

When Annie Butler opened her eyes, she could see nothing but the dark. Nothing. Her face warmed up to a sob, but she squeezed her eyes shut against the tears. It was no good being a baby. She had to think about how to get out of this mess.

A deep breath turned into a gag because something smelled gross. Where was she? It was freezing. And why couldn't she move?

In an effort to shift away from the cold, and the smell, and the heavy something holding her down, she only managed to turn her head to the side. When she did, pain shot through her skull and a deeper darkness came and took her so she didn't know anything more.

Deadly Thyme

By

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I

CORNWALL, ENGLAND

Ten hours earlier

Annie Butler loved to stand on this rock promontory, arms outstretched to grab the wind. The sky lightened with the promise of a new day. She and her friend cut across the brilliant green field, a stage set high above the sea where heaven touched earth.

There had been a storm the night before, the kind that brings shells to the shore. They were on a mission to collect them.

Annie caught up to her friend. “Dot, you didn’t say a thing about my new shoes. Look!”

“Yeah. So?”

“My mother didn’t want me wearing them till tomorrow’s school.”

Dot laughed. “Why are you wearing ’em, then?”

“Couldn’t wait, could I?” Annie paused to swipe at a wet leaf stuck to the toe of one of them. “Come on. Don’t be such a slow coach.” She ignored her friend’s disbelieving face and navigated the overgrown path where it dropped through the bracken to the first tier of the village roads. Her mother would worry, as she always did. She pulled out her mobile to text: **W Dot @ beach**. She sent it to her mum. Tromping down a side street, she cast a glance toward her home where her mother would keep breakfast warm until she returned. A tinny note sounded, and she glanced at her mobile. The new text read: **Thx. C u**. As she climbed down to the path that led to the beach, she caught her shin on a jagged rock. She rubbed at the sudden burning pain, but a little blood didn’t dampen her resolve. She slid the rest of the way and then jumped to the pavement. Her shoes clattered across the stones.

Dot kept up, but just barely, finally saying in an overloud voice, “You’ll wake the village, yeah. See what your mum says then, naffo.”

“Ha.” Annie squeezed around an old black car taking up much of the alleyway. A thought passed briefly that she had seen that car before. Did it belong to that odd man who kept hanging about? He reminded her of a crab the way he sidestepped away when she stared at him. She tugged open the gate above the beach, glanced back at Dot, and then hopped down two steps. “We’re going to find bags of decent shells, you know. I feel lucky today.”

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On the beach, hidden in blue shadows cast from the abrupt wall of rock, Charles sat on an old crab sack in the middle of a circle he’d

drawn in the sand.

A spasm jerked the hands in his lap. He looked at them and imagined them tightening on Cecil's smooth neck, saw in his mind the look in her eyes, and he wanted the past back so badly it hurt.

Above the seawall, cottages stuck like limpets against the rock. They belonged to people who hated him and he them. Among them was the American woman sitting this very moment in her pert little cottage. Why had she come here? She had brought back the old trouble, and it was ruining his life. He had to do something, but what?

Rocking, rocking, he closed his eyes, fighting the pain in his gut while bile scorched the back of his throat. The hiss of waves formed words.

"Don't. Do. Something. Stupid."

He dug his fingers into the sand, took a handful, and threw it at the seawall where the soft pellets stuck. He hated his mother's voice.

A commotion above him ... Someone was coming. Footsteps pattered lightly down the stairs, and just in time he stood and pressed his body into the recesses of uneven rock. To be caught here would be disastrous.

The footsteps slowed to a stop. He did not want them to stop. *Walk on. Walk on!* He peeked over the edge of a step at two girls looking out across the inlet, their backs to him.

One girl pointed at something in the distance. They took some time to gather shells. The girl with the sack said something he couldn't make out. Then the other girl took off across the sand, disappearing around a jutting shelf of granite.

The girl with the sack half-turned and Charles choked back a gasp. The American woman's daughter! He pushed back into shadow. That woman brought the voice back. Now he couldn't remember things, couldn't think, *couldn't* be blamed. And her daughter was here, a few feet away, and they were alone. It must *mean* something.

