

Even when the stones yell out,
I'll never hear their cry.
Unbalanced, petrified, I shout;
Unsilenced, screaming, 'WHY?'

Fin Rackman (The Stone Balancer)

The Stone Balancer
by John Townsend

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THE STONE BALANCER

John Townsend

RAVEN



*August. Sunday. Sunset. Warm sea breezes.
Lapping waves on shingle.
Seafront crowds. Bustling cafés and bars.
Live music. Wafts of vinegary fish and chips.
Dark beaches. Darkening sky. Darker cliffs.
A cry of gulls. A dying scream. Eerie silence.*

*Midnight. Moonlight.
Moving shadows on a cliff.
The strike of a match. The curl of a flame.
The flare of frantic fire.
Sparks in surreptitious eyes at sea
... secretly drifting in on the forbidden tide.*



Breaking the Silence

I didn't hear a siren when the police car skidded to a halt at the quayside after midnight. Its flashing lights swirled around the harbour, sparking across dark water and sweeping over moored yachts swaying like ocean phantoms in the mist. Beach huts shone in bursts of shuddering blue, shimmering in a pulsing ghostly glow. The silence tightened – stifling my thumping heart and the frantic pounding in my head.

They bundled me into the back of the car. Police jumped in beside me, wrenching a seatbelt round my waist. As we sped off in a spray of shingle, I looked back at the moonlit beach disappearing behind us and I knew it was over. At least, the first part was over ... and I was relieved.

Endings can be so uncertain. They might be new beginnings in disguise. There's no question about the first beginning – ten days before my fourteenth birthday. Even though it was back in August, it's taken ages to write everything down; beginning, middle and sort-of end – the complete mystery. Maybe now someone will believe the 'silent witness' and understand my words, balancing them with hard facts like solid stones – from mysterious beginnings to uncertain endings; of the grim discovery from my fourteenth summer.



ONE

Monday 15th August

I was dreaming of Grandad again – just like when he died after Christmas.

Struggling from sleep, I sat up and saw him at the foot of my bed, pointing at the old wardrobe. ‘Don’t forget it’s in there,’ he smiled. ‘I bought that wardrobe with my first wages, so it’s a bit special. Just like you are to me, Fin. I used to hide all sorts from your gran in that little cubbyhole underneath. She never knew it was there. I want you to keep that biscuit tin safe inside till you grow up ... and never let *you know who* find it. Don’t even tell your mum. It’s our special secret, Fin. You and me – the best of pals – the two wise monkeys.’

He gave a wheezy chuckle and turned away.

‘Please come back, Grandad.’ I tried to call after him, but my words made no sound. I could only mouth silently, ‘I want you to stay forever.’

But I knew that would never happen.

I woke up late, after sleeping through two alarm clocks – one under my pillow that vibrates like mad and the other that fires a spinning missile that’s meant to make you jump out of bed. They both failed to wake me, so it was just before eleven o’clock when, all bleary-eyed, I pulled back the curtains to see brilliant sunlight sparkling on the sea. A great day for the beach.

Usually Mum woke me before she went to work, but I guessed she’d overslept, too. I decided to make her a mug of tea, grab some toast then head off on my bike.

I’ve got to be honest, the stone-balancing craze was becoming a bit of an obsession. It’s one of those things that seems to take you over. It’s magic when you find just the right shape and size of rocks that can pile up at weird angles and make it look like you’ve had to use superglue rather than masses of patience and practice to sense how to keep them all in place. I love the concentration it takes to work out the centre of gravity of each stone.

Some of my masterpieces up to ten rocks high can last for days above the high-tide mark, if it’s not too windy or kids don’t lob pebbles at them. A few of the designs an old man does on that same beach are totally awesome – like amazing sculptures and works of art. He seems to go into a trance and talks about finding a point of silence inside himself. I guess I should be able to do that, but I just place one stone on top of another and hope for the best. Inner

silence like that isn't really my thing. My silence is different.

I had to shake Mum to wake her up. 'I've got you some tea, Mum. It's late.'

She went into one of her panics. 'Has work called? I'm supposed to be there by now.'

'It's no use asking me,' I said. 'I've only just got up myself. Try your answerphone.'

