing.

‘‘Ave her, Tina!’ one of the boys cried.

Before the girl’s wind-milling arm could connect, Megan hit her with a swift punch to the stomach. The girl doubled over and hit the ground, gasping for air.

Megan stepped over the moaning girl and took a threatening stride forward, fists raised. The boys turned to each other, looking shocked and confused. Megan took the advantage. She charged, head down, at the tough guy. Just as she was about to collide, he span out of the way. She went sprawling into the muddy bank. Shaking the mud from her eyes, Megan rolled on to her back and tried to get to her feet. The boy pounced and started raining down blows on her arms and chest.

Without thinking, she wrapped her legs around his waist and twisted. With a cry of rage she flipped him on to his back and leapt astride him. She pulled her right fist back and let it fly, straight into his smug face. He made a satisfying grunt of pain. She went to follow with her left fist when her head was yanked back. Someone was tugging her hair, pulling her away. Both hands went up to shake off her attacker and she was left open. The tough guy smiled before hitting her in the face.

Megan’s nose crumpled under the impact and she couldn’t breathe. She couldn’t move. Pain shot through her skull and colours danced in front of her eyes. She was dimly aware of blows hitting her body as she curled into a ball. She

was rolling in the mud, sliding downwards, as hands pushed and tugged at her.

With a splash, she hit the cold water of the river. The icy sheets embraced her and pulled her down. She flailed her arms, clawing at the air. Her boots, now full of water, dragged her deeper. Blood snaked from her nose and clouded her vision. She cried out, releasing a string of bubbles. The sound of her scream was swallowed by the deafening rush in her ears. It was as if the world had been put on mute. Fear took hold as she fell further and further away from the glittering surface of the water. She was sinking, fast.

With a thud she hit the riverbed and her boots sank deep into the silt. She tried to push against the sludge, to propel herself back to the surface. But she couldn't move. Her muscles seized with the cold and her body refused to respond. Fighting against her treacherous limbs, she bent over to tug at her boots, desperate to free them from the sucking mud. The surface and its precious air glinted just meters above her head.

She struggled for what felt like an age, panicked and frantic, until there was no air left in her lungs and her chest burned. Again and again she pulled at her legs and finally one of her feet came free. The other remained anchored by the boot, which sank ever deeper into the mud.

It was useless. There was nothing she could do. She would die here at the bottom of this stinking river. Her lungs stopped convulsing and she simply floated there, held in place by her beloved boot.

Around her weeds waved. As the light started to fade she thought she saw the faces of creatures with strange, slit eyes and wide, smooth brows hiding in the reeds. They smiled at her. She smiled back.

'I'm dying.' She laughed and a bubble escaped her mouth. The last of her

air.

The darkness crept over her and she thought she could make out things moving in the gloom. Hands caressed her face, but it must have been the reeds claiming her as their own. Something wrapped itself around her waist. And all she wanted to do was curl up into the warm embrace.

Then she felt a dull pain in her head. Someone yanking at her hair. But she didn't have the energy to make them stop. Besides it was too late now; all the light had gone and a terrible tiredness washed over her. Unable to resist any longer, she breathed in the water letting it fill her aching lungs.

The last thing she remembered was the feeling of being pulled upwards.

CHAPTER TWO

THE FORGE

At first Megan thought it must have been a dream. That she was curled up in her bed at home and any minute her Dad would be calling to tell her breakfast was ready. But then she became aware of the sound of a river running nearby. And the agonising memories of the past year came rushing back. There was no breakfast waiting for her, or Dad to make it. Megan was alone. And in pain.

She opened her eyes to see a dark shape bending over her. She sat up, ready for a fight. Her head swam and stars spun behind her eyes. She fell back with a squelch.

‘Relax,’ said a deep voice. ‘You’re safe now.’

The shape moved and Megan could make out the silhouette of a man framed by a soft orange glow. She shifted, moving cautiously away from the figure. The bedsprings beneath her clanged loudly. She tried to get her bearings. She was lying on a lumpy bed in a strange house. She was wrapped in a rough blanket that was as damp as her clothes underneath. And she stank.

She sniffed and the pain in her nose shot up into her skull. Tentatively, she reached her hand up to inspect the damage. Her nose felt soft and swollen. That boy had a good punch that was for sure. She’d got into a fight. That much she could remember. But then what?

A shudder of cold passed through her. Megan had of a feeling of falling. The water. And something in the reeds.

‘Where am I?’ she said, holding her hand to her spinning head.

‘You’re in my house,’ the man said, moving into a shaft of light. She blinked and slowly he came into focus.

