

PROMISE ME

*A murder at a party
A conviction
A lie?*

VICTORIA GEMMELL

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The Party: Scene One

It was Halloween and she was a ghost, dressed in a Victorian style nightdress, her bare feet peeking out from below the hem as she walked. Charcoal grey circled her eyes, her lips blood red.

“You’d make a beautiful corpse,” Patrick whispered in her ear.

Louise shuddered. “Morbid. I’m a ghost; post corpse.”

He poured more punch into her glass. “Would you come back to haunt me?”

“Maybe.” Her lips formed a teasing smile.

Patrick wrapped an arm around her waist and nuzzled her neck. His grip was strong, almost possessive.

A camera flashed in their faces and they blinked, caught off guard.

“Beautiful!” shouted a magician, his rabbit waving beside him.

“Take one of us.” The rabbit thrust the camera in their direction.

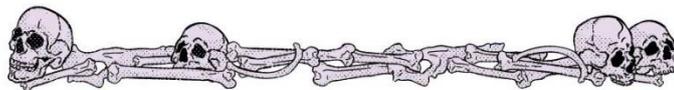
Patrick released Louise from his grip and reached for the camera. He tucked the Polaroid photo of them into his belt before turning to the magician. Louise slipped away, side-stepping hanging skeletons and watched as her classmates danced and laughed. Her eyes were drawn to a boy standing alone in the corner of the room. A pirate; scarf tied around his head and beard drawn on, Captain Sparrow style. He looked uncomfortable, lost.

After a few minutes his gaze met hers, eyes a familiar blue. *Christian had come to her party?* She smirked, but didn’t look away. His arms were folded and even beneath the wig and scarf she could tell he was frowning. Always looking angry and disinterested; *what was his problem?*

He headed for the door and Louise moved forward, ignoring calls from a friend to come and dance. Determination and curiosity sparked inside. From a young age, boys had always fawned around her; she never had to work hard. But with him...he always looked less than impressed. It bothered her.

Out in the hall she caught a glimpse of him at the top of the staircase. She followed silently, nightdress flowing out behind her, blonde curls tumbling down her back.

It was an image which haunted many, forming their last memory of her. A ghost climbing the stairs, walking to her death.





Chapter One

Mum crunched the gears all the way up the hill, the car almost rolling backwards on more than one occasion.

“Nearly there!” She shot me a manic grin and I turned my music up another notch.

As we stuttered past his old house, distinctive with its blue window frames, a familiar Nirvana riff filled my ears. Goosebumps darted up my arms. I’d read he was a fan of nineties grunge and he looked a bit like Kurt Cobain. The numerous images from online forums were imprinted in my mind; messy dirty blonde hair and startling blue eyes. Thanks to Mum I was also a fan of nineties grunge. It made me feel an affinity with him when I had read about his trial.

“What’re you staring at?” Mum pulled out one of my ear buds and I jumped, realising I had my nose pressed up against the glass.

“Christian Henderson’s house.” It felt strange speaking his name, like I knew him.

Mum pursed her lips. “Yeah well, the family don’t live there anymore.”

I remembered reading he lived with his mum. People made a lot of the fact his father had left when Christian was young. Now I had something else in common with him.

I was conscious Mum kept shooting me sidelong glances.

“You remember what we talked about?” she said.

I sighed, wishing I hadn’t pointed out his house or brought up his name. Mum hadn’t reacted well when she’d stumbled across the clippings I’d collected about Christian’s trial. She found them during our pre-move clear-out. She’d misinterpreted my interest in his case as an unhealthy obsession.

The day I really took notice of Christian Henderson coincided with the week from hell. Before that, his name was background noise; I barely registered the newspapers spread across the breakfast table at weekends, my head too full of my own carefree life to really notice or care about some boy from a well-to-do Scottish village accused of murdering a local girl at a party.

Then things started to fall apart at home. Mum and Dad sat me down, trying to explain what they didn’t fully understand at the time; that their marriage was over. Dad moved out temporarily to give us all ‘breathing space’. Ironically, it felt like I stopped breathing during that ‘in-between time’ of waiting for answers, waiting for Dad to come home. I was sleep-walking through classes in school, not talking to anyone, not eating.

