

A violin is positioned diagonally across the center of the image, lying on a thick carpet of dry, brown autumn leaves. The violin's body is a warm, golden-brown color, and its f-hole and scroll are clearly visible. The background is a dense field of fallen leaves in various shades of tan, brown, and orange, creating a textured and seasonal atmosphere.

From the author of
The Sign of the Rose
Rose: The Missing Years
Finding Rose

The Violin Case
A Novella
by John Morey

'Love should never be this hard'

The Violin Case

Jimmy's duffel bag was full of sports kit and sandwiches. Nothing else. No school books. *It was a new year*, he thought, *and who knows what stupid books we're going to need?*

Nice attitude, Colville, he could hear Smithers say. That would be his new Form Teacher. Smithers. 'Smigsy'. That bit he *did* know about the new school year. His *last* school year! That was Jimmy's ambition, anyway, *To be out of Grammar School and working*. He'd made that promise to his dad at the end of the last term. He was sixteen after all. His dad had been working nearly two years by that age, or so he said.

He hoped he didn't need his sports kit after all. It was Tuesday and Gym Class was always on a Tuesday – least-ways so far that was the case. That was another thing he hated – Gym Class. All that climbing ropes and jumping over the vaulting horse - that looked *nothing like* a horse. How many times did he have to crack his knee on that stupid horse for Edwards to realise he couldn't do it? More than that, he didn't *want* to do it. What was the point of it all?

Come on, Edwards had said (he was the Gym teacher), *it'll make a man of you. Or the reverse*, Jimmy thought. *Anyway, there's no war on*. His dad had fractured his jaw in Gym Class on the army training ground in the last war and was discharged because of it. *Where's was the sense in that?*

Edwards had it in for Jimmy. Not in a really *bad* way, but just enough to niggle. *I want you for the cricket team*, Edwards had said – told him, mind you, not asked. Oh no! That would have been *much* too polite. And it was such a lie. Fake! He didn't want Jimmy to *play*. No. What he wanted was for Jimmy to *score* for the cricket team. How boring was that? '*Twelfth Man*' they called it. At best, and only if someone didn't turn up

for the match – which was *always* in the evening, after school – he might get a game. Some game.

If they were fielding he would be the fool right out on the boundary – so called because you had to run *like a fool* if the opposing batsman slogged it. Or he might – at best – be 'silly mid-off'. Yes. You guessed it – it's as stupid as it sounds. Without boring you, (which is so easy when people talk about cricket) you are closer in and nearer the batsman so that (and here we go) if he slogs it and you miss it, you have to run like the fool you are, for playing the stupid game in the first place.

But it's not as bad as 'silly mid-on'. Now we're really getting down to it. That really *is* stupid. They should re-name it '*stupid* mid-on', he thought.

Why? Well (Jimmy would tell you), his dad's uncle was *killed* fielding at silly mid-on. How? Cricket ball – hit hard – straight into his great uncle's solar plexus. Dead. That's what his dad had told him and, if you can't believe you dad, well...

According to Jimmy, Edwards was a creep anyway. Oh, not *everybody* felt the same as he did. He had his favourites – those who sucked up to him. 'They' – the sucker-uppers – would give it, *Sir, sir? Have you heard this joke, sir?* And so it would go on. *Oh, that's really funny, Davis. How would you like to be opening bat tomorrow?* (That would be Edwards, the sucker-upped-to) Jimmy saw all the angles and they made him puke. *Who wants to be a phony anyway?* he told himself.

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Curses, I'll be late, he said under his breath as he spotted the time. He had been *so consumed* by his rant, enjoying it *so much*, he'd lost track. Not that he really *cared*. Not too much. But, if you *were* late, the stupid 'dawks' always stared at you, as if you'd just murdered someone, or pee'd your pants. Jimmy didn't want to be singled out, to be stared at anyway – least-ways not by *losers*.

Girls, maybe. Now you're talking. That was different, as he'd discovered when he moved up from a 'boys only' high school two years ago, to the co-ed grammar school he was in now. *They were different - especially by one girl.*

It was September, the start of the new term, so he rode to school on his bike as long as the weather was reasonably fine. If not he took the bus from his village – from the corner of Park Road, Blaby, where he lived. Now he was late, so he had missed that option anyway.

Most times he rode the three miles to school on his own. It took him fifteen to twenty minutes, depending on whether his best mate, Dave, rode with him – which he sometimes did, but usually on the ride home. It was a fairly easy ride, cutting through Mill Lane into Wigston and on to 'Guthie'. Guthlaxton Grammar. The hardest part was the hill up towards the bridge over the railway line.

I wonder if she's still there? he pondered, thinking about the gypsy girl he'd seen one day during school holidays. She didn't go to school – not to his school, anyway. There was a Romani family camped on Mill Lane and just up from The Ford – a favourite site all the gypsy community shared amongst themselves. They liked it because it was near the village, but not too near, and close to the village farm where they could often find work, albeit casual and seasonal.

Jimmy had just started to 'notice' girls, but they remained a confused mystery to him – not nearly as simple as his main passion, soccer! *What do you talk about?* He thought. What if he came out with, *Oh, I see The City are doing well. Do you think they'll get promoted to the First Division?*

No. Not so sure that would work. Or he could go the other way, bringing out his feminine side, if he could find it: *That's a nice skirt.* He would say. *Did your Mam make it?* Even if that *did* work, if ever one of his mates heard him come out with

that he'd be a right laughing stock!

Somehow she – the Romani girl - stood out from the rest, almost as if he *knew* he could talk to her – about anything. But how could that be? He had merely *seen* her, and then only a couple of times, and he had never spoken to her or heard her say anything, not even to her brother and sister.

But there was *something*. The look in her eyes as she had glanced up as he rode past – just a flash of her dark eyes with the hint of a smile in each corner. He hoped his pal, Dave, hadn't seen her. Oh, he would be *straight* in. He always was. He went from one girl-friend to another with no effort at all. *Nothing ever 'happened'*, he would say – whatever that meant. But he could guess.

He always had a girl-friend and that annoyed Jimmy so much. It was so unfair. After all, he was in a higher class than Dave and was much better at soccer, so why did *he* never have a girl-friend. Even his parents were worried, but they never said. The worst thing was the way he had to put up with lame questions from his aunties when they came to visit.

They just would *not* leave it alone, with *Aren't you courting yet? Never mind, there's plenty of time.*

Jeez, he thought, *I'm only sixteen. Give it a rest, will you?* Which was true, of course. Sixteen and with a whole life ahead of me, one that doesn't (or so he hoped) involve stupid aunties around me all the time, with their even more stupid questions! But it didn't help and he had no answers. He would just slope off, hearing the aunts in the background whispering to each other, *Isn't he moody? It's his age. Poor Jimmy.*

All he could do was to take comfort in his thoughts. His *secret* thoughts. He knew what he wanted to say to the gypsy girl if only he had the chance, but when might that be? It would be harder than trying to speak to the girl at school. The other girl. The one who had started the previous term, just

before they broke up for the summer. At least he would see her every day – or most days, at school. He hoped.

She, too, had those eyes that just pierced you to the very soul, looked right *into* you. But, how could that be? Did she look at *all* the boys that way? She certainly knew enough of them, or they wanted to know her.

Should he approach her? Walk right up and talk to her at break time? *What?* He asked himself. *So that every one else could hear me? See me. And laugh?* So he did nothing. Remaining silent. Tortured. Unnoticed.