He had dark, tousled hair, which framed a square face. Handsome, if you liked that rugged, outdoorsy look. Tall, with broad shoulders and thick arms that bulged out from his black T-shirt. It, like his trousers and sturdy black boots, was old and well worn. Not all that much older than her, Megan reckoned. In his early twenties maybe. But there was something in his deep brown eyes that made him seem older. He wasn’t looking at her in that pitying way so many adults did. In fact, he didn’t so much look at her, as through her. As if her being there was a mild distraction and he was already thinking about something else.

‘What happened?’ Megan asked, carefully sitting up. ‘The last thing I remember was those kids pushing me into the river.’

‘Yeah,’ the man said. ‘Then running ‘round like headless chickens when you didn’t come up for air.’

‘But what happened?’ Megan asked again. ‘I was...’ The word caught in her throat. ‘I was stuck.’

‘I pulled you out,’ he mumbled, rubbing the back of his neck and gazing at the floor between them.

Now that she looked at him closely she saw his hair was wet.

‘Er...Thanks,’ she said, untangling herself from the blanket. She tried to stand. The dizziness came over her again and she swayed on her feet.

‘Easy now,’ the man said, catching her by the shoulders and guiding her back onto the bed. She sat there, holding her spinning head in her hands. Every inch of her ached; a dull, pounding pain that radiated from inside her bones. She breathed in and

a stabbing pain shot through her ribs.

‘They gave you quite a beating,’ the man said, his voice rich with the lilting tones of a country accent. ‘But you put up quite a fight yourself. Jamie’s going to have a lovely black eye I reckon.’ He sounded impressed.

‘Jamie? Was he the tall boy?’

‘Yeah. I don’t think he really meant to hurt you. Just scare you, most likely.’

‘Well he managed that all right.’ She felt her tender nose again. ‘Anyway it’s that little brat I want a word with. I was only trying to help him.’

‘That’s Tim, Jamie’s little brother. Reckon he’s not used to people trying to help him.’

‘Yeah, whatever. I’ll remember to stay out of it next time.’ Megan pushed herself to her feet. This time she stayed upright.

‘You should probably get out of those wet clothes. I thought about... Well, I thought I’d wait till you got up.’ Megan could see a touch of red rising in his dark cheeks. ‘I’ll make tea,’ he muttered and headed for a small door. ‘There are some warm clothes you can put on. And a towel.’ He gestured at a pile lying on a small table.

‘Thanks. I don’t know your name.’

‘Smith.’

‘Just Smith?’

‘Yep.’

‘And I’m...’

‘Megan Fletcher. I know.’

He disappeared through the door before she could ask him how he knew her name.

She waited until she could hear the deliberate noises of tea making from the other side of the door before pulling off her top. The bruises along her side throbbed. They would take a while to heal, but she'd taken worse. Careful not to make any sudden movements that would aggravate the pain, she towelled herself dry and started to pull on the clothes he'd left: an enormous pair of brown trousers, which she tightened with a belt and rolled up at the bottom, and a thick, white woollen jumper.

Dressed, she walked over to the fire and laid her wet clothes on a metal rack. Smith had already done the same with her cardigan, which was almost dry. Glancing over her shoulder to make sure she was alone, she pulled off her striped gloves and wrung them out onto the stone floor. The neat rows of thin white lines shone in the dim light, like her arms were wrapped in a spider's web. She rubbed at the scars before putting the gloves back on.

'How long was I out?' she shouted.

'About an hour.'

Megan looked about her. The building was hexagonal, with rough, whitewashed walls that looked like they were only being held up by the dirt. There were large gaps between the stones, filled with old newspaper and straw. One was home to a family of swifts and Megan watched as the mother darted in and out.

Dominating the room was a large, open fireplace. It was covered by a heavy metal hood attached to a flume, which bent upwards to a hole in the ceiling. A low fire flickered in the centre of the hearth giving off a warm glow.

Strange metal objects adorned every space; rows of long, thin tongs and lines of metal hammers stood next to a large anvil. Along five of the six walls were racks holding more metal tools and blades. On the last wall was a row of bookshelves, which bowed under the weight of the books. These, along with the bed, were the only

signs that anyone lived here.

‘What is this place?’ Megan called out, carefully leaning over the fire and peering up through the flume at the circle of daylight above.

‘It’s a forge,’ Smith said from behind her, causing Megan to bang her head against the metal hood. He carried two mugs in his hands and passed her one. ‘I guessed you might want some sugar.’

Despite the borrowed clothes, she was still cold through. The heat of the mug stung her icy fingers. Pulling the long sleeves of the jumper over her hands, she hugged the steaming mug to her body.