Until one afternoon in Mr Bailey’s English class, a photograph of Christian flashed up on the whiteboard, the headline, *Troubled teen, from a broken home, convicted of murder* jumping out at me.

Broken home. I looked into Christian’s eyes, detecting an echo of pain which resonated deep inside. It was what I feared most; having my sense of home ripped apart and having my security taken away.

Mr Bailey wanted us to study Christian's case, to look at the rhetoric surrounding the reports, and in particular the online coverage.

The online forums debating Christian's case were more personal than the newspapers, with anonymous postings from locals speculating about what had really happened. Mr Bailey wanted us to consider if it was possible these could have contributed to his guilt. Would a judge really be able to determine if a jury had been completely immune to any coverage prior to the trial?

The deeper I had delved into Christian's troubled life, the more I forgot about my own. And the more I read about him, the stronger my belief had grown that something had gone wrong here; things didn't seem to add up and it bothered me. It made me wonder if he could be innocent.

"Darcy?"

Mum's voice brought me back to reality. I realised she was waiting for some reassurance. "Don't worry. I remember my promise," I mumbled, clicking my music back on.

By the time Mum had made the connection that the murder had taken place in Rowantree, she had already fallen in love with our new flat. I managed to convince her she was over-reacting, with the promise that I would stop reading about Christian Henderson and forget about a horrible incident which happened long ago.

The car rolled to a stop. "We're here." Mum turned to me, looking for approval.

I pulled out my ear buds and looked up at the flat complex. It was as swish as I remembered from the brief tour. Like something from Hollywood, minus the communal pool and sunshine. My shoulder offered a half shrug.

"This is going to be a good thing, Darcy. A fresh start."

"Whatever." I sighed, leaning down to slip my Converse back on.

"We're going to like it here. I'm sure of it." As I looked up I caught the plead in her eyes: *This is difficult enough for me, please don't make it any harder.* A pang of guilt numbed my resentment.

"It'll be great." I squeezed her hand quickly and opened the car door before she started to cry. Or worse, before I did. The air smelled different here, away from the pollution of inner-city Glasgow. This was what being rich must smell like.

Mum pulled out the kettle from the boot and a box of herbal tea. "Come to Mama!"

The big move had officially taken place last week. Dad insisted on flying up, taking time out from his new life in London to help. I chose to stay at gran's and go to my old school, to hand in overdue library books and say my goodbyes as everyone started their sixth year without me. Basking in the celebrity status that a last day incurred was much more attractive than making small talk with a man I no longer had any respect for.

"Race you!" Mum sped off up the path to our building, her auburn hair flowing out behind her.

"How old are you?" I shouted after her, running to catch up.

"Twenty-five," she yelled back.

"You wish!"

A girl opened the door to the building just as Mum reached the top step. Mum nearly fell over, panting in her face. The girl recoiled, a look of disgust barely concealed.

Great. My face burned. *Fantastic first impression.*

The girl was beautiful in an intimidating way. Tall, curvaceous in the right places, masses of curly blonde hair. Every skinny red-haired girl's nightmare.

"Hi, I'm Lily and this is my daughter, Darcy." Mum slung an arm around my shoulders. "Your new neighbours."

A smirk played on the girl's lips. "Welcome...*Darcy.*"

My cheeks burned as I mumbled a thanks.

“What’s your name?” Mum prompted.

The girl looked taken aback by Mum’s forwardness. “Kara.” She looked me up and down and I edged further up the stairs, uncomfortable with her scrutiny.

“Well, great to meet you Kara. Have a lovely day.”

Kara nodded in response and hurried down the stairs. As I watched her retreating mane of blonde curls, recognition dawned. *Kara Stephenson*.

“D’you know who that was?” I hissed as I followed Mum into the building. We started up the stone steps.

“A girl who got flippin’ lucky when the puberty queen came to visit.”

