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Matty

If the world had an arsehole, I reckon Usher's Well would be it. It's not that it's a terrible place, it's just so bloody awkward to get to. Even more so when you're driving a temperamental old Morris Traveller that's low on petrol, the weather's not great and the heater's broken and you're shitting yourself in case you get pulled over because you only have a provisional license.

The village is tucked away in deepest, darkest Kent. Sandy's spent most of her time as navigator with her feet up on the dashboard and her nose stuck in some dog-eared road atlas that used to be her granddad's. She's not just interested in vintage, she's a bloody anachronism. I often wonder why she can't just be normal and like normal stuff and do normal things. It'd make birthdays easier for one thing.

'It can't be far now,' she says, squinting at the squiggly lines. 'It's meant to be just past Ashford.'

'Oh, yeah?' I snort. 'And where's that? You've brought us off the beaten track.'

She sniffs triumphantly and then whacks me with the atlas.

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'Next left, Smart-arse. Want a sweet?'

I nod, and she pops a wine gum in my mouth as I stick the indicator on. We turn into what looks like a dirt track. I have my doubts as the car jigs up and down over pothole central, our instruments bang about in the back, and I nearly choke on the sweet. Trees hunch over and block out most of the grey sky. Some leaves brush against the windows and I'm just about to shoot my mouth off when I spot it.

However hard it was to find, I'm guessing it's hard to get lost in this village. The green itself is one massive roundabout with a maypole stuck dead in the centre, presumably ready for the festivities next week. The buildings are lined up all around it. It's laughable. Everything looks like it should have been knocked down years ago.

'So, where's this gaff we're playing at?' I mouth it quietly at Sandy. A few of the locals are beginning to stare, but that's probably because of a strange car on their turf. I can feel curtains twitching, and it's making me uneasy.

'Go up there.' Sandy waves at a cobbled path between the barber's and the post office. I'm guessing it's meant to be a road. We twist and turn past a few more dead houses until we reach a gravel drive. At the end of it is what looks more like a witch's cottage from a fairy tale than a pub, but there's a weather-beaten sign swinging from rusted hinges telling us we're in the right place. The Jack-in-the-Green Inn is the first stop on our tour. It starts to spit as we park up, and we give ourselves a chuffed high five before running inside.

Even if the village is horror story territory, this pub seems all right despite the heat. They've got a fire going in the hearth

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at one end, and even the furniture seems to be sweating. It's decked out olde-worlde style, with wooden beams and horse brasses everywhere, and some music from the year dot is playing. I think "cosy" is the word you use to describe places like this. Even the woman behind the bar looks like she could be your aunt. She's busy shuffling cardboard displays of pork scratchings but turns as Sandy and I approach.

'The Groveses, isn't it?' Her face lights up and she starts talking to Sandy like she's known her for years. Who knows, perhaps she has – Sandy was desperate to come here, for whatever reason. Said she had a feeling about the place.

The woman squawks and shakes my hand a bit too hard.

'It's lovely to have some young blood in this dump,' she says, taking our confirmation print-out. 'We even had a banner made up for you – I hope you don't mind?'

Over in the corner is a tacked-up sheet with "The Groveses Folk Rock Tonite" painted in what looks like fence stain. It's the sort of thing you see tied up on a flyover telling Auntie Val "Happy 50th Birthday" and hanging limp with last night's rain. Well, you have to give it to her for trying. It's the first time anyone's made an effort for us.

'Oh, cheers – that's the nuts!' Sandy says and immediately jumps into the preparations for our gig tonight. I let her get on with it. I'm whacked after driving, and the smell of hops and the heat from the fire are making me feel claustrophobic. I excuse myself and plonk my bum down in a booth. It's next to a bookcase which is handy because it looks like Sandy's going to natter with that barmaid for a long while. They're already cackling like a pair of witches.

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I drum my fingers on the sticky table as I scan the stuff on the shelves. It's the usual crap that tourists leave behind – Caravan Club stuff, battered Ordnance Survey maps and some well-thumbed romances, the sort with the pages folded over at the dirty bits. I pick a grimy map and spread it out on the table. Some of these roads probably don't exist anymore.

Bugger that. I whip my phone out to write a cheeky status, but the *no Internet connection* notification of doom appears before I even think of one. There's not even any network coverage for a text. I shove the phone back in my pocket and have another look at the shelves.