She was in the year below Jimmy anyway, so he only saw her occasionally, at break or between lessons. He had been mulling all these things over in his head on the way to school that Tuesday, before suddenly realising he was at the school gates. And, guess what? There she was.

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She was just getting off the school bus – the same one that he would normally catch. She lived in the same village as him. But who was that waiting for her? Jeez, it was that creep Bartorelli. *What does she see in him?* He asked himself.

He answered his own question: First, he was well-off, or at least his parents were by the looks of it. Jimmy had seen him being dropped off last term – by his mother – in a rather swish-looking red sports car. His *mother* of all people. With her *own car!* Italian. Like him. Jimmy's folks could only just afford one car – for his dad to go to work in - and that was 'new' at ten years old. And the only Italian thing about it was the ice cream wrapper Jimmy had left on the back seat.

The other clue that they had money – or were 'posh' – was how she kissed him – her own son, Jake, goodbye as he got out of the car. Kissed! By his mother! In public! How gross was that? But the worst part? His mother was *so* good-looking. And young – barely thirty he guessed. She reminded Jimmy of

that film star he'd seen in the Western films they showed at The Ritz cinema in South Wigston – *Rhonda Fleming* – yes, good old Rhonda, that was the one. What a babe! Typical that she would fall for an Italian. (Not that he knew what Italians were *really* like!)

None of his friends – but *none of them* – allowed their mothers to kiss them, not even in private. Jimmy's certainly would not even *think* about it. But there was one other thing that helped Joacim Bartorelli – or Jake, as he was called by the rest of the kids at school. He played in the school orchestra. The clarinet. *Or, at least, pretended to*, Jimmy suspected. Sadie – *Sadie Green*, the girl Jimmy was so taken with – played the violin. First violin. She was so good. And so beautiful – the nearest Jimmy had seen to Natalie Wood anyways. Oh, how he loved that James Dean film – *Rebel Without a Cause*, that was the one. (He told his mates he was named after James Dean. Hey, why not?)

If she let's Jake kiss her, I'll puke, he whispered under his breath. What a relief! They just held hands. That was enough.

“Another crap day at Guthie Grammar,” he said out loud.

“What's that you said?” It was Dave. He'd scooted up on his bike behind Jimmy whilst his mind was elsewhere.

“Oh, nothing,” said Jimmy. But Dave knew what was troubling him.

“You'll have to forget all about her. Either that, or do something about it.”

“But what?”

“Just talk to her. Get to know her. Properly.”

“How?”

“Common interests.”

“I don't play the violin. I don't play anything – 'cept soccer.”

“Like that's going to help...” finished Dave. They moved in through the gates with the rest of the late arrivals, making

their way to the bike sheds to chain them up.

“See you at break,” said Jimmy, heading for assembly.

Jimmy and Dave were in the same school year but in different classes. During term time they had each made new friends with fellow classmates, but they still joined up for break time as well as out of school, back home in their village.

The first time they became really aware of each other was at the occasional brick fight between Blaby and Whetstone kids. It was a rivalry that probably went back decades, centuries even. Just off The Avenue were the Blaby Allotments, accessed by a jitty (pathway) across adjoining fields that continued on to the neighbouring village of Whetstone. The neutral field between them was considered Blaby territory or Whetstone, depending on where you lived. Now and again (and nobody ever knew how or why it started), a gang of kids between eight years old and fourteen would gather at each boundary during school holidays – one made up of Blaby kids, the other from Whetstone.

Although it was *not unknown* for home-made bows and arrows to be made for the purpose of battle, or catapults, the principle armoury was made up of bricks and stones. They were of varying sizes to match the capability of those doing the throwing. Battle continued until one or other side became bored (nobody was ever injured), or until the conflict was broken up by concerned parents or the village 'Bobby'.

Even rarer still, but to the delight of the kids on both sides, the parents themselves would end up fighting, but never the Bobbies.

Dave and Jimmy would be only eight years old at the time, but they had remained friends ever since. Soon after they had even made their joint debuts for the impromptu village soccer team on Blaby Park, using borrowed boots. They were aged ten at that point, after which they were conscripted into the

school team. They never looked back.

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With school assembly over, Jimmy and his classmates made their way along the corridor, up the stairs, and along the top corridor where Smithers, their Form Teacher, was waiting. And so another school year was about to begin.

Jimmy had already elected to leave after the school year or even during, if his school leaving grades were good enough for him to look for a decent job. He would sit some of the subjects in December. If he passed well enough he would leave at Christmas, otherwise he would re-sit those where he had low marks, leaving the following July. That was the plan, until events unfolded which encouraged him to increase his work load, adding extra subjects for a special project.

Unlike Jimmy, some of his classmates from the previous year elected to go for advance level qualifications, with a view to applying for university. They were placed into a different stream from him conversely, pupils from other classes joined Jimmy in his. His direction – career-wise – was still vague and confused. It would be a long year, with few prospects at the end of it – unless he could find an aim in life. But what?

Maths, French, English, Sciences – they were still on his core list of subjects, but he needed more stimulus for his creativity. He opted for crafts and woodworking but he still needed a direction – a focus. That came just before half term.

Performing arts had always been popular at Guthlaxton, featuring dance, theatre and music. The highlight of this was usually the orchestra, primarily a classical concert on the last day before recess. It was compulsory to attend for all pupils, with local dignitaries attending by invitation.

Jimmy was no particular fan of highbrow music, but the programme of Vaughan Williams changed all that. Already

softened by the rural splendour of this celebrated composer – impressively performed by the school orchestra – it was the next recital that floored him. It was 'Meditation' by Jules Massenet, beautifully executed by... Sadie Green.

Dressed in a most elegant sequined gown, Sadie drew gasps from the audience before a note was played. The young girl was transformed into a beautiful woman, and a beautiful, gifted, talented musician. The piece, for violin and piano, lasted some six minutes during which Sadie and the pianist, Angela French, lulled the audience so that, by the seventh minute, a virtual trance had descended upon the main hall. They were spellbound. Never had the assembly room remained so quiet for so long, allowing the most exquisite sound to emerge from the bow and slender fingers of Sadie, and the fingerboard of her violin.

She sustained the last note until silence reigned, at which point she stood motionless, her bow and violin returning gently to her sides. The audience remained silent, stunned by what they had just heard and by the unique performance they had just witnessed. Still no-one moved or made a sound. You could almost hear the trickle of the tear that ran down the cheek of the headmaster's wife on the front row, so moved by the virtuosity of the young pupil. It was Jimmy who responded first, instinctively, unable to help himself.

Quietly, reverently, he rose to his feet, standing as the one lone figure for the briefest moment while the rest of the audience remained sat. Sadie was all he could see, locked in his gaze, all he *wanted* to see; and Jimmy was all Sadie could see now, the audience still rooted and a mere grey, indistinct, silent mass. Finally, Jimmy began to clap, softly at first, but gradually louder as the audience joined him, emboldened and bursting into a crescendo of applause – hand on hand followed by whoops, cheers, whistles – a full standing ovation.

Sadie cast her eyes back and forth across the rest of the audience as her view of Jimmy was engulfed by the whole room now on its feet. He quietly made his exit.

Shortly afterwards he was in the corridor, immediately outside the double doors of the assembly hall, listening. The minutes ticked by and still the ovation didn't abate, growing to its highest pitch for a short spell before slowly, slowly fading, after over five minutes of solid applause. The rustle of coats and chairs told him that the audience was about to come streaming out of the double doors. He made his way outside for some fresh air and much needed reflection. He was beginning to form a plan in his mind as to what he had to do. His plan would take new skills, dedication, and time.

