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Opening extract from
Nightwanderers

Written by
C. J. Flood

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One

Mackerel fishermen found Ti's things on a rock at Durgan Beach early on Saturday morning. Black jeans, her beloved long-sleeved dolphin top, grey duffle coat, purse and, round the neck of an empty Bells bottle, the seahorse necklace I bought for her birthday, with its chain broken. Her twin sister's things, were there too, though I don't remember what they were exactly.

Ti De Furia was my best friend in the world; Ophelia De Furia was something else completely.

News that the twins were missing tore through Flushing's single high street the next day, and the De Furia café shutters stayed down for the first time since they had opened five years ago. Regulars milled about outside, despondent.

'Beautiful girls, they were.'

'So spirited!'

'But no match for Durgan rip tides in a storm.'

Charlie Fielding said she'd seen Ti with a bottle of

whisky the night before when she was running to the Drama block for a forgotten prop. It was show night, so school was busy, and soon others were claiming to have seen Ti stumbling at the edges of the playing field or crying in the car park. Rumours spread fast in Flushing, and after everything that had happened theories developed.

Some kids said the twins had drowned themselves on purpose, to escape all the trouble they had caused. Others guessed they'd been skinny-dipping drunk and got into danger by mistake. People claimed to have seen the girls hours, minutes, seconds before they disappeared.

It was an accident. A double suicide. A tragedy.

The fact that never changed was that both girls were dead.

I wouldn't believe it, and neither would my little brother Joey. He refused to accept Ti was dead until her body turned up, which made perfect sense to me. We didn't discuss Ophelia – she was unknowable, and capable of anything – but it was nice talking about Ti in the present and future tense.

'She's just hiding out,' Joey told me, lying on my bed waving his feet in the air. He was wearing his dinosaur socks, and I watched the tiny T. rex swaying. 'Waiting for all this to die down, and then – pow!' He slammed his heels down suddenly.

'Pow,' I repeated, and he turned to me so I could see the freckle flecks on his nose.

‘She’ll emerge like a falcon from the ashes!’

‘Phoenix.’

‘What?’

‘Like a *phoenix* from the ashes.’

‘I think they changed it to falcon.’

‘They didn’t change it to falcon, Joe.’

‘They did, Rose, actually. Actually, they did.’

‘She’s punishing her parents, that’s what it is. Her dad hit her the night before this happened, you know. He’s the one that should have drowned.’

‘Nobody drowned, Rose. They didn’t!’

‘I know.’

‘And nobody should. Ever!’

‘No. I know.’

I put my arm out, and he burrowed into it. They were comforting, these conversations with my brother, even if he was only eight years old, and half convinced he had super powers.

Mum and Dad didn’t like it. They whispered to each other about denial and responsibility, and the importance of facing up to the truth, but I no longer listened to what they said.

Joey was the only one who had never given up on Ti, and I loved him for it.

Because if Ti was dead (*which she wasn’t*) it was all of our faults.

TWO

It all started with a poo in a flower bed. A small act of revenge from Ti, towards our Drama teacher, Ms Chase, for the recent expulsion of Ophelia, which Ti swore was undeserved.

It was dark, with a quarter moon in the sky and lots of cloud cover as Ti dashed up the drive of a large semi-detached house, and I followed, adrenalin making the night seem to bounce. It was her turn to wear the purple balaclava we'd found in a charity shop, and I felt strangely conspicuous with my face out in the breeze. A security light clicked on, turning the colours up for a second, and we kept running, past the house and into the depths of the garden. We knew the drill by now: aim for shadows.

Round here, the gardens were huge: five times the size of mine, ten times the size of Ti's. We were on Castle Road where all the rich kids lived, as well as some of the

teachers. Lawns and rockeries and netted ponds holding koi carp. Sheds and garages with cars, plural, and conservatories. Lots of trampolines.

The security light clicked off, and we stepped out from a hedge, half blind and clutching each other. Nerves made me need to wee, left laughter right at the top of my throat, and I was already giggling helplessly as Ti led the way across the first garden.

‘This way,’ she said, tearing over the neat grass. A stepladder helped us over the first fence, an apple tree the second, and the third had only a hedge, which we scrambled through no problem. Black windows loomed over us as we ran, and my guts squirmed because anybody could be looking out – murderers, paedophiles. With my thumping heart, even ghosts seemed possible.

Nightwandering was a hobby of ours, but usually it was aimless. Stealthily dressed we crept from our houses after midnight to explore the town in peace. We lay on the coast path to watch the stars; peed in the long jump sandpit. At night the hierarchies of school ceased to exist, and we were the queens of Flushing.

Nightwandering, my courage almost matched Ti’s. But she took risks needlessly.