‘What’s a forge?’

‘I make horseshoes and stuff. Melt metal in the forge there and shape it on the anvil.’ He nodded in turn to the huge fire and the hunk of black metal.

‘Horse shoes, huh?’ she said, strolling around the room.

‘And other things.’

She stopped at a large pile of twisted metal. ‘These kind of things?’

‘That’s just... I was just messing about.’

She inspected it. It looked like some kind of animal made from strips of metal. It had the head of a horse and the body of a fish.

‘I like it,’ she said. ‘It’s like a sculpture I saw once. You know, in a gallery?’ She was about to tell him about how her foster parents had taken her. But stopped when she remembered how the day ended. With her locked in her room, as usual.

‘Thanks but it’s not finished. Don’t think I’ll get time to finish it now, either.’

‘Why not?’

‘I’m working on something else.’ His tone let Megan know not to push it.

‘It’s a nice...’ she paused before finding the right word. ‘Place you have here.’

Smith laughed a quick, coughing laugh.

Megan continued around the room, poking at random objects that lay about; a pair of tongs here, a leather book there. All the while she could feel Smith's eyes on her, watching her every move. An old, mottled mirror hung on the wall next to the door. Megan examined her reflection. Her usually small nose was puffy and red, and dark purple shadows were appearing under her eyes. She'd have two perfect shiners before the day was out. She combed her long fringe with her fingers, pulling it into place over her left eye.

Below the mirror was a small table. On it laid a long, bulky object covered in sackcloth.

'What's this?' she asked, her hand moving towards the cloth. She had just lifted the material an inch to see something silver shining from beneath, when Smith's heavy hand wrapped about her wrist.

'Nothing,' he said, pulling her hand away and re-covering the object. Megan twisted her arm out of his grip and stepped away.

'It's not finished,' he said, through clenched teeth, those dark eyes boring into hers.

So he didn't want her to see it? That only made her want to know what it was even more. Megan didn't like people keeping secrets from her. For now, she just shrugged and made her way back over to the bed, her bare feet slapping on the cold stone floor. She sat down and sipped at the tea, flinching as the heat stung her aching throat.

'Where'd you learn to fight?' Smith asked.

Megan sniffed. 'Sort of picked it up. You want to be different, you've got to know how to look after yourself, right? And my Dad taught me a few moves.'

‘You could’ve just walked away.’

‘I guess. But when I get angry I can’t do much about it. Dad used to ...’ She stopped speaking, painfully conscious of the sound of her own voice. Thinking of her Dad, her hand went up to her throat.

‘My necklace!’ she said, patting at the empty space where it used to hang.

Smith’s eyebrows knitted in what looked like genuine concern. ‘I didn’t see it on you when I pulled you out. Sorry. Was it expensive?’

Megan let her hand drop. ‘No, just an old key. It doesn’t matter.’ But it did matter. Her Dad gave it to her when she was six. Plucked it out of an old cupboard he was throwing away and handed it to her. ‘The key to my heart, Megs,’ he’d said laughing. And she’d worn it ever since. Now it was at the bottom of a river. Just one more thing she’d never see again.

‘You were watching then?’ she asked, trying to change the subject.

‘From the window.’ He gestured to a tiny, smoke-stained windowpane. Through it she could see the river running by and, on the opposite bank, the spot where the fight had taken place. ‘I was on my way to break up the fight, when you went in.’

‘Lucky for me, I guess,’ she said.

‘I guess.’

Megan shivered with the memory. Minutes, maybe just seconds, had stood between her and death. Lucky didn’t cover it.

She stared into the flickering fire and drank the sweet tea. Now and then, her eyes darted over to the cloth-covered object. Smith sat on a stool at the other side of the room and just watched her, his own tea untouched. Neither said a word.

‘Mad weather, huh?’ Megan said, breaking the silence.

‘What?’

‘The weather. Weird, right? The hurricanes and tidal waves and stuff. The newspapers have been on about it for weeks.’

‘I suppose.’

More silence. Then the steady chiming of church bells rang out.

‘What time is it?’ Megan asked.

‘Just after three I reckon.’

‘I’d better be off,’ Megan said, draining her mug. ‘Batty Hattie said she’d back at four. She’s gonna have a fit when she sees me.’

‘Batty Hattie?’

‘The old lady I’m staying with. My great, great Aunt or something. Old Batty Hattie Dad used to call her, and it kind of stuck.’

‘Where are your parents?’

Megan paused before she answered. ‘Dead.’

‘What happened?’