Sandy's chuckle rings through the place as I pick up a crinkled women's magazine, thinking I could have a laugh at a true-life story. Then I decide there's only so many times you can read about a woman with one nipple too many and sling it back on the shelf.

That's when I see it and wonder why I hadn't before. A massive, leather-bound tome – because that's the only way to describe a book like that – complete with brass thingies, wedged between two shelves. I lean across the table and tug, but some idiot's got it well and truly stuck. It might come if I use two hands, so I hook my fingers either side and really go for it.

It finally gives, and my elbow flies back, hitting something hard. Whatever it is, falls and smashes.

'Well done, numb-nuts!'

I spin around and see Sandy looking at the glass of coke that I knocked out of her hand, now in bits on the flagstone floor. She thumps my shoulder with her empty hand.

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‘What d’you want to do that for?’

‘It’s all right, love! No harm done!’ The barmaid’s tottering over with another drink and a dustpan and brush, a wad of blue roll tucked in her armpit. ‘I’ll clear this – you just get started on those drinks.’

‘Thanks, Karen,’ Sandy says, as she slides in opposite me.

‘Best mates already?’ I smirk.

‘Look - she’s paying us for tonight *and* giving us free board, and you’ve just wrecked her floor. Just shut your mouth and be thankful.’

I want to laugh as she says it all in one breath before taking a mannish swig of her drink. That’s typical Sandy – meaning well, in her own roundabout way. She smacks her lips and nods towards me.

‘So, what have you got there, then?’

It takes me a while to figure out she means the book I’ve still got in my hands, and I drop it like a hot sausage. It thumps on the table, cover side down.

‘Oh, right – I thought you and her were in it for the duration. Talking.’

Karen mumbles something about the cat’s mother from near my knees as Sandy reaches over and slides the book towards her.

‘This thing weighs a ton.’ She bounces it up and down in her hands. I can see some of the cover between her fingers. Embossed in the leather is a mess of leaves, acorns and vines. It’s got eyes, and it’s freaking me right out, like it’s staring me out.

I’m glad when red talons appear at the side of the table like

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a grappling hook, distracting me. Karen hoists herself up from the floor, dustpan poised like a weapon. *The She-Warrior of Usher's Well*. I have to bite the inside of my cheek to keep from bursting, but Sandy has twigged it as well and pulls her hair in front of her mouth, trying to keep it together as our eyes meet, laughing.

'Done!' Karen beams with that weird self-satisfaction of people over a certain age, and her earrings jangle as she dusts her knees. I expect her to click-clack back to the bar when she leans over Sandy.

'Oh!' She crows. 'I knew it wouldn't take you long to find that old thing. Be right up your street, no doubt.'

Sandy heaves the book over and examines the leafy design on the front. She brushes her fingers over the top and bites her lip like she always does when she's excited about something.

'It's a Green Man,' she breathes. I haven't heard her breathe like that since we discovered foreplay, and I'm actually jealous of the bloody thing. She opens the book up and sniffs the paper. *Weirdo*.

'*Folk Songs Of Olde England*,' she reads. She starts turning the pages carefully. They look a bit crumbly and she's only a pair of gloves short of looking like an archivist.

'There's a lot in here I recognise,' says Sandy. *Oh, joy*. I'm not going to get any conversation out of her for the next few hours. *Thank you so much, Karen. That's right, bugger off back behind the bar. And thanks, me, for getting the bloody thing off the shelf in the first place.*

'Here's *Allison Gross*! And *Bold William Taylor*... oh, and this one looks really cool!'

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'Isn't there a contents page or something?' I ask, desperate. *On second thoughts, don't tell me.* I don't fancy another lecture. I slump back in my seat and look around me as Sandy reels off more song titles and exclamations. There's a fruitie in the corner, and I doubt Karen reckons I'm underage seeing as we drove here. I might have a go on it in a minute. I'll try to win some petrol money.

I look to the bar to check if Karen's looking, just in case, but she's chatting to some old bloke with his arm on the bar top. When did he get here? I don't really like the look of him, he's perched on a stool and facing this way. He's listening to Karen but staring straight at me from under his flat cap, tumbler in hand. It's creeping me right out and I'm grateful when Sandy catches my eye.

