

UNBURY THE DEAD

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press



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For Karen & John

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TEDDY

Teddy left the cinema, threw her oversized popcorn bucket in the bin, and headed to the warm art deco bar by the entrance to order a Coke, no ice. She took it over to a window seat and sat there, watching the rain and thinking about how she had never jumped out of a helicopter like she'd just seen Jason Statham do, and wondering if she could ask Choker to get her a ride in one. She fished a sugar packet out of the bowl in front of her, poured it onto the table, and used one of her undamaged fingers to push it into the shape of a star. Then she picked up her phone and called Art.

He was too chipper when he answered. 'Hey, Ted! Thanks for calling back.'

'Listen,' she said. 'I'm two movies into a three-movie marathon. This better only be non-work news.'

'Well,' he said, and Teddy sighed into the phone.

'I'm still in pain from our last case,' she said. 'You know I broke a nail?'

Like, all the way off. It still hurts.’ She held up her hand and looked at the bandage around her fingertip. ‘Maybe I’ll tape my nails from now on, like when I used to play netball.’

‘I know, I get it. I’m still covered in bruises and smell only of eau de Deep Heat.’

Teddy sighed. ‘Then why are you doing this? You got the most hurt out of all of us at Earl’s.’

‘That was my fault,’ he said sadly. ‘You told me to go for the knees.’

‘Well, I haven’t even said yes to whatever you’re asking yet. So what is it?’

‘A missing persons case.’

Teddy sucked at her teeth.

‘I’m on holiday,’ she reminded him.

‘Teddy, listen. I was at Choker’s, looking for work, and this is a job he had on offer. But I can’t do it alone – you know how he is about needing two of us for this stuff.’

She did know. Choker always said that with two people you pick up on more things and win more fights. Twice as many people get it done in a third of the time; that’s how he sold it to clients.

‘Also I need the money,’ Art wheedled. ‘Which means I need you.’

Just as Teddy opened her mouth to tell him no, Art said, ‘And this missing guy needs you too.’

Goddammit, Teddy thought.

‘I’ll see you at yours in an hour,’ Art said, and hung up.

Teddy drained her glass and glanced back at the cinema. She had planned her three movies – arthouse, action, then comedy – followed by takeaway on her apartment balcony, some CBD gummies and falling asleep to *Iron Chef*. It was supposed to be a good day off.

Art knew her well, of course: Teddy was a sucker for missing persons cases. In the middle of *Brixton Heist* an hour ago, she’d been moved by the same tug Statham had been, of wanting to get someone home to safety.

She shrugged on her jacket, scooped the sugar into her palm and

threw it in the bin. Maybe they could find the missing person tonight and be done by tomorrow. A stipend in the bank account and takeaway every day for the next week. And somebody found, someone back home where they should be, out of the rain.

~

The apartment still felt sterile. Lucky Malloy – Teddy’s father – had bought it five years ago, and he had been a man of spartan needs. When she’d moved in after he died, there was only a dinner table that he could fold up against the wall, two stackable chairs, an armchair in front of his kid-sized television, a double bed in his room, and a single in Teddy’s, even though she’d been twenty-two when he’d moved in there. He had given her the room with more sun, and when he’d died nine months ago, she’d stayed in that room, in her single bed. The apartment still smelled of the lanolin that he used on his skin, because Teddy used it too, filling the house with his ghost the only way she knew how.

She’d used the bond refund from the Northcote share house she had been living in to upgrade, just a little, with a bigger television, a two-hundred-dollar couch off Marketplace, and a towering monstera she almost never watered. Six of Cherry’s drawings were Blu-Tacked to the wall; Teddy’s favourite was the one of her, Cherry and Alice as dragons, recognisable from the hair growing out of their spines: short black hair for Cherry, long thick black hair for Alice, and the Teddy-dragon with chaotic hair in four shades of brown and beige, which Cherry had done while complaining, ‘Auntie Bear, your hair isn’t any colour.’

There were also two blu-tacked pictures of Ikea entertainment units up on the wall either side of the TV, which she’d put up to help her decide which one she liked better. She had done that in February; it was May now. The weather was cooling down, the trees outside her balcony stripped of their leaves.