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Meanwhile, he bathed in the excitement and chatter of the audience that was now all around him in the school yard. He was invisible to them, but their enthusiasm for what they had just heard inspired him more. He would set about working on the idea that had come to him just a few minutes earlier, transforming it from an idea and into a reality, as soon as he returned for the start of the next term.

Several more minutes had now passed and the crowd were thinning out, heading for their cars, buses and trains, and home. Jimmy was carried along by the flow as they exited. He had arrived on his own, and was leaving on his own, prepared to walk the three miles home – grateful for the opportunity to take in what he had just experienced. What happened next surprised and encouraged him further.

Performers and those responsible for bringing them to the concert were able to park in a special reserved area at the side of the school. It so happened that Jimmy had to walk past there to the school gates, before taking the road over the railway bridge, through South Wigston, and home. It was a

Maserati that first caught his attention. How many of those were there in Leicester, let alone Wigston in the 1960's?

That drew his attention to the vision that had just recently stood before him, before them all, radiant on the stage – it was Sadie Green. She had just placed her violin in the boot of the car and was about to disappear into the rear seat when she stopped. As did he, pausing for one last glimpse of the one who had stolen his heart so many weeks before, and who had now crystallised that emotion into an experience that would never leave him. Not until his last breath.

She held Jimmy's gaze for several seconds - too long for the person sat waiting inside the car. It had to be Jake – who soon confirmed his suspicions by urging her to get in. *One moment*, she replied to the voice – to Jake - inside then, deliberately and slowly, she silently mouthed the following words, *Thank you, Jimmy*, she had whispered, and smiled.

Seconds later she was away, involuntarily whisked off to some swish Italian-style country house in one of the villages nestled in Leicestershire's most prestigious area, The Langtons (or so he guessed). As the limousine cruised silently out of the school gates, he just made out the elegant profile of Mrs Bartorelli, with her son and Sadie behind her.

Sadie actually called me by name, he muttered to himself. She actually *knows* who I am. He was so full of what had just happened; the miracle of what he had just witnessed. Did he imagine it? It would be the best part of an hour before he reached home but he didn't care. Nothing else mattered.

Lost in thought, he couldn't even remember walking through South Wigston itself, passing Moore's music store and Holmes bike shop without a glance this time. The High School, where he had finished his first stint of secondary education just a couple of years earlier stood lifeless, not even a light on, a mere shell. But he ignored that, too.

Further on, and taking the lane branching off the Blaby Road, he headed towards The Ford and Mill Lane to where it met the back road into the village by the church. Although the concert had extended into early evening, the clocks were still on British Summer Time, so it was still light for most of the way. As it turned out he took a lot longer than an hour to get home. It was a distraction that was as welcome as it was unexpected, adding to his as yet incomplete plan.

“Tell your fortune, Mister?” called the voice as he passed the Romani camp. It was the gypsy girl. It took Jimmy totally by surprise. “Only cost you sixpence,” she added.

Before he realised what was happening, she was inviting him into the centre of the camp where an open fire was warming what seemed to be, by the aroma emerging from it, a pot of some kind of stew.

“How can I resist?” he replied. Not only was the warmth of the fire and the smell from the stew-pot hard to say 'No' to, the idea of talking to the gypsy girl was something that offered to crown the whole evening. He had been trying to pluck up courage the whole of that summer. It was an opportunity not to be missed.

“Come and sit opposite me, by the fire,” she beckoned. He followed her into the camp where they were joined by the mother. “This is my Mum, Molly. I’m Rose,” she added.

“Jimmy. I’m Jimmy,” he said, amazed even at himself that he had been so compliant, so biddable, offering not an ounce of resistance. “Sixpence, you said?” He pulled out a handful of coins and handed over the silver coin.

“My mother will watch over us,” she said. “I’m still learning the art. Now, can I have your dominant hand?”

“My...?”

The one you write with,” she answered. He reached out his hand, palm facing upwards. At least he had got that right.

“Thank you,” she said, then went on to study the lines on his palm in silence. For his part Jimmy just sat, still mesmerised by the figure before him. He found himself drawn to her, enthralled by her natural beauty, her delicate features and dusky complexion which, he guessed, sprang from generations past and her Roma ancestors from the Indian sub-continent. He laughed at himself, thinking, *So geograhly is of some use.*

After a while she spoke again. “You have a gift to fill other people's dreams with happiness. You will be a *saver* of life, rather than a *giver* of life. Your kindness and generosity will last and be treasured by others long after you depart this earth.” Abruptly she let go of his hand, glancing at her mother. Molly shook her head which went unnoticed by Jimmy.

“Is that it?” he asked.

“For now,” she replied. “It is all I am able to foresee. I'm at the beginning of my teaching. Come back in a year's time and I may be able to tell you more, in more depth.”

She's a bit uneasy, he thought. *Is something wrong, I wonder?* But he soon dismissed it from his mind with the offer of rabbit stew. It was one of Molly's specialities, infused with herbs and leaves from the hedgerows that years of Romani living had taught her. The promise of the evening meal had drawn the children, the grandmother and Molly's husband, Ned, out of the gypsy caravan, the vardo, to enjoy the delights of Molly's one-pot recipe.

“And who might this be?” asked Ned, taking the steaming dish from Molly as he sat down on a straw bale.

“Jimmy. Jimmy Colville,” he replied, standing up to shake Ned's hand.

“That where you're from? Coalville?”

“No. My name. It's Colville – C-O-L-V-I-L-L-E,” said Jimmy – so used to having to go through this ritual with those he met

for the first time. He took his seat once more, his own dish of rabbit stew almost burning his lap through his trousers.

“I read his palm, father,” chipped in Rose as a way of explanation for a stranger joining them for supper.

“Happy with what the future holds, then?” asked Ned, chuckling. Jimmy was surprised that he appeared so cynical.

“If I understood it, I might be.” Jimmy was keen to get on with his meal, not having eaten since lunchtime.

Jimmy did most of the talking so he finished his dish last, probably out of nervousness. He told them all about the afternoon concert, including a note by note description of Sadie's performance in the finale. They seemed impressed.

“Ned plays,” said Molly. Then, “Ned get your fiddle and give us a few tunes. You gonna join your father on the guitar, Boy?” she added, pushing one of the twins – Rose's younger sister and brother – to fetch his instrument. Jimmy noticed the beautiful inlaid designs on the violin case that, in spite of its being clearly of antique status, he was surprised at how it shone with a brilliance – no doubt in honour of the valuable instrument it protected.

Two concerts in one day. Jimmy could hardly believe his luck. Ned started with a couple of traditional tunes with a Spanish flavour to them – he was, after all, a 'Gitano' gypsy – before launching into a medley of Gypsy Jazz. His son did his level best to keep up 'La Pompe' rhythm on the guitar, as Ned's fingers flew faster and faster up and down the fingerboard, the bow becoming a blur.

Sadie would love this, were his first thoughts. She had played with a sensitivity and emotion that he had never witnessed previously, but this was totally different. Its pace and richness were equally infectious, but in a way that reflected a whole culture that was Romani life.

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It was now dark, the light of the fire suddenly joined by headlights from a car, as it turned into Mill Lane. It pulled onto the grass verge next to the vardo. "Looks like Sean," said Rose, getting up to go over to greet him.

"Sean...?" asked Jimmy.

"He's her... well, he's sort of *promised* to her," said Molly. "When she's ready, that is, which hopefully won't be long."