She grabbed my arm. 'Fin, look at me. Make sure you take your phone if you go out today. Don't go in the sea and be careful near the rocks. Send me a text to tell me what you're doing and where you are. Keep to the quiet roads – I worry about you on your bike. They said on the news a boy in London had headphones on, so didn't hear a lorry behind him and got knocked off his bike. You must take care, Fin.'

'I haven't got headphones and I don't do music,' I snapped back.

'You know exactly what I mean, Fin. Sometimes you don't realise ... Take some food and a drink from the fridge. I won't be going to work now but I might have to go out. I'll text you to let you know when I'm coming back.'

She didn't let go of my arm until I said about three times that I understood her every word.

I left her in bed, put on my backpack, ran to the shed to get my bike and headed off to the cliff road. The heat bounced off the tarmac as it rushed beneath my wheels and I had that tingling feeling of excitement in my arms and

legs as the sun beat down on my body and the warm breeze flapped through my T-shirt.

It was great to be out, with no one to boss me or fuss and I could be free all day. I've always loved going down to the beach below the cliffs in the next bay from our bungalow, as not many people know the way down and they can't get round the headland at high tide. Few people from the caravan park behind the hedge that I whizzed past seemed to use the cliff path below their field – where smoke was wafting from what I assumed were lazy breakfast barbecues.

As soon as I smelt the seaweed, felt the sea breeze on my face and saw the sunlight swirling on the water, I couldn't wait to get down there on the sand. On windy days, long before I'd clamber down and see the massive waves, it was awesome to feel the spray on my skin, breathe in the salty blasts and sense the thundering thuds shuddering through the rocks. The seagulls get flung around all over the place but they don't seem that bothered. They just flap a bit, ride the gusts and carry on doing their own thing. I like to think I'm a bit like that. Maybe I was a seagull in a previous life. Maybe that's why I tried to glide through the storm that blew into my world that summer.

I left my bike under a gorse bush on the cliff edge, then scrambled down a steep winding path, overgrown in places by brambles and bracken. My trainers slipped in the dust so, to stop me careering down out of control, I had to grab tough clumps of long grass that cut my fingers. Each

time I skidded, trickles of stones spilled down the cliff in a mini-avalanche onto the rocks below. About halfway down, at a slippery corner of a zigzag, my feet slid from under me and I hurtled off the path into the undergrowth, grabbing at anything that could stop me nose-diving out of control. Brambles tore at my hands and, as I sprawled into a clump of nettles, I saw a woman's pale pink sandal, speckled with dried blood, caught on a twig. Just then a man in scuffed boots with odd laces, muddy grey jogging bottoms, red binoculars strapped round his neck and dragging a windbreak rolled round a spade jogged up the path. He spat as he lumbered past.

As I hadn't heard him, I was really startled at his sudden appearance, but even more shocked that he spat right at me, leaving me to tumble down and head-butt a gorse bush. He was gone as soon as he'd appeared – in a flash. I didn't see his face – just the back of his head, a sweaty brown T-shirt caked in sand, and a tattooed left arm. And that was it, he'd gone. But his image didn't leave me; a big, stocky bulk of a man – the last image I saw of him, as I dragged myself back to the path. Blood was smeared on one knee of his jogging bottoms, so maybe he was rushing to get medical help. Even so, that spit seemed perfectly aimed at me.

Wiping my cuts and stings, as well as the man's gob of frothy saliva sliding down my shoulder, I groped my way back towards the path. It was then my hand touched something smooth under a clump of heather and I pulled out a small purple wallet. It was new, open and seemed to

be empty, but I took it with me as I headed on down. I zipped the wallet safely in a pocket on my backpack, intending to check for a name and address later. Right then I just wanted to be down on the beach where I could now see the tide was halfway out and the sand was still damp and shiny.

I ran down to the breaking waves near to where a woman was paddling and throwing a stick into the water for her dog to fetch. Further up the beach a man with a metal detector swept the foot of the cliffs, picking through dried seaweed. Children at the far end played with a Frisbee, their wet hair and discarded towels showing they'd already been swimming. Otherwise, the beach was empty and I had the freshly-washed stones to myself, far away from anyone else.

