

THE CAULDRON

A prequel to *The Tor*

Anthony Morgan-Clark

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The Cauldron

Martina stepped off the bus and into Downhope bus station. It was as if the pavement itself was a defibrillator; as soon as she set foot on it, her pulse quickened. She was close to taking such a big step in her life.

The two of them had been chatting online for several weeks now. It was Charlie who'd initiated the conversation. Both had been one of a throng in a music chat room, most of which consisted of people slagging off other people's tastes. She'd seen Charlie pop up more evenings than not over the past few weeks. They seemed to like the same bands, so it was no surprise when the private message box appeared on-screen.

'Wanna chat?'

The chats were tentative at first and began with the usual questions - A/S/L, music, clothes, films. Over the course of each subsequent chat, Martina felt she was getting to know Charlie a little better. As well as Radiohead, Sheryl Crow, Ash and Alanis Morissette, they shared the same taste in films. Charlie was more bookish than Martina, and introduced her to new titles and authors. Jeanette Winterson, Margaret Atwood, and Brian Aldiss now sat amongst the other novels on her shelf. She was midway through the latter's *Helliconia Spring*. A torn strip of junk mail marked her progress.

'How'd you get on with H Spring?'

'Long. Bit slow. Preferred Atwood.'

'Read it through. It's good.'

'Might do.'

'Did you read Oranges?'

'Y'

'What did you think?'

'Good. Had to hide it from my parents though.'

'Me too. Got a BF?'

'Nope. Y?'

'Curious. How come? No decent guys near you?'

She waited before answering. She'd known for a little while of course, but was still struggling to come to terms with it. She couldn't tell her friends. All through school poor Sarah Densmore had endured years of bullying just because of their suspicions. During the penultimate term of secondary school, just months before they were due to complete their GCSEs, she disappeared. The staff said she'd moved to another school, though the rumour was she'd tried to take her own life. Pills. And tell her parents? God, no. They'd kick her out for sure. If their minds were any narrower their ears would be touching on the inside. They read the Daily Mail for Christ's sake, devoured every word. Even in the 1990s she couldn't believe that some still looked down on *people like that*, as they put it. People like her. But here was Charlie from the big town of Downhope, with its bars and crowds. She took a

deep breath and pressed each key in turn. Gingerly, as if any one of them would bite if pushed too hard.

'Not interested in guys.'

Nothing. She watched the time on the status bar flip forward a whole minute. Then the cold hand of panic gripped her throat. How could she have been so stupid? She'd given her name, her age, the name of her village to this stranger. How did she know that 'Charlie' wasn't someone from college? She bit her lip and blinked away a tear. Come the start of the new term she could be looking for a new sixth-form.

Then the reply appeared. She had turned the little electronic chime that announced each new message down low so that she could hear if anyone set foot on the stairs. It should have whispered, yet it rattled her to the edge of her seat. She leant forward, hand over her mouth, and willed herself to read.

'Sorry. Got distracted. That's cool. Me neither. Wanna meet up?'

'Sure. When?'

'Town. Downhope. Sat? 2? The Neer Cafe, near the bus station.'

'K'

'I'll be wearing a Nirvana T-shirt, red scarf in my hair.'

'K'

'C U then. Can't wait!'

It was that simple. She IM'd Shelly, told her she was meeting someone on Saturday.

'Exciting! Who?'

'Can't say. Need you to cover for me. Can I tell my mum I'll be at yours?'

'K. I'll be out all morning. Cinema with Danielle and Sheena.'

'Time?'

'Starts at half 2. Lunch first. & shops. Leaving for Taunton at 11.30.'

'Thanks. I'll tell her I'm with you. I owe you.'

Martina told her parents. Her mum phoned Shelly's mum, who confirmed the cinema times, and her dad gave her ten pounds to spend 'for doing so well at sixth form'. Martina took it, thanked him, kissed him on the cheek, and ignored the waves in her gut.

Downhope was the shopping destination for most of the local small towns and villages. The bus was full, and Martina had to stand for the entire ride. Even as the driver seemingly did his best to loosen her grip on the bar she was holding, she couldn't help but grin to herself all the way. For some, a secret is a drug like no other.

'The Neer Cafe, near the bus station.' How hard could it be to find? She asked around but nobody knew. She wandered a few streets looking for it, wishing she'd had the sense to check exactly where it

was. She stopped another few people. The fourth person directed her to a cobbled alleyway, one she'd walked past twice already. There on the stones, not twenty feet away, was a black A-board. 'Welcome to the Neer cafe! Ask about our specials!'