‘You really want to know?’ Megan asked. Most people were only too quick to change the subject, or muttered something about being sorry, which only served to annoy her. How could they be sorry when they’d never met her parents?

Smith nodded.

‘My mum died in Hurricane Katrina in 2005. Although she left home when I was little so I never really knew her. She ran away to America with some jazz player, apparently. Karma, Dad called it.’

‘And what about your Dad?’

‘He died... last year.’

‘And you’ve no brothers or sisters?’

‘Nope. Just me.’

‘It must be tough.’

‘I get by,’ she said, instinctively rubbing at her arm.

She stood up and tried to find somewhere to place her empty mug, finally deciding on the floor next to the bed. ‘Is it okay if I borrow your clothes to get home in, and you know, like, bring them back tomorrow? It’s just that if I don’t get back soon...’

‘Batty Hattie,’ Smith said, nodding. ‘Okay. But bring ‘em back mind. That’s my favourite jumper.’

‘Sure, thanks.’ She looked down at her feet and wiggled her bare toes.

‘I couldn’t find your boots,’ Smith said.

‘Damn.’ Hattie’s place was at least a twenty-minute walk away.

‘I’ve got an old pair of wellies somewhere, if you want? They’ll be too big, but...’

‘That would be great. Thanks.’

Smith left the room and Megan could hear him rummaging about in what she assumed must be the kitchen.

‘I think they must be out back,’ he called. ‘Hang on.’

As soon as she heard him open and close a door she felt a nagging curiosity. Her eyes were drawn again to the object on the table. What had he been so keen to hide? Listening out for any sign of his return she crept over to the table and lifted the cloth. At first she wasn’t sure what it was. She pulled the material completely away, revealing a long strip of metal with a large, curving guard. A sword. And it was beautiful. The blade was about two inches wide with a rippling pattern along its length, like clouds moving beneath the metal. As Megan moved closer, rainbow

colours danced across the surface. It reminded her of swirling petrol. The handle was made of a thick spiral of metal, wrapped with a strip of brown leather.

Without meaning to, her hand drifted over the sword and hung just above the guard. Her shaking fingers closed around the handle. And she felt a pulse of heat surge through her body. A dull humming, like the sound of people singing from another room, filled her ears. She lifted the sword and held it before her, amazed at how light it was. It settled into her hand, almost as if it were made for her. The reflection of the room moved in the guard's mirror-like surface as she turned the blade. A face stared back at her. She laughed when she realised the rapt expression was her own. With the eyeliner washed off by the river she hardly recognised herself.

Suddenly, in the reflection she saw something that made her feel like she'd just been plunged back into the water. Standing in the doorway, his jaw hanging open, was Smith.

Megan threw the sword down and spun around, trying to hide what she'd been doing. But the blade caught on the thick jumper and went toppling to the floor. Megan winced as it clanged on the flagstones.

Opening one eye at a time she looked at Smith. He just stood there, his face red with anger, the wellies held tight in his hand.

'I... I,' Megan stammered.

'I think you'd better go,' Smith said, charging across the room. For the first time Megan noticed he walked with a limp. He pushed the boots into her hands and bent down to pick up the sword. Brushing her out of the way, he replaced the sword on the table and re-covered it with the tatty cloth.

'I'm sorry,' she said. 'I just wanted to—'

'Just go,' he said, his back to her.

Megan scuttled out of the way and hopped into the wellies. They were enormous, but she wasn't about to complain. She gathered the pile of damp clothes into her arms.

'I'll bring your stuff back tomorrow,' she said.

Smith just grunted. She took it as a yes.

'Thanks again,' she said from the doorway. Smith turned to face her and she was struck by his expression. He was staring transfixed, as if there was something about her he couldn't quite believe.

Megan turned, opened the door and ran away as quickly as her booted feet would allow.

CHAPTER THREE

THE FACE IN THE FLAME

Megan managed to make it back to Hattie's house in the enormous wellies. Although by the time she'd walked up the slight hill that lead to the cottage, blisters were forming on her heels. Grimacing, she slipped off the wellies and left them outside the door. As an afterthought, she scooped them up and brought them into the house. Hattie might get suspicious if she saw a pair of men's boots on the porch.

The door opened with a creak. Poking her head around the doorframe Megan peered inside. The hall was deserted. The only thing she could hear was the ticking of the grandfather clock.

Once inside, Megan closed the door behind her, still unsure the house was really empty. Every inch of the dark hall was crammed with strange objects. Stuffed birds clung to wooden plaques, and their beady black eyes followed Megan as she passed. Row upon row of plates was fixed to the walls by white plastic wires. Megan wondered why anyone would hang plates on a wall, especially ones as ugly as these.