'Look, I know this isn't your idea of fun,' she begins, shutting her eyes like she's steeling herself for something. *Captain Obvious strikes again.* If I weren't feeling uneasy, I'd make some smarmy comment like that. But we're here for her, and I want to make it nice for her. No rows like we've been having more and more of lately.

'Go on, then.' I reach over and tap the pages. 'See if I'm in there.'

It's done it. Her eyes spark right up.

'Righto!' She flicks through the pages. I didn't ask to be called Matty. It's a stupid name really, something you'd call a dog. But even though I'm not folk music's biggest fan, it's still pretty cool to share a name with a song and a bloody, gruesome one at that. And the Matty in the song bedded a rich older woman. That can't be bad.

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The bloke at the bar's still staring at me. It might just be his way. When you hit a certain age, I think you lose any sense of politeness. There's just something about his eyes. It's not a blank stare like when you're looking at someone on the train but thinking of what's for tea. It's almost like he's studying me, and I wish he'd just piss off.

'You're psychic,' Sandy beams.

'Do what?'

'*Matty Groves*. It's in here. Whoring yourself out to old books, eh?' She peers at the words a while longer. 'Though I have to say I don't remember it ending like that.'

'Like what?' I forget about the creep at the bar. She's got my interest now. I've been forced to listen to different versions of the thing for the past few years, as well as play it in our sets. It must be different if Lady Folkly has twigged it. I swap sides and slide in next to her.

Sure enough, she's right. A solitary page is loose, but it doesn't look like it was ever attached because the paper's different, and the words are handwritten. There's one more verse starting from where the original ballad left off, when Lord Donald goes apeshit and kills Matty for shagging his wife, and then the wife for putting it about. This new verse is borderline spooky:

*"A grave, a grave, she was put in, but now to take her out,
Lord Donald's wife of noble kin shall rise to walk about
As the mists do kiss the cliffs so white, and so the sea the sand,
I call on them to do their work; Lady Donald shall live again."*

We read in silence, just taking it in.

'Poor show, mind. It doesn't even rhyme!' I nudge Sandy

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and we crack up. Then something grips my shoulder, cold and hard as a vice, and I nearly choke.

‘Bloody hell!’

‘Matty, pack it up!’ Sandy elbows me in the ribs, then her voice goes funny and almost posh like when she’s talking to her supervisor at college. ‘Sorry, sir. You gave him a bit of a fright.’

Sir? I look up into nose hair and, above that, the creepy eyes of the weirdo from the bar. He looks at me thoughtfully, moustache wiggling as he chews his lips.

‘No trouble, love,’ he says, finally. ‘Young man.’ He nods at me, then sits down opposite us. *Rude.*

‘So, you’re the Groveses, then.’ He stares at us like he’s weighing us up, then wets his lips like a real old codger. ‘I must say I’m looking forward to the show tonight. It should be an interesting evening.’

Before I can ask him to leave or stop talking, Sandy speaks for the pair of us.

‘Thanks very much, it means a lot.’

‘And I see you found *that*.’

This is meant for me, as he catches my eye and nods at the book. It’s feeling a bit too *Wicker Man* for me to answer.

‘You’ll have noticed the centre pages, no doubt.’

Are you kidding me? This bloke’s really not doing himself any favours.

‘Yes...’ Sandy begins, cautiously. She looks at me, and I think we’re on the same level. *What is his game and why won’t he just get lost and, Christ, why hasn’t he heard of mouthwash?* As if answering me, he knocks back his whiskey.

‘You would do well not to read from that extra page. The

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handwritten one. Don't even whisper the words if you can help it.'

'Leave them alone, you old git! Filling their heads with all that curse rubbish!' Karen's waving at us from behind the bar, and I could kiss her. *Thank you, glorious she-warrior.* 'Don't you take any notice of Laurence, my loves. It's his age, he gets a bit confused.'

'It is not rubbish, Karen!' Laurence slams a papery hand on the table and we all pop up like possessed Pringles lids. He sneers at us, and stands, shuffling towards the door. Karen shakes her head and waves a hand like she's telling us to forget it. Once the old boy's out of earshot, Sandy shakes my arm.

'Did you hear that?' Her eyes are wide. 'A *curse*?'

I nod, and then grin at her.

