

Transcript
Mockery Minis, Tales from the Manor
Episode 1
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Long Cat Media presents Mockery Minis: Tales from the Manor, episode 1.

One night, Freddie Armstrong went a-wandering through the manor in the hope of finding something horrible.

It was common knowledge that the old place was stuffed with secrets. Locals talked of how the manor, the park, and the Mockery woods were haunted by the ghosts of all its victims. Even if you didn't believe half the stories, everyone knew there was something deeply *wrong* with the place, and everyone at Freddie's school knew that Freddie lived right in the centre of it all.

'Well?? You must have seen *something!*' the children would say.
And every day his answer was the same. 'Not yet'.

And so it happened that what had once marked Freddie as dark and dangerous and desperately cool, instead became the mark of failure. The children's breathless curiosity gave way to disappointment, impatience... contempt. Because if THEY lived there, THEY would have seen something. Imagine being so boring that you could live in a haunted theme park and NOT see a ghost! And imagine being so straight-laced that you wouldn't just *invent a story*, for **BLEEP** sake.

I mean, I would, wouldn't you? "Oh yeah, there's a headless horsemen in the Mockery Library. Yep. A spectral dog lives under my bed. Mmhmm. Nah, it's cool, I'm used to it.'

But Freddie wouldn't, he COULDN'T make something up. Too many bedtime stories had taught Freddie that lying was one of the worst things you could do. He knew a lie would get the kids at school to back off, he knew a lie would make his life much easier, and *precisely because of that*, he knew this was a *test*. A test of his honour. A test of whether he, Freddie, was the pure-hearted main character of his own story, or a side-character that came to a sticky end and served as a warning to other bad little boys and girls.

(It would be many years before Freddie realised that the engine of mankind was fuelled by lies. That truth was often an unflushable turd in a guest toilet. Embarrassing. Vulgar.)

If Freddie couldn't – or wouldn't – lie, there was only one solution. He had to find a ghost. A real one. Or a murderer, or a cursed object, maybe a beast. Anything horrible, really.

And so, one night, Freddie went in search of a true story. For tomorrow they would ask again, but tomorrow his answer would be different.

Well past midnight, and down the dim corridors Freddie crept. For the most part, the moonlight streaming through the casement windows lit his way, though he was grateful for the reassuring weight of his flashlight in his hand. It was perfect for swinging at a murderer's skull. His mother's bedtime stories were full of murder; she had taught him that horror often lurked *where you least*

expect it. But growing up on such tales meant that Freddie fully expected murderers to lurk in the dark corners of the manor; *as he expected it*, that must mean that they *wouldn't* be lurking in the dark corners of the manor. Except that if he didn't expect them to lurk in the dark corners, there might be lurking murderers, as they lurk where you least expect them... do you see what I mean? Thus he was grateful for the weight of the flashlight in his hand. Logic, see?

Logic rarely makes something less terrifying, of course.

Having grown up within its walls, Freddie had never been scared of the manor before... but it was a stranger this late at night. He knew its twists and turns like he knew his mother's face, but now... in the moonlight, wreathed in shadows... had that spiral staircase always been there? Or that portrait of Alfred Mockery, had he always been holding the skull of a cat? Talking of cats! There were so many! Freddie was aware of the park's thriving feline population; he'd helped Parker move a nest of kittens from a ride engine on more than one occasion. The ferals distant yowls and trills had lulled him to sleep to his whole life – but somehow, he had never known so many roamed the manor at night. They were everywhere! Hopping from surface to surface, darting across doorways, lamp-eyes glinting in the moonlight.

It was unnerving, yes, but fascinating. As if in daylight, the manor had kept him at arm's length, maintained a polite distance. But at night, her secrets swam so close to the surface, that one might be tempted to reach down and trail a hand in her black waters.

And yet. Despite all this. Freddie looked and looked, hours passed and... not a single horrible thing occurred.