Using a trampoline to mount a particularly high fence, for instance, when I’d found a perfectly quiet and safe alternative. I winced at the racket she made: creaking springs and stretching canvas, then *crash!* She

bellyflopped on top, the whole fence wobbling, her feet scrabbling at the slats of wood as she hauled herself over, shaking with laughter.

I looked around with pathological frequency, pressed into the shadows, expecting lights to come on and our captors to emerge, and then finally Ti landed in the garden with a shaking thud, swearing because she'd bitten her tongue.

'Careful how you go,' she lisped. 'The ground'th wonky.'

A little closer towards the house one of the fence panels was loose, a nail missing from the bottom, and pushing it aside now, I squeezed through, wood scraping the soft skin of my stomach.

'I tried to tell you,' I said, when Ti called me a show-off, and it was true. But Ti had an uncanny ability to turn her ears off when receiving instructions.

'Just hurry up, okay,' I said. 'In, out, remember?'

Ti clutched my wrists, and pressed her forehead to mine. This was our power move, though she used it more often than me.

'This is it,' she whispered, and the wool of her balaclava was itchy against my skin. Her curly dark hair sprang out of the bottom, instantly recognizable to all who knew her. 'Ms Chase's abode.'

I felt like I was going to collapse. Ms Chase was the kind of teacher who prided herself on not giving second

chances, and I should have tried harder to talk Ti out of this. But she convinced me that surviving the escapade would make us brave and exciting, and I wanted to be those things so much.

A light came on in a frosted window upstairs, and my blood pumped so hard it made me dizzy.

‘Careful,’ I pleaded, as Ti crept towards the house, unshaken by the proof that Chase was inside. There was no way I was going any closer if I could help it. Upstairs, the light went out, and my stomach fizzed with nerves as Ti looked around for the perfect place to take her revenge. Stepping into a flower bed, she whipped down her black jeans, and I was confronted with a full view of her bum.

‘Don’t look,’ she said at the same time as I said, ‘Jesus!’

‘You say “don’t look” *before* you pull your pants down, Ti. Like a second or two *before*, not after.’

Ti farted in response. I couldn’t believe it when she did things like this; it was like she didn’t care what anyone thought of her, and that impressed me more than anything. She and Ophelia were exactly the same in this respect, though they showed it in different ways. They’d inherited it from their dad, Fabio, who shouted instead of talking, and swore like an angry chef (which he was).

‘I don’t know if I can go,’ Ti whispered. ‘I don’t know if I’ve got anything.’

‘You can do it, Ti. I believe in you.’

‘I’m not sure,’ she said, and the effort in her voice as she strained was gross, but it only made me laugh harder. I’d told her to bring toilet roll, but she’d insisted she didn’t need it on account of her gift for doing what she referred to as ‘ghost poos’.

My shoulders shook, and the urge to pee was strong, but I daren’t go here, in spite of Ti’s encouragement. ‘It’s the most natural thing in the world!’ she said. ‘Don’t be such a prude.’ All the same, I couldn’t do it. Not in a teacher’s garden.

We were having fun again now, but still I counted down the seconds until we could leave. I pictured us safely on the coast path, sharing out the tea in Ti’s rucksack, as she pulled up her trousers, and crept forward.

‘*What are you doing? Stop!*’ I hissed, because she’d promised to leave as soon as she’d delivered her present. Downstairs the lamps were dim, floral blinds down. The faintest glow escaped, lighting up Ti who was metres from the window, trying to look in.

‘Sexy music!’ Ti hissed back. ‘She’s got someone in there!’

Her voice shook with delight, and I knew from experience there was no getting through to her now. For the first time in the history of nightwandering I wished to be tucked up in bed, with a nice sensible friend who liked to sleep at night after watching a film with a face mask or

maybe plaiting each other's hair or something, and then Ti took another step, straight into a metal dog bowl.

The tin clatter was deafening against the moon-quiet night, the bowl spinning round and round.

Click! The garden flooded with electric light.

All in the same second Ti stopped laughing, I sprang for the loose fence panel, and Chase appeared at the patio doors in a lilac satin dressing gown.

Ti backed away, but it was too late. Chase had stepped on to the decking outside her house. She clutched her gown at the neck, red feathered hair loose around her narrow shoulders, and it was so private seeing her like that I almost closed my eyes.

'Titania?' Chase said, disbelieving. She insisted on using Ti's full name, and pronouncing it in this fancy way – Tih-tahn-yuh – completely different to Fab's version – Tie-tan-yuh – and it drove Ti doolally, though perhaps she wasn't thinking too hard about that right then.

I was outside the pool of light, the palm trees beside the house providing cover, but I could hardly breathe. Any second she could walk from her spotlight patio and catch me.

Chase couldn't finish sentences. 'What . . . ? How . . . ? I don't . . . ?'

