

# The Test

by Chris Heyward

She sat on the kerb, knees drawn up to her chest, pushing stray wisps of hair back up under her black beanie.

A couple came out of the petrol station coffee shop and stood by her as they waited to cross the road. She pulled her rucksack in a little closer.

The forecourt reeked of petrol and chip fat. Waves of litter had blown against the wall of the cinder block building. Three gulls were screaming and ripping at a polystyrene burger box, their great grey wings smashing against the tarmac, sending scraps of paper and plastic flying.

The wind was picking up and the first drops of rain were black spots, stains on her washed-out jeans. She gathered her jacket tighter, crossing her arms across her chest. She was hungry but she wouldn't eat here. She'd wait.

The sleek black car slid to a halt. The driver ducked his head and looked at her through the passenger window. She pulled her hat down a little further. He leaned across the leather seat and pushed the door open.

'Hi.'

She turned her head away and looked further up the road, as if waiting for someone.

'The heavens are going to open in a minute.' His voice was soft, inviting.

She pushed her hands into her pockets and dropped her chin to her chest, hunching against the now persistent rain.

He held his hand up, showing off a heavy gold band.

'My name's Mark. I'm married and run a publishing company in London. I'm 42 and love to sail. I adore Italy, olives and gardening. I'm going to Beckstead to pick up my

wife and daughter from my mother-in-law's. There. You know all there is to know about me. Can I drop you somewhere?'

The girl looked up at him, droplets of rain clinging to long eyelashes. She held him in a steady gaze, as if making a decision. Then she quickly stood, threw her rucksack into the passenger footwell and got into the car.

'Where to?' He eased the car forward.

She waved a slender finger at the windscreen.

'Out there. Somewhere. Anywhere.'

Once out on the dual carriageway, he pressed a button on the steering wheel and the speakers jumped into life.

'Music?'

She pulled off her hat, shaking out long blonde hair.

'Whatever.'

She felt his gaze on her, taking in her slim build and tight jeans.

'You a student?'

'No.'

'Daisy's a student, that's my daughter. She's studying veterinary medicine at Liverpool. Down for the hols. I'm so proud of her. There's some more music here somewhere if you'd prefer... hang on...'

He didn't take his eyes off the road but leaned across the girl and opened the glove box. She shrank back into the seat slightly as his hand brushed her thigh.

'Well, there you go. You choose.'

He left the compartment open and the girl rummaged inside, found a CD and slotted it into the player. Moon River, Frank Sinatra.

'Ah, classic. You like the oldies then?'

'Yeah. 'Spose.'

She leaned back and undid her jacket, slipping it off her shoulders. Her tiny tee shirt exposed a bare midriff. A red gemstone glittered in her navel.

‘So, where are you headed?’

‘Look, thanks for the lift and all, but what’s with all the questions?’

‘Sorry. But we’ll be in Beckstead in about an hour. End of the road for me. I just wondered where...’

‘I said. Anywhere.’

‘OK.’

Fields and villages passed in a blur as they sped along. The rain that had been coming down in sheets was starting to ease and the sun was glaring off the wet road.

‘I do believe I can see a few patches of blue sky. Taking the family out sailing this weekend. What about you, got any plans?’

She shifted in her seat.

‘Sorry. That was another question.’

He turned his head slightly towards her as he spoke. She knew he was looking at her belly button ring.

‘I need to pee.’

‘OK, there’s a service station about a mile ahead.’

‘I need to pee now. I know this road. There’s a lay-by. I can go in the woods.’

‘Are you sure you wouldn’t rather...?’

‘I’m busting. There it is, look.’

Mark hurriedly indicated and crunched onto the gravel.

The girl hopped out of the car and leaned back in for her bag.

‘You can leave that here.’

‘I don’t leave my stuff.’

She slung the bag up onto her shoulder and walked off into the woods.

The clearing looked a little different from the first time she was here ten months ago. Forty-two weeks, three days.

She remembered the trees pushing up through the snow like burnt, black fingers.

She remembered lying quietly, slowing her breathing, sensing her blood seeping, staining the white. Feigning death. Hoping he'd leave. Disappear.

She'd been chosen that day. The man had picked her out of the crowd milling about outside the petrol station coffee shop. He'd decided that she was the one. She'd got in the car with him because he was nice. Clean. Polite.

Well, today she'd done the choosing. She'd waited with a steaming cup of Colombian and made her choice. She wanted the cleanest. She wanted the nicest. A flash car might be fun to complete the picture. And along came Mark. She didn't know his name then, of course. But Mark had something she didn't have that day that seemed so long ago. That seemed like yesterday. He had a choice. He could return to his family and spend a weekend sailing, or he could lie in the heather and feel his life ebb away. It was entirely up to him.

And now she stands in the woods and waits. Is he going to prove her wrong? Is he going to pass The Test and stay in the car?

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