Fear is very tiring. Once the body has burned through its adrenaline reserves, sleep calls. And so, grit and vinegar in his eyes, Freddie finally gave up... and of course that's when he saw it.

Typical. The second you stop looking, there it is.

Not a horrible thing, but a door. One he'd never seen before. And there was a thin strip of light at the bottom where the wood didn't quite meet the carpet. Was someone in there?

(SFX RATTLE HANDLE) Locked.

Luckily his mother had taught Freddie to venture where he shouldn't, so he returned to his bedroom, fetched the kit he'd received for his last birthday, and then back he went to pick the lock.

It didn't take long. For a nine year old, he was pretty good at breaking and entering.

Beyond the locked door, Freddie found a room he'd never been in before.

A tall, windowless room lined on all four sides with shelves, upon which hung dozens of lamps, and on the shelves, reaching up to the ceiling; thousands of books. At the far end of the room, a fire burned in the grate, and in front of the fire, a squashy chair with a tapestry throw. The tapestry depicted a mother cat and her kitten... sitting on a pile of human skulls.

Otherwise, the room was empty. And deliciously inviting. Freddie loved stories and secret rooms –

of course he did, who doesn't - and so he went straight to the shelves to scour the titles for something juicy, the quest for something horrible altogether slipping from his mind.

(Not for long, of course. The next day at school, the children would once again sneer their question, and Freddie would suddenly, quite unexpectedly, feel not the slightest bit of shame.

“Well?? You must have seen *something!*” they would say, and Freddie would sigh “What do you think?” in a tone SO bored and so dismissive, so casually scathing, that it was like the proverbial flashlight to a murderer's skull.

No-one ever asked him again.)

But we're getting ahead of ourselves. That first night in the library, on the highest shelf in the furthest corner, Freddie found a thin volume bound in what looked suspiciously like skin (never a good sign), and on its cover, a title in dripping red: Tales from the Manor.

He took it to the squashy chair and settled in its depths, draping the cat tapestry across his legs. The fire crackled and popped in the hearth, and cast strange shadows over the cover of his new book. Freddie flicked through its pages. There were so many illustrations, so many stories. All written with pen and ink, and each story in a different hand.

Freddie stopped at a random place, almost at the back of the book, at a story called 'Misadventure at Mockery Lake'. The illustration looked like the cover of one of his aunt's silly old horror books. Two people in a rowboat, on a misty lake fringed with forest, a fat moon hanging in the night sky. Freddie traced the lines of the illustration with his finger, and felt... *something*... through his skin. Something electric. A buzz. A hum... of life? Or death?

Freddie read on...

(music swells)

Stories within stories within stories.

If there is a campfire and a group of teenagers, someone at some point will tell a ghost story.

On this occasion, the story started after the batteries in the boombox died.

With the music gone, the stillness of the night crept in to the spaces between sentences. The group of fifteen or so teens became painfully aware of themselves, and of their surroundings: the dark expanse of water on whose shores they sat, the woods beyond, and the vast night sky, dotted with stars.

They tried to bring the vibes back, but without the music it was like trying to start a conga line at a funeral.

“We could sing?” a boy called Bradley said, a note of panic in his voice. The party couldn't end yet; summer was almost over and he hadn't had so much as a whiff of romance. “Wait, no, I've got a better idea! Let's tell scary stories. I'll start!”

One of the girls stood up.

“I'm going back to the Lake House,” she said, grabbing her jacket from the ground.

“Vicky! You're not going to bed?” Bradley protested. “It's only midnight!”

“I'm cold,” she said, hugging herself. “And I need the loo,” she added.

“Just piss in the lake.” He gestured at the treacly waters nearby. There was a distant 'blop' as something unseen broke the surface.

“Shut up, Bradley,” she said, and crunched up the shore towards the Lake House.

“Call me Brad,” he called after her. He'd been trying to get people to call him Brad all summer, but he was from Brighton, not California, so it hadn't stuck.