'Hello?' she called out. No answer. Apart from the painted dogs and birds Megan was alone. She breathed a sigh of relief. If she could at least tidy herself up before Hattie got back, perhaps the old bat wouldn't freak as much. Although she would have every right to. Megan had, after all, almost got herself killed. She would have succeeded, too, if it hadn't been for Smith. And how did she thank him? By snooping around in his stuff.

Megan sighed again as she remembered the look on his face. A burning wave

of guilt hit her. She couldn't help herself; the sword was so beautiful. It was a compliment to him really that she was drawn to it. He probably didn't see it like that. Most likely he saw her as a silly girl who got into fights and caused trouble wherever she went. It's what everyone else thought of her.

Who cared? She decided to forget him and the stupid sword.

She stomped up the staircase, dragging the boots behind her. The old steps creaked and groaned, unaccustomed to the inconvenience of being used.

Her room was at the very top of the house. The same one her mother had stayed in when she'd visited a lifetime ago. Or that's what Hattie told her. Megan reckoned it hadn't been touched since. Everything was pink. Prancing pink horses on the pink bed spread, kittens on the pink wallpaper and pink flowers on the curtains. It made her want to gag.

If all of that wasn't bad enough, Megan entered the room to find it tidied. The clothes she'd worn and discarded in a heap on the floor were now neatly folded across the back of a chair. Her large duffle bag had also been interfered with, all of its contents unpacked and carefully put away. Megan seethed at the idea of Hattie rummaging around in her things.

The window was open and the curtains flapped in the wind. Megan threw the damp clothes to the floor, crossed the room and slammed the windows shut. She'd had quite enough of the outdoors for one day.

Standing in the pink room surrounded by the cute animals, Megan felt thoroughly sorry for herself. She was bruised and battered. She had nearly drowned. Her feet hurt. And to top it all, she smelt. Terrible. Well, at least she could do something about the smell.

She took off Smith's clothes and laid them in a respectful pile on her bed. A

fluffy dressing gown hung on the back of her door. She pulled it on and padded down the hall to the bathroom.

Inside, she turned the large brass taps. Rust-coloured water flooded into the tub, filling the room with steam. Odd bottles, half-filled with coloured liquids, were lined up on the sides of the bath. She sniffed at one. Lavender. Megan wrinkled up her nose in disgust. What was it with old women and lavender? The second bottle didn't smell that bad, a sort of strawberry scent. She poured a generous amount of into the bath and waited.

When the bath was full with white bubbles, she tested the temperature with her toe. Hot, but not too hot. Letting her dressing gown drop to the floor, Megan eased herself into the warm suds. The hot water met with her bruises and she flinched. The pain was short lived. She sank beneath the surface and stayed there for a moment, letting the water trickle into her ears, blocking out any sounds. Her nose popped above the foam and she breathed deeply, feeling her bruised ribs complain.

As she lay there, she wondered what would happen if she ditched the house and got the next train back to London. The truth was, she didn't have anywhere to go. No friends to stay with or family to rely on. Only Batty Hattie and this ancient house.

Most of her friends had disappeared after her Dad died. They just didn't know what to say. She'd punched one girl for saying his dying was a good thing. After that, they just left her alone.

She stretched out, trying to touch the end of the bath with her toes. Suddenly, she heard the sound of laughter from nearby. She sat bolt upright, splashing water over the edge of the bath and stared around the room. She strained her ears but heard nothing except the steady dripping of the spilled water onto the wooden floorboards. Inserting her little finger into her ear she jiggled it about to try and dislodge the water.

Still nothing. Just the sounds of the old house. She must have been imagining it. Or it had come from outside.

Megan sank back into the tub, shaking her head. This house was driving her mad. She ran her fingers through her hair and rubbed at her face trying to dislodge the river grime. If only the lines on her arms could be washed away so easily. She rubbed at them and remembered standing in the shower, a stolen disposable razor in her hand, the blood running down her arms and into the drain. She liked to watch the blood mix with the water, like clouds. When the buzzing rage in her head got to be too much, the cutting soothed it somehow. It was the only time she felt in control. Then one of the carers at the home saw the scars and freaked out, convinced she'd tried to kill herself.

She was sent to see specialist after specialist. Each one asked her 'why?' They were unsatisfied by any answer she gave, until she snapped and said; 'To be with my parents, okay. Is that what you want to hear?' Judging by the psychiatrist's smug expression, it was exactly what he wanted.