Jimmy felt a pang of... what was it? Jealousy? He wasn't sure. His feelings for Sadie had consumed his every waking hour, from the moment he had seen her at the beginning of the last school term. Then he had seen Rose, and now he'd met her. He was confused inside. Confused because he hadn't even *spoken* to Sadie. He had merely exchanged glances, whereas he was actually *spending an evening* with Rose - until the arrival of Sean, it seemed.

He had lost sight of Rose. *Where are they?* Jimmy muttered to himself, worried - but without really knowing why, other than that Rose - and this Sean fellow - had just... disappeared? His relief was almost visible when they re-emerged, Sean carrying a bodhran. Of course! He played the percussion on these occasions.

Without a word spoken, Ned started out on some nameless - but obviously well-known by all - slip-jig. It was now Sean who was battling to keep pace. Rose returned to her seat, the straw bale next to Jimmy. He felt reassured. But why?

Sean had arrived unannounced, but not empty-handed. He had called into The Baker's Arms on the way through from where his own family were - at the far end of Hospital Lane - to fill a couple of flagons with Everards Best Bitter, fresh from the barrel. Before Jimmy knew what was happening he had a glass thrust into his hands, promptly filled to over-flowing with the pub's finest ale.

His feeble attempts at pleading "No I don't..." were sharply

rejected by Sean's piercing gaze which said, "Yes you will... ." as he filled Jimmy's glass. He took a long draught of the amber nectar without further protest, or complaint.

A couple of refills soon followed, so weakening Jimmy's resistance further to any offers or invitations. As it was, he would not have refused even if he were sober. Ned began the first few bars of a gentle Scottish Air. Rose was standing before him. He was almost in a trance as her delicate hand was reaching out, inviting him to his feet.

This time, the very idea of coming out with a "No I dont..." to Rose's beckoning hand was the furthest from his thoughts. He knew the answer would have been, "Yes you will..." in any case – if not from Sean, then from Rose. Obediently, he got to his feet before drawing her close as she responded to his outstretched arms.

It was a slow air, but how he wished it were even slower, or that it would never end. His right hand encircled her slim waist as his free hand joined with hers, swaying slowly, but in time, to Ned's faultless playing. She was so light she might have been floating on air. He dare not close his eyes for fear that, if he were to open them again she would not be there. Was it all a dream?

No. It was real. He held her gaze as she did his, verse after verse of Ned's soft tones caressing the cool night air as the music floated off to – who knows where? - towards The Ford? Crow Mill? Infinity?

Finally but regrettably it did end. The mournful minor chords easing into the last line of the Scottish ballad – the unnamed, unknown, song that everyone recognised, that Jimmy would never forget.

"Thank you," said Rose as he released her, but inaudibly even though they were so close - silently, just as Sadie had mouthed those same words to him just a few hours earlier.

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“Well,” said Sean, “I’d better be on my way,” the suddenness of his declaration breaking Jimmy’s spell. “Can I give you a lift?” Sean was putting his bodhran away in its case.

“Urrr... yes. If it’s not out your way.” Jimmy answered. “I live at the top of Grove Road opposite the garage.

“Fine,” said Sean. “I can go via the cross-roads and cut back through Western Drive. We’re on Hospital Lane.”

They said their goodbyes to the family and were soon on their way. *It all ended so fast*, thought Jimmy. *There’s so much I still want to say. To Rose.* Even though he had formed an attachment to her he was now under no illusions about their future, seeing that she was ‘promised’ (as Molly had made plain) to Sean. In a way it made things simpler. He must direct his full attention towards Sadie.

“They’re a lovely family, aren’t they?” It was Sean opening the conversation. “How long have you known them?”

“Just tonight.”

“That figures. I didn’t think I’d seen you before or heard them talk about you. What’s so special about tonight?”

“Nothing really. I was just on my way back from Wigston and Rose called me over for a palm reading.”

“How did it go?” asked Sean. Jimmy could see the grin forming on Sean’s face – just as Ned had reacted.

“No idea.” After a pause they laughed. It was clear what he meant. Sean seemed just as sceptical as Ned.

“Nice little village,” said Sean. They were just passing The Bulls Head. A few ‘last orders’ drinkers were leaving.

“Just here,” said Jimmy as they neared Grove Road. “You can pull into the lay-by near the telephone box. I live opposite.”

“I know where to find you now,” said Sean as Jimmy opened the car door, but there was no threat in his voice.

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Jimmy enjoyed the half-term breaks – spending most of the days with his mates playing soccer on Westleigh sports ground, just outside the village. It was actually a rugby club but, given that they were 'good kids', as the groundman had called them, they didn't mind. They were insurance against others - with not so good intentions - breaking into the club bar in the hope of making off with a few bottles of beer.

Nowadays, however, his focus had switched to the other end of the village, and Mill Lane. It wasn't that he had expectations of a *relationship* with Rose, but now, at last, he had someone, a girl, he could talk to – to air feelings and emotions he felt weird about talking to Dave. So it was with some disappointment for Dave that, on the second day of the holidays, he announced he wanted to go fishing by the bridge over the River Sence, at the bottom of Mill Lane. For the first time – ever – soccer had to take the back seat.

“You don't *have* to come,” explained Jimmy to Dave, secretly hoping he'd say 'no' to a day's fishing.

“No. I will,” said Dave. “It'll be a change, and I heard the trout have come back. The pollution must have been cleaned up. I'll be round your house for about 10 o'clock.”

Jimmy knew that meant ten thirty. Soon after that they were walking through the village towards The Ford. Dave had turned up on his bike but Jimmy insisted they walk, and for his own reasons. His excuse was that it was difficult cycling whilst carrying fishing gear. The real reason was that they would be passing the site where Rose and her family had camped. Walking, rather than riding, would mean they took longer to pass by the vardo. That gave him more opportunity to see if he could catch a glimpse of Rose.

He was disappointed. He could see nobody apart from grandmother 'keeping guard' and looking after the twins, Rose's younger brother and sister. Molly and Rose worked at

Church Farm until mid-afternoon. Maybe he could catch her then. He and Dave carried on to The Ford, full of optimism for a good day's sport ahead.

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It was a good day in many respects. They each took sandwiches and a drink, so lunch came early – just after mid-day. Although it was October the summer had decided to stay for a second round – at least during the daytime. There was still warmth in the sun, and it was dry.

Dave and Jimmy had been pals since Junior School and shared everything. Well, nearly everything, until now. Dave knew of his 'fixation' (as Dave called it) with Sadie, so it was understandable that Jimmy told him about the splendid end of term concert, when Sadie had actually spoken to him. Almost.

Today was the fourth time Dave had heard every detail of that evening, but this time with a slight change. So far, Jimmy had kept what had happened *on the way home* – his palm reading and, finally, meeting Rose – to himself. On this last occasion, by accident, Jimmy inadvertently included the final part of his journey – meeting the family. Now Dave wanted to make sure he had *all* the details.

“So,” he began, “it's all about this 'Rose' now, is it?”

“No. I was just saying, what a great *family* they are. Such brilliant musicians and easy to get on with.”

“... and that includes Rose's boyfriend?”

“Sort of. Yes,” explained Jimmy. “He's not *really* her boyfriend. More of an 'intended'.”

“You *do* know what that means, don't you?”

“What?” Jimmy was getting defensive.

“'Intended'. It means he's going to *marry* her!”

“I suppose so. Yes.”

“There's no *suppose* about it.” said Dave. He really did have to put Jimmy straight. “It's tradition in gypsy communities.

You get 'promised' – sometimes from birth.” Of course he was exaggerating, but Jimmy finally got the point.