“Wait for me, Vicks,” her friend said. As if a silent alarm had gone off, all the others started to gather their things.

“Last one puts the fire out,” Vicky shouted behind her, into the dark night.

Only three remained: Bradley, a guy called Jim who was too stoned to move, and a girl who rarely spoke but was always there.

Defeated, Bradley went to follow the others.

“What's the story about?” the girl said, the campfire casting strange shadows on her face.

“Oh, that.” He thought for a second, wondering if he should waste it on these two. He didn't even know the girl's name. Still, she was kind of cute, in a small, pale way. And fear was a great aphrodisiac.

“It's about something that happened here.”

“At the lake?” she said. “When?”

“Funny you should ask that.” Bradley took a seat next to the girl. He lowered his voice. “It was ten years ago this very night.”

Jim snorted. Maybe he was less wasted than he looked.

Bradley ignored him. “And just like tonight, it started with a party.” He scowled in the direction of the Lake House. “A better party than this one, though. No-one went to bed at *midnight* like a giant *baby*. They stayed up until dawn and got drunk and loads of people shagged each other and it was--”

The girl interrupted. “Did someone get hurt?”

Bradley nodded.

“Yeah, someone got hurt. A couple took a rowboat into the middle of the lake... and let's just say, not everyone came back.”

Jim silently passed him a joint. Bradley took a shallow toke, exhaled a thin plume of smoke, and continued...

It was the summer of 1976, and boy, was it hot. Too hot for some, but not for Sherry. When she wasn't working shifts at Mockery Manor theme park, Sherry would cover herself in cooking oil, lie on the flat roof of the Lake House, and bake herself to a deep brown. She loved the feel of the sun on her bare skin. She even loved the musty, mud-tinged scent that wafted off the lake. The others said it was like rotten eggs, but to Sherry, it was strange, fecund... exciting. Like the sweaty groin of Dionysus himself.

But while the days were too hot for most, the evenings were perfect for outdoor parties. Every night, when the theme park shut, the park employees would gather on the lake shore to drink and flirt until the small hours.

This was the first summer Sherry had successfully flirted with *anyone*. The heat had loosened the tight coil of British reserve within her. She felt free. Reckless. Which was probably why she had found herself in a rowboat in the middle of the lake, at midnight, with Mockery Manor's own Dionysus: Duncan Green.

Duncan, the same name as one of Sherry's favourite singers. And just like the singer, he was confident, cute... and a total slag. The girls of the Lake House had noticed he'd been paying Sherry special attention, and had made up a rhyme; “six foot two, eyes of blue, Duncan Green is after you.”

But Sherry didn't care about Duncan's reputation. Or more accurately, it was the reason she'd

allowed him to drag her away from the party tonight. The time had come. Sherry didn't need her first time to be special; she just wanted to get it over with, so she could relax and find someone she cared about. Although she doubted they could go all the way in such a small rowboat, not without capsizing. Maybe they'd just make out. Yeah, that was probably for the best; after all, she wasn't the strongest swimmer.

Duncan's knees bumped against hers as he rowed.

"We're so far out," Sherry said, squinting at the shore and the small, glowing blob that was the campfire. The muted sounds of laughter and music drifted across the still water.

"This'll do," Duncan said, and pulled the oars in. Bathed in the cold light of the full moon, he looked vampiric. Even dressed in hot pants and a singlet.

"We're just gonna drift?" she asked.

Duncan leaned towards her, reached down. Sherry's breath caught in her throat as his fingers caressed her calf.

But then it stopped, and Duncan reached further under the seat to grab something.

"Take this," he said, pulling out a six-pack. He rummaged some more and then straightened with a flashlight in his hand, which he jammed into the oar-lock. He turned it on, sending a powerful beam of light between them.

"Mood lighting," he said with a smile. Sherry laughed and passed him a beer, before opening one for herself.

The beer was warm and tasted like the lake smelled. They drank in peace for a moment, gazing into the darkness, listening to the trill of the crickets.

