

TRUTHS

by

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2008

'I've had enough of you, I'm going!' he spat at me. I fought the surge of indignation that required me to respond. *This isn't my fault*, I wanted to scream back at him. Let it go. The conclusion was what I wanted to achieve, after all.

His eyes seared furiously into mine. Now I had to suppress laughter at his impotent rage. Frustration at his stupidity, hilarity at his lost temper. It was a moment of realisation; that was as deep as my feelings reached. It was as though my core, where the genuine emotions dwelt, was Kevlar protected. Sod it, fuck off.

He had his own moment of realisation. I wasn't going to cry or rise to his taunt and retort. Briefly, he seemed ready to explode, turning a comical tone of purplish red. Then, speechless still, but with the last word to his advantage, he was gone with a rather pathetic slamming of the door.

Alone, I looked around my sparsely furnished flat, righteously triumphant. I overrode the slight sickness in my stomach and the moist heat stinging my eyes. I flicked the stereo on and let the obscenely loud music compliment me on my victory.

1808

Hang. Dead.

The only words that filtered through the haze, ominous echoes, yet strangely meaningless. The disapproving frown of the black-capped

judge was surely directed elsewhere. She heard a gasp of horror over her shoulder. Why?

The firm men's hands grasping at her arms were warm but too persistent, pulling her towards the steps.

Automatically, she descended with them. Step, step, step, stumble, step, step. A gloomy corridor, a breeze caressing her neck, guttering lanterns. Been here before, but going deeper this time. Long shadows looming.

The echo returned, pursuing her: hang, dead, hang, dead. A sudden stutter of her heartbeat, a hot pulse of fear. But numb thoughts. Nonsensical sounds, nothing more, not yet.

Turning a corner, the clanking of keys, the grinding of the iron lock. Stern bars giving way, allowing them through.

A shadow rising from a gloomy desk, tattered uniform, limpid eyes, thread veins, and thin grey hair. Too fat for his buttons.

And then the nausea of realisation.

CHAPTER ONE

2008

That alarm was beeping incessantly, but too early, I was sure. I rolled over and peered at the red digital numbers. 8.03. They faded into a blur. My head pounded with an ache that could only be the result of the half bottle of Southern Comfort I had downed as a nightcap. Thank fuck there hadn't been a whole bottle left. The alarm was still attempting to wake me; I reached over and whacked the *off* button.

My legs were unnaturally heavy as I lowered them to the floor, dubious as to whether they would do their job properly as I attempted to stand up. Upright, but unsteadily, I rubbed my eyes and tried to think as the room finally came to a standstill. Work. That meant clothes. Where had I dumped them? A crumpled pile in the chair at the foot of my bed told me I should look in my wardrobe for clean ones. What about breakfast? My stomach flip-flopped at the thought. I headed for the small blue-tiled bathroom, hoping a cool shower would wash my cotton-wool head away.

It was by some miracle I was on the bus by 8.35. I sat in the first of the front-facing seats, looking desperately through the windscreen, trying to avert the daily motion sickness, which today was so much the worse. The lukewarm shower (I was too much of a coward to turn it to cold) had helped, and I had achieved dressing in my fresh black jeans and skinny T-shirt without too much of a problem. Now I thought about getting through the day ahead. No lingering on other thoughts; fuck him.

1808

‘Lizzie’s back.’ There was hilarity in the man’s voice. ‘Won’t be leaving this time!’ he said, snorting. My name is Elizabeth, she thought. It was all that was left to her now.

‘So she is.’ The limpid eyes were looking her up and down. Shiver. ‘Welcome back, Miss Cooper. Lizzie. Knew we’d be seeing you again. You have the devil in you, missy, only one way to cure that.’

The first furious tears, not of fear but of rage, welled. Vision blurred, throat aching. ‘I didn’t do it.’ Cracked lips, a retort which just had to come out.

‘Judge and jury say otherwise, Lizzie. You know they’re right.’ He was looming over her, grinning. Her gaze fell lower; one of his brass buttons had fallen from his blue uniform jacket, leaving a mess of threads. More tears, but now she fought them. Do not give him the victory.

‘Paperwork’s done already, love, knew you’d be back y’ see.’ More grinning. Yellow teeth, one absent from the front. A shudder of revulsion and a rising of the bile inside her. ‘Down to Mrs Beckinsale with you now, get you settled. Not that you’ll be with us for long, naturally.’ A vicious chuckle to accompany the wave of terror he saw in her.