Sometimes she lay out there on her stomach with her cheek pressed against the tiles. Something about the dirt and the cold and the misery of it all felt like a good way out of grief and pain and the times that the violence stuck in her mind. When they'd gone to Earl's on the weekend, thinking he'd be there alone and it would be easy, she hadn't even flinched when Earl's two oversized sons had been there as well and it became apparent what kind of showdown they were actually in for. The effort had hurt, but they'd subdued all three of them eventually, then passed on the message to keep out of other people's territory with a gentle additional suggestion to move elsewhere altogether, and left them cable-tied for somebody else to come along and deal with. It wasn't the memories of her own fight that bothered her – not the feeling of the bat in her hands coming down hard on Earl's eldest son's torso, or the pain of the punch Earl's younger son had landed square in her gut – but the image of Alice kicking in the older son's teeth. The sound of his incisors falling on the ground afterwards. The sound when Art had broken someone's arm getting the ties on. The sound of her friends doing those things.

She had cleaned up her apartment by the time Art arrived, hair freshly washed and damp and with a bag over his shoulder. He handed over a file and she skimmed the notes while he threw his bag into Lucky's room and sat down at the table with a can of ginger beer he'd pulled out of his jacket pocket, setting down another for her.

'Where were you that you needed to have a shower?'

'Gym,' he said, cracking open his can.

'Have you considered resting?'

'Gotta stay the himbo you hired me to be,' he said.

He was partly right: she'd met him at a different gym a year ago, where she'd told him he kept leaving his long blond hairs on all the equipment and he'd apologised and started checking conscientiously when he'd wipe things down. When some buff chump kept dropping the weights on Thursday and Friday mornings and ignored the staff's requests to quit

it, Art had eventually intervened with a three-kilo weight square in the chump's jaw and got himself kicked out. Teddy liked those morals and invited him out for dinner with Alice to see what she thought about him as a potential colleague; it took until dessert before he politely said he was not interested in a threesome. They told Choker to hire him, and then Teddy slept with him anyway, which had been fine, but nothing worth continuing. He'd proven to be a useful new addition; it was handy to have a man around sometimes for those people who just wouldn't talk to a woman no matter how much you held a literal knife to their balls.

Art opened his own file. 'Cole Arnott,' he said. 'Nineteen. According to what Researcher Rusty dug up from the client and online, he was first reported missing on Tuesday by his workplace, wasn't in the day before either, but had been at work on Friday. Whoever gave this information to Choker did it today – Wednesday – so he could have gone missing anywhere in that time.'

Teddy held up the picture they had of him. Cole was shirtless, in front of dark clouds and an expanse of crowded beach; he was white, with brown hair cut shaggy over his face, and grey eyes that glared at the camera. He looked angry – at the weather, or the photographer, she didn't know. It was an Instagram screenshot, and the caption underneath read simply: *Rye*.

'God, I hope he's there now,' Art said. 'What a breeze! Shake hands, tell him to call his folks, then go for a swim.'

'It says it's the most recent picture, but this is from a year ago,' Teddy said. 'Aren't kids these days constantly taking pictures of themselves?'

'How old are you again? Ninety?'

She was twenty-seven, same as Alice. 'Fuck off. You're closer to his age, and you always take pictures of yourself.'

'Wouldn't you?' He got out his camera, tousled his hair, pouted and took a picture. 'I'll post that later with the caption, "Hard at work with the boss".' He turned the camera on her.

'You post a picture of me and I'll throw your fucking phone in the toilet,' she said.

'Touchy.'

'Point is,' Teddy said, 'there's not a lot here.'

'Says whoever the client is doesn't want cops sniffing around, but Choker thinks that it's paranoia on behalf of the client more than related to the missing person,' Art said. 'So where do we start?'

'If he was last seen at work on Friday, I guess we gotta start there.' Teddy checked her watch. 'They'll be closed by the time we got out there now. We'll check over these notes tonight, and go round first thing tomorrow.'

'Sure thing, boss.'

Teddy looked down at Cole's face. 'What do you think when you see him?'

'This is a safe space, right? I can say he looks like a little prick?'

'Really?' Teddy touched the face in the picture. 'Why do you say that?'

Art shrugged. 'How can you be that angry when you're at the beach? What is there to be mad at? What a miserable asshole.'

'Maybe he was sad because one of his friends was going to murder him and throw him in the ocean.'

'That's dark.'

'He's literally missing, Art. Aren't we trying to find him?'

'I guess so,' he said, then paused. 'What do you think when you see him?'

Teddy tried to push Art's words away before they burrowed in. He did look miserable, but maybe he had reason to be. Maybe he knew somebody wanted him gone. Maybe he was just sad, and wanted to run away. She had to be open to all the outcomes: ones where he was a prick, ones where he was the nicest man on earth having a bad day on camera.

'Pull a face like his,' she told Art, who obliged.

‘That hurt,’ he said.

‘Now smile,’ she said, and he did, and the whole room got brighter.

‘All right,’ she said. ‘Let’s get this done.’