"It's nice to have some privacy," she said.

Duncan groaned. "Tell me about it. I'm so sick of the boys dorm. Can't even have a wank without wondering who's listening."

In an attempt to look unfazed at the mention of Duncan's ween, Sherry gave a knowing laugh. It came out as a squeak. She rushed on.

"Is this your first year working at Mockery Manor?" she asked. God, she sounded stiff! 'Be cool, Sherry', she berated herself, barely hearing Duncan's reply. "Don't let him know you're a square." She took another sip of beer and tuned back in.

"...done it loads of times now, but I'm not coming back again," Duncan was saying. "Six times is enough."

"You've worked at Mockery Manor for *six* summers?" Sherry said. "Wow. Long time. Is it true about the turtles?"

As urban legends go, this one was pretty tame: the story was, a few years ago, there'd been a breakout at the Mockery reptile house. A pair of snapping turtles the size of coffee tables had somehow escaped and made their way through the theme park, across a small section of forest, and into the lake. Every year since, someone would spot one of them in the water. No-one ever got close, though, because no-one ever swam in the lake. It was too opaque, too choked with algae. And it smelled way too gross.

Duncan crumpled his empty can and tossed it over the side of the boat.

"Yeah, it's true. They escaped the first year I was here. And it wasn't just turtles."

Sherry's eyes widened. "Something else got out? What?"

He leaned towards her, his icy blues fixed on hers, as if to better catch her reaction.

"A crocodile," he whispered. "And it's still here."

"Oh no," Sherry said, fighting the urge to laugh.

There was a pause. And then Duncan lunged at her. The boat rocked madly at the sudden shift in weight, and Sherry let out a piercing shriek that was abruptly cut off when Duncan's warm mouth

closed on hers. Disoriented, heart thumping in her chest, Sherry forced herself to relax. She'd only just started to enjoy herself when Duncan pulled away, grinning.

Sherry slapped him on the shoulder.

“Hey.”

“You could've capsized the boat!” Sherry folded her arms in mock disapproval. “We could've fallen in!”

“Scared the croc will get you?” he asked.

Sherry laughed. This was good. They were having fun. This would be a good memory to look back on when she went to uni in the autumn.

“There's no crocodile. You're just trying to scare me.” She gave him another playful whack, harder this time. “You big fibber.”

As if a light switch had been flipped, Duncan's smile dropped.

“Fibber?” he repeated. “You think I'm lying?”

Sherry felt a small jolt of alarm. She studied his face, in case he was teasing her.

“No, of course not,” she said, confused by the sudden change. “I... I thought you were joking.” Her eyes widened. “So... there's really a crocodile in the lake?”

Duncan didn't answer, didn't even look at her. He slumped back against the bow and shook his head, incredulous.

Sherry kept on, trying to paper over the cracks with words.

“Wow. A crocodile. How did a *crocodile* escape? That's crazy. I only heard about the turtles. No-one ever mentioned a crocodile before.”

“So you *do* think I'm lying,” he said.

Sherry felt a spike of frustration. “No! I never said you were lying! Just that you... made it up.”

Duncan looked at her, stony-faced.

“Why are you being weird about this?” she demanded.

“Oh right, OK, so you're angry at *me* now?!”

“Yeah, because you're being weird about some stupid urban myth!” she said, her voice rising to match his.

“Lemme get this straight. You call me weird and a liar, and you hit me – twice! - but somehow I'm the bad guy?”

Sherry just looked at him, lost for words. A cold stone of disappointment settled in her stomach.

Duncan had never seemed particularly easy-going or laid back, but she had no idea he could be like *this*. Who the hell was she stranded in the middle of the lake with?

“I think I want to go back to the party,” she said, voice tight. “This isn't fun anymore. Take me back.”

“Oh! OK! Right away, milady!” Duncan snatched at one of the oars, his movements sharp and furious. He swung the flat blade into the lake, almost hitting her in the process.