I smiled. “That was the dead girl’s cousin.”

Mum’s shoulders visibly tensed, and I braced myself, waiting for her to bring up my promise again. “At least use her name, instead of referring to her as *the dead girl*.”

Louise’s name started to form on my lips just as Mum interrupted with, “Anyway, I thought she lived with Louise’s family in the big house, does she not?”

I was surprised Mum knew that. She always shut down any conversation when I tried to read her bits about the trial from social media over breakfast. “I think they all had to move out for a bit...due to forensic analysis. And press intrusion. Maybe Kara didn’t want to move back in with them.”

“Don’t blame the poor girl.” We reached the top floor and Mum lunged at our door.

“Check it, check it.” She framed our new name plaque with her hands.

“Lily and Darcy.” I read the plaque with a frown. “Mum, you don’t put our first names on it. The postie has to know our surname...” My voice trailed off as I realised we no longer had the same surname – Mum was choosing to take back her maiden name, and I was staying a Thomas. “But I’m sure they’ll figure it out.”

She was fumbling with the lock, thankfully not paying much attention.

The door creaked open, the smell of new carpets and IKEA furniture a depressing hello. I wandered into the living room and was relieved that it already started to look like home, with our favourite books lined up along wooden shelves and familiar paintings dotted around. Some new trinkets and throws on the sofas marked just enough change.

“So what d’you think, kid?” Mum hooked her arm around my waist, pulling me close. I leaned my head against her shoulder. “I think we’re going to be a-okay.”



Chapter Two

School was already a few weeks into the new term. Finlay Academy. *“Best reputation in the West of Scotland,”* Dad had said. Such a great reputation that it had taken months of negotiation with the Council to let me in, particularly because my old High School was technically still within our catchment area.

Mum had been less than enthusiastic. *“She’s moving into her last year – it’s a stupid time to change school...”*

“She’s never had an easy time in that jungle of a school. There’s nothing to challenge her there and she’s always saying no one ‘gets’ her.”

I stopped to listen out in the hall, surprised that Dad had actually picked up on my unhappiness at school.

“She’s seventeen, Jim. No one is supposed to get her.”

“Most of the young people from the village go to Finlay Academy. It’ll be easier for her.”

“It’s the fact that most of the young people from the village go there that worries me. You know I found folders full of clippings about that boy, about the murder. She collected them for months. I’m worried if Darcy goes to his school she’ll get distracted again with it.”

I held my breath, waiting for Dad’s reaction. I knew how impressed he’d been when I showed him Finlay Academy’s latest HMI inspection report online.

“The fact she got so involved in that English class debate about the case shows she needs stimulation,” Dad said. *“Isn’t it a good thing she feels passionate about social justice?”*

When Mum didn’t react, Dad continued, “I just think going to the main catchment school will make it easier for her to settle in Rowantree.”

“None of this is easy for either of us. Don’t you think we’ve encountered enough change?” Mum’s voice was getting shrill and I knew that signalled the start of a proper argument, or tears.

I pushed the door open. “I want to go. Please.” They looked over at me in surprise.

Dad nodded. “I’ll make it happen.”

So, a few months of Dad’s best persuasive talk and an offer to pay for a new computer lab and here I was.

A mix of anticipation and fear flashed up and down my legs as I climbed the stairs to reception. *This is an opportunity, Darcy, to impress. To live up to your name and be a freaking cool rocker with attitude.* I could leave the old boring Darcy behind at my other school and carve out a new life of excitement. The thought calmed my nerves.

“Watch it.” A boy shoved past me through the doors, his bag clipping the side of my head.

I mumbled an apology, catching the door before it hit me in the face.

A mass of purple blazers and noise sent the fear in my legs into overdrive. No one glanced in my direction as I searched out the office, all too busy catching up on the weekend’s gossip. Shiny haired girls laughed and huddled close. Not so much orange fake tan here; more of a subtle-tinted moisturiser. Good news for a freckled pale face.

The office staff shoved a timetable at me, a harassed-looking woman mumbling

something about my pastoral care teacher dealing with some crisis so he'd meet with me another time. The bell rang and the noise levels peaked, a sea of bodies darting off in all directions.