After gathering a mix of boulders, smaller rocks of different colours and all sorts of smoothed stones, I began building by balancing one on top of the other or at a slight angle to the one below. The art is to make each stone appear to defy gravity or seem too big to balance on the one beneath it. I was soon totally absorbed in constructing little towers that stood firmly without swaying. If each stone is balanced carefully enough, the sculpture won't collapse – but if it does, you just start again without getting flustered. The secret is to keep calm, still and really relaxed. I don't often do 'relaxed' so maybe it's a Virgo thing that drives me to get something just right without anyone able to criticise. It can be a struggle being a perfectionist in an imperfect world, so I love to get lost in my own head without worrying about time.

Eventually my efforts began to pay off as, after however long it took, I'd finished a spectacular circle of stone towers that people on the beach came to admire and take selfies beside. It was only when I took pictures myself on my phone that I saw a text from Mum.

Fin, need to talk. Please come home. Sorry.

I texted back, sending a picture.

Look, I'm a genius. See you soon.

I didn't hurry back. I knew we'd argue. I was so fed up with Mum fussing all the time. 'Be careful. Don't go far. Keep in contact.' All my life I feel I've been held back. Grandad never stopped me doing stuff and always encouraged me to take risks, but since he died I've felt I was back in a cage.

I was sure, as I cycled home, that Mum would be in a mood and it would spoil everything. We'd probably have another row. But I had no idea, when I entered the kitchen with, 'Hi, I'm back,' that I was about to face more than I expected.

'It looks like you need a bath,' Mum said as soon as I walked in. 'Look at the state of you. You've caught the sun – I hope you put some cream on. I bet you haven't drunk enough – it's easy to dehydrate in this heat, you know.'

'I'm fine,' I said, turning away to avoid a torrent of further nags and to stop myself screaming. In fact, I sometimes think I should add an 'e' on the end of my name and have 'I'm Fine' tattooed on my forehead. Anything to stop fuss.

‘I wish you wouldn’t spend so much time on your own, Fin,’ she continued. It was like the same old record playing over and over again. ‘Why don’t you bring a friend home or mix a bit more?’

‘You know I like being by myself.’

She sighed and looked like she had all the troubles of the world on her shoulders. ‘I guess it’s my fault for letting you spend all your time with Grandad rather than with kids your own age. Sometimes you even sound like him – more like a quaint old man than a ...’

‘A gobby job?’ I laughed. ‘Just you wait till my birthday – then you’ll notice the difference. I’ll turn into a stropky chav then, so watch out.’

She gave me one of her funny looks, so I gave my cheekiest grin back and said, ‘It’s not my fault you gave birth to me at the end of August.’

I don’t believe in all that horoscope stuff, but I showed her what it said in one of her magazines: *Virgos are undemonstrative and introvert, often being loners with waters that run deep. Wise, witty and watchful for detail, the Virgo is sensitive, has a good understanding of human nature and can effectively help people solve their problems.*

‘So that’s what I am, Mum – just get over it!’

Instead of her giggling or chasing me down the garden waving a broom for a laugh, as she sometimes did, she took me by surprise. She went very serioius and said, ‘Let’s hope you can help me solve one of my problems, Fin.’

She rolled up her sleeve to show the bruises up her arm; black, blue and purple. Even yellow. Everywhere.

‘Who’s done that to you?’ I asked. ‘Whatever happened?’ For a horrible moment I thought Uncle Calvin had come back.

‘It was the shed door knocking into me in the wind. The doctor sent me for tests. It’s something to do with dodgy blood, apparently. It might explain all my nosebleeds and headaches as well.’

I told her not to worry, but I knew that was a waste of time. Mum could win a gold medal for worrying. She was always worried about something – usually in case she was made redundant from her job at the Tourist Information Centre in town, even though the place is heaving with tourists all year.

She held my face in her hands and sighed, ‘I worry what’s to become of you, Fin. It’s a tough old world out there, eh?’

I told her she didn’t have to worry about me any more, but she turned away and mumbled something which I didn’t catch – but I guessed. I knew she was about to cry again.

I’ve always been used to Mum crying. This time it was about her feeling guilty for not taking me away on holiday. ‘I’m so sorry, Fin. I really need a holiday, what with being so tired all the time – but I just can’t afford it at the moment. When they sell Grandad’s flat I promise I’ll take you somewhere amazing. That’s if Uncle Calvin doesn’t take it all.’