She followed it, with a queer feeling in her stomach that she was falling down a rabbit hole, and took a seat inside the cafe.

The cafe was quiet and dimly lit. Another large chalkboard was affixed to the wall opposite the entrance. '*Pick a seat, we'll take your order*'. She sat at a small round table against the near wall, from where she could see the entrance. Almost all the tables were empty. There was a bar at one end of the oval-shaped dining area, with two kitchen doors at the far side. At the other end of the room was a small stage and parquet dance floor. There was no sign of anyone in a Nirvana T-shirt with a red scarf.

A waitress approached, a thin girl in her early twenties. Her long black hair reached almost to her waist. Ringlets danced about her face. Blood-red lips flashed a riptide smile.

"Hi, my name's Debbie. I've not seen you in here before. Is this your first time at Neer cafe?"

"Yep. Though I'm waiting for someone - a friend, I mean."

"That's okay. Can I get you a drink while you wait?"

"A coke, please."

"A coke it is." She smiled at Martina again, held it a little longer than necessary. A moment later she returned from the bar, slipped a napkin onto the table, and placed the drink on top. The ice cubes clinked against the glass. Martina smiled, thanked her, and sipped her drink as she waited. She checked her watch. Ten to two. She was early. She checked every two minutes. Her pulse rose as the hand crept closer to the hour - as if Charlie was going to appear dead on cue, bursting in through the doors with her scarf in her hair. Two minutes past. Five minutes past. Ten past. Quarter past. She finished her coke and looked around. Debbie was behind the bar, and dropped her eyes as soon as Martina looked in her direction. Martina waved her over, and Debbie pretended she'd only just noticed.

"Another drink?"

"Yes, please. Another coke."

Two thirty. The lunchtime crowd had disappeared. Martina was determined to wait the full hour until the cafe closed at three, partly out of hope but partly out of stubborn determination. Two forty. Another coke.

"Your friend not turned up?"

Martina swallowed the disappointment rather than choke on it. "No, not yet. She's like that, though. Unreliable. Never sends a text to say if she's running late. She could have forgotten, she's pretty absent-minded." She checked her rambling and looked up at Debbie. "Could I have another coke?"

"Sure, I'll be right back."

Two fifty. Two fifty-five. There was no-one left in the cafe now aside from Martina. Debbie came over in timid steps. "I'm really sorry, but I'm going to have to ask you to finish up. We close at three, to get the place ready for the evening. Would you like the bill?"

Martina pursed her lips and nodded. She gave Debbie the money, and a small tip.

"Thanks."

"No problem."

She shouldered her bag and walked towards the exit, looking at the floor as she went.

* * *

Where now? She'd told her parents she'd get home around five. They'd be suspicious if she arrived home too early. She had over an hour to kill before getting on the bus. She wandered around a few stores, checked out the new releases in HMV, looked at some clothes. Then she remembered the cash her father had given her and made her way to Borders. She chose a copy of *The Robber Bride* and made her way back to the bus station.

The station looked to have been constructed in separate stages by different architects. In the centre was a clutch of bus stops huddled on an oval concrete island, each stop serving several routes. Buses came and went like lumbering bees, dumping passengers at the kerb, who then had to cross the busy tarmac to reach the town. Parallel to one side of the island ran three parking bays, one long Perspex shelter serving all the stops. Perpendicular to the other side of the island another dozen bays corralled passengers awaiting their ride home. A corrugated roof protected them from the rain, and an assortment of seats and benches were strewn around the pavement. This side of the station also served as the turning area for every bus entering the station, since there was only one entrance, which was also the exit. Martina had time to watch four buses held up on leaving or entering.

Martina slid through the crowd to look for a seat. People milled around with their shopping bags, chatting. Pigeons raided the floor for scraps of food like winged rats. She looked at the timetable, peering through the grime stuck to the Perspex. Her bus was going to be another twenty minutes. She picked one of the cleaner seats, covered in faded graffiti but no bubblegum, and sat down to read. Roz, Charis and Tony had just left for the cemetery when she felt a light tap on her shoulder.

"Hi, I thought it was you."

"Oh, hi."

"I guess you didn't find your friend, then?" Debbie's eyes shone like beacons above her red lips, white teeth showing through.

Why, what a wide smile you have. "No, no sign of her. I'll message her when I get home, find out where she is. I expect something came up."