I inched forward, the grass crunching ear-splittingly with every step.

‘*What* in god’s name are you doing in my garden?’ Chase said, getting herself together at last. ‘This isn’t funny, Titania. Don’t think this can be shrugged off as a prank. I’ve called the police!’

At the mention of police I pushed the loose plank aside, and squeezed back through the gap into the garden with the trampoline. Before I’d even thought about my decision, I’d sprinted into the road and was crouching behind a car, panting.

With my fingers crossed, I waited for Ti to emerge with the defiant look she wore at school, the closest she got to a uniform, but she never came out. Finally, a police car arrived, and if I’d dared to look up as it left, I would have seen Ti, ashen, in the back seat.

Three

Whenever I heard the word kindred I thought of me and Ti. It was a rainy Monday in Year Six when she turned up in my classroom. She was big-boned and fearless-looking, with short dark curly hair that stood out all around her face. She'd moved from Italy, Mrs Gamble said, and so at break the kids made fun of her accent, and tasselled leather shoes, and the extra vowels she put after words when she talked.

She didn't run shrieking to the veranda like the rest of us girls when it started raining, but stood face to the sky in the playground, and let herself get drenched. After dinner, when Mrs Gamble paired us together, I was secretly pleased. I could be trusted to be helpful and kind, Mrs Gamble said, but the intense look she gave made me wonder if she knew how I longed for someone who thought I was brilliant all the time, unlike Charlie Fielding who laughed with Mia Lewis whenever I got upset.

My nerves sparked with excitement as Titania and Charlie swapped seats. Ti was still damp from her soaking, dark hair tamed into ringlets, and her toffee-coloured eyes were open and amused. She wrote questions on a piece of paper that we passed back and forth, demanding to know why everyone stared at her, and wore the same shoes, and followed Charlie Fielding with a frightened expression.

Do you follow CF? she wrote, and my answer covered the whole reverse side of A4: *NO*.

Charlie cursed our alliance. She banned us from sitting at the good table at dinner, and made sure we were picked last for teams in PE. She invented lies about why Ti had moved here, and called me a traitor for leaving her gang, but I didn't mind a bit.

I'd never had a true friend before, and I knew it. Charlie had always made me feel less than I was, whereas Ti made me feel like more. She didn't say it was disgusting if I had gravy on my school tie or sleep in my eye, and she didn't want to talk all day about the clothes everyone was wearing. Best of all she loved school dinners just as much as me.

Ti and me were outcast, and I'd never been happier.

She was used to it, she said, because her dad got people's backs up wherever he went.

'We're a family of outcasts,' she said. 'You'll see.'

And I did. Within weeks Fab had annoyed the Flushingites by feeding leftover ciabattas from the café

to the seagulls in the square. The first time he didn't know it was an offence, but after he was prosecuted it became a regular act of pure De Furia rebellion.

'Look at them!' he said fondly, when a small colony hopped towards us on the pier. 'The way they jerk their necks, just like little Mafiosi – who could resist you, eh? Little brutes! Landed in the wrong place!'

Checking the coast was clear in an exaggerated fashion to make us laugh, he scattered a handful of chips, while Ti's shy mum, June, scolded him, first waving her arms at the birds, then collecting the chips he'd thrown and putting them in the bin.

I felt sorry for June, as did everyone else. Fab strode around the town like he'd always been there, with his bright checked trousers and loud remarks, and June scurried behind him, sending out apologetic looks and wincing. They were an odd match, people said.

Which were my sentiments exactly about Ti and her sister. I didn't even know she was an identical twin until Ophelia turned up in Mr Burgoine's class a week later.

'Nobody notices me when Ophelia's around,' Ti explained when I called her out on how weird it was, and though I'd never admit it she wasn't exaggerating. Ti was pretty if you stopped to look, but Ophelia's beauty *made* you stop and look. Both girls had wide cheeks and full mouths and thick eyebrows over melty brown eyes, but every time Ophelia's features arranged

themselves in the slightly more attractive way: her eyes slanted upwards where Ti's were more square, her front teeth had a gap where Ti's were close together, plus she was skinny (because she rarely ate), and like me Ti still had what Mum insisted was only puppy fat.

Seeing she was destined to be popular, Charlie immediately tried to take Ophelia under her wing, but Ophelia was too powerful for that. She burst straight through the feathers, and the two of them began their drama-filled friendship. I hated it when they fell out and Ophelia came to hang around with us; she spoke Italian to exclude me, and Ti stopped laughing at my silliest jokes, pretending to be mature and nonchalant like her sister.

They both despised being referred to as *the twins* or being asked if they felt each other's pain, but they had a strange power over each other, and almost psychic ways of communicating, and I was painfully jealous of their bond.

Still, I never would have thought it would make us lose touch.