I didn’t say anything. I just remembered what Grandad had told me just before he died, so I shrugged

and went to my room. I sat on the end of my bed and stared at the wardrobe – and at my face in the mirror on the door. It always reassured me that I could see a bit of Grandad in the shape of my face, but I dreaded ever looking like Uncle Calvin, with his puffy double-chin. Even so, maybe I shared some of his naffest genes. What a pity you can't get a gene transplant or get to choose your own relatives, I thought.

It was then I saw my face morph into Grandad's in the mirror. There was no sound, but I knew what the lips were saying. 'Take a look in the wardrobe, Fin. Make sure the tin is safely hidden inside. Remember everything I told you. Guard it with your life.'



TWO

The wardrobe's wooden floor lifted to reveal a dark space underneath. It was where Grandad's biscuit tin had remained hidden since the very last time I saw him. That was on Christmas Day, when he was in a wheelchair and so ill, but he'd insisted on spending 'quality time in private with my best friend and grandson'. It wasn't totally private because Maisie, his guide dog, lay at his feet by the wardrobe while he told me everything. He winked and said she was one hundred percent trustworthy and wouldn't breathe a word to anyone.

'That tin has all sorts in it; various bits and bobs, family heirlooms and a few papers. Keep them under wraps. When you're eighteen you can decide what to do with them and show Mum then if you want. But it's best if your Uncle Calvin never gets his grubby paws on them.'

The thing is, Fin – you know I think the world of you. You’ve been more than my eyes these last years. Maisie loves you, too ...’ She looked up at me with perfect timing, with those big brown Labrador eyes. I stroked her head as Grandad asked me a question that took me by surprise.

‘What did you think of Uncle Calvin when you saw him on my birthday?’ His blind eyes opened wide as he waited for me to reply.

‘If I’m honest, we didn’t speak to each other. I still don’t really like him, Grandad. I know I shouldn’t say that, but he doesn’t like me either. Nor does Jasmine.’

‘Well, they certainly don’t think much of me. Once I’ve gone, they’ll be crawling over everything in my flat, trying to get their claws on my money. I don’t want to tell your mum what he’s really like, as she’s already got enough on her plate. But I’ll warn you, Fin. Never trust Calvin. He’s got a nasty side that your mum doesn’t know about – because Gran and I kept it all quiet for years. As far as Mum knows, Calvin went off to university, then backpacking around Australia.’

‘I know,’ I said. ‘She’s told me about it.’

‘But that’s the point,’ Grandad shook his head sadly. ‘He did neither.’

I was concentrating hard, watching Grandad’s face very closely and hanging on his every word as he added slowly, ‘He was in prison for three years.’

I said nothing as I tried to imagine the uncle I didn’t see very often as a convict behind bars. I was stunned, but as the news sank in, part of me wasn’t too surprised.

‘He broke his mother’s heart. Mine too, for that matter. When he moved away from home he got in a bad crowd, got mixed up in all sorts of trouble and went off the rails. He’s been a ne’er-do-well ever since. I always reckoned drugs did something to his mind. He was convicted for assault and diagnosed with something called IED; intermittent explosive disorder. That’s basically a terrible temper, but he’s calmed down since then. We didn’t dare tell your mum about it all as she was going through a hard time herself. You know how stressed she can get. We were going to tell her everything in time, but then her world fell apart and I couldn’t knock her confidence when she was at rock bottom.’

I knew exactly what he was talking about. ‘You mean ten years ago, when I was three?’ I asked.

He nodded. ‘When you got very ill and we nearly lost you.’ His eyes filled as he turned to tell Maisie. ‘The doctors said little Fin wouldn’t make it. It was the last straw. That’s when Fin’s dad walked out. It was all too much.’

‘Mum never talks about all that,’ I butted in. ‘She told me once that my dad was from another planet and, for all she knew, he now lived on the moon. Even now I stare from my bedroom window at the full moon when it hangs in the midnight sky and turns the sea gold. That’s always so awesome to watch, but I still stick up two fingers – as it reminds me of a dad who disappeared without trace one morning when I was three and a half.’

Grandad reached out to touch me. His hand was unusually shaky, cold and bony.