“Watch what you're doing!” she snapped, just as Duncan, in his clumsy fury, fumbled the oar. Like a diver entering a pool, it slid into the water with barely a ripple. Duncan let out a shout of anger.

“Look what you made me do!”

“Grab it, quick!” Sherry shrieked.

But it was too late. Sherry watched in horror as the oar, oblivious to all the excitement – because, after all, it was an oar – was swallowed by the lake. Duncan lunged over the edge of the boat and plunged his arm deep into the cloudy water. After a few moments of impotent groping, he gave up, and in a fit of anger, he punched the water. The impact sent a splash directly into his face, which didn't help his mood much. He turned to Sherry.

“This is your fault!”

Sherry ignored him, and picked up the second oar from where it was resting against her bench. It

was surprisingly heavy, and the wood was wet and slippery. She shifted her grip to the rubber handle and carefully manoeuvred the blade into the water.

“What are you doing?” Duncan snapped. “We’ll go round in literal circles with one oar.”

“Not if you use your hands to paddle,” she said, trying to keep her voice as calm and level as possible.

“Or how about *I* use the oar, and *you* can use your friggin’ hands,” Duncan said, and grabbed the handle. Sherry twisted away from him, shielding the oar with her body.

“No, Duncan! Leave it!”

“Give it to me!”

“No!”

Duncan switched his attention to the wooden shaft. He grabbed it with one hand and yanked hard. Sherry jerked forward, but kept her grip.

“You’re so childish!” she shouted, furious now. Duncan ignored her and pulled again, and Sherry slid off the seat, her knee hitting the bottom of the boat.

“Stop it!” she squealed. The boat rocked as they tugged backwards and forwards, neither one willing to relent.

“Just let go, you freak!” Duncan shouted. He pulled again, this time with both hands, and yanked it free from Sherry’s grasp. Unfortunately, the force of the pull, and the smoothness with which it left Sherry’s hands, carried Duncan backwards and straight over the side of the boat and into the water. Duncan was a big lad, and the wave he created carried the boat several feet from where he’d entered the water.

“Duncan!” Sherry cried after a moment’s silence. She gripped the sides of the lurching vessel. Panic squeezed her throat. “Duncan??”

She scanned the dark waters. There was no sign of him. Sherry looked around the rowboat for some kind of buoyancy aid, but Duncan had ejected the life jackets to make room for beer. She was just about to shout into the darkness again when he surfaced, choking, gasping, at least ten feet from the boat.

Relief washed through her. “Are you OK?”

“I’m in the lake!” Duncan cried, redundantly.

“The boat’s drifting away from you! Hurry!”

But she needn’t worry; Duncan was a powerful swimmer, and it wasn’t long before his hands gripped the edge and he hauled himself up the side of the boat. In the moonlight, the water streaming down his face and torso looked like ethereal ropes tethering him to the lake.

“Be careful!” Sherry shrieked as the boat tipped. With Duncan’s weight pressing on one side of the flimsy vessel, the rim had sunk almost level with the water. In an attempt to balance the weight, Sherry scurried away from him, to the other side of the boat, but this meant that the rim moved too high above the water for Duncan to clamber over.

“Sherry, you’re gonna have to help me,” Duncan said, his voice waterlogged, after the third attempt to haul himself into the boat had sent him back under the surface of the lake. “I can’t get in on my own. Pull me in.”

Sherry didn’t budge.

“Just try again,” she said, tremulous.

“Sherry!” he roared. “Help me!”

“No!” she shouted back. “I’m not strong enough. I’ll go over the edge. Or the boat’ll capsize. Just... just try again!”

There was a long pause while Sherry listened to his ragged breathing.

“Duncan??” she eventually said.

“It won’t work. I can’t get in without your help.”

Sherry bit her lip, conflicted.

“You could swim to the shore?”

“Are you fucking kidding me??”

“Why not? You're a good swimmer. And the water's not even cold.”

