

SEA BABIES

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Edinburgh, April 1983

NEIL INCHES FORWARD blindly. His eyes are covered by the scarf – tied perhaps too tightly around his head. Lauren’s painfully sensitive to every change of his expression. And the fact he put his trust in her.

‘It pinches,’ Neil says. He reminds her of Jesus. When she first laid eyes on him in the university canteen he looked just like Ted Neeley in her favourite film: brown shoulder-length hair with a hint of gold – intense blue eyes and tanned skin. He was even wearing a cream linen grandad shirt. Biblical. And leather sandals, in *March* (although, admittedly, it was a warm spring). She saw his friends as his disciples.

Lauren wants to be Mary Magdalene – the one in the film. She pulls him by the hand up Granny’s Green Steps, both of them slightly out of breath. Grasping his warm fingers in hers she’s corporeally aware of the slight tremor in Neil’s hand. His pulse tipper-taps into her palm.

The slope below the castle is bathed in yellow light. Underneath, in the shadows of Kings Stables Road and Grassmarket, an evening chill descends but up here it’s still warm. Squeezing her eyes shut she experiences a flickering aura from the warm sun on her face. Tendrils of hair lift off her forehead in the calm breeze. Above, in the castle grounds, bagpipe music whirls upwards. All the surrounding

sounds had mingled together when she could see, now each is distinct and separate: the pipes, the rush and blare of traffic from the road below, the chatter of local accents and unintelligible tourist babble. Footsteps, bumps and nudges from passers-by on both sides, moving up and down the steps. Lauren and Neil are stranded in the middle of it all.

Seagulls cry in the air between the castle and the streets below the hill. She forgets to open her eyes and stumbles, feels a sharp pain as her shin catches on the next step. Neil flips her round to face him. He's not wearing the scarf anymore. Without warning he covers her mouth with his and she can't breathe. *There couldn't be a better way to die.* She doesn't struggle, allows their lips to meld. When he peels away he glances as if surprised at his hands, falling from her shoulders. Lauren gasps for air. Neil's arms hang at his sides now. Her scarf lies on the ground at his feet.

'Sorry.' It's the first time they've kissed.

Her cheeks flare hot, she's been waiting for weeks for this, and yet, already, the responsibility's terrifying. It was only a game. And she was supposed to be in control.

'You took the blindfold off.' She blinks.

'Good job I did, someone had to be there to catch you.'

The intensity's too much. She turns and indicates across the slope of grass, out beyond the furthest picnicking couple. A lone reader at the far edge is surrounded by a pile of books. Dips her hand repeatedly into a bag of crisps, inserts each into her mouth as though into a slot machine.

'Look.' Lauren forces words from her closed throat. 'Rabbits. Hopping about everywhere. They're not bothered by the people at all.'

'Hopping *aboot*. Aye, they're *no* bothered, are they?'

'Ach, shu' up,' Lauren gives him a slap with the flat of her hand, tension released. 'I canna help how Ah speak, any more than you can, Mr *Caenada*. Mibbe we should both take elocution lessons, eh?'

'No' a chance,' Neil mimics again. 'Dinnae ye dare, Ah love you just the way ye are.' She slaps him again. 'Okay,' he says, 'I'll stop now. Anyway, I'm actually Scottish too, you know, on *both* sides. My mother came from around here. My father's grandpa was called Donald MacDonald. He emigrated from the Highlands. Or maybe it was the Western Isles? Anyway it was in the eighteen-forties.'

He's babbling. And she's paying scant attention to his heritage. She bends instead to snatch the blue scarf from the ground, holding the end of it between the tip of her finger and her thumb. She watches it reach into the breeze like a flag. *I surrender.* Neil takes her other hand and presses it between his. She senses trembling in his whole body. He *is* human. The moment catches and breaks, along with his voice. 'Come on.'

She lets go of the scarf and the wind snatches it. They watch it fly above the serrated-edged turrets and rooftops. He holds her hand while they climb over the rail and then he pulls her down onto the grass beside him. They balance on the edge of a slope above the city and he fits his arm around her, as if she's the missing piece of his puzzle.