'Fin, you're a miracle and I love the way you talk to me. Back then was a bad time and I blame all that for bringing on Gran's heart trouble. It was a terrible shock for your mum to find her dead in this very room. That's why I've tried to protect Mum ever since. Not that I need to worry now as you're doing her the power of good. Even so ...' he leaned forward and tapped his nose, 'best not tell her about her brother, eh? Just be on your guard but hush-hush. Let sleeping dogs lie, I reckon. Isn't that so, Maisie?' He smiled as he patted her and she rolled on her side.

That was my last memory of the man I adored.

I opened the wardrobe door as I relived that conversation from nearly eight months before. Lifting the false floor, I peered in at the biscuit tin hidden inside. I hadn't opened it since I'd put my letter in there after Grandad's funeral. Somehow I'd hoped he might be able to see again and read what I'd written. The envelope was exactly as I'd left it with two words written on it:

To Grandad.

Although I remembered most of what I'd written, I took out the letter and read every word of my best handwriting once more.

Dear Grandad,

My teacher said it might help if I write to you and let you know how I feel. She's noticed a change in me, as I'm not like my old self'. Surprise, surprise! She's the teacher I told you about. Mrs Holmes is brilliant – the

one who told me I was as bright as a button but added with a laugh 'despite everything'. The bad news is she's retiring in the summer at the end of my Year 9. That's another blow as she's got me reading and helps me with dyslexia and stuff.

There were loads of people at your funeral and they all said amazing things. I didn't cry till afterwards. Even Uncle Calvin did a good talk and he really impressed Mum. Jasmine drank too much and slept in the car most of the day, but even she scrubbed up well for a 'large Goth with big issues'. You used to laugh at how I described her and everything else to you. I so miss all that. I also miss Maisie and I hope we did the right thing. Mum and I so wanted to keep her ourselves, but after a long talk we decided we should let her go to another blind person as she's still young and such a brilliant working dog. We thought that's what you'd want, but it meant we'd never be able to see her again. That hurt so much.

When the van came to collect Maisie, Mum and I locked ourselves in the shed and blubbed like babies all afternoon, before going wild at the theme park and going on every single ride. We screamed till we were totally pooped, then had hot dogs, ice cream and candyfloss before going for a massive curry. Weirdly, we weren't sick, even when we drank bottles of coke watching a spooky late night foreign film with subtitles. I bet you'd have been real chuffed with us. We didn't tell Uncle Calvin.

I miss Maisie so much – but not as much as I miss you. To be honest, I don't think I'll ever be the same again. This year hasn't been that great so far and I reckon it's the end of the Fin you knew. Or as they'd say in France, 'le fin de Fin'.

Thanks for being so epic, Grandad – and my inspiration forever.

As soon as I returned the tin to its hiding place in the wardrobe, I saw Mum's face in the mirror beside me. Spinning round, I just hoped she hadn't seen Grandad's secret tin, but I soon knew she was in manic mode and unaware of anything – apart from whatever was on her mind. She sat on the bed and told me to sit beside her, making sure I was looking at her face. 'I need to talk to you, Fin. I'm sorry I haven't cooked anything. I'll get something from the freezer or open a tin. I haven't had time, what with everything else.'

'What did you think of my photo?' I asked. 'I did some great stone-balancing today.' I could usually calm things a bit by changing the subject.

'Very nice, love. I just wish you'd do it with a few friends. Mix a bit, that's all.'

'I'm going to print off that picture and make some cards. I might sell a few,' I said, ignoring her.

'That's not a bad idea,' she answered, although she was obviously thinking about something else. 'I could sell them at the Tourist Office if you like.'

'Sweet!' I grinned. 'I'd like to make a few quid for the

Guide Dogs. Grandad would want that. It could be our little business in memory of him.'

'The only thing is, I might be off work for a while,' she went on, biting her lip.

'It looks like I'll need to go into hospital soon, love.' She looked away but I saw tears drip on the duvet. 'I didn't tell you everything earlier – about what the doctor said. You don't need to know all the details, but I've got blood problems and may need some treatment. I'm afraid it looks like you may have to go and stay with Uncle Calvin for a little while.'

'I'm going to print my pictures,' I said, without looking at her. I went to my printer, leaving her sitting there talking at me non-stop, although I had no idea what she was going on about. I didn't want to think about what she was saying. Eventually she left me alone, although I didn't see her go.