There had been muted conversations in corners between the doctors and the care workers after that. 'Not set up to deal with cases like hers,' they said, before booting her out to live with the foul-breath foster father and his whining wife. That had only lasted a few months until they were fed up with her, too. Her social worker finally tracked down Hattie, after finding some papers of her Mum's. Just how long would it be before Hattie wanted rid of her?

Megan closed her eyes and tried to shut the thoughts out. The water felt good. Her skin tingled almost as if the bubbles were washing the pain away along with the dirt. She tapped her foot against the ceramic side of the bath and listened to the dull, thudding sound. Thud, thud, thud-thud, thud. There were two responding thuds,

finishing off the rhythm. And the laughing again. Megan almost choked on a mouthful of water as she sprang out of the bath. She grabbed the robe from the floor and held it to her body. She was certain. The sound had come from nearby. A high-pitched giggle somewhere in the house.

‘Who’s there?’ she called out, not really wanting a reply. The house was silent. She shook her head, and breathed in and out to try and steady her now pounding heart. She was just letting the creaks and groans of this old house get to her. It’s probably the plumbing, she told herself. A squeaking air bubble trapped somewhere in a pipe. She slipped back into the bath determined to ignore any strange sounds.

She was in the bath for less than a few seconds when the sound came again. A childish laugh. Then there was a splashing, as if something just jumped into the bath with her. Paralysed by fear, Megan stared straight ahead, willing the terror away. Slowly, she gathered herself and slid up the side of the bath trying not to make a sound. Her heart thundered in her ears, almost deafening her. She looked around. There was nothing there.

She heard a noise downstairs, which made her heart stop. A loud bang and the sound of feet.

‘Megan? Are you home?’ It was Hattie.

Megan let out the breath she had been holding and rolled her eyes at her own stupidity. What was she like, letting the old house spook her like that? ‘Yes. I’m in the bath!’

‘Well, I hope you haven’t used up all the hot water!’ Hattie yelled.

Megan listened to Hattie busy herself about the house, clashing and clumping things. She finished her bath with no more disturbances and returned to her room.

It wasn't until she glanced in the mirror that she started to feel really afraid.

Expecting to see large bruises, she saw nothing. Just her normal pale face looking back at her. No black eyes. Even her small nose bore no sign of today's fight. It didn't even hurt. Neither, she realised as she felt her side, did her ribs. It was as if the fight had never happened.

She stared at her reflection, open-mouthed. It wasn't that she wanted the bruises; they'd have landed her in a heap of trouble. But to have them completely disappear was simply not normal. Thoughts chased themselves around Megan's mind. Nothing made sense.

Then the world started to shake.

The wind howled from outside, battering at the windows and the floor started to vibrate beneath her feet. It was like she was riding on the back of a truck. Dust and plaster started raining from the ceiling. The mirror bounced off the wall and smashed on the floor.

'Megan!' Hattie's voice screamed from downstairs. 'Megan Fletcher, get down here!'

Did Hattie think whatever was happening was her fault? Freaked out by what was going on, Megan yanked on whatever clothes were to hand – a pair of striped leggings, a black jumper and her old trainers – and hopped out the door. Just as she left the room the shaking stopped and stillness took hold of the old house.

'Megan!' Hattie called again, sounding desperate.

Megan raced down the stairs two at a time and entered the dark hallway below.

'What's going on?' Megan said, running into the kitchen.

Hattie was standing, her limbs outstretched, desperately trying to stop an old

vase, a patterned plate and a coffee pot from toppling off the dresser. Megan ran forward and took the vase from Hattie. She replaced it on the dresser and looked about. Some of the other crockery hadn't been so fortunate. A teacup and saucer lay in pieces on the tiled floor.

'Phew,' Hattie said, delicately replacing the plate. It had a picture of a stupid-looking dog painted on it. Megan wasn't sure why the woman had gone to such efforts to save it.

'What was that?' Megan said, bending over to pick up the shattered pieces of the cup.

'An earthquake. Third this week.' Hattie steadied herself on the wooden kitchen table and sat down, clearly shaken. She was a tiny thing, with a bent back and shrivelled skin that looked like it was two sizes too big. Although she was anything but frail. When Megan arrived at Tolbridge station the night before, Hattie had carried the heavy bag that contained all of Megan's belongings as if was nothing more than a bag of shopping.

'An earthquake? Here? I thought they only happened in America and places?' Megan went to deposit the shards in the bin.

'Not in there, you silly girl. The bin men won't collect it. Just leave it on the side.'

Megan mimed wringing Hattie's neck. But did what she was told.

'And while you're at it, you can wash up your dishes from this morning.'

'What?'