I read my timetable. "Where's the English department?"

"Turn left down the corridor. Advanced Higher class last on the right." The woman looked over my shoulder, turning her attention to the next person.

I stood to one side, waiting for the crowds to disperse then set off down the corridor. English was a good start to the day; better than Maths, for instance, which had the potential to induce panic and stupid answers. Words, and subjectivity, I could handle.

Through the open door I could see the class was mainly seated and the teacher was handing out papers. She looked up at me and curious eyes followed her gaze.

"Yes?" She pushed her glasses up on top of her head.

"I'm Darcy. I'm new." My voice sounded too loud in the silence.

"Why don't you give us a pirouette, *Darcy*."

I looked to the back of the class, where Kara smirked, a couple of girls sniggering beside her.

"Zip it, Kara." The teacher motioned to a desk at the front of the class. "Take a seat, Darcy."

I sank into the chair, avoiding eye contact with the boy beside me. As I laid my notebook on the desk a name carved in the wood caught my eye. I traced a finger over the letters; *Christian*. He'd sat in this seat, or at least at this desk.

"Are you named after the ballet dancer?" the boy beside me asked, without looking up. He'd written his name at the top of his paper: *Daniel*.

"No. The bass player from the Smashing Pumpkins."

"Cool." He nodded and I waited for him to say something else. He didn't.

A copy of *To Kill A Mockingbird* was placed on my desk and I started to relax into the lesson, though couldn't shake off the sensation that Kara was watching me from behind, analysing my every move.

The door swung open and heads darted up.

"Morning." A tall, arrogant-looking boy sauntered in, giving the teacher a wave. *Patrick Barrington*.

"Twenty minutes late, Patrick. I am not impressed."

"Sorry, Mrs C. I'll try harder tomorrow." He flashed her a grin. A few of the girls giggled.

"Asshole," Daniel muttered under his breath.

Patrick stopped at my desk and at first I thought he'd heard Daniel. But his attention was on me, a teasing smile playing on his lips.

"Well, hello, new girl."

Disarming, more than capable of deception. It was the picture I had built of him when I'd read some stories about him during the trial. Looking into his eyes sent a shiver down my spine.

And then I heard a little voice whisper somewhere deep inside: *This boy should not be trusted.*

*

Lunchtime arrived; a welcome but at the same time dreaded part of the day. Where to sit? Where to go? A glance through the open door of the canteen revealed mayhem; long queues, screeching laughter, reserved seats at overflowing tables. Kara and Patrick and a petite brunette headed the queue, so I kept walking.

My timetable was weirdly in sync with Kara's, apart from Psychology, and she hadn't made much attempt so far to make me feel welcome. The other girls seemed to be following suit by barely acknowledging my existence. So much for making a great first impression.

Sunshine streamed in the windows, persuading me to venture outside. A large oak tree was firm in my memory from my walk through the gates that morning; a perfect resting spot to sit and eat my packed lunch, listen to some tunes, catch up on some reading. *Geek*, an inner voice shouted. “Shut up,” I mumbled.

“What?”

I blinked in surprise and looked up to see Daniel pushing the main doors open in front of me.

“Nothing.” I grabbed onto the straps of my backpack, embarrassed.

“Where you off to?” he asked, holding the door for me.

I shrugged. “Just outside.”

He looked at me curiously, like he was trying to decide if I was a bit soft in the head.

“How about you?” I asked.

He tucked a strand of black hair behind his ear and I caught a flash of a star tattoo on the inside of his wrist, partly obscured by the cuff he wore. “Going to sit on the grass. You can join me if you want.”

“Okay. Thanks.” We walked side by side in silence along the gravel path, down to the grassy verge beyond the car park. A few boys were kicking a ball about and girls were lying on the grass, making the most of a fluke late summer.

“Hey, Daniel.”