As I was doing stuff on my laptop and choosing images to print while trying not to dwell on what Mum had said, she sent me an email.

Sorry, Fin. I didn't know how to tell you. I've got something called MDS. It's best if you Google it so you know what it means. Please don't worry.

That's my job! Love Mum.

Knowing how she always feared the worst and worried whatever, I did as she said and tapped in MDS, expecting to see something like Mild Depression Symptoms. I guessed it was probably just one of those

‘midlife things’ that a few tablets could sort out. But a long word that I couldn’t say came up: Myelodysplasia. I read some of the description but didn’t take it all in.

In MDS, your bone marrow doesn't make enough healthy red blood cells, white blood cells and/or platelets. Instead, it makes abnormal cells that are not fully developed. Treatment will depend on your type of MDS and your level of risk. The aim is to get the blood cells in your bloodstream back to normal, and manage symptoms. If your MDS has only a low risk of turning into cancer, you may not need any treatment at first, just regular blood tests.

The word ‘cancer’ screamed in my head and burst through my silence like a juggernaut. I swore and threw myself on my bed. Why did this have to come crashing into our lives right now? All I ever wanted was to be left alone and to get away from all the constant fussing from adults – and now cancer was muscling in as well. I’d already seen what that did to Grandad. Although I knew I could do nothing about that scary intruder, I would certainly do everything in my power to stop the other – Uncle Calvin. The last thing we needed was him on the scene – or me on his.

I vowed right then I would take control and do something drastic. Nothing was going to make me live with him and his gross partner.

‘I know it’s not easy for you, Fin,’ Mum said later, over a plate of spaghetti hoops on toast. ‘But it’s not easy for me

at the moment, either. I should feel a bit livelier at the weekend when I've had another blood transfusion, so maybe we can go out somewhere then. Have a think where you'd like to go. We'll have a bit of fun, eh? We may not have a chance again this holiday if I need to have chemo.'

'I'm not going to Uncle Calvin's, Mum. Grandad once told me ... ' I stopped myself just in time. 'He told me Uncle Calvin doesn't really understand me. We might not get on and you wouldn't want that, would you?'

She was about to argue, but I stroked her hand and she smiled. 'We'll see, love. I'll do the best I can for you, but I haven't got any answers right now. We've got a lot of thinking to do, but like the specialist said, "One step at a time". He's arranged for me to visit someone who's already gone through the treatment, so I'm going there tomorrow. It's another day off work, but I'm sure they'll understand. I can't face going in to tell them yet, so can I ask a big favour, Fin?'

'Let me guess,' I said, trying to sound as cheery as I could. 'You either want me to dress up as the town crier and make an announcement outside the Tourist Office, or you want me to pop in and give them a note.'

She came over and gave me a hug and this time it was me who fought back the tears. 'Fin,' she said calmly, 'I'd be so lost without you, love. I really mean it. You mean the absolute world to me.'

That night I couldn't sleep. I lay with the curtains open to let the moonlight spill into my room. In the wardrobe

mirror at the foot of my bed, I watched the moon slowly move across the sky and brush the sea with specs of gold. It should have seemed magical, but I couldn't help sticking up two fingers to curse the moon and the growing shadows looming in the darkness.



THREE

For a few seconds I was convinced a golden Labrador sitting in a bus shelter on the seafront was Maisie. She looked up at me and wagged her tail as I walked past, so I couldn't resist going over to talk to her. Her owner was a woman in dark glasses, but she wasn't blind and up close the dog didn't have Maisie's distinct little frown. I said something about Grandad but the woman didn't smile and I had no idea what she mumbled back, so I quickly headed off to the Tourist Office, clutching my bag of newly-printed cards.

As I walked up to the counter, I gave a quick wave to Sandra, Mum's boss. She looked at me nervously, as if I was about to take a sawn-off shotgun from my bag and demand all the carnival programmes. For some reason she always spoke to me as if I was three and a half – and a total moron. She pronounced every word really slowly with

exaggerated mouth movements, like I was some kind of dumb puppy.

‘Hello, Finley. Is Mum any better?’