For the boys, it was 'par for the course' when it came to banter between them. It wasn't really an argument, 'just a frank exchange' as Dave had once explained. For that reason they had been firm friends for getting on ten years now.

By two o'clock they were ready to pack up – a successful catch of four brook trout each. More than that, the early lunch meant that two growing boys were now hungry again and, given that neither had remembered to bring along a box of matches, trout cooked on a spit over an open fire was not an option. But it did give Jimmy an idea, one that he would *not* discuss with Dave beforehand.

Conveniently, by chance and with absolutely no forethought whatsoever (yeah, right!) they had to pass the gypsy camp site on the return home.

“Hello Mrs Lee,” Jimmy called out as he spotted Rose's mother tending the cook-pot over the fire.

“Molly, please,” she insisted.

“Yes. Mrs Molly,” he spluttered. Dave sniggered quietly at seeing Jimmy *so* nervous. “I mean Molly,” he corrected himself. “I've got four trout if you'd like them.”

So that's it. All along! Dave muttered under his breath.

“That's *so* kind,” said Molly. “Rose will be back in a minute. Won't you both stop for a cup of tea?”

“No - I mean yes,” stumbled Jimmy once more. “*I* can. But Dave can't. He's got to get home and he's late already.” Jimmy shot Dave a worried glance as Dave thought, *News to me!*

“Yes. I have to get on,” agreed Dave, marvelling at Jimmy's ability to think so quickly on his feet – when he needed to.

Dave carried on home, mumbling to himself but switching to a cheery smile as he saw Rose coming towards him from the farm. “Hello Rose. I hope you like fish for supper.”

What? She gave him a strange look, befitting such a strange remark from a stranger she didn't know. But it all became clear when she reached the camp.

"Jimmy caught us some trout," Molly announced, holding up the recent catch. "Sit down. I've just made some tea."

Although it was fine and dry, the sun was now hidden behind the clouds. Being October, the breeze had taken on a distinct chill. It gave Jimmy the opportunity to sit close to Rose by the fire as it heated the water for the tea.

Grandmother was having her afternoon nap whilst Molly set about preparing the evening meal. She had sent the twins off to forage the hedgerows for certain leaves and herbs with which to flavour the trout. It was just the moment Jimmy had been waiting for, so he could talk to Rose – alone - about his surprise for Sadie. He called it his 'Project'.

It also gave him the chance to tell her *about* Sadie and what she meant to him or, at least, *hoped* she would mean to him. He found it easy – easier even, than sharing his inner thoughts with Dave – which he very often did. The bonus was that she could see things from a girl's point of view. Rose proved to be a good listener and wise beyond her years. She loved his idea.

In turn, Rose opened up to Jimmy about her intended 'promise' to Sean, and the decision she would very soon have to make. She had lived with the notion of being 'one' with Sean for so long now, it was not really a concern. However, in more recent years, during which the notion was becoming more of a certainty – more 'real' - she wondered how she felt about having her whole life mapped out before her. Like Jimmy, she found discussing all this with someone she could trust a comfort, albeit for totally different reasons.

"I wonder if we should swap places," Rose said at the end of sharing life stories. It seemed a natural conclusion - which neither of them took seriously, of course – and reached after

only their first real time together.

~ *** ~

Ned arrived home from working on the Lutterworth Road improvements. "Hello, Jimmy," he called out as he handed over the reins to his pony to one of the twins. It was their job to 'see to' the trap and the little pony – feeding, watering, and settling her in for the night. "Any tea left in the pot?"

Dutifully, Rose served up a steaming cup of Molly's brew to her father. Jimmy saw it as his signal to head home.

"Don't go on my account," said Ned. "Tell me what you've both been up to." For Ned, family life was all the more precious after a day working alongside a gang of labourers. He enjoyed hearing about *their* day. It kept him grounded.

Rose started with the treat in store for their supper, if only to give her father something to look forward to after a hard days' toil. She then explained Jimmy's project to him, but without all the fine detail he had revealed to her in confidence.

Ned was most taken by the idea. "As a fiddle player of some experience," he cleared his throat in the way of authority, "I think it's a great idea. Maybe I can help – as long as you're happy, that is. Why don't we work together?"

It was more than *an offer he couldn't refuse*, Jimmy needed the expertise from someone like Ned. If his playing was anything to go by, his skill and knowledge would be just what he needed. "That's great!" He sealed it with a handshake.

~ *** ~

But what was 'The Project'? Apart from himself, only Rose – and now Ned – were privy to the idea. He was *bursting* to tell Dave but he knew better. It wasn't that he didn't *trust* Dave. He knew Dave wouldn't tell a soul. It's just that the fewer the people who *did* know, the more special it would seem.

The new school term resumed and Jimmy found himself directing more attention to the Crafts and Woodwork classes

than to the more academic options. He also conscripted his sister Liz to help – but without saying why.

Liz played the piano, at least well enough to show Jimmy the fundamentals. He could already read music – at a pinch – and Liz could get him to a reasonable standard. She *needed* to – there were just a few months left before presenting the fruits of his 'Project' to Sadie – ahead of the Spring Break when there was another school concert.

The other part of his life – of his and Dave's life – to suffer, was soccer. Apart from the occasional game at Westleigh with his mates, all his spare time was devoted to woodwork, leathercraft, and mastering the fundamentals of music.

His parents noticed the change in him but could hardly disapprove. He had grown closer to his older sister, which couldn't be a bad thing. They had become more of a family. They even approved of his friendship with the Lee family. Jimmy's dad already knew 'about' them from the time he owned Hillview Nurseries on the Lutterworth Road, opposite Blaby Rose Gardens. He had employed Molly and, probably Rose when she was a little girl, in the pea-picking season, along with students and other casual, seasonal workers.

“They were always hard workers,” his dad had said. “The Lees and the Ryans used to earn much more than the local villagers when it came to tallying up at the end of the day.”

~ *** ~

For those reasons he was happy for Jimmy to spend whole days there, learning from Ned – not only craft skills, but also developing a deeper understanding of music. At weekends he would often join the Lee family for an evening meal which always, without fail, was rounded off by a session of folk music. As a Gitano, Ned brought in European flavours to his style of play, but Gypsy Jazz was everybody's favourite.

For practical reasons, bringing the piano to the camp (!)

ruled out any participation from Jimmy – until he learnt a few basic chords on the guitar. Christmas brought a real treat for him. The whole family had pitched in to buy him the solution to it all – an acoustic Martin guitar from Moores in Wigston.

Jimmy's ability to play improved enormously thanks to Rose's brother teaching him the basics. The final part of the jigsaw fell into place. Quite a lot of what Ned played didn't have a title or, if it did, he was not aware. It was from years of playing by ear. Whenever Romani families assembled at events such as the horse fairs – at Mountsorrel or even Stow – it was time to share what they themselves had picked up.

Impromptu gatherings of musicians were central to the evening entertainment at horse fairs, allowing tradition to prevail and for songs, stories, and poems to be handed down the generations and over the decades. Jimmy and Ned combined well musically, much to the delight of Rose, who now counted Jimmy as her closest confidant – even more than her mother or even Sean. Not only that, *he's becoming more Romani as each day passes*, noted her grandmother.

It was true. Jimmy and Ned began to write their own songs which, although Ned – as brilliant a musician as he was - couldn't read music, Jimmy could. When he was stuck, providing he could carry the tune in his head from the gypsy camp to his own house – even after a few glasses of Everard's Best Bitter – his sister, Liz, could help him with 'the dots'.

