



The Devil Takes

Me and Sam and David and Charlie, that's how I always remember it. Sam would probably have thought of just the three of them, me tagging on along behind. He'd always say the same thing.

'You can come along, Ali, but if you want to play with the big boys you've got to keep up.'

He was eleven and I was seven and despite what he said he looked out for me. I can see that now. He never complained. If Charlie wanted to scramble down the bank of the old canal, Sam would say,

'Not me, Charlie, not today. Don't want to get my feet wet today.'

He knew it was too steep for me, see, after that first time when I slipped down and couldn't get up. We had to walk all the ways down to Sheepbridge before we could get back up and Mum wouldn't let us out for a week for being late home and muddy. Twenty years ago, we'd walk through the big field, and past the cow field, past Walker's farm and down to the river. Sam and David had tied a plank to a thick piece of rope and strung it on a branch that hung over the river. After the first time they tied a thinner piece of rope to the plank so it could be pulled back when they got stuck. The games usually ended with someone stuck, dangling, trying to get back and no-one would pull them in. I

couldn't get on the plank alone so Sam would lift me up and push me out. I'd scream with delight and the boys would laugh at my terror and excitement as I flew across the water.

I followed the same route today. The river is just a stream and the rope has worn through about a foot from the branch, but it's still there. I stood on the bank remembering the last time we played here. There were fish in the river just like I remembered. I'd always look as we arrived because the noise frightened them off when we started playing. It took me a while to get my eye in today and then I spotted them, mottled brown, swimming to stay still against the current. They were smaller than I remembered, but still pretty big for such a small stream. Idyllic. It was hot that day – just like today. We didn't swing for long and the boys were on their backs with their tee-shirts off, just lazing. Charlie suddenly sat up and stripped his shorts off and ran down to the bank. Sam gave him a 'look'. Charlie laughed.

'Ali don't mind, do you Ali? 's just like I'm wearing trunks.'

I didn't mind. I didn't think about it much although the boys were at an age where they did, I guess. I'd have jumped in myself but Sam wouldn't let me.

Charlie splashed around but no-one wanted to join him so he got out but stayed stripped down for a while to dry off, carrying his clothes back the way we always returned, until we reached the stile and the edge of Stansbrook Wood. The wood was a long strip that we always washed up against, lying between us and the shortest way home. We always stayed out too long and so we always took the shortcut through the middle. Stansbrook was supposed to be left over from the Old Forest that covered England from the earliest times –

the only strip left in our parts. There were all sorts of stories about it. Mostly people didn't go in there. The trees grew thick but there was the start of a path by the stile and the end of one at the other side. All you had to do was run straight and leap the brook that ran through the middle. It used to take me five minutes. We always ran through playing 'Devil take the hindmost'.

The boys would give me a start but not so much that I'd be out of sight, Sam never let me out of sight. Charlie would crash past me pretty quick and David would try to jump the brook before me. Sam would catch me right at the very end. I never figured out back then that he held himself back so I wouldn't get scared.

Charlie stopped at the stile and put his shorts and top back on, tying his laces with his foot up on the wooden fence.

'Devil take the hindmost, Ali? Don't let Old Nick catch you.'

Charlie liked to try and frighten me before we set off.

'Ain't no Devil in there, Charlie. Mum says.'

'Oh, *grown ups!* You're listening to grown-ups now are you? What do they know? Why's it called Stansbrook then? My Gran says it was Satansbrook when she was a girl.'

'She never! Anyway, your Gran not a grown-up then?' said Sam.

Charlie laughed.

'Not really, not any more. She's gone a bit ...' he circled his finger by his head. 'I reckon the Devil got her in the woods and she's not been right since.'

'Did she tell you that, Charlie?'

'Don't encourage him, Ali. If you just want to walk through the woods with me today that's okay.'

'No way. I'm going to win today! Devil take the hindmost!'

I was off. Old Nick at my heels and running like my feet were burning with the fires of hell. I reached the brook ahead of them all. It was then that I realised things looked different. The stone I usually jumped off wasn't there. I was slowing and I had time to think that all I had to do was keep running and I'd get out the end of the wood somewhere. Then I heard Charlie behind me. Idiot! He'd run the wrong way too, I suppose. He'd be past in a second.

'Charlie?'

Still running hard I could barely squeeze the word out. Charlie didn't come past. I felt a chill sweep across my body.

'Charlie?'

I should have been through by now. I could hear breathing between my own gasps, not heavy breathing like mine but soft and smooth.

'Sam? David? Charlie?'

Something was *right* behind me. A bow wave of fear hit me. All the hairs on my body stood up and my heart raced. Something was so close I could feel its breath on my neck as I ran.

Then swiftly as it came I was out in the sun and it was gone. I saw David and Charlie far down the field and turned without stopping and ran towards them. David saw me and called and caught me in his arms when I arrived.

'Sam? Where's Sam?'

'He was with you, Ali.'

'No. No. The devil was there. The devil took him. We got to help him.'

The adrenalin that drove me out made me turn to run back in again. I was hysterical and David didn't let me go.

'Calm down, Ali.'

Charlie started to talk about the devil but David cut him short.