Then it came to him. He could use her.

The girl moved into his line of vision and he could not help but

watch her. Her dance fascinated him. A flash of sunlight transformed her hair to spun gold. He edged back, but if she turned, all the shadow in the world would not hide him. Hide him.

“Don’t. Do. Something. Stupid.”

The gurgle of waves—it would not stop. The breeze lifted his hat brim. He jerked it lower. A flutter of black and white, and a magpie swooped down at the girl while she sent up a shrill noise and dropped her sack. The bird pecked at the sand and took flight again.

Picking up the bag, the girl smiled and stepped into a waltz in time with the surf. He despised her pleasure. She sang the magpie song. “One for sorrow, two for joy, three for a girl, and four for a boy, five for silver, six for gold, and seven . . .”

“... for a secret never to be told,” Charles said aloud, because he had a plan.

With a gasp, the girl pivoted to face him.

He stepped forward. “Up and out a bit early?”

“Who are you?”

Charles said nothing. *She knows. I can see it in her eyes.*

Slowly she backed away from him. “You’ve been following my mum, haven’t you?”

“Don’t be ridiculous.”

“You were at the market yesterday, staring at her. And the day before I saw you standing outside our house, on the street.”

He stepped closer. The surf hissed.

The girl turned away. “I’m going home.”

“Your mum shouldn’t have come here. Don’t you understand?”
Brat. He grabbed her arm. It was thin, as fragile as a bird’s leg. He could snap it.

“Let go!” She broke his grasp.

He stood between her and the stairs and held out his empty hands. “I only want to talk.”

She stood her ground. “I’ll scream.”

“No, no, you mustn’t. I want to explain. Wait!”

She zipped around him and up the steps.

She might have tripped.

Or had his hand squeezed onto her ankle?

He didn't know. He couldn't recall. But she now lay very still at the base of the steps. This wasn't the plan. He hadn't meant to kill her so soon.

Everything disgusted him—the way the wind blew, the way the waves sounded, the smell in the air.

The other one might be back at any moment. The girl's hair lay in waves. Hair and sand, sand and hair—it was the color, the same color. What was this? He could see a vein pulse on her thin neck.

The voice in his head snapped, "*Don't stand staring, idiot!*"

He didn't have to listen. He had to think. He couldn't leave the girl to wake up and tell. She would tell. Grabbing up his large crab sack, he fit it over her head and worked to stuff the rest of her in. The smell from the damp burlap—wet hemp and shellfish—clung to the back of his throat.

With a glance up at the closely shuttered cottages, he lifted the lumpy sack. She was not heavy. He lurched up the steps and through the gate to his car, and as he dumped her in the boot, her body noodled limply out of the bag. Her sweat and female scent were loathsome. He slammed the boot closed with a thud that matched his heartbeat. He climbed into the driver's seat, pausing before releasing the brake. He was free. Then a wheezing in his ear made him cringe.

"Something stupid!"

He closed his eyes for a second. He snorted back a retort and slammed the car into gear.

e

Ruth Butler couldn't shake a sudden uneasiness. She plunged the shovel into the stone-hard earth with a clanging that set her teeth on edge. She studied the ground. Her efforts had made not even a dent. She lifted her shovel and then, as if her arms hadn't the strength to hold it, she let it drop. Cold penetrated her jacket and made her shiver. The last week of March had brought a week's reprieve in weather, but now, in this first week of April, it seemed winter would

give them another gut punch to remember it by.

Where was Annie? She stared down at the bare-rooted fern. Something was wrong. She glanced at pots and creeping ivy and the way the light from her kitchen window tinged her drive yellow. Everything looked in order. So why this sudden worry?

She dropped her gloves at the back door, switched on the electric kettle, and stared out the kitchen window while waiting on the hot water. She picked up her cell phone and reread the text from Annie. She was fine. So what was wrong? She grabbed the duck mug, one of the items she had managed to save from her grandmother's belongings and just about the only thing surviving in one piece from Texas to Cornwall. She set it on the counter and rubbed her hands to work the cold away.

The kettle whistled. This worry was silly. Everything was fine.