We both turned at the voice, my eyes registering the spark of flirtation in the smile belonging to the girl with black and blue hair. Her tie hung loose like she was making a point that she refused to be restricted, her skirt skimming the top of her bare thighs, violet eyes lined with dark kohl which gave her pretty pixie features a hard edge. She cocked her head in my direction, her nose stud winking in the sunlight.

“Who are you?”

Her forwardness made me self-conscious and I felt my cheeks scorch as I introduced myself, telling her it was my first day and that I had just moved to Rowantree, wishing my mouth would stop moving and let me play it cool.

The girl raised an eyebrow. “Poor you. It’s probably the most boring place on earth.” I wondered if she meant Finlay Academy, or the village, or both.

I waited for her to return the introduction, but then her phone beeped and she laughed at whatever message filled her screen and she walked off without saying goodbye.

“Who was that?” I asked, simultaneously enchanted and affronted by her rudeness.

“That’s Roo. She’s Zoe’s little sister. Zoe’s in our year; she was sitting with Kara in English.”

I nodded, names already listed in my head, matching to new faces.

Little sister. I looked over my shoulder, watching Roo’s retreating back, taking in her confident stride. She was small and skinny, sure, but her aura suggested Senior. “What year is she in?”

“Fourth.” Daniel shot me a wry smile. “She’s trouble.”

Daniel led me past the crowds and set his bag down at a quiet spot. He threw himself onto the ground and stretched out. “I hate this place so much.”

I sat crossed legged beside him. “It seems okay. Better than my old school anyway.”

“Where did you go?”

“Linton High. Not far from here.”

He sat up, letting out a low whistle. “You must be well hard.”

I smiled wryly. “Yeah, as you can see I’m all muscle.”

He laughed. “How come you started here?”

“Thought it would be good to make a complete fresh start.” I pulled at the grass, noticing that Daniel wore tight black jeans in favour of the cotton trousers all the other boys seemed to

be wearing. “D’you live in the village?”

“Yeah, our own little celebrity jungle,” he scoffed, and I knew he was referring to the way in which the press had invaded the village for the past couple of years.

“It’s weird because I feel like I sort of know Kara and Patrick,” I said slowly, unsure about how much anyone would want to talk about things.

“You don’t,” he said sharply, his expression darkening. “You can never trust what you read on the internet. I bet you think you know Christian too.” His green eyes were challenging, defensive.

“Were you friends with him?” As I asked the question I realised that Daniel was the ‘best friend’ who had tried to defend him on numerous occasions in forums.

Daniel nodded, throwing a stone at a tree up ahead. “And it still makes me so mad, the way everyone totally sold out on him. He never stood a chance.”

“So, you think he’s innocent?” I asked, pulling my lunch out from my bag, watching Daniel’s face closely.

“No question. There is no way Christian is a murderer. He’s not a violent person. He couldn’t do something like that; slapping Louise across the face, then stabbing her.”

The image made me shudder. “For what it’s worth I couldn’t believe it when he was found guilty. It seemed wrong,” I said quietly, biting into my sandwich.

Daniel frowned. “Which part of the social media hounding gave you that impression?”

“Some of the stories, the way they wrote about him – like just because he was quiet and a bit aloof, they made out like he was a weirdo. I mean, obviously I don’t know him.” A piece of chicken sandwich stuck in my throat as I met Daniel’s scrutinising gaze.

Daniel folded his arms. “Did you follow the whole trial?”

I hesitated, thinking back to the days following that introduction to Christian’s case in Mr Bailey’s English class. I hadn’t been aware of the trial when it played out in real-time; we were looking back on everything, just after Christian’s conviction. Then I had spent hours trying to piece together the story, wondering what had really happened the night of the party.

The online debaters attempted to build a profile of who Christian really was, speculating about his motivations, bringing his Mum into the conversation; the outspoken hippie outcast with wild eyes and wild hair adding fire to suspicions that ‘something wasn’t quite right’ about the family, just because they didn’t fit the standard affluent middle-class profile of most of the villagers.

It was the motivation part I was most fascinated by. And all of the unanswered questions about the young people who might have played a part that night. I looked at Daniel, wondering what he really knew. What part might he have played? “Not in any major depth. Some stories stick in my head more than others. And some people.”