'I don't know what you were used to in those 'home' places. But you're going to have to earn your keep here, my girl.'

'But there's just been an earthquake!'

‘That doesn’t give you an excuse to neglect your chores. And like I said, it’s the third this week. So we just have to get on with things.’

‘All right already,’ said Megan, walking over to the sink and rolling her sleeves up. ‘I’ll do it now.’

Megan ran the taps and began cleaning the bowl. The oats had toughened around the edges and proved difficult to shift. Her Dad once said that people should build their houses out of porridge after he tried to make some for her and ended up cementing it to the pan. He had never been a good cook.

All the while, Hattie tutted over the newspaper she was reading. ‘Earthquakes, floods. I don’t know, the world’s gone mad! Miss Weeds, from the shop in town, had to cancel her holiday to Hawaii because of that volcano.’ She shook the paper at Megan. ‘And worst of all, the roof was ripped off the church last week in that hurricane!’

Megan was only half listening. She rinsed the mug and laid it on the draining board. ‘Is that all?’ Megan asked. Her heart was still racing from the earthquake. And what she’d seen in the mirror.

‘Actually, no. Sit.’ Hattie pointed at the seat in front of her and closed over the paper. Megan took her place and waited. ‘I’ve just been to visit my friend Mrs Wallace. She’s the head mistress of Rosehill High – the school you’ll be going to next year.’

Megan opened her mouth to protest. There was no way she was going back to school. When she’d walked out of the school gate, only a week before, she’d sworn she’d never step foot in one again.

Hattie read her expression. ‘It’s either back to school or a job for you, missy. I won’t have you hanging around the house making a nuisance of yourself.’

‘I’ll get a job then,’ mumbled Megan.

‘Oh will you now? And end up working in a pub your whole life? They told me you was bright. Why bother sitting all those exams if you’re just going to throw it all away?’

‘I only bothered ‘cause some teacher bet me I’d fail.’ And I probably have, she thought. She wouldn’t get her results for months. Not that she cared.

‘Did he now?’ Hattie said, and her lips puckered in a smile.

Why are all adults so utterly smug? Megan thought. Hattie looked exactly like that teacher when Megan had waved her completed coursework under his nose. Like he’d planned it all along.

‘I am not. Going back. To school.’ Megan said, barely controlling her anger. ‘And what do you care what I do? It’s not like you’ve done so well with your life.’ She regretted saying it almost immediately. But Hattie just snorted and smiled that infuriating smile of hers.

‘Well, have a look at these anyways.’ Hattie pushed some shiny brochures across the table. ‘Nice school that Rosehill. Your mother went there.’

Megan was struck by how much Hattie knew about her mother, while she knew so little. Her father had told her a few stories of how they met, about how he’d proposed and their wedding day. That was on the good days. On the bad days he’d ranted about her running off and leaving him stuck with a useless child to bring up. Towards the end, there had been more of the bad days.

‘Clever young thing she was. Your mother,’ Hattie went on. ‘Rebel streak a mile wide. But clever. She was all set to go off to University when she met your Dad.’

Megan flashed a warning look, which Hattie ignored.

‘A wrong’un from the start, I told her, but would she listen, would she... And

I was right, weren't I? See how he ended up. Setting fire to himself while trying to burn the house down in a drunken rage.'

'Stop it,' Megan said, icily.

'Defending him, are you? After all he did to you... The social services told me all about it, you know? You being taken into care every few months, him begging to have you back.'

'I said stop!'

Megan met the woman's gaze and stared back. There was no way she was going to back down. Hattie's mouth twitched in apparent amusement and, finally, she looked away.

'Can I go?' Megan said, scooping up the brochures and hoping Hattie couldn't see she was close to tears.

'Yes, yes. Off you go,' Hattie said, her voice softening. 'But mind you have a look through them brochures. You'll have to decide what you want to do soon enough.'

Megan stomped out of the room and up the stairs, swiping angrily at a cobweb that clung to her face. She entered her room and slammed the door. Dust shook from the ceiling and landed in her hair.

She leant against the door and banged her head against the wood. God, she hated this place. The spiders. The dust. And that old witch. There was no way she was going back to school. Ever. She'd even burnt her school tie the day she left as a promise to herself. Megan looked down at the magazines cradled in her arms and had a thought.

She picked up her damp trousers from the floor and patted the pockets looking for her lighter. When she felt a hard rectangle she groaned. Her phone. She'd

forgotten it had been in her pocket. And now it was dead. Water had turned the screen the colour of mottled mould and it wouldn't switch on no matter how hard she pressed the button. She swore and threw it on her desk, where it promptly broke into three pieces. Today was most definitely not her day.