~ *** ~

Gypsies were often not welcome in local pubs, even though their casual labour formed an important part of the growing and harvesting cycle on farms. If they *did* want a drink they were usually confined to the Bottle & Jug, being served with flagons or bottles of beer for *outside* consumption but never in the bar itself. In Blaby, Countesthorpe, Wigston and Dunton Bassett that was soon to change. On 'music night'.

Ned, Sean, and Jimmy formed a group – a folk group – playing in local pubs and fairs in and around the area. While the Lutterworth Road highway improvement was going on in the immediate vicinity, Ned and his family remained in Mill Lane. That was their base which, of course, suited Jimmy equally well. He was now firm friends with Sean, developing a mutual respect even though it was a connection initially born out of their mutual attraction to Rose.

Jimmy became ever more focussed on his Project – his bid to win over the affections of Sadie. Rose was his closest ally in this, with Ned lending *his* hand where needed, as did Liz.

In the meantime, as it transpired, Sean and Jimmy shared another interest – fishing. He had let soccer fall to the wayside. Although he considered himself a competent soccer player, Edwards didn't – so he didn't make the school team.

Your loss, was Jimmy's response, soured even more because Dave, and a few other school pals, *were* picked. *At least it frees me up for more days fishing*, was his attitude. *With Sean!* But that led to a devastating outcome that changed everything, for everyone, for ever.

~ *** ~

Jimmy was happy with river fishing, especially now that the River Sence had been cleaned up, but his main choice was always canal fishing – coarse fishing. He had promised to teach Sean what little he *did* know, given that Sean's was the opposite – Sean had been 'brought up on' river fishing.

It was leading up to the Spring Break, by which time his 'Project' was on schedule to be ready for Sadie. Most of the work was done. It was getting lighter in the evenings so, all things considered, he had more time for 'other pursuits'. That included fishing (or even soccer!), but the start of the coarse fishing season was still several weeks ahead.

Nothing wrong in starting early by laying some ground bait,

he thought. *It's a good time to prime some pegs.* He could then almost guarantee plenty of good fishing at the start of the new season. The principle was simple. He would walk his favourite stretch of the canal – from The County Arms and back towards South Wigston – identifying the best locations to throw in regular supplies of bait as he went along.

It would be a mixture of fish food and maggots dropped every few days, enticing the fish to frequent particular parts of the canal. Parts that only *he* would know. At least that was the theory, even though he didn't bother to tell Sean.

On the Saturday afternoon in question there were not many people about, especially not so many men. It was still the soccer season and a proportion would either be playing or watching. He cycled from the village armed with ground bait. Once he was on the towpath at The County Arms (formerly The Union Inn before it was re-built by Everards Brewery), he walked slowly along choosing his spots as he went.

He was just approaching Knights Bridge where he would rejoin Little Glen Road, crossing into The Ford and Mill Lane for the ride home.

“Mister, mister! Me brudder's in the water!” It was a little girl no more than seven years old running towards him, tears streaming down her face. “Come on!” she was breathless.

The girl turned, running back from where she'd come, looking over her shoulder every now and again to make sure Jimmy was following. He hurried to keep up, now running alongside his bike as he scanned the canal for a sight of 'the brudder'. Soon he saw him.

The little girl caught hold of a third child stood patiently on the towpath - a boy, perhaps a year younger. The 'brudder' in question was a mere tot, out there in front of them, sucked into the middle of the canal. The lock gate further along had just been opened, allowing water higher up to be released,

causing a flow resembling a river. All Jimmy could see was something resembling a large ball of wool. It was floating on the surface. Thankfully the little boy's jumper was temporarily resisting the water into which the child had fallen.

There was nothing for it. Jimmy couldn't tell whether or not the child was facing face down, or for how long. He dived straight into the cold water before he realised - he couldn't swim! Hardly - perhaps a few strokes of 'doggie paddle' at best. But he needn't have worried. Thankfully, his feet touched the bottom of the canal. He waded the rest of the way.

The child remained on the surface of the water - face up - chuckling in delight as he saw his rescuer, Jimmy, reaching out to pluck him from the canal. "Come on, little fella," he said, cradling the little mite in his arms. He waded to the bank, and safety. "Where do you live?" he asked the older sister.

Without being asked she picked up Jimmy's bike, wheeling it alongside her, steered by the handlebars. "Up here," she replied, taking the lead along the towpath.

Her brother followed behind, with Jimmy bringing up the rear, still carrying the sodden, but apparently contented, toddler. He was now making 'cooing' noises, reaching out with his chubby little fingers, trying to touch Jimmy's excuse for a moustache. "Good grief," muttered Jimmy, "the little monster actually *likes me*."

A few yards further and they were approaching a bridge over the canal, where the little girl turn off the towpath, climbing shallow steps to the road, bumping his bike up each tread as she went. "We live just here," she said.

It was a council estate, the modest terraced houses and flats arranged in a semi-circle around a green swathe of grass. She turned into the second gate (although the gate had disappeared - perhaps for firewood!), first leaning his bike against the fence before running to the front door. She

knocked, not having been entrusted with a key. A young woman opened the door, drying her hands on a tea-towel, brushing the hair from her face as she saw Jimmy.

"I believe this little fella belongs to you," he announced. "He may be a little damp but, otherwise, he seems to be fine."

"What...? Where...? " she said, reaching out to relieve him of the damp little package. She was close to tears.

"I pulled him out of the cut about ten minutes ago."

The mother turned to the little girl who was already looking guilty, holding her other little brother's hand tightly out of security rather than comfort. "I told you *never* to go down to the water!" said the mother.

"I'm sorry," pleaded the little girl, " but I forgot."

"She forgot," mimicked her brother.

"Wait till daddy hears about this," added the mother.

"Please don't tell him...pleeese!" shrieked the little girl.

"Please," said her brother, holding his big sister even closer. "Don't tell daddy."

The mother turned to the little tot in her arms. He was still fascinated by Jimmy's moustache. "Let's get these wet clothes off you, Colin," she said, placing him carefully in a cot by a gas fire in the living room. The front door opened straight into the lounge, or living room, judging by the washing which was drying on a clothes horse by the fire. She turned to Jimmy.

"Thank you *so* much, Mister," she began. "I've told them time and time again never to go near the cut. The last I looked they were playing on the grass outside. I'd only nipped out back to bring in the washing."

"No harm done," he said, but he was still sopping wet and glad for the warmth from the fire.

"Wait here a minute," she said, then disappeared, returning seconds later with her purse. "Here, please take this." She held out a worn ten shilling note – equivalent to her child benefit.

“No, no,” he protested, refusing the gift. He knew that this 'reward', if he were to accept it, represented most of the week's shopping to feed her three little children. She was clearly still in shock, tears not far away. He was close to tears himself, overcome by the honesty and generosity of people who had very little to give in the first place. He thought he had better go.

“Won't you stop for a cup of tea,” she asked but, secretly, wanting to give her youngest a well-needed hot bath.

“Thank you, but no,” he replied. Although he was loathe to leave the warmth of the living room, he was soaked through to the skin and needed a hot bath. He said his goodbyes to the mother and children and was soon pedalling towards Mill Lane, and home. Normally this would take him past the gypsy camp, but on this occasion he chose the short-cut through the jitty, out onto Wigston Road and past The Bakers Arms.

Spring had arrived but a keen wind cut through his wet outer clothing. He stopped before crossing the river so that he could put on his windcheater. It was light and rain-proof, but today he needed it as defence against the wind. He badly needed to get back into the warm, taking less than fifteen minutes to cycle home.