‘Come on, Lizzie.’ The first man pulled her arm. Another black passageway. She had been kept in a cell near the court stairs, innocent until proven guilty. Now guilty, they were leading her into oblivion. A fitting preparation for what was to come. Dizziness, almost glad of the strong hand at her elbow.

‘Lizzie,’ the voice called from behind her. She stopped but did not turn, dread seizing her. She waited expectantly. ‘I’ll see you later, Lizzie.’ Sick to her stomach, but denying him a reaction, she went towards the gloom.

2008

Nottingham, with its compact, modern city centre of bustling shops and thriving coffee bars, showed little evidence of its grimy industrial heritage, let alone its pedigree as an important medieval market town in the heart of England. It was a thoroughly up-to-date city and not at

all picturesque, but it had always been my home and I was comfortable here. The centre was already full of its daytime inhabitants: mothers and children, pensioners, students. The good working population were already at their desks and counters. In my jeans, canvas rucksack slung on my back, I suppose I seemed more like one of the students than someone on her way to gainful employment. Just one of the reasons most people did not see what I did as a 'real job', whatever the hell that was. A job not starting until 9.30 a.m. didn't mean it wasn't really a job.

Soon I left the frantic commerciality of the main shopping streets behind, trying not to feel too superior. I was as prone to indulging in retail-worship as the next person; not having the money did not make me any better than those that did. I climbed the hill that led to the old section of the town, breathing steadily to convince myself I was actually in better condition than I was.

At the top of the hill, I crossed a busy road, which seemed to separate the present from the past. Ahead, everything seemed more subdued. Old red-brick, white-windowed Georgian industrial buildings kept their secrets, of this Midlands town's nineteenth-century heyday. People did not come here to look at them, and it always struck me that they had not quite resigned themselves to being relics, rather waited patiently, quiet with a secret pride, for a time when they might be useful again. A recollection of their history always moved me; I preferred these sturdy, gentle buildings to all the grandeur of a gothic cathedral.

A delivery van up ahead started its engine as I crossed an area of flagstones, now deserted, which had once been the town's marketplace. The information board was covered in blue graffiti. The Victorian church to my right was a fashionable pub these days. It was pleasingly impossible to be romantic about history, even here. Time went on, the past receded. I should have remembered it was important to move on with the days and months. The past was not a place to linger in, but that was just what I did every day.

The Museum of Law and Justice, my place of work, was located in the old Shire Hall and County Gaol. This stern building became visible rather suddenly as you rounded a curve in the road, though you barely noticed the bend as you walked. You saw it even before you noticed the huge medieval church opposite, which overshadowed it. Set back from the pavement by the width of five stone steps, the sandstone

edifice was carved into columns and looked like it needed a thoroughly good wash. It was supposed to be imposing, commanding, terrifying. Instead, I smiled as I crossed the road and climbed the steps. I felt welcome here; this was my gateway to history, to forgetting the real world for a while.

I entered the four-digit code in the pad to the side of the employees' door, like a magic word to take me back in time. I turned the heavy brass handle and passed through into the shadows of a side hallway.

1808

Footsteps on stone; long echoes. Keys jangling and iron locks scraping. A pitiful squeal of hinges. A shorter passage; a wooden doorway; worn stone steps. An odour to turn the stomach.

A woman, older than herself and taller too. Broad shoulders and thick arms, red hands. A face that was tired rather than severe. Dull grey eyes. Equally grey dress covered in a stained white apron, straining a little at the waist. Stitched tears and patches in the skirt.

She was pushed forward. 'Elizabeth Cooper.' The information came from over her shoulder. 'Thief. For the rope.' Cold disbelief and again the assertion in her head. I didn't do it. I didn't do it. I didn't do it.

'In y'come then, missy, I'll not be expectin' any trouble from y' since there's not a lot of good can be had from it in your case.' Local accent, harsh and rough, but somehow more kindly and familiar than she expected.

More steps forward. Lime washed walls. Long wooden table, well scrubbed. Guttering lanterns. A window with bars and no glass sending a fierce breeze through the chamber, enough to chill her heart. The grey daylight of late on a rainy day did nothing to illuminate the place. Gates clanking and locking behind her. No way out. Not ever.

Two women alone in the gloom. A curious empathy, against the rules, unspoken and unexpected, yet she sensed it very clearly. How was empathy possible? She was empty, dead already. Dead. Hang. Dead. The echo in her head was loud, constant.