'Pack it in, Charlie. She's really scared, can't you see.'

I didn't calm down and they reluctantly followed me up the field

'Sam! Sam? Come on now. You're scaring, Ali.'

Charlie called into the silent trees. We waited. David went back into the woods and called out, though I begged him not to. They took me home eventually and I remember thinking 'he'll be there, back at home wondering what all the fuss was about'. But Sam wasn't home. Sam never came home and I never came to Stansbrook wood again until today.

Why today? David asked me to marry him and I want to, I really want to, but I have ghosts. I need to tell Sam and make sure he understands. No one looked after me like Sam did and now someone wants to. David wouldn't come. He understands, he even drove me here, but he doesn't want to think about it and he definitely doesn't want to walk through Stansbrook Wood with me.

The stile is shiny and new, not the old one that had our initials carved on it. That was falling down twenty years ago. I clamber over it trying not to think the words but I can't help it.

Devil take the hindmost.

It all looks different. What am I doing here? David was right, there's nothing to be gained. The police combed these woods over and over many years ago - though they never asked me to come back in here. I wouldn't have done then, I was terrified. I expected it to be like the river, diminished with the

passage of time, but it looks just as dark and forbidding now as it did then. No wonder we made the stories up. How can I tell which way to go? We had to run straight, but that day I must have veered to the left.

I'm nervous now. It really is dark in here, and chilly too. The stream takes longer to reach than I remember and it brings back the memory of that day. It was by the stream when I first heard it, and first felt the fear. I take deep breaths to control myself. I'm talking myself into hysteria and my hairs are prickling. This part of the woods really is thicker and it smells more musty, earthy, *older*. My chest hurts and I have to lean against a tree. Relax, Ali, you aren't seven any more. It sweeps through me again, the fear. I realise it is the smell. The slightest stirring of breeze and it is strong for a moment, a fetid stink. I wish I hadn't come now, I need to get out and I start to run.

Where does this damn wood end? It can't be far. Then my stomach lurches and I'm down, my foot twisting and my arm caught painfully in a thicket of brambles. I'm shaking with terror and I can't breathe. On my back I look down towards my feet and the smell makes me choke. My legs are out of sight in some sort of hole and the air is thick with stench. I force myself to sit up although I'm gagging. I pull my legs up towards me and the undergrowth seems to close up behind them. The air clears and the smell is gone.

I crawl forward and the ground suddenly disappears beneath my hand. The smell of fear hits me full in the face before I recover myself. I start to tear at the moss with one hand and cover my nose and mouth with the other. I'm hysterical, acting out of pure instinct and the pain in my foot goes unnoticed. The pit is wide enough for a man to fit down, deep enough ... well I can't say how deep, too deep for me to see the bottom. I push myself away from edge

and begin to sob.

From quite close by I hear David shouting. Now my foot really does hurt. It won't take my weight and I hobble towards his voice, not twenty yards away at the edge of the wood.

That was a week ago. I made David take me to the police station first. Later he made me go to the hospital to have my foot checked out. Stansbrook itself is a small village. People remember. The desk sergeant seemed struck dumb when I told him my name. Then he repeated it after me. Then he asked me what he could do to help, his eyes wide, as if he'd seen a ghost.

Today a policewoman came round. Young, smart, blonde pony-tail. The sort they send to break bad news, I thought, when she first arrived. Younger than me but she seemed old in her confidence and authority. I sat with my fractured foot up. David sat by me and held my hand.

'It took us a long time to find it, but we kept looking, you know. Nobody wanted to give it up.'

'I'd have come down. I'd have shown you.'

She glanced up.

'No need, love. Right ...' She started to read details off a sheet. '... a deep hole. Thirty to forty feet. Either natural or so old there's no telling any more. Mud and stones at the bottom. A fall would probably kill you. If you were lucky you'd just break bones. The whole thing covered by moss and grass just as you said, but in the heat and with the right breeze, the smell escapes. Something awful. I was there.'

'And at the bottom, officer?'

'Please, call me Janie, everyone does. At the bottom - a real mess. Lots of dead animals, going back years and years.'

'Bones?'

'Bones yes, and more recent ones too. Some starved to death, some killed by the fall.'

'And ... human remains?'

She looked me in the eye.

'Can't say for absolute sure, love. See it's not just a pit, there's a tunnel leading away too. Evidence of things having been moved, remains having been eaten. Probably animals not too badly injured trying to escape down the tunnel. It's narrow, and so far as they've found at least one branch leads to water. They haven't found a way out yet though.'

'But, Sam, my brother, Sam. Wouldn't they have found clothes or something?'

'There really is no telling. If he did fall down there the damp might have rotted the clothes away. I'm sorry, love. I'm really sorry. We might never know.'

I can see it as if it happened yesterday. I'm running up ahead and Sam running behind. The slight breeze, the smell and the panic. Both us panicking. I can hear him but I'm too terrified to look around. I run right past the pit, but Sam falls, the smell released again spurring me on and then I'm out in the sunlight and he's down in the dark. I can't get the image out of my head. Sam lying in the dark, maybe a broken leg or worse. Never going to see the daylight again.

Today, for the first time, I wept for my brother.