"I expect." The smile was fixed, the eyes still shone. Debbie looked Martina up and down. "Can I sit?"

"Yeah, of course. I'm waiting for the number forty-two. It should be here before long."

"Batsford girl, eh?"

"Yep. Unfortunately. Can't wait to move out. Where are you from?"

"Same. I grew up there."

"Oh? I don't recognise you."

It was Martina's turn to scrutinise now. Debbie could have been anywhere between seventeen and thirty. Even this close, she could see not a blemish on Debbie's skin, not a greying hair on her head. Yet Debbie held herself like a woman much older.

“I’m not living there at the moment. There was a house fire. I’m living near the coast now, at least for the time being.”

I don’t remember a fire in the village, thought Martina.

Debbie continued as if in answer. “It was a while ago, it’s just taking longer than we thought to rebuild. Look, here’s your bus.” Five people were already at the doors, waiting for those on board to exit.

Martina rose from her seat. “Well, it was nice talking to you. I’d better get on.”

Debbie stood also, glanced around the station, and leaned in.

“This ‘friend’ you were waiting for.... wouldn’t happen to be a female, would it?”

Martina couldn’t stop the red pins pricking her cheeks. Her eyes fluttered left and right before she confirmed with a quiet “Yes”.

Debbie smiled like she was sharing the secret. “I thought as much. Do you fancy dropping by again next week?”

“Yeah... yeah, okay.”

“About the same time? It should be quiet and maybe we could chat for a bit.”

Martina smiled and nodded. “Yes.”

She showed her return ticket to the driver and took a seat near the back. Time and again during the journey home a smile crept across her features, unnoticed, like a thief.

* * *

She got off the bus in Batsford High Street and walked the few streets home. The village was quiet. Saturday afternoons always were. The morning shoppers had deserted the high street, the afternoon drinkers were in the pubs, and those who wanted anything else were in the surrounding towns. She approached her house, a sensible semi-detached with a garage. On the roof above her bedroom window, a crow perched. She stopped to look at it. It looked back, watched her walk past the neighbours' houses, watched her unlatch the front gate and watched her step into the front garden.

Skawk.

The sudden noise made her jump. The bird took off, circled once, and flew westwards toward the Tor, atop which there sat a circle of stones and a burned-out cottage. Martina thought of Debbie, smiled, and opened the front door.

Both her mother and her father were in the living room, watching TV.

“How was the film?”

“It was okay. I enjoyed it.”

“Have you eaten?” asked her mother. “We kept some for you just in case, it’s in the microwave.”

“Thanks, I’ll eat in a bit.”

She fetched a drink from the kitchen and went upstairs to her room. She turned on the PC and signed in to AOL. Her Joan Osborne CD was still in the drive. She took it out. She wanted to hear the stairs creak if anyone came snooping. She clicked on the messenger icon. Charlie was not online. She sent a message anyway.

‘Where were you?’

‘Nothing to worry about,’ she told herself an hour later. ‘It’s a Saturday. She’s probably out, that’s all.’

She tried again in the evening and twice on Sunday. Charlie, it seemed, was no longer talking with her.

She went to bed early. The worry returned. It bred in her stomach like a virus. It chipped away at her mind. It stopped her from sleeping and made her feel sick. It was early morning before she finally dozed off.

* * *

Monday morning. No choice but to face it head-on. See what it brought. She got up with her alarm and went through the usual morning routine. Shower, breakfast, makeup, leave. Her first lecture wasn't until half-ten, so she stayed in bed to avoid her parents. They always could tell when she felt upset or nervous, and today she was terrified. She had no evidence that 'Charlie' was a student at her college, but the 'what ifs' burrowed under her skin like maggots. Right on time she left her house for the short walk to the bus stop and resolved to keep her head up the entire way.

Her sixth form was a former adult education college that had been built in the nineteen-sixties, and converted to its present use in the nineteen-eighties. The main building consisted of two floors of lecture rooms, housing the English and maths departments, and the admin block. There was a small theatre for the performing arts courses. A series of drab portacabins littered the grounds behind the building. They housed all the other subjects - economics and social sciences, business studies, the traditional sciences, modern languages. The entrance hall was a large octagonal area. Four steps and a wooden balustrade split it into two equal sections. It was always crowded. She walked in, spotted a few people she knew, and walked over to them, picking her way through the throngs of students. Everything normal. Everything fine.

Even so, for the rest of the day she was on edge. Every whispered comment was about her, every snigger was aimed at her. As she left college for the bus she realised that nobody had said anything to her about 'Charlie', and she no longer had to force her head up. She relaxed. The ride home was quiet, and she allowed herself to think about Saturday.