She plopped a tea bag in the hot water and wrapped her fingers around the mug. She backed up and almost tripped on Annie's tennis shoes. If she wasn't wearing them, then it stood to reason she'd gone out this morning wearing her new shoes, the very shoes she'd told her not to wear until tomorrow. She huffed. What was she to do with a ten-year-old who wouldn't listen?

Ruth took her tea to the window overlooking the road to watch for her.

The doorbell rang and she jumped. She hadn't seen anyone come up the walk. She set the untouched tea on a side table.

Standing on the porch, out of breath, her daughter's friend Dot huffed, "Where's Annie?"

"Wasn't she with you?"

"I lost her! I thought she came back here."

"Weren't you at the beach?"

"For about five minutes."

"She must have come another way."

Dot's expression made that seem like a ridiculous response.

Ruth's thoughts raced. There were so many places on the beach to get hurt, like the caves that were only empty of water at low tide and the unstable coastal rock that was scarred with deep clefts. "Let

me grab my jacket.” She texted Annie: **Where r u?** and took off with Dot toward the beach.

The village was Sunday-morning silent. People would be at home reading the paper, sleeping, or bustling kids into well-dressed bundles for early services.

Ruth and Dot ran up and down streets, looking around corners, peering down alleys. Ruth’s skin crawled with fear. All she could think about was that this couldn’t be happening. They were safe here.

A walker with a dog came up the street and Ruth stopped him. “Do you know Annie Butler?”

“No.”

“A girl, have you seen a girl with a pink jacket?”

“No, no sign of anyone. Sorry.”

Ruth nodded, numb with anxiety. In the ten years they had lived here, hadn’t they always been safe? She caught up to Dot. Couldn’t Annie have stopped by another friend’s house? No, Dot explained, all of their other friends lived too far away to walk.

Ruth didn’t scream bloody murder. She didn’t beat doors down. She didn’t stomp her feet and throw things because the world hadn’t produced her daughter immediately. But all the worst questions came full circle in her mind: What if? What if? Could it be happening again? She couldn’t stop checking her phone. Why didn’t Annie answer?

At the beach, sheer rock rose from the sand in a jagged edge of land as if the Almighty had used a saw to sever the coastline from the sea.

“Annie!” she called.

The cliffs cast her cries back at her. Gulls screamed, darting up from their perches.

Dot returned from the other end of the beach. The thought crossed Ruth’s mind that she would hear bad news. But the child said, “No one’s seen her, Mrs. Butler.”

“Why, Dot? Why did you leave her?”

“I just ran round the other side of the rock there for a second. I

thought there might be prettier shells closer in.”

Ruth took a deep breath while staring at the jutting, sheer wall of rock. On the other side were the stairs. *Be patient with Dot, she's just a child, too.* “Where was Annie?”

“I thought she was behind me, but then she wasn't there. But she had said she would get more shells farther down, while the tide was out. Then I couldn't find her. She didn't go to the water.”

“How do you know?”

“She wouldn't have wanted her shoes wet. Her footprints stopped at the bottom of the steps. That's why I thought she went home.” Dot's china-doll face glistened with tears. “I don't know why she left me.”

“Go tell your mum. Run!” Ruth heard the panic in her own voice and wondered, *When should the official time for panic begin?* Her life wasn't what it appeared to be, and she could never talk about it.

Annie was old enough to walk with a friend without her mother hovering like a crazy. She didn't want Annie to grow up afraid of her own shadow. She trusted Annie to know what to do in a bad situation. Hadn't she taught her?

The morning sun had hardly moved. How could that be? She stood on the beach and stared back up at the village sprawled up rolling hills away from the sea. The River Perrin cut down between the cottages with their higgledy-piggledy roofs and tumbled into the surf.

She and Dot must have caused a stir running around and yelling because two couples and several teens came scrambling over the rocks from different directions.

Many voices blended into the beat of surf. Ruth heard, “... looking for your daughter ... called police ...” Her legs went wobbly. She sank down on the cold sand. *Oh Lord! Don't let me fall apart. I'm overreacting. Surely, I'm overreacting. There is no way he could have found us.*