'A cursed book, eh? What a load of old bollocks!'

'Matty, don't.' She makes to put the book back on the shelf but I grab it off her.

'Matty, give it to me.'

'Don't tell me you believe that crap?'

'Please.' Her eyes are sparkling, and not in the good way. It's the usual prelude to me getting labelled a nasty prick or worse. She's filling up like she's about to let the floodgates open, and it makes my stomach twist up. It always does when I feel guilty for doing something. I don't want to spoil the first leg of the tour, but she has to learn.

She tries to snatch the book out of my hands. We struggle briefly, but I'm too strong for her and as she slips I end up smacking myself in the face with it.

'You stupid cow. What's up with you?'

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She doesn't look at me but stands and pushes past me with her hands in her pockets.

'I'll get the instruments in. Don't even speak to me.'

Well done, you nasty prick.

It doesn't matter how many times I perform, I still get the nerves. I've been in the shitter twice already and my t-shirt has begun to stick to my back and we're only tuning up. Everyone in the village has turned out to watch us, or at least it feels that way. Sandy's fighting with the mic stand and I realise that we've brought the one that sticks, not the new one her dad bought for us, and I wonder if this is a sign that it's all going to go to pot because that would be just our luck. Today certainly seems to have started off that way.

Thankfully, she wrestles it into place and picks up her fiddle. She doesn't look at me as she sticks a finger from her free hand in her ear, ready for the accapella introduction we've practiced all week. Apparently it helps you keep in tune, but I think that's a load of bull and she does it to look old-school.

'Come you young men, come along,

With your music and your song!

Bring your lasses by the hand

For it's that love does command!

I join in on the harmony, hands shaking on my guitar, but she catches my eye and finally smiles.

'Then to the maypole haste away,

For 'tis now our holiday!'

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All eyes are on us as we bounce straight into a jig with its funny time signature. It's all right for her playing actual melodies but when you're just doing chords, it can be awkward. Christ, I wish we were playing rock. Maybe I'll ask if we can finally branch out, when things between us are sound again. Right now, we just have to get through this set.

We play a few of the old staples which appear to go down well with the locals. They're all near to death that it's hardly surprising. They go for any old bollocks as long as they've got a drink in their hand. My Nan was the prime example at the Christmas talent show. I've even twigged old Laurence tapping his foot in time near the bar. After a while, even I get into it. It's always the way, I can't help but get caught up in the energy – and even though I'd rather be playing rock, it's great to have people just listening to *us*.

We've just finished some tune about a sailor – I never take a lot of notice of the titles – and they all clap. Even Karen, who is still behind the bar, is pumping her fist and making “ooh-ooh!” noises like she's egging on a fight. It's funny to hear in the sleepy candlelight.

‘Thanks very much, ladies and gentlemen,’ Sandy says, running a hand through her sweat-stuck fringe. ‘It's been brilliant having you all tonight. We'd like to say goodnight with murder most foul, as you do. This is a ballad called *Matty Groves*, but perhaps not as you know it.’

I assume she means because not everyone sings these songs the same way, but there's something about the way she's tensed up that makes me wonder. She looks at me and gives me one of her winks she thinks looks badass when she's beat me at

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a game. Something's up, but I can't ask what because we've started playing.

I keep my guard up throughout the song. I can't help but feel like Laurence is watching me. It's bollocks, of course, because everyone in this place is watching us, but there's something about the way his eyes dart between me and Sandy that makes me worry, like he's expecting us to slip up, or worse. He starts chewing on a finger and I have to look away, concentrating on another weird-arse time signature.

Sandy's just sung the last line, when Donald's killed the wife and asked her to be buried on top of the lover which always weirds me out a bit. We usually play a few more bars of music and end it there, but two bars in Sandy catches my eye, and mouths something at me. It looks like "carry on". She fishes something out of her pocket with her free hand, nodding her head as I continue strumming. It's just the sound of my guitar now and I wish she'd hurry with whatever she's got planned because I don't like feeling exposed like this.

She holds whatever it is up in front of her, but I don't even need to see what it is before she starts singing again. I flush with excitement for her. *Go on, girl.*

'*A grave, a grave, she was put in -*' she starts. That's done it. It's chaos near the bar as Laurence has his stool over and starts pushing his way towards us.