She gave her PC a cursory check when she arrived home. No message from Charlie. *Forget about her.* She reclined across the bed, CD playing through the PC's lousy speakers, and tried to read *Heliconia Spring* again.

The nerves returned Tuesday morning. What if her tormentor had been lying in wait to see if she'd return to college? What if this person was watching her settle back in before announcing to everyone what they knew? She told herself she was being paranoid. Tuesday passed without incident, as did Wednesday, Thursday, and Friday. By Saturday morning she had forgotten all about Charlie.

* * *

Saturday. Martina was up, showered and downstairs by mid-morning. Dad was loitering in the garden, pretending to weed the lawn, killing time until Grandstand came on BBC1. Mum was in the kitchen putting some dishes away.

“Morning Martina. Would you like some toast?”

“No thanks. I’m going to Downhope this afternoon, and I was wondering...”

“Ask your father. Who are you meeting up with?”

“Some friends from college.”

“Anyone we know?”

“No, some people I met this week. We’re going to go for a coffee or something, mooch about some shops. Girl stuff.”

“Hmm. I’d rather it was someone we knew.”

“Mum, you can’t know all my friends. Especially now I’m in sixth-form, most of them aren’t in the village anyway. So can I go?”

“I suppose so. Check with your father first, though.”

“Um, can I have some money too? Please?”

“Ask your father about that as well. If this is going to be a regular thing you might want to think about getting a part-time job. That Andre in the Spar is off to University, he’ll be finishing there soon. You should ask.”

“Okay, I will. Thanks, mum.”

Her father gave her another ten-pound note from his wallet. Martina took it, thanked him, kissed him on the cheek, and wondered if this was the start of a double life. And, if so, how long she’d have to lead it. Would her parents still accept her if they knew how she felt? And would they feel guilty, or angry with her about the fact she’d had to lie to them?

* * *

It was one thirty when she arrived at the Neer cafe. There were more people than the last time. A low buzz floated around the cafe, lunchtime conversation. Who had bought what, and where. Who had done what on Friday night, and with whom. Every table aside from one had two or more people sat eating and drinking. At the table furthest from the dance floor, a mother sat cradling a child approaching toddler-age. Dressed in neutral colours, the child sat in its mother's lap and played with her long auburn hair. A cup of coffee cooled on the table.

"Hi, glad you came." Debbie had appeared whilst Martina was staring at the mother and child. Martina hadn't seen her approach. "Your table's free."

Martina followed Debbie to the table, sat, and picked up a menu. "What's good?"

"Everything. Try the Caribbean lamb curry. Or if you're less adventurous, maybe a tikka baguette."

Martina chose the baguette and a coke, and five minutes later Debbie returned with both.

"Thanks."

"That's okay. Don't worry about the bill. Once this lunchtime rush has died down I'll come and sit with you, if that's okay."

"Sure. I'd like that."

Martina watched Debbie as she served, cleared, thanked and accepted tips. She moved with lithe grace between the tables, charming every person with whom she spoke, exchanging polite words, smiling and nodding. It was a form of magic, a glamour that attracted the attention and favour of others yet gave nothing in return. Martina marvelled at the sight, a feeling tinged with envy. The only table Debbie didn't attend was that with the mother and child. She waited until the mother had gathered up her child before clearing the crockery and used napkins.

As the woman left, carrying her child, she looked at Martina. Martina looked away, embarrassed. She hadn't realised she was staring. The woman stared back, not looking where she was walking. She mouthed something before she stepped out through the doors: "go". Martina felt the chill of her whisper, and shuddered. What the hell was that about?

Debbie appeared at her shoulder. Again she'd appeared without Martina noticing her approach.

"Is everything okay?"

"Yeah, just... yeah."

"I'll get you another drink." Table by table the cafe quietened. Martina stayed in her seat, watching Debbie work. She was quick. Tables were cleared and cleaned in a flash, the floor swept, the bar wiped down. Martina watched Debbie get the attention of a passing woman in a business suit. She was older than either of them. She nodded once at Debbie, and Debbie came over to Martina's table, a glass of coke in each hand.

"Chloe, our manager."

"Your boss."

“One of them. We’ve a kitchen manager too. But Chloe gets to say what happens out here, and Chloe says I can clock off early and sit with you.” Debbie smiled a wide, red-lipped smile. Lips that livened up her pale complexion. “What made you say yes?”