‘Not really,’ I answered. ‘She’s got another appointment today and asked me to give you this note. I’ve also got some cards that she says you could sell for me – to make some money for charity.’ I spoke quickly, hoping she would realise I wasn’t the dimwit she thought I was. It made no difference.

‘Ooh, they look lovely, sweetheart. Did you do all those yourself? What a clever boy. Hey, Marjorie, come over here and see what Finley has made. I’m going to buy a few myself to start the ball rolling.’ She emptied coins from her purse onto the counter and when Marjorie came over, she whispered an aside that she seemed to think I wouldn’t notice. ‘It’s Finley, Ali’s boy. You know, the one I told you about. He’s selling cards, bless him.’

Marjorie peered over the counter at me with a startled stare, as if she was expecting to discover a puff adder coiled on the carpet tiles. ‘Well he looks just like his mum, doesn’t he? It’s amazing what those kids can do these days, isn’t it? Schools can work wonders. Those cards look super, although I’m never really sure why people glue stones together on a pile.’

Although she was talking *at* me rather than *to* me, I said, ‘It’s called stone-balancing. Bit of a clue in the name. No glue was harmed in the building of my artistic creations.’

She stared at me with a nervy twitch, as if she hadn’t

expected me to understand a word. 'I'll get you some coins from my bag,' she said, and went to the back of the office, followed by Sandra who mouthed to her in a stage whisper, assuming I couldn't tell what she was saying, 'It can't be easy for Ali bringing him up by herself, what with everything. It must be a trial.'

She returned and gave me a handful of coins. 'Take this money for now, Finley, and we'll try and sell the rest for you. Haven't you been a busy boy?'

'Yes,' I smiled, 'particularly as I'm still being house-trained.'

I left them to their stunned and silent stares.

I now had about ten pounds in loose change that I wanted to give to Guide Dogs, so I set off up the street to find the house I'd seen with a life-size guide dog statue outside, with a collecting box round its neck. About halfway along Braxted Avenue, past all the guest houses, I spotted the retro-looking statue outside number 21. Behind the gates a driveway led to black garage doors beside the front porch of an old-fashioned 1930s-style house with big bay windows and closed curtains.

Leaning my bike against the gates, I took a handful of coins from my pocket and began feeding them into the slot in the guide dog's collecting box. I was concentrating on pushing down coin after coin and counting how much was going in, so I didn't notice a little old woman in a wrap-over overall bustling down the drive towards me, waving a tea towel.

‘Stop that. Stop that immediately. I’ve told you children before, it’s not a toy. I can hear that bell indoors, you know. You just like to hear it ring each time you poke something in there, don’t you? I soon know when you silly boys push stones and lolly sticks in. You mustn’t do it as it clogs things up and takes forever to clean it out. You’ll stop money going through, which we need for the guide dogs. Now off you go and don’t do it again.’

I looked up at her, thinking, *well that’s the thanks I get for trying to be helpful*, but I said with my saddest spaniel eyes, ‘But it’s my money I’m putting in – just over ten pounds. I’ve been raising money for you.’

The woman paused and looked me up and down. ‘Really? Are you serious?’

‘Yes. My Grandad had a guide dog and I want to help buy one for someone else.’ I let my bottom lip wobble a bit to show I was upset.

‘My dear, I’m so sorry. I thought you were one of those horrible little boys from the next street. I can’t tell you how sorry I am. You must come in for a drink and a biscuit. I’ve got some puppies indoors if you’d like to see them.’

She opened the gate, ushered me through and up the steps into the porch, where the smell of cooking fish spilled from the hallway. ‘I’m just boiling up off-cuts for the cats,’ she said. ‘I’ve got about twenty at the moment – and a few litters of kittens. We have an RSPCA cattery in the garage. I run a couple of animal charities here and we’ve always got a few stray pets to look after, as well as the odd injured seagull. Nothing is ever turned away. Now, come inside

and tell me how you raised the money. We like to know who our friends are. You'd be surprised at how many enemies we have as well. Some people can be very cruel to animals, so we do all we can to stop them.'

She took me into a dark sitting room which had its own distinct animal smell, with each chair occupied by a sleeping cat. 'Sit down, dear,' she went on. 'Push Sooty off the armchair and make yourself comfy. I'm Mrs Boughtwood – what's your name?'

'Fin. Finley Rackman. I think my grandad knew you. He was Gerald Gibson.'