“Sherry,” replied Duncan, his words slow, as if to reassure her that he was in control, that he wasn't angry, and that she needed to listen to logic. “There is a crocodile in this lake. I would like to get out of the water as soon as possible, if that's alright with you.”

“Duncan,” she said, in the same reasonable tones. “That's just an urban legend.”

“IT IS NOT AN URBAN LEGEND!!!”

Duncan was clearly a loony, and Sherry's resolve hardened.

“Just swim to the shore!” she shrieked, huddling deep in the hull, as far away from him as she could get. “Forget the crocodile! There is no crocodile!”

There was a faint thud as Duncan leaned his forehead against the side of the boat. “Yes, there is,” he replied. “*I know* there is. Because I released it.”

Sherry wondered if she'd heard him right.

Duncan continued.

“Me and some of the lads, we broke into the Reptile House. We were gonna put one of the turtles in the girls dorm, just for a laugh, but they were too heavy so we just... left the enclosure open. And then later, I went back. On my own. I'd seen this baby crocodile. Skinny little dude. Not even two feet. I took it. I dunno why. But then I almost got caught, so I dumped it in the lake.”

Sherry looked out at the dark water. Here and there, she could discern faint ripples on the surface.

“Oh,” she said blankly.

Aside from the ripples, she also noticed the distant, glowing blob of the camp fire was missing. It had disappeared. The party was over. There was no point screaming for help, then.

She licked her dry lips. “Duncan? You said this was... six years ago? The crocodile, it's probably dead by now.”

“It might not be.”

“Well. Even if it's not, it's only little.”

“It could be ten feet by now.”

Sherry tried to swallow, but her throat was too tight.

“It might not be hungry?” she tried. “I think I remember hearing they don't eat very often. They can go *months*.”

She paused, waited for him to speak. When he didn't, she again suggested he swim for shore. “I'll just drift,” she added. “When you get back, can you tell someone to come rescue me?”

Again, Duncan said nothing. And then he roared like a wounded hippo, and in one movement, energised by fury, he heaved himself up the side of the boat and managed to swing one long, dripping leg into the hull. With that, the boat tipped almost vertically on its side, and Sherry slid downwards towards the thrashing figure of Duncan.

And then, of course, the boat flipped over.

It turned out the lake *was*, in fact, cold. The unusually hot summer had certainly warmed the water more than usual, but it was still sufficiently below body temperature to be a shock. Another surprise was Sherry's sneakers swelling with water and doubling in weight. And how dark it was beneath the surface. For a deeply frightening few seconds, Sherry was unsure which way was up, and it was pure luck she kicked in the right direction and broached the surface.

Frantically treading water with leaden feet, Sherry spent what felt like several minutes choking, trying to clear her clogged throat. When she could breathe again, she prised each swollen sneaker off her feet. Released, they floated into the depths like strange fish, to be nibbled on by curious

lake-dwellers.

She couldn't see the boat. Sherry turned in circles, but there was nothing. Nothing! She could barely see two feet in front of her.

"Duncan??" she called.

No answer.

"Duncan?" she cried again, her voice cracking.

Just then, the moon slipped from behind a cloud, and illuminated what looked like an enormous turtle on the surface of the water. The overturned rowboat. Whimpering with relief, Sherry doggy-paddled over. She was feeling the slimy wooden shell for hand holds when something smacked her on the side of the head, sending her reeling back and under the water.

Sherry resurfaced quickly, spluttering, her ears ringing. Through streaming eyes, she looked up to see a dark shape splayed over the crest of the hull.

Duncan. He was on top of the boat, lying on his front down the length of the keel.

Had he... had he kicked her in the head?

"Why," Sherry gasped, "why did you do that??"

"Oh, you want my help now?" Duncan rasped from atop his wooden turtle. "Better take your own advice and swim! Go on! What are you waiting for?"

Duncan waited for her to beg. Now she knew what it felt like. It was her turn in the lake of death. But in place of the anticipated pleas for help, there was a series of small splashes, and Duncan was left wondering if Sherry had actually started out for the shore.