“Is the water hot, Mam?” he asked as soon as he arrived.

“What on earth happened to you?” she asked.

“Pulled a little kid out of the water.”

“Is he OK?” At first, his mother seemed more concerned about the child than Jimmy, but she started running the bath as soon as she realised he was so wet, and chilled to the bone. “I'll put some soup on,” she added.

Jimmy immersed himself in the bath, as hot as he could bear it. He had begun to shiver but, after several minutes, he felt a lot better. Half an hour later he felt 'normal enough' for a bowl of hot beef broth and a crusty roll. Even so, he remained

by the open fire in the lounge, dressed only in pyjamas and dressing gown.

"You'd better stay in tonight and go to bed early," his mother said. It wasn't a request, but an order.

~ *** ~

The next morning he was rested but far from recovered, after a poor night's sleep. During the night he had sweated profusely, soaking his bedclothes due to a fever. His mother told him to remain in bed and just as well. As the day wore on he developed another temperature followed by a persistent cough. Even walking to the bathroom was an effort. On the third day he was no better so his mother called the doctor.

"I'm afraid he's got pneumonia," said the doctor after a brief sounding of Jimmy's chest and breathing. "All we can do is keep him warm with plenty of nourishing food and hot drinks. But it might take some time before he's well again."

"How long?" Jimmy asked weakly, "I have to be well enough for the end of term concert. Sadie's playing and I have..."

"It will take as long as it takes," his mother broke in. "You've spent most of your time doing that 'thing' for Sadie. I'm sure she can wait if *you* can." There was no arguing with his mother, even though she had no idea what his 'thing' was.

He said no more in the way of protest. Once his mother had made up her mind, that was it. His main concern was the concert less than two weeks away. He *had* to be well by then but, as the days progressed, he became even weaker.

"Give this package to Dave," he began one morning, after days in bed. Even the energy to get up was eluding him. "He'll know to give it..."

"...to Sadie. I know." said his mother.

"No," he said. "To Rose - then *she* can take it to Sadie."

~ *** ~

The following night Jimmy's body could fight his illness no

longer. It gave in. He passed quietly away – mercifully in his sleep – before dawn broke. The family were devastated.

“Typical,” muttered his father, “you help somebody, and end up suffering yourself.” It was a bitterness that never left him. He had been *so* proud of his son. Proud of the dedication to his school work displayed in the last year. He was shaping up to be a fine young man and thanks, in part, to the gypsy family he had befriended just a relatively few months previously.

It was Dave who broke the news to Ned and his family. They had accepted Jimmy as one of their own. Even the grandmother claimed she could see 'Romani' in his spirit. *I swear if you went back far enough you'd find he was one of us*, she'd said.

Perhaps she was right. Certainly, the way he fitted into the musical tradition of gypsy culture was as remarkable as it was natural. It was effortless, learning the skills and knowledge from Ned for the completion of his 'Project'.

“I think he would want Rose to give this to Sadie,” Dave said as he handed the carefully wrapped package to Molly. Jimmy had used unassuming thick brown paper for the outside wrapping, upon which he had attached an envelope simply saying, *To Sadie, with love, Jimmy x*

“I'll make sure she does,” promised Molly. “but how can we get it to her?”

“Perhaps do it before the actual day of the concert,” was Dave's reply. “Tomorrow evening they have the final rehearsal at the school. That would be a good time.”

And so it was agreed. Rose was only too pleased to deliver the well-kept secret to Sadie, who she had never met but about whom she had heard so much, from Jimmy. Sean offered to drive her to Guthlaxton after work. He, too, had grown to like and respect Jimmy in spite of their earlier potential 'conflict' over Rose. But that was in the past, and well buried.

“There’s the front gate,” pointed Rose, as they arrived at the school. “We can park next to those cars – I think the main hall is round the back.” She was right.

The orchestra sound was audible from the car park, so they just followed its source until they reached double glass doors to the side of the hall. Sean tried the handle, opening it quietly as they crept into the hall.

“There she is,” whispered Rose. She had never seen Sadie but, from Jimmy’s detailed description it was obvious who she was. Apart from being strikingly beautiful, she was easily recognisable as the First Violin. They waited patiently for the piece to end, appreciating for the first time the excellence of Sadie’s playing. Jimmy hadn’t done that part justice.

As luck would have it, as soon as the piece came to a close, the orchestra took a short break. Sean and Rose walked towards Sadie as she was stepping down from the main stage. “It’s Sadie, isn’t it?”

“Yes. Who are...? How do you know...?”

“Jimmy asked us to come. Jimmy Colville?”

“Oh, yes. I know. Well, I don’t actually *know* him, but I know who he is. Isn’t he with you?”

“You didn’t know?” Rose and Sean glanced at each other.

“No. Know what?” asked Sadie.

“Jimmy passed away.”

Sadie paled, searching for a seat. “Here,” said Sean, “allow me.” Clearly shocked she was lost for words.

Finally she spoke. “That’s tragic. He was such a sweet boy. How did it happen?”

Rose then told her the whole story of how he had dived into the canal to save the young child, only to succumb to pneumonia as a result. She then remembered why she and Sean had come to see her in the first place.

“He wanted you to have this,” said Rose, handing over the

plain wrapped package to Sadie – Jimmy's 'Project'.

“For me?” Sadie questioned, totally surprised by a gift from someone she had never really known. Slowly she peeled back the brown wrapping paper. She gasped. “It's beautiful!”

“He made it himself. But with some help from my father,” Rose added. “He's also a violinist – well, a fiddle player.”

“Just look at the detail,” Sadie enthused. He's thought of everything. And you say he's...”

“... dead. Yes. I'm sorry. We didn't want to upset you, but we knew how important it was – to him – that you got this before the end of term. He'd been working on it for months.”

~ *** ~

They took a moment to reflect. None of them had seen 'The Project' in its final completed state before. They marvelled at the craftsmanship – the outer shell skillfully covered with Tuscan leather, inlaid with gold leaf; the lid had been chiselled out to allow for the bridge; the violin nest set inside the rectangular shape was so precise, whilst Jimmy had allowed enough room to introduce separate compartments for spare strings, rosin, and the shoulder rest. There was even padding to protect the end pin.

“It was surely a labour of love,” said Sadie, after she had taken in all the detail. “It shows in every stitch.”

“Yes, it was, in more ways than one,” added Rose. “Over the months I have grown - I mean *we* have grown - to love Jimmy, haven't we Sean?”

Sean agreed, then he spotted something that neither of them knew about beforehand. “Is that a letter tucked into the pocket for the sheet music?”

Jimmy had written down his final thoughts, hand-written in a fine italic script, on a cream laid textured paper. Sadie took it out and began reading, first to herself, then out loud:

Dear Sadie

I'm sorry I cannot deliver this in person. As I write I am not feeling too well but I do hope to recover in time for your concert. Your last performance meant so much to me. In fact, you mean so much to me or, if you allowed, you could mean so much to me.

I confess that I have admired you from afar for so long now, but I wish it were more than that. It's just that, whenever I see you, I cannot think of a word to say, or at least, not the right words. Not only that, you always seem to be with that Jake fellow – but for reasons only known to you. (Sorry, perhaps I shouldn't have said that.)

There. As you can see I am rubbish at expressing my emotions in words. So, to overcome that obstacle I have put all my feelings for you into making this violin case. I do hope you enjoy it and that I have thought of everything to produce the perfect one for you – just as I feel you are the perfect one for me (if only you gave me a chance). That's all I now ask. A chance.