“Sorry?”

“To coming back here. To see me.”

“I... liked the way you spoke to me. I thought about you all the way home, on the bus. I thought... I dunno... it felt like we connected. Somehow.” Her eyes had flitted this way and that as she spoke, looking everywhere but at Debbie. She felt the familiar heat blossoming in her cheeks. She laughed as she fiddled with the glass on the table, turning it round and round in her hands. “Yep. A connection. As cheesy as that sounds, I felt something and I wanted to find out more about you. To get to know you better.”

The smile drew closer in conspiracy. In a much quieter voice, Debbie said, “I’m glad you did.” She winked and sat back up. Martina told Debbie all about her home, her college, and her friends. She told Debbie about her parents’ view on ‘traditional’ marriage and the ‘trend’ of ‘gays’ they saw ‘everywhere’. She talked about last weekend, about how worried she’d been going to college on Monday, and why. She talked about not wanting to end up like Sarah Densmore. And all the while Debbie nodded like she already knew.

When the clock reached three, Chloe strode over. “Time’s up, girls. We’re shutting up to get ready for the evening rush. Debbie, you owe me an hour’s work. Can you come in early Monday, or shall I take it out of your pay?”

“My pay. The bus won’t get me here an hour early. I can stay an hour later to make the time up if you want.”

“I don’t. We’ll have three on for the cleaning on Monday.”

She exited through a door marked ‘staff only’.

“We’d better go. Can I walk you to the bus station?”

“Of course.”

The town was busy, and Martina had to raise her voice to compete with the crowd. Out here, she talked only of more mundane things. The bands she listened to, the books she read, the TV she watched. She almost grabbed hold of Debbie’s hand when Debbie said she was a fan of The X-Files.

“Really? I love that! It’s the only thing I won’t miss on TV.”

“Me too. Did you know there’s a film coming out?”

“No! When?”

“I’m not sure. The next year or two I think.”

They rounded the corner to the bus stop. “Here we are,” said Martina.

“Indeed. My bus should be here in a few minutes. D’you fancy meeting up again? Outside of work?”

“Sure.”

“Can you get out tomorrow?”

“Probably.”

“Okay. You know the lane at the far end of the high street?”

“Yep - the one that leads up to old Dadeni farm?”

“That’s the one. I’ll meet you at the junction there. It’s out of the way, nobody will see us.”

“I told my parents I was meeting a friend from college today. You could just come over to the house if you’d like.”

Debbie shook her head. “No buses on a Sunday. I can get a lift to Batsford, but I won’t be able to get back home. We can take off in the car for a few hours, and we can drop you back in the village. Find somewhere private.”

Martina thought her heart would leap right out of her chest and get home before her. “Okay, yes. Yes. What time can you get to the village?”

“About ten.”

“Okay. Do you have AOL at home?”

“No, I don’t have a phone line where I am. Why?”

“Just in case I can’t get away. How will I let you know?”

“I’ll wait thirty minutes. If you’re not there, don’t worry. Just meet me here next Saturday. We’ll figure something else out. Maybe I should enrol at your college, become your study partner.”

Martina laughed. “Okay. Look, here’s your bus.” She watched Debbie board and take a seat, and watched as the bus took her out of the station. Still smiling, she sat down on one of the plastic seats. Debbie had an allure about her that made Martina comfortable. Confident. She’d never revealed so much of herself to someone who was, when you got down to it, a stranger. She realised she’d given a lot more about herself than Debbie had, but that was okay. Perhaps that was what tomorrow would be about. Perhaps she’d ask Debbie if her family knew about her lifestyle. How had she broken the news to them? How had they reacted? Martina needed advice in that regard, and so far she’d met nobody qualified to give it.

This could be her first proper relationship. She’d been to a few parties before, almost gotten with a few boys. Christ, her parents would hit the roof if they knew even about that. To them she’d stopped maturing at the age of twelve; she was still their little girl. How could two adults, two adults who’d birthed and raised a child, be so terrified of sex? Where in the hell did they think their daughter had come from? Dad used to joke that he’d bought her from a Kleeneze catalogue. Perhaps that’s what they really preferred to believe. But this would be something different. If tomorrow went well this would be the first time she’d even thought of a serious relationship since she’d come to understand more about herself, come to discover what she wanted rather than what they expected her to want. It might not last, she knew that. But for now, she felt that Debbie was someone who could make her happy. Who wouldn’t grab that with both hands? She’d figure a way to tell her parents another time.