Daniel’s expression softened, a desperation flickering beneath the defensiveness, like he needed someone else to believe in his friend.

I thought back to the forums I’d read, the ‘case analysis’ podcasts that supposedly-intelligent local adults and students had set up, the anger I’d felt at some of the sensationalised coverage of someone so young. Mr Bailey was an ex-journalist and he explained to us that the press had also exploded with pictures two months after his arrest, in March 2015 when Christian had turned sixteen.

Mr Bailey seemed angry, like me, about the way the papers had vilified Christian, fuelled by witch-hunt-style commentators on social media. Our class debate got cut short when the head of the English department suggested we focus on less sensitive discussions in class, and I never did find out if Mr Bailey thought Christian was innocent.

I knew Mr Bailey would be pleased the law in Scotland had changed just a few months after Christian’s conviction, meaning no one under the age of eighteen could be named in the press for a crime, but I wondered how much control anyone could ever have over the social

media forums, or the local gossip in the village shop and pub which blackened names and cemented reputations.

I considered telling Daniel about our discussion, but decided it might just get him worked up. Instead I shared one of my thoughts I'd voiced during the class.

"The impression I got of Christian, was that he was misunderstood. He came across as being perceptive and quite literal, which probably did him no favours."

"What do you mean?" Daniel sat up.

I hesitated, wondering if I should try to cut the conversation short. It was obvious Daniel's feelings were still a bit raw about the whole thing. "Well... if you're good at seeing someone for who they really are but no one else can, then it makes you appear like a judgemental ass, right?"

Daniel nodded. He let out a long sigh. "You're right about him being misunderstood. He wasn't great at socialising – he was an outcast here but not in a shunted kind of way. Most of the time it was him choosing to evade others, not them rejecting him. That literal way he had of communicating that you picked up on...it made him come across as a bit insensitive but really I think he's the complete opposite." Daniel flushed. He made a face and tensed his arms into a muscle man stance. "Not like me, Mr Macho man."

I laughed to help defuse his embarrassment, desperate to leave with at least one friend today. I didn't want Daniel clamming up on me now.

"And he was very talented of course. At art," I added. Sketches of Louise's face flashed through my mind. Someone at the party had found sketches of Louise in the bag Christian had left behind and had handed them into the police, allowing people to build a picture of obsession. I asked Daniel what he made of that.

"He acknowledged that she was aesthetically pleasing but he didn't like her. He thought she was stuck up," Daniel said grimly.

She was pretty when she didn't talk. A quote which was distorted and turned against him when he expressed an honest opinion of a pretty girl he had no time for.

Daniel held out his hand to me. I hesitated and he smiled. His handshake was firm.

"So, I think we can be friends now."

I returned the smile, relieved I'd made at least one good impression today.

Daniel lay back down on the grass. "Man, I miss him."

"D'you ever visit him?"

"At the start I did. But now he keeps telling me not to."

"Why?" I tried to imagine what it would feel like to be locked away, cut off from everyone I loved. I would cling on to any contact I could.

"Because the offenders' unit sucks big time. He tells me to pretend that he's on tour with Aerosmith."

I laughed and Daniel smiled.

"I email him."

"He gets access to email?" I realised I knew nothing about prison or a young offenders' unit. Only images from films and TV programmes of traditional prisons, which probably wouldn't reflect the unit Christian was in. But I bet he didn't have a window. Not being able to look out and see the sky, see the world – that would drive me insane.

"Sort of. I can email him through a prison email system, but he can't email back so he writes me letters. Sometimes." Daniel made a face. "He doesn't write much but I feel like I have to keep him connected to reality, you know? I worry he's going to lose it in there. I would totally lose it. We talk on the phone sometimes too, but he's always hated talking on the phone so prefers to write."

I stopped myself from asking more, not wanting to push things with Daniel.

"He gets a lot of mail from girls who think he's innocent."

“Oh yeah?” I asked, surprised.