I hope you get to know Rose and Sean, whose father helped me in the design and crafting of the case. They are my best friends and I have come to love them like a brother and sister – to love all of them in fact, the whole family.

Perhaps when I am well again you will let me introduce them to you properly. Rose's father, Ned, is an excellent fiddle player and we have so much fun round the camp fire, learning and playing folk songs together. You will fit in perfectly.

Which brings me to the final part of this gift to you. In the pocket for the sheet music, you will see a musical piece I composed with Ned. My sister, Liz, helped me to write 'the dots' for the musical score. Ned has taught me quite a few Scottish Airs, even though he is a Spanish Gitano gypsy himself. Their influence comes through in this piece. I hope.

I have called it 'To Sadie, with Love'. The music is for violin

and piano and I am sure you will find it easy to play – easier than it was for me to write, anyway!

Please accept these gifts with all my love. Even if we may never become one, then at least you will have a part of me here to keep. All I hope is that you think of me each time you open the violin case, and each time you play this music.

All my love forever

Jimmy x

P.S. ...otherwise these are only words, and words are what I don't have, to take your heart away.

~ *** ~

All three remained silent, motionless, even expressionless until the honesty and sincerity in Jimmy's final words were too much for Rose. She buried her face in Sean's shoulder to hide her tears. Sadie wrestled with her own feelings brought to the surface by the love expressed, not only in the letter and those final words, but through the hours of dedication built into what would become 'the perfect gift'.

It was Sadie who broke the silence. "I must play this." She was humming the tune to herself, reading from the sheet music. "Angela!" She called out to her pianist. There was an urgency in her voice. "I have a new piece we *must* do for the concert - let's run through it now."

Rose had recovered, at least enough to take in what was about to unfold before her. After tuning up and both musicians taking an initial scan of the sheet music before them, Sadie and Angela launched into Jimmy's composition. The rest of the orchestra ceased what it was doing, silence prevailed.

Just a few bars in and the power of the music, combined with the virtuosity and feeling built into Sadie's performance, cast its spell over the whole school hall.

At long last, the full depth of Jimmy's commitment to the

ideal of true love – poured into the construction of the violin case and the composition - could be heard for all to enjoy. As the notes flew from the bow of Sadie's violin – notes that had never before blessed the air waves, a new standard in the genre of romantic music was born.

The last extended note rang out and the whole orchestra - who had remained silent throughout - stood up, erupting into a crescendo of applause.

~ *** ~

Rose and Sean quietly and unnoticed slipped out of the side double doors. It wasn't just a remarkable performance. By any standard it was beautifully played, all the more exceptional because neither Sadie nor Angela had seen the music before, let alone played it. Clearly Sadie and Jimmy were 'in tune' musically, if not spiritually. Her expressiveness as she addressed each musical phrase and bar was unforced and natural, almost as if she knew the piece already, or had worked with Jimmy and Ned in its composition. How sad that it was a partnership that ended before it had really started.

Sadie was disappointed, but not surprised, *not* to find Rose and Sean waiting for her on completing her first performance of '*To Sadie, with Love*'. But she appreciated the fact they had left her to absorb the gravity of the piece on her own, and how it had come to be written.

The forthcoming concert was scheduled for just a few days time – just long enough to ensure Rose, Sean, their family and Jimmy's, all had tickets. She also lived in Blaby village and knew where the gypsy camp would be - where it had always been. She set out for Mill Lane the following day, leaving enough tickets to include Jimmy's sister, Liz.

On the eve of any concert Sadie normally suffered from nerves – but not on this occasion. In fact, she was *so* relaxed that she was worried she was 'too loose', and lacked the edge

you need sometimes to pull off a stellar performance. *Why am I so at ease?* she asked herself. The answer was simple: confidence. Somehow and in some way, Jimmy's composition infused her with its strength, a new level of understanding for her music and for her instrument. It was as if Jimmy himself guided her every note.

As usual, the concert was a sell-out, but Sadie had arranged for prime position seats for her special guests. Even Jake's parents had to put up with seats several rows back. Jimmy's mum and dad, and Rose's, met for the first time that night. Their next meeting would be at Jimmy's funeral.

At Sadie's late request, Jimmy's '*To Sadie, with Love*' was to close the concert. Respectfully, she introduced the piece with the story of how it had come about, together with a self-deprecating remark aimed at herself.

"Never has a composition affected me in such a way," she began. "Not only has it blessed me musically, but inside. I feel enriched because of it, a better person in so many ways.

"It also taught me a lesson. So many times, so many of us – myself included – are blind to the goodness, kindness, and even love, bestowed upon us by those around us. Even those we may not automatically count as friends, or family. Jimmy's love and devotion comes through – to me – in every note of this next piece. Unfortunately, it is now too late for me to respond, other than to play his music. The lesson – and my message to you all – is *don't let it be too late for you.*"

A low murmur rippled through the audience, many were visibly moved – especially Jake. He knew he had often taken Sadie for granted, allowing his parents' money and position to buy him favour. Was he on his way out? Only time would tell.

~ *** ~

The finale to the show bore all the promise of Sadie's introduction. As expected – at least by Sean, Rose and Ned –

its effect on the audience ranged from being captivated to reaching an even more sublime level. Their appreciation was mirrored in the ten minute standing ovation, surpassing all previous performances by all previous performers.

To crown it all, Sadie invited Ned onto the stage as the co-composer of the piece, to share in the applause. It was a proud moment for Rose and her family, and some consolation at least for Jimmy's parents and his sister Liz.

~ *** ~

But the ride home was a sober affair. Jimmy was gone and nothing could bring him back. True, his memory would live on in the minds of his family, and that of Rose's. And from now on that would include Sadie Green. Likewise, as a song it would last way into the future, available for every concert or campfire wherever his music might be played.

Inside the pocket of the violin case was a whole portfolio of songs composed by Jimmy and Ned – sometimes for fiddle and guitar, often for violin and piano. Going forward they would form a new direction for Sadie and for the development of her musical career.

But the real surprise – for that evening, at least, awaited for Rose, Sean, Ned and Molly on their return to the camp. It was to come from grandmother. As expected, she was enjoying her evening pipe of tobacco by the camp fire, the twins tucked safely in bed. She was on her third glass of port. But that was not the sole reason for what she came out with, as they joined her round the fire. It stunned them into silence.

“Who's that humming?” asked Ned as he stepped out of the car. He was still a few yards away. She was hidden from view.

“It's Grandma,” said Rose. “Why?”

“I recognise it. The tune. It's one that Jimmy and I worked on. How would she know it? We've never played it to her.”

She had heard them drive up and was ready to greet them.

“You just missed him,” the grandmother said, drawing deeply on her favourite tobacco, her own herbal mixture (!).

“*Who* have we missed?” asked Rose.

“Jimmy of course. Jimmy Colville – spelt C-O-L-V-I-L-L-E. You just missed him. He said he was on his way to a concert.”

“That’s impossible,” said Molly, “he’s...”

“Shhh,” broke in Rose, quietly. “She doesn’t know yet.”

Grandma chuckled to herself, blowing smoke rings into the chill night air. “Ha! ‘*She doesn’t know*’ indeed! I’ll tell you what I know. He was *here*, with *me*. He was on his way to a concert.”

She carried on humming to herself, reminiscing to herself on her recent visitor “I told you he was one of us. Lovely lad – and *you* all missed him!”

~ THE LIVING END ~

The Violin Case
A Romantic Novella by John Morey

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