'Let's 'ave y' in 'ere then,' said the woman, and the transient empathy was shattered. Through a heavy wooden door into a large chamber. The stench grew stronger. Only one lantern here and a grate

but no fire. No heat at all. A tiny barred window, too high in the wall. The light seemed not to be able to penetrate.

Benches along the walls, and now figures in the long shadows, which danced maddeningly as the candle guttered in the draught. Women with obscure faces turned her way.

‘This is Elizabeth Cooper,’ came the guttural tones from behind her. ‘Make sure she knows the way of things.’ The harsh jangling of keys sealed her into the chamber with the ephemeral women.

2008

Passing into the main reception hall of the Shire Hall, my footsteps echoed around the silently imposing room. High ceilings, stone columns, armorial shields, and oak panelling. It was surely no accident, the resemblance to a Victorian church. Doors to other passageways, stairs, led off mysteriously to the right. In this warren of a building, I still did not know where they all went, even after over a year of working here.

I meandered to the reception desk, where the museum visitors would buy their tickets as soon as the doors opened—providing there were any visitors of course, which was by no means certain. I slipped behind the desk to scrawl my name in the signing-in book.

‘Mornin’,’ a voice said from the office containing the monitors for the CCTV and the supplies for the reception desk.

‘Good morning,’ I said, turning to see Jim, the usual receptionist, middle-aged, bland enough but not someone I counted as a friend. It was an incestuous sort of place to work, this, rife with rumours and bitching, and I had decided long ago to be careful who I made friendships with. There was nothing really wrong with Jim, but nothing made him stand out to me either.

‘All right?’ he enquired, cheerfully.

‘Yeah, fine thanks,’ I replied, there being no chance I was going to explain my hangover and its cause to him. Forgetting to ask after his well-being, I slid out from behind the desk and through the doors to the side, which took me into an oak-panelled corridor at the side of the courtroom.

A few turns later and through another coded door, and I was at the shabby staffroom, a small hole at the very end of the corridor, right

next to the supervisor's office, with a kettle, stained and chipped mugs, some leatherette chairs that stuck to your skin in summer, and a walk-in closet that acted as a cloakroom.

I made my entrance reluctantly; as usual, the cleaning staff, whose shift had just ended, were gathered, cackling over their tea. A couple of other colleagues were sitting with mugs in their hands: Jade, a rather useless student, and Mike, a retired man who was here for the pleasure of the job, not the money. Neither of whom I counted as friends, either. Politenesses were exchanged again and my head started to pound. I dumped my bag on the small bench in the cloakroom and departed the staffroom once more, following a familiar route, back through the entrance hall, through one of the doors marked 'staff only', and then climbing a back staircase that was painted in a shade of blue that always reminded me of a hospital.

Five minutes later I returned to the staffroom, transformed. That was the idea at least. In reality, I was dressed in a not-so-well-cut black jacket, with pretend corseting at the waist, and a black floor-length skirt with a torn hem. The costume made me a Victorian prison wardress, and despite my disdain as I glanced in the smeared mirror, the visitors seemed convinced enough.

Pulling my hairbrush from my bag, I turned my back on the people in the room and brushed my long light-brown hair out in front of the mirror. Without the natural dexterity required, I plaited it into a long tail which I coiled round into a bun at the nape of my neck. It was as close to a period hairstyle as I was going to manage, and, let's be honest, I was the only one who worked in the place who cared about such things anyway. Jade had pink highlights in her hair. Very fucking Victorian.

I usually liked the way my reflection looked once I had done my hair; it brought out my big hazel eyes, which I vainly regarded as my best feature, and emphasised the heart shape of my face. Today, it merely drew attention to the slightly greyish tone of my usually pink skin and to the dark shadows underneath my eyes. I brushed some dust from the sleeve of my jacket and went to work.

1808

Motionless for a moment, and wondering what to do. Then one of the women was on her feet, a shadow no longer, but a pale face,

flickering with the lantern. ‘Maisie Burrows,’ said a girl’s voice. A gesture to the other shapes in the gloom. ‘These are Jane Larkin, Mary Smith, and Gilly Stevens.’

Vague movements and mumbles in the darkness as her gaze began to penetrate its thickness. A rasping cough from a large woman, Mary Smith it seemed, who appeared far older than Elizabeth.