She didn't need their permission to be who she was, though she'd be happier in herself once she knew that they knew. Happiness, confidence, chicken, egg.

She looked up. She'd missed her bus. Luckily she still had *The Robber Bride* in her bag, and she read on whilst waiting for the next one.

* * *

The next morning Martina was up for breakfast by nine-thirty at the dining table. Once there had been two rooms downstairs, a sitting room and a parlour. But they'd been knocked through at the end of the eighties to make one open-plan room. It was around that time her dad had started spending more time in his shed.

"I could get used to this," said her mother, "seeing you at breakfast."

"Well, I'm off out with Shelly this afternoon. Probably just go to the park, maybe back to her house." Shelly had already agreed to cover for her. She wondered how her own parents had managed to get time alone together before AOL. Perhaps they hadn't. Perhaps they'd had a chaperone at all times, separate bedrooms until they were married. She couldn't help but smile at the thought.

"You look different. You're smiling, don't often see that either."

Martina shrugged. "College is going well. It's a smaller place than secondary. I like it."

"You liked secondary."

Martina chose not to argue. She took a piece of toast from the rack and buttered it, then left for the door.

"Thanks. I gotta go now. I'll see you later."

"Don't get crumbs on the carpet." The front door clicked in response. "She's smiling more, no doubt about it. She was smiling most of yesterday evening. There's a spring in her step too. Maybe there's a boyfriend."

"Better bloody not be," came a voice from behind the Sunday Express.

Martina made her way to the end of her cul-de-sac, out through the estate and to the high street. The morning air had a chill to it. The college term was eight weeks old, and Christmas not too far away. The Spar was open but empty, and the streets were quiet. Morning service at the church didn't start until eleven. Her parents would be among the crowd of worshippers. They didn't object to her non-attendance. Like every choice she made, they assumed it was 'just a phase'. A 'passing fancy'. Something she'd grow out of. Yet she knew she'd never 'grow out of' not wanting to hear some sanctimonious fuck telling her that his way was the only way, whilst he preached tolerance and acceptance. You can't preach inclusion and practice exclusion. It was a trick as thin as that performed by any no-mark conjurer you could find at the seaside. 'Doublethink'. She'd read '1984' as part of her course, and the word was perfect. A few weeks back she'd picked up the newspaper and flicked through the pages. On one page there'd been an article describing how 'thousands' of Europeans were settling in Britain, and how disgusting it was that we were expected to pay for their healthcare. On the very next page she'd read an article about British expats settling in Spain, and how unfair it was that the Spanish state wouldn't provide them with free healthcare. She showed her parents. They saw no contradiction, couldn't bring themselves to admit that their beloved newspaper might be showing even the slightest hypocrisy. That was them all over. She was their daughter. They were proud of her, proud of her intelligence and independence and loved her unconditionally - on the condition that she didn't use her intelligence and independence to do anything they wouldn't.

She hurried past the church.

The high street wound on past the library and the village petered out. After the last short row of cottages she came to a lane that snaked up the hill to her right. Atop the hill was the old Dadeni farmhouse, a derelict cottage that had been there for years. Here at the foot there was a car waiting. Martina didn't have much interest in cars, but she could see that this one was an old maroon Ford Cortina. It made her think of the repeats her father watched on TV: it looked like something The Professionals might have chased criminals in. Debbie was in the back. Martina waved, smiled, and loped over to the passenger door. The window was wound halfway down.

"Get in. This is James."

Martina said "Hi" to the goateed man in jeans and denim jacket. He looked to be in his twenties, and he smelled of stale tobacco. He nodded a reply.

James started the engine before Martina had buckled her seatbelt. He pulled away from the kerb and drove along the high street out of the village. They came to the crossroads. The main road was as quiet as the village. They drove straight on. Whiteshill Tor rose before them, swinging to their right as the road curved. The radio was on. Don't Fear The Reaper oozed around them.

"Where are we going?" asked Martina.

James shrugged, and looked in his mirror. "Where to, Rebecca?"

"The Cauldron."

Martina loosened her seatbelt and faced the rear. "Rebecca?"

James laughed, and the figure in the back seat allowed herself a small chuckle. "*Debbie* is just for work. It's cash in hand, no questions asked. If anyone comes in asking for Rebecca, well... This is the first time I've picked up anyone from work."

"So you've picked people up like this before?"

"Plenty of times."

James laughed again. Martina sat back in her seat.

"Where's The Cauldron? I've never heard of it."