Daniel grinned. “I don’t think it’s based on the fact they’ve done any investigative analysis. More about aesthetic analysis and no doubt wanting to rescue ‘the bad boy’.” My face flushed, hoping my defending of his character hadn’t come across like that.

“Where you staying in the village?” Daniel asked, changing the subject.

“In the flat complex on Kyle Road.”

“They’re quite posh. Kara must be your neighbour then?”

“Yeah. She’s in my building. Didn’t she used to live with...the Marshalls?” I didn’t feel comfortable saying Louise’s name in front of him; it sounded over familiar and Daniel was already touchy about me acting like I knew them all.

“Kara never went back to that house after the murder. She lives with her gran now.”

“What about her parents? Where are they?”

“In France. Story goes she’ll move out to be with them once she’s finished school. She spent the summer out there. I was surprised she came back for a sixth year. But I’ve heard rumours that her parents aren’t the best, which is why she was living with the Marshalls. Think her Mum has some problems with alcohol, and her dad didn’t seem to be around much.”

“Oh.” I started to see Kara in a new light. No wonder she came across as a bit abrasive.

The bell rang and Daniel grabbed his bag, jumping to his feet. “What you in next?”

“Art, I think.”

“Cool. Me too.”

We walked through the crowds, returning inside to the madness.

“You’ll like Mr Harris. He’s about the only decent teacher in this dump,” Daniel said as we climbed the stairs to the art department. “He also really stuck up for Christian.”

“Only because he was sleeping with his mum.”

I jumped at the voice behind us. I turned in time to see Kara’s frown before she disappeared around the corner to the Science department. I was relieved that she wasn’t joining us in Art.

“Is that true?” I asked Daniel.

“They became close during the investigation. Christian’s mum wasn’t exactly supported locally, whereas Mr Harris was completely on their side. Kara’s just bitter about it because she felt like it was a betrayal to Louise.”

Daniel shoved open the Art room door and the smell of turpentine and paint was comfortingly familiar. The desks were set out in a circle, with tables in the centre littered with weird and wonderful objects.

A tall man with spiky greying hair and a bright red shirt stood at the back of the room, rinsing paint brushes. He was humming along to the tune blasting from the stereo. It was one Mum loved...and one I secretly liked too, even although I complained it was so depressing any time she played it in the car. The teacher turned to smile at me just as the singer’s name popped into my head; *Morrissey*.

I sat down next to Daniel and glanced round the class, noting some new faces. Kara’s brunette friend sat across the room. *Zoe*. She was quieter than the others. And much less ‘in your face’ than her sister, Roo.

“Hey, new girl.”

A cloud of aftershave invaded my nostrils as Patrick slid onto the stool at my other side.

“It’s your lucky day,” he grinned. “Thought we should get to know one another better.”

“Yeah, lucky me,” I said, my heart sinking. I caught Zoe watching us.

She quickly looked away when our eyes met. The seat beside her was vacant and I wondered if Patrick usually sat there.

I jumped as Daniel’s stool scraped back.

“Where’re you going?” I hissed.

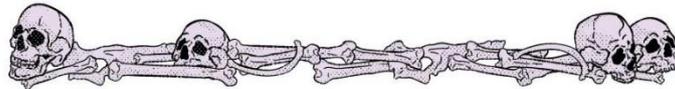
“I’m not sitting anywhere near him,” Daniel said, gathering up his things. I watched in disbelief as he wandered across to the other end of the room, sliding onto the stool beside Zoe. My face burned.

Patrick let out a low whistle. “Rude, eh?”

I didn’t answer.

“Don’t let him give you the wrong impression. I’m a nice guy, really. You’ll see that when you get to know me.” He flashed me a dazzling smile; the kind that could convince girls of anything if they were gullible enough.

But when his smile faded there was darkness in his eyes, hinting that something deeper was hidden beneath the charm. That was the Patrick I was curious about, even if every fibre of my body warned me to stay away.



End of free extract

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Victoria Gemmell is on the Scottish Book Trust Live Literature database and is available for talks and Creative Writing workshops

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