More determined now, she dug about for her lighter and pulled it out of a side pocket. Water trickled out of the lid and the wick had gone an odd green colour. She gave it an experimental flick. It lit first time. At least one thing would never let her down.

Megan strained an ear to hear if Hattie was anywhere nearby. Judging by the sound of the radio blasting out some soap, the old woman was suitably distracted. Standing on her bed, Megan pulled at the heavy windows and opened them as quietly as possible. She stuck her head out, wincing in the cold wind that swept through her wet hair. The faces of grinning schoolgirls gawked up at her stupidly from the brochures still in her hand. A flick and the lighter caught. She had just started to burn the edges of the pages, when she saw something that made her gasp and almost drop the lighter into the rhododendron bushes below.

A small, flickering figure was dancing in the fire, its face contorting into rude expressions. It stuck its tongue out at her. Megan blinked twice to make sure she wasn't imagining things. The figure was still there; a tiny little orange man with an elongated head that changed shape with the flame. Now his thumbs were in his mouth and his fingers up his nose, pulling a very ugly face. Megan flicked the Zippo shut and took a deep breath. She had to be imagining things. Little men did not appear in your lighter. She felt her head for lumps, wondering if she had a concussion. Everything seemed fine. She clicked the lighter once more. Again a flame shot out of the chrome holding. Again a little man danced within it. Now, he had his back to her

and was shaking his tiny bottom in her direction.

She closed the lighter and slipped it in her pocket, her hands trembling. She sat back down on her bed. One of the brochures was smouldering gently and a spark of fire spiralled into her lap. The pain shook her to her senses. She fanned the flames out and chucked the scorched magazine in the bin.

‘Okay,’ she said to herself. ‘First the bruises and now you’re seeing things. You’ve got to get yourself to a doctor.’ Although she knew if she told anyone about this, they’d probably lock her up. Especially with her history. Maybe she was dreaming. Or maybe, she thought, she’d been drugged. A cold shudder ran through her. That made sense. Some of the kids at the home talked about stuff that could make you see things. One of the kids had ended up in hospital after he tried running through a mirror. What if Smith had put something in her tea? That weirdo, he was behind this. She just knew it. He’d been acting all nice and all the time he’d been trying to drug her. But why? What was he playing at? She didn’t know, but she was going to find out.

Megan pulled on her coat and stormed down the stairs.

‘Where do you think you’re going?’ Hattie asked, standing in the doorway, her arms folded across her chest.

‘Out. To see a friend I met today. She invited me for dinner.’

Hattie’s eyes disappeared into wrinkly creases. ‘Friend, hmm? What’s her name?’

‘Em,’ Megan’s mind searched for an answer. Then she remembered the girl from the fight. ‘Tina.’

‘What? Tina Bradshaw? That stuck up little madam?’

‘Well, I said I’d meet her and I don’t want to be rude. I’ll come back straight

after,' Megan lied.

'Well all right, but I still don't like it. That family think they're too good for the rest of us.'

Megan barely heard Hattie's last words as she was out the front door and charging down the path.

Tall hedges blocked her view and strange moaning noises came from the other side. It was getting dark now and Megan was a little nervous walking along the twisting paths alone. Out of the corner of her eye she thought she saw shapes following her and a cold dread bubbled in her stomach. The wind that wove through the trees sounded like voices calling to each other. Megan was convinced it was her name they were calling. The shadows made mocking faces of the trees. She bit her lip, pushing back the fear. She wasn't about to turn back. She would see Smith and confront him.

Increasing her pace, she started to jog, staring straight ahead. The lights of a car ahead blinded her, and she tripped over a concealed log. She was only saved from falling by grabbing hold of a thick tree branch. Although, she could have sworn it hadn't been there a moment before. She snatched her hand away and steadied herself. As she started to walk on she was certain she heard a creaky, sarcastic voice say, 'You're most welcome.'

Megan started to run, full speed, trying to block out the voices that called to her and the eyes she felt boring into her.

Panting, she arrived at the town. The pub was open and the sounds of music and laughter spilled out of the doors. As she sped past, a young man shouted, 'Where's the fire, love?'

'You have no idea,' Megan muttered.

Ahead, she could see the forge, smoke spiralling out of its roof. Her resolve hardened. She didn't for a moment think how dangerous it could be going back to the house of a man who might have drugged her. She was so furious with him she didn't care.

She arrived at the door of the forge and had just pulled her hand back to knock when the door opened.

'You'd better come in,' Smith said. 'We've been waiting for you.'