'Stop! You don't know what you're doing!' he cries as he stumbles past other punters who are getting arsey with him. Sandy's still singing but gives me a funny old look when she twigs Karen, who's jumped out from behind the bar and is trying to pull him back.

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‘Sit down, you old prat!’ she whines. ‘You’re spoiling it!’

He shrugs her off with the strength of someone half his age.

‘For goodness’ sake, listen!’

Nobody does.

‘–*Lady Donald shall live again,*’ Sandy finishes. Everything’s tense as I do a final few strums, but nothing happens. Laurence stands, hunched and puffing, and everyone turns to look at the div who nearly ruined the set. Karen gives him a shove and starts to take him back to his place.

I don’t see what happens next. I only hear the scream.

2

Matty

It's got to be Sandy pulling my leg – screaming like something's up and trying to make me feel like I'm in the wrong. I don't get a chance to find out. The whole place erupts in noise, screams coming from all sides in full-on surround sound.

But why the hell is everyone running away, scraping chairs and dropping glasses, all trying to get out the door as quickly as they can? I turn to look at Sand, but I'm garroted by my guitar strap. The instrument's torn from my body, the strap breaking. It flies across the makeshift stage, just missing Sand's head by centimetres and smashing up against the wall. She doesn't flinch – not at the near miss, not at her own fiddle beating itself against the floor. Not even at the banner flapping madly in an invisible gale-force wind. Instead, her eyes are popping out of her head as she stares at the page from the book. She drops it and it's like its mass changes mid-fall. It stiffens and slams itself against the floor and it's now that I realise it's glowing white, lighting up the joint like Blackpool illuminations, shooting off sparks, and shaking violently. The

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flagstones under my feet grumble in what feels like an epic earthquake, but it's all coming from that page. What the actual —?

Sandy's gone at it with her mic stand, swinging it axe-style. It bangs and bangs into the ground, but it's doing nothing but sending even more sparks everywhere. Got it — *destroy the page, curb the magical bollocks*. If that's even what this is.

I crouch down, struggling to balance, and stick a hand out to grab it.

'Shit!'

I fly back and land on my arse. My hand's burning hot and tingling all at once, and it's bloody sore. Did the bastard just *electrocute* me?

'Matty!'

Sandy rushes for me. It all happens too quickly. The ground's still shaking and she's coming towards me, but the page is there, between us, flashing whiter than white. A slit of white shoots up, slicing my view of Sand in two. No, it's a *hole*, and it looks like invisible hands are fighting to open it up wider as the sides tremble and slowly part.

I can see her through the white flashes, it's like looking through net curtains. Her hand passes through it, grabbing mine. She grasps so tightly that my arm jolts as something tries to snatch her away. Our fingers separate as her legs are yanked backwards. She chins the floor as she falls. I hear her swearing and shouting as she's dragged backwards into the white making me go cold. They're distant, and it's not possible to sound distant when she's so *close*. I try to grab onto her hands, like claws as they flail, trying to catch hold of something,

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anything.

I'm too slow. My guts do a somersault when I can't see her anymore. She's not there. She's not anywhere. It's starting to close up, slowly but surely, and my heart boxes my ears as I scramble to my feet and take a few steps back. Then I start for a running jump.

'Don't!'

Jangling hands yank my shoulders back and nearly have me over. It's Karen, and she looks like she's about to cry, her face pale and crumpled. Everyone else is gone. All except her, and someone else.

'I warned you! Didn't I warn you?' Laurence is edging towards us, his leathery hand shielding his squinting eyes.

He did warn us. We didn't listen, but then why should we have done? Who would listen to this absolute bollocks that you couldn't make up even if you tried? I don't need to be treated like some kid who's misbehaved. I don't have time for it.

'What the hell *is* this? Where's she gone?'

'A place that far predates our own.'

What does that even mean? He clamps a hand on my arm but I shrug him off.

'Back off, you old bastard,' I spit at him. 'I've got to go after her.'

'But —'

'I'm *going* — end of.' Because if I don't go now, the hole will close and I don't know where Sandy is or what's happened.

He seems to deflate but there's something in his watery old eyes that looks nostalgic, like he'd have done the same fifty years ago. Maybe he did, maybe the old prat's a glutton for

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punishment. He looks at Karen, whose whole being seems to be saying “no, don’t go, Matty, because I want to call it a night and have a cup of tea and I can’t ruddy well do that if you go off because there’ll be lengthy legal implications”. He looks at all that, then back at me and nods.