'Good heavens, I knew your grandfather for years. You look so much like him – the same mouth and chin. Lovely man. He often sent us funds, God bless him. Then it's a pleasure to meet you, Finley. I've got some chocolate cake in the kitchen – you must have some – nice thick icing on top. Sophie loves it. That's her practising the piano in the other room. Do you play?'

'Sorry? Play what?' I have to say, it was a struggle to keep up with all her gabbling. Her mind seemed to be darting from one thing to the next and I was still trying to work out what was moving in a closed cat basket on a wheelchair in the corner.

'The piano, dear. That's a rabbit in the basket. It's got an injured back and just came back from the vet. He was found in a ditch – the rabbit, not the vet. That's Sophie's wheelchair. She's on crutches, you see, but loves coming here for the animals and the piano. Would you like tea or a cold drink?'

My mind was spinning. 'Who's Sophie?'

She gave a sickly smile as if I was asking a stupid question and should have known the answer. 'Our granddaughter, dear.'

The name suddenly clicked in my head. 'I know Sophie Boughtwood. She's in the year above me at Community College. I've seen her in Mrs Holmes' room.'

Right on cue, Sophie appeared in the doorway. 'Hey, you're Fin,' she beamed. 'I've seen you around school. You're one of Mrs Holmes' cool kids – hashtag cute! I'm so going to miss her, aren't you? What are you doing here, anyway?'

'Your grandma dragged me in off the street,' I laughed.

'I thought Finley was a hooligan, Sophie. I was mistaken, of course.'

'You should've gone to Specsavers,' Sophie giggled.

'Enough of all that,' her Gran said, waving a tea towel. 'It's time for tea and cake. You two have a chat while I put the kettle on. What did you think of Sophie's playing, Finley? We're very proud of her.'

Before I could answer, Sophie was whispering in her gran's ear, so I just mumbled something about how I didn't really have much time for pianos.

Mrs Boughtwood stared at me for a few seconds, gave another of her sickly smiles, told Sophie to 'turf Rusty off the sofa and make yourselves comfy' and bustled from the room – leaving the two of us smiling at each other awkwardly.

'Gran is a bit eccentric, I'm afraid. She's really my

step-gran, but she's got a heart of gold and cares for all dumb creatures, especially me with CP.'

'CP?'

'Cerebral palsy. That's why my legs don't work properly. Luckily my hands aren't too bad, so they thought the piano would help develop coordination – as well as keep me here out of everyone's way. I actually love it here despite the manky fishy pong, but it's kitten heaven. I can show you some little cuties out in the shelter – yes, a genuine World War Two air raid shelter in the garden. Gorgeous puppies in there, too. So how come you ended up here at 21 Braxted Avenue of all places?'

She sat on the sofa and, as we both stroked sleepy cats on our laps, I told her about the beach, my photos and cards for sale in town.

'I've never heard of stone-balancing,' she said. 'Mind you, balancing is clearly not one of my things – and I couldn't get down to that beach if I tried. Mr Rattacheck once took me and Gran round there in his speedboat. He's a wealthy guy who supports Gran's work. She calls Mr Rattacheck 'Mr Write-a-cheque!' He's a governor at school, too – you must have seen him in the paper and stuff. He once got into trouble for calling this an old-fashioned dozy little seaside town stuck in the past that needs bringing into the twenty-first century. Hashtag big mistake!'

I had no idea what she was going on about, probably because I've been called old-fashioned and dozy myself (by Uncle Calvin). I took out my phone and showed her some of my pictures. 'This one's my favourite,' I said. 'I took it

from a distance to show all my stone piles together. How awesome is that?’

‘Wow – I’m impressed. Can I enlarge it to see a bit of detail? I might just see how you’ve nailed all the rocks together.’

She expanded the image and held it up to her eyes. ‘What’s that, then?’

She pointed to a blurry shape at the foot of the cliff behind one of my stone piles. I hadn’t noticed it before and I certainly hadn’t seen it when I was there. Lying on the pebbles below the rocks was a pale pink handbag and, as the image sharpened, its chain strap became clearly visible. But that wasn’t all. Beside it was what appeared to be a hand sticking up out of the sand, like a claw ... its bent fingers glistening with trickles of blood.