Was that a smile on the face of this Maisie Burrows? Inconceivably, it seemed so. ‘You’ll grow used to it before long,’ she said, in tones too mature for the years of her voice. ‘This is the day room. We sleep through there and Mrs Beckinsale lets us to the table for eating.’

Fighting the echoes, she could not do anything but stare silently. Still the smell turned her stomach. A curious look from Maisie. ‘You can talk, can’t you?’

‘Yes.’ The first time she had spoken here. Her voice unfamiliar and large in the murk. No more words. Had she ever known any more words?

A scuffling in the corner of the room drew her attention. ‘Don’t mind the rats,’ said Maisie. ‘They’re as hungry as the rest of us.’

Was that humour? No, the tone was bitter. Empathy with rats? How could she be here? Sickness rose in her throat again and she swallowed hard. She drew in a deep breath and choked on the stench, the dankness of the chamber.

‘So’—Maisie was still talking, she knew words aplenty—‘what did you do?’ No answer. Then the injustice pushed a reply to the surface.

‘I didn’t do it.’ The melancholy in her own voice struck her dumb again.

‘Course not,’ Maisie said, ‘none of us did.’

I’m not like you, Elizabeth thought.

‘But they’ve found you guilty of something upstairs, ain’t they? Look at we four ladies—two thieves, a bawd, and Mary, who struck her husband with her skillet, but only hard enough to bruise ‘im.’ She sniggered. Elizabeth looked at the women, tried to apportion the crimes to the indistinct figures.

‘Stealing in a dwelling house,’ she said blandly, as though it applied to someone else. ‘They say I’m a thief.’

‘Another one ‘ere, Gilly,’ Maisie called across to the most obscured of all the female shapes, farthest from the light. ‘That makes three, you, Gilly, and me,’ she said. ‘What sentence did they give you?’

It was such a light question. The echoes hammered against the inside of her skull. Hang. Dead. Dead. Hang. The gloom was suffocating suddenly, the inconstant illumination dizzying. The air was rotten, like a tomb. Her tomb. There weren't the words to answer the question. Her stomach lurched and her bowels felt loose. The walls spun around her, mocking her. The floor was closer than it should have been, pushing up towards her. Then, there was nothing.

2008

'Come on, out 'ere, let's see you, scum, the lot of you, I'm sure,' I called, in my best local accent, to a small party of visitors, a speech I now reeled off with barely any hesitation. They were in fucking early this morning. Quite often I didn't have to move from my chair until after eleven o'clock. Typical that, today of all days, the tourists were keen. A family with two children; an elderly couple; a young man and woman, who seemed to be together, holding hands. Fools.

I had reached the point where the composition of an audience really did not affect what I had to say to them. Wanting to amuse and impress people had been a feature of my first month or so here. Now, after a year and a half, a longer time than many of those imprisoned in the gaol had lingered here, my words were pretty generic. I went on, the familiar words slipping out more or less before I thought them. 'What are you lot in for then? Any murderers?' They had been allocated crimes with the purchase of their tickets, and the elderly man and the boy, who looked to be about twelve, raised their hands tentatively. 'Oh good,' I said, regarding them with a sinister, and most likely queasy, smile. 'You look the sort. This is where it ends for you then. This is the exercise yard of the Victorian prison.' I brandished my black polished cane about me, a little wildly. 'It is also where we are going to hang you.' Mock horror and giggles from my spectators as they glanced up at the noose on the gallows, swinging gently in the breeze. A giant stage prop, the gallows in the yard, a huge framework of wood stained black, a platform reached by a steep run of steps. It was so high the noose was nicely silhouetted against the sky when the visitors first came into the yard. Most of them thought it was genuine and loved to gaze up and nudge their friends and family. People's fascination with brutal death

never ceased to amaze me. I guess I felt it too, why else would I be working in this place?

‘You’re lucky really though, before 1868 you’d have been hanged in public on the steps out front.’ A little more genuine revulsion, as they remembered the way they had entered the museum. ‘But for some reason, in 1868 they stopped public executions and moved them in here. We still get a good view at least. Since you’ve been convicted after 1872, it’ll be the long-drop for you. A quick death, providing you get a good executioner, your neck will break instantly. Of course if the rope is too short you’ll strangle, and if it’s too long your head might come off...’ I trailed off, a certain triumph inside me that even the cocky young man looked a little disturbed at the notion. ‘It’s better than you would have got on the steps outside though. There it was the short-drop, where you’d just dangle and strangle slowly, for up to an hour, unless you could pay someone to pull on your legs and make it a bit quicker.’