‘Then you must hurry. Trust nobody but believe. You have to believe!’

I don’t believe in an awful lot but I believe in what I see and I don’t even yell a goodbye as I launch myself into the absolute load-of-bollocks, white-net-curtain, electric hole of doom.

3

Sandy

‘She will need to die, sire.’

They’re the words I hear, over and over, echoing like I’m underground. I think I heard them in my dream. I don’t remember what happened, but there was talk of magic, and murder. I’m awake, but sort of half-dreaming still. My head’s banging and I’m frightened to open my eyes. It’s in case I do it too quickly, and they go into that awful, tight kind of spasm that hurts like a bitch and makes your eyes water for the first ten minutes of the day. I try to move my hand to give them a massage before I open them, but I can’t lift it. It’s pinned down by something. Something heavy, warm, and hairy.

I chance it and snap my eyes open. To the left of me is a massive, nay gargantuan dog, who sighs in his sleep through his nose – I’m guessing it’s a he, purely because of his size. The smell of his breath is a meaty, bad-teethy concoction that makes me want to chuck. He’s as grey as a rain cloud, and shaggy like Teddy Warbucks who still comes to bed with me sometimes. I think he’s a deerhound – like a greyhound, but fuzzier and way bigger. His head has got to be the size of a

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small kid, taking up the whole pillow on his side. *Meathead*, I think, and laugh – quietly, so as not to have him wake up and rip my throat out. Maybe I'll greet him when he's awake, as long as his temperament's all right.

I shut my eyes again, still heavy with sleep. Where did the meathead come from? And what's happened, exactly? I go through what I can remember in my head. We were performing – that's right; we were touring. I didn't pass out, did I? I hope not, I can't stand people fussing over me. Did we go straight to bed, in our room at the inn? No, there were no animals allowed, else we'd have brought Ozzy, mum's Jack Russell, with us. Then, where –?

I sit up sharply, tearing my hand out from under the dog, and my head rushes painfully. There was a curse. There was that book. All that mad business back at the inn, like poltergeist goings-on. I go cold as I look about me. The dog doesn't move, but there's definitely movement in the room. It's dark, but I can just make out curtains swaying gently at the end of the room. There's sunlight eking through underneath.

Sunlight. Christ, is it morning? Have I slept right through? I rush over and try to draw the curtains open. The heaviest curtains in existence. I heave and finally feel the sun's warmth on my face. It's fresh, like the windows are open. There aren't any windows. Through the curtains I'm let out onto a square stone balcony, with a low balustrade decorated with arches. Beyond that, there's green.

I step gingerly out and look all around me. This is definitely still the countryside, nothing but fields as far as the eye can see. That familiar smell clings to my nostril; dung and rapeseed. I

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inhale as deeply as I can, hoping it'll clear my head.

I turn back to the room. The bed I've just got off is a massive four-poster affair, with crimson sheets and a thick eiderdown, the same colour purple as my favourite chocolate. The dog's rucked it all up around him since I left, and I wonder if he's gotten cold without me.

There are candles burning on a heavy oak sideboard, and tapestries with hunting scenes covering the stone walls. These have to be worth some money. I can see they're old, but they're in far better condition than anything I've seen on the antiques programmes on telly. They might have been bought yesterday.

The entire place looks like one of the medieval mock-ups in the castles that Matty and I visit a lot, only far better quality.

'Matty.' The word comes out automatically, and the dog lifts his head to stare at me. I think it's trying to decide whether or not I'm talking to him. Then he rolls over onto his front and has a bit of a stretch before plopping down off the bed. I don't feel scared as he trots over to me and rubs his great big fuzzy head into my belly. I take this as the okay to fuss him and scratch behind his ears, and his eyes close gently as he makes soft licking noises and leans all his weight into me.

'You going to help me find out what's up, then?' I ask him, though I think it's more to myself, trying to break the silence. But when I start towards the door, he keeps by my side. There's no door to this room, only an archway next to the sideboard. So, feeling a bit like an adventurous tomboy from the books I read when I was little, I hook a hand on the stone and poke my head around the corner.