~

Teddy FaceTimed with Alice and Cherry that evening, while Art had a post-takeaway nap in Lucky’s room, snoring loudly and cheerfully. He had not been emotionally affected by the fight at Earl’s; Art had an almost pathological inability to hold on to the past. If Teddy thought about a list of pros for this skill, it meant that he never held grudges, never got held up second-guessing himself, and slept every night like he’d had the purest day awake. The cons were that he never learned lessons: Alice and Teddy could fight alongside one another smoothly because they knew how the other worked, but when Art was in the fray, it was always a mess, even if it was successful. He also never offered to pay for petrol, and never rode shotgun if all three of them were in the car because he couldn’t navigate the city, or even his own suburb.

Teddy couldn’t drive as well as Alice – nobody could – but she was good at directions, and learning. She also thought too much about things, and stewed on bad moments, like Alice kicking in Earl’s son’s teeth and wishing it had been Teddy behind that final thing to take him down so that Alice didn’t have to think about it. Dwelling on things was meant to be Teddy’s role in this team; she did it so nobody else had to.

Cherry was the one who picked up, smiling with her tiny teeth, and holding up a marshmallow. ‘Daddy let me have one,’ she told Teddy.

‘Did you save one for me?’

Cherry examined her marshmallow, very carefully. ‘But there’s only one. I can save you half.’

‘Save me a third?’

‘What’s a third?’

‘Teddy,’ Alice said, coming onto the screen, ‘we’re on holiday. We don’t do learning now.’ She turned to Cherry and said, ‘It’s like imagining your marshmallow in three equal parts. Do you know what equal means?’

‘No?’

‘Exactly,’ Alice said. ‘See? No learning on holiday.’

‘It means you have to tear part of it off and save it for me,’ Teddy said, and Cherry dutifully started tugging at the pillow of sugar.

‘It does not,’ Alice said. ‘You eat that marshmallow and don’t you share any of it with Aunty Bear. She can buy her own marshmallows.’

‘But I want that one,’ Teddy said.

Cherry said, ‘I’ll put a bit of it in my pocket and give it to you next time.’

‘Literally none of us win in this situation,’ Alice said to her. ‘You get less marshmallow, and Aunty Bear won’t get it either because you and I both know we’ll forget that’s in your pocket and I’ll wash your pants and everything will be sticky.’

Cherry looked beseechingly at Teddy.

‘Make Mama eat it,’ Teddy said, ‘and then she’ll buy me a marshmallow when she sees me next to pay me back.’

Cherry pushed the candy into Alice’s mouth. Alice glared at Teddy, who grinned.

Once Cherry wandered off to be with her father, Alice said, ‘How are you feeling about all this? Not getting your holiday?’

‘At least I’m getting money,’ Teddy said. ‘And money is very useful. Do you know how much my body corporate bill is?’

‘No,’ Alice said, even though she did, because she kept track of these types of things in case Teddy needed help, even though she would never ask.

‘Send me through the details,’ Alice said. ‘In case I have some downtime to figure it out.’

‘No,’ Teddy said. ‘You finish your job and get back to your family.’

‘At least send me a picture of the kid,’ she said. ‘What if I know him?’

‘You don’t know him,’ Teddy said, but she sent it to her anyway.

Alice studied the picture, and Teddy gave her a moment.

‘He looks sad,’ Alice said. ‘I feel bad for him. Maybe he’s had a rough time.’

‘Art thinks he looks like an asshole.’

‘Some of us aren’t in a permanent state of sunshine like our Arthur,’ Alice said. ‘With the limited – by which I mean non-existent – amount of information you have given me, I’d say that if I had that face, I would want to escape from whatever was making me pull it. Either that, or whoever was making me feel that way has murdered me. What do you think?’

‘I honestly don’t know yet,’ Teddy said. ‘But I’m more worried for him than I should be, considering I only know about four sentences of information more than you do.’

‘You think he’s dead?’

‘I have no reason to think that,’ Teddy said, which wasn’t a no.

‘Well,’ Alice said, ‘I hope you find him, safe and well and grateful and, you know, yesterday.’

After Alice rang off, Teddy sat with Cole’s picture in her hand. The resolution wasn’t crisp enough for her to study the lines of his face, to memorise every feature, but she watched him and let her mind stay open. He wasn’t forthcoming, and even after she put the picture down, even after she climbed into her tiny bed that night, she wondered about Cole. If he was safe, if he was trapped, if he could breathe properly where he was; or if he was fine, sitting on his own, away from everyone he knew, looking up at the stars, hoping nobody would ever find him.