Now on to my favourite part to deliver, the moment I would finally get a reaction, maybe a real connection with the history of this place if I was lucky. ‘When you murderers are dead, remember we can’t bury a murderer in consecrated ground, so you’ll be going under here.’ I tapped the flagstones at my feet with the cane. ‘In fact,’ I gestured to the wall on my right, where some square slabs, carved with simple lettering, were mounted, ‘these are the grave markers of real murderers who are actually buried under your feet.’ A pause for dramatic effect. Give me a fucking Oscar. ‘We’ll put quicklime in your coffin so your body dissolves faster.’ A little squeal from the young woman, who clung to her boyfriend; down-turned eyes from the whole party, who suddenly, shifting on their feet, seemed a little less at ease. At least the reality of this place had hit them now. I had no damn idea where the bodies of the murderers really were. They could have been at the other end of the yard entirely. Or non-existent inventions to scare the visitors. I had been really worried about attention to historical detail when I had first taken this job. Then I realised sensationalism and getting the visitors through as quickly as you could were more to the point.

I smiled. ‘So, the exercise yard. This is the only bit of open air you’ll get in this place, and it will be where you spend any time when you’re not in your cells. Before the prison system was reformed, you’d

be allowed to do pretty much as you wanted here, but the Victorians decided that wasn't good enough and brought in a far more disciplined system. So since I'm an enlightened Victorian myself, I could make you march round in orderly circles, in silence, and you won't even be permitted to look at your fellow prisoners.' I waved my stick menacingly. 'You can see evidence of some of the people who were here before you on that wall there.' I pointed to the building side of the yard. 'Can you see the graffiti? The names are on record as those of men who were imprisoned here before the stricter system was brought in. Some of them were counting down the days.' I gestured at the tally marks inscribed in the bricks. 'Don't forget, in those days, they weren't counting down the days of their sentence. Up until the mid-nineteenth century, this prison was a holding prison, not the punishment in itself, just a place to hold the criminal until their sentence was carried out. These markings could be counting down to a whipping, transportation to Australia, or maybe death.'

Letting the word hang in the air for a moment, I moved a little to my left and pointed towards a dark doorway to the side of the yard. 'You'll have time to look around the yard in a moment. First, you are going down into the oldest part of the prison, the pits and the dark cells. The name is appropriate, I think you'll find. The pits are the oldest cells—or I should really say dungeons—in the prison, dating back to medieval times, carved into the rock below the building. The dark cells are for punishment and were used into Victorian times. Disobey me by talking or laughing,' I glared at them at this point, 'and you'll be locked in there, with no light and no human contact, your food will be thrown through the hole to you, and you will use the floor as your toilet. So try to catch your food before it hits the floor.' My comment got the sniggers it deserved. 'Prisoners coming out of there have been so ill they have to be helped up the steps to the gallows.'

'Look out of the window, through the bars, when you're down there. You'll see some houses. They're built on what used to be Narrow Marsh, the city's worst slum. Bear in mind two things: firstly, those houses don't have proper sanitation and the smell coming up from down there is almost as bad as the one in your cell. Secondly, you probably know people down there. The residents of Narrow Marsh are well known for their bad ways. During a police chase they lower their washing lines into the streets to help the criminal escape. Your family

and friends could be down there, just a wall away. You'll hear children playing in the streets and you'll hear drunken shouts and fights coming up from the pub that is still at the bottom of the cliff here, the Nag's Head. Go down, have a look around, and when you come back I'll answer any questions and tell you what it was like to be transported to Australia.'

Thank God, I thought, as I sent the group through the doorway to examine for themselves the horrors of what was, for most people, the most frightening part of the prison. On a busy weekend, I might have to deal with more visitors, delivering this first part of the speech again, before the previous group emerged. Thankfully, this was a weekday and I had a few moments to myself.

I struggled to organise my thoughts into anything but a craving for sleep. I gazed at the carvings in the prison brickwork, my mind inert and languorous in the warm early summer sunlight. Mercifully, I was too hung-over for any meaningful contemplation. I didn't want to think about why another relationship hadn't worked. I didn't want to think about drinking so fucking much and the way my head was now pounding as my just reward. In truth, these days, it was better not to think too much at all. Feeling as though I was seeing my surroundings through a haze, I turned my attention to the dark, gaping entrance of the pits and waited.