"I know. It's a small place, most people don't know of it. It's private. You'll like it."

Martina wound the window up and shivered. "It's cold in here. Can we turn the heating up?"

James reached for the heater and slid the knob into the red. Rebecca opened a back window. *Thub-thub-thub-thub-thub*. Like being followed by a helicopter. Martina looked at the speedometer. The needle swept across the dial until it touched sixty. Then it hovered there, only dipping when they took a bend. Rebecca had one arm out of the window, her long black hair streaming in the wind. She had closed her eyes. Martina looked left and right. Since passing the Tor she'd lost track of where they were.

"I don't know this road. Are we still near Batsford?"

James laughed.

“I want to get out.”

“You can’t. I’m driving, and you just said you don’t know where you are.” He pressed the accelerator and the bushes whizzed by even quicker.

Thubthubthubthubthub.

“Please stop.”

James laughed again and pumped the pedal. The car lurched forward, into corners, out of corners, so close to the verge that Martina thought for certain they’d careen off the road and into a ditch. She gripped the seat with both hands and whimpered.

“Stop scaring her!”

James looked into the rear-view mirror and eased off. The car slowed down to a steady fifty, and the noise from the back window resumed its steady beat. Debbie gathered her hair at the nape of her neck with one hand, wound the window back up with the other.

“I’m sorry Martina, that wasn’t funny.”

“It’s okay.”

“It’s not. James frightened you, and that’s not fair.” Behind the wheel, James was still grinning like a maniac let loose. “James, we’re almost there. Slow down, please.”

“Sure.” He had a local accent.

The car swung into a large gravelled car park, dominated by a yellow Tudor style building. A large wrought-iron sign hung from a tall post at the entrance. Above the name of the pub, animals clung to a cauldron. They climbed the sides and teetered on the edge of the pot. The whole thing squeaked in the breeze.

James turned the engine off, killing the music.

“Here we are, then,” said Martina. She reached for the door handle. “Oh. The child lock must be on, or something.”

Cold, cold hands reached forward from the rear seat and squeezed her throat. There was no time to cry out. She felt chill and bloodless flesh pressed tighter and tighter. She wriggled and thrashed, unable to break free. Her left hand slapped away behind her head. Time and again she hit the ceiling, the headrest. A few futile slaps connected with Rebecca’s head - glancing blows that did nothing to stave her off. With her right hand she lashed out, tried the same thing. Then she went for the seatbelt release. Strong nicotine-stained fingers twisted her wrist away from it, held her hand tight enough to leave a bruise. She kicked with her legs, cutting her shins on the glove box. Black clouds encroached on her vision, and the rising panic manifested itself as a moan. A waste of air, and she couldn’t draw any back in. The clouds grew thicker, blotted more of her sight. She pushed against the dashboard twice, three times before falling into the seat.

Rebecca held on for a few seconds longer, just to be certain, before releasing her grip on Martina’s neck. James laughed again. She flexed some movement back into her fingers. Martina’s head lolled to one side, propped up by the window. Rebecca leaned forward between the two front seats. She drew

back a few loose tresses of Martina's hair, hitching them behind the corpse's ear. She licked her lips.
"So pretty..."

* * *

A gentle gust disturbed her fringe, tickling her eyelids. They fluttered open. She shivered, stretched and sat upright. She tried the handle, and the door opened. Aside from her, the car was empty. Abandoned. The moonlight was strong enough for her to see every detail of the building in front. The yellow pub, with its creaking sign. She saw movement on the roof. A crow perched on the edge of the gutter, looking down at her. *Skawk*. More stood on the ridge of the roof, on the tiles, atop the eaves. *Skawk. Skawk. Skawk. Skawk*. They all watched her. The noise they made felt welcoming, as if they had expected her.

She stepped out of the car, steadying herself on the open door before swinging it shut. Her hand went to her neck, fingertips running back and forth. No swelling, no bruising. It felt fine. "Where is this place," she murmured. Her voice was neither rasping nor weak.

The car park was quiet, apart from the occasional squeak of the sign. The birds had settled down, and most of them watched her with interest. A few preened their wings. Light seeped out around the curtains, heavy drapes set in the four windows, two to each side of the jutting entrance. Martina walked up to the door. It opened before her with the lightest of touches, and she walked inside. The door closed behind her once she had stepped into the little hallway. It clicked shut of its own accord, and Martina knew it was keeping more than the weather at bay.

She pushed open the inner door - and turned back. With two long strides she was back at the front door. She slammed against it with an open palm, thumped and kicked at the wood. There was no handle on the inside. Rebecca's hand rested on her shoulder.

"It's okay... it's okay."

Martina faced Rebecca and pushed her hand away. She supported herself against the door, compensating for her weakened knees. "What did you do to me?"

"It's okay. Just come inside, all will become clear." Rebecca stepped away and waited for Martina to follow. Martina stayed two steps behind Rebecca, but followed her lead.

Beyond the inner door, the hallway continued for perhaps another ten feet. Two doors broke the wall, one on either side. To their left a large black door skulked. The pointed top and studded iron bands made it look like it led to a dungeon. Martina placed a hand on it as she passed. It was cold enough to make her fingers tingle. To their right a small flat-topped door opened on three narrow stone steps that dropped to a cramped bar area. In one corner squatted a round table surrounded by three short stools. James sat on one of them, still grinning. He waved.

Behind the bar, an older man worked the pumps whilst a young girl cleaned glasses. He looked up at Martina as she stepped into the bar.

"Drink?"

He placed a drink on the bar for her, a bottle of lager. She walked over, thanked him, and picked it up. She reached for her pocket. He waved her away and walked off to draw a pint from one of the farther pumps.

Martina looked for Rebecca, who was sitting with James. She saw Rebecca wave her over. She looked over the crowd before walking to them. Would she recognise anyone? The conversations around her were quiet. She couldn't pick out any words. Nobody looked at her.

Everyone here dressed in a way she found strange. Nothing matched. Everybody looked as if they had come from a different decade, from mods and teddy boys to sixties miniskirts and beaded twenties dresses. Flares and collars. Baggy jumpers, shoulder pads. Swing dresses. Rockabilly dresses. Every era of the century, it seemed, was here.

Rebecca leaned in to James and said something Martina could not hear. Rebecca took a sip of her drink. James laughed, the loudest sound in the bar. Everyone stopped to look, and as Rebecca took another sip of her drink the conversations continued.

A drink. She'd been drinking here ever since she'd arrived. How long ago was that? She wasn't certain, but those that came after her wore clothes she'd never seen, talked of events that hadn't yet happened.

The world had moved on without them. She thought of her friends, and struggled to recall their names... though she remembered Charlie. And Debbie. She probed the memory of her mother and father and found that the memory was now a dusty tome. Remote. Inert. Of only passing curiosity. She wondered if any of the others felt the same... the thought passed. She twitched, preened herself, walked a little further along the tiles. She would wait here until the Tor summoned her, for whatever purpose it felt necessary.

* * *

Rebecca stepped off the bus and into Downhope bus station. Another busy Saturday. Sunshine beamed down as she walked towards the town centre. She stopped to buy a drink at... what was it now? It had been a corner shop before the owners knocked it through to become part of the shop next door. Then it was a small Asian supermarket, then a generic mini-mart. Currently, it was a Polish shop. A faded A5 flyer peeked out from the visual noise of the window. Mobile phone logos, adverts for Walkers and Cola and Lyca Mobile crowded the small ads. All screamed for the attention of those passing by. On the flyer, the local constabulary badge sat above the sun-bleached photo of Martina. She stood in her family garden, smiling. The text was difficult to read, but by peering closely one could make out the following: 'Missing. Last seen leaving her home in Batsford on-'. The date had disappeared, as if the sun had faded that text first. The next line read 'If you have any information please visit your local station, or call the non-emergency helpline'. A Crimestoppers logo adorned the bottom right corner.

Rebecca smiled, opened her bottle of water and took a long draught. Her watch read eleven am, and she was in plenty of time for Lizzy to meet up with Angelina, just a week after Annie had stood her up.

Thanks and credits

As always, this book is dedicated to my wife, Ali, and to our children, Jack and Rhian.

Cover painting of The Tor by Gina Wilkinson, www.facebook.com/faeriewingsandmoonlightdreams

Thanks also are due to the beta readers who took the time to read through the early drafts. Any remaining errors are my fault, not theirs.

A word from Anthony

Thank you for reading *The Cauldron*. If you enjoyed the book and you'd like to follow *The Tor* and those affected by it I would recommend [The Complete Tor](#).

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About the author

Anthony Morgan-Clark is the author of horrors The Tor series and The Soul Bazaar, as well as the sci-fi Reformed.

For more information:

www.Facebook.com/MorganClarkAuthor

www.twitter.com/AMorganClark

www.AnthonyMorganClark.com