Suddenly, Duncan shrieked as the boat dropped deeper into the water before springing up again, and then down and up and down again while wobbling from side to side like a bucking bronco. On the verge of sliding off and into the water, Duncan gripped with every fibre of his being. Just as his thighs and fingers started to cramp, the boat calmed to a steady, shallow bob. And somewhere underneath him, through the wood, Duncan heard a sob of exertion.

Sherry. She was under the boat.

She'd ducked underwater, and surfaced in the pocket of air formed by the overturned hull.

Furious, Duncan thumped the wood with a soggy fist.

"Sherry? What do you think you're doing?? I almost fell off!"

A mere inch or two below him, Sherry had almost finished hauling herself onto the bench that, in happier times, she'd sat on while sipping warm beer. Keening with effort, she inched herself a little further so that her head and torso were fully supported, with her legs floating in the water. Finally, she allowed herself to relax and catch her breath, before gathering her strength and carefully shuffled forward, along the length of bench. The boat tipped with her movement.

"Stop it!" came a muffled cry from up top. She ignored him, and reached down into the water, towards the oar-lock. The flashlight. She knew it must still be there because she could see a thin beam of light arcing through the water.

She found it, unclipped it from the oar-lock and pulled it out of the water and onto the bench. It filled the hull with a warm, yellow light.

And that's when she saw it. A spare oar. It was secured with waterproof rope to the inside of the boat.

It wasn't unheard of to lose an oar to the lake; a spare meant no-one ever had to be stranded. As long as you weren't rowing in the dark, unaware that it was there.

She almost laughed. They could've just rowed back to shore.

Too late now. Now she'd have to stay put until morning, partially submerged in water.

On the other hand, maybe she wouldn't make it 'til morning. Not if there really was a crocodile in the lake.

There was a first aid kit too, bolted to the wood. Sherry doubted a few bandaids would be enough to

save her.

The laugh that had threatened to bubble over turned into a sob.

“C'mon, Sherry,” she berated herself. “Be cool.”

One of the things that Sherry prided herself on was her logical approach to life. When emotion clouded her ability to cope, she did her best to shut it down. Panic and terror were actively unhelpful, but facts... facts helped her find the best possible solution to any problem. And so Sherry considered what she knew about crocodiles.

It wasn't much. She'd seen a nature documentary on them once – or maybe that was alligators. She couldn't remember the difference, or much else besides, but she had a vague feeling that splashing and shouting were best avoided.

It was a little too late for that, of course; they'd both been screaming and splashing for a while now. If there was a croc in the lake, it knew they were there. And if it was hungry, then Sherry's dangling legs were the obvious target.

Unless she and Duncan swapped places.

Hmm.

She considered.

Duncan's grip on the hull was precarious, that was clear enough. If she made Duncan fall back in the water, she could clamber onto the hull herself, and Duncan would become the target.

But then Duncan would knock her straight back into the water, and he was strong enough to do it quickly. No. If Sherry pushed him off the hull, she'd have to figure out a way to keep him off.

According to Duncan's watch – top of the range, glow-in-the-dark, waterproof to 1000 feet – Sherry had been under the boat for twenty minutes. He wondered when the crocodile would strike, and how much warning there'd be. Duncan suspected they made no sound at all until the point of attack, but that didn't stop him straining his ears in the darkness. His main fear was that the crocodile would attack Sherry with such ferocity that he would be knocked off the boat and into the water, and in the frenzy, he'd get eaten too. He had to be prepared. Duncan tightened his grip on the keel, and clenched his now-aching thighs and calves around the swell of the hull. Maybe if he pretended he was riding a whale or a dragon, then he could distract himself from the--

The boat wobbled, followed by a splash from somewhere close-by; Duncan's senses snapped into high alert. He scanned the area, but the moon had slipped behind a cloud again and he couldn't see much.

“Duncan!”

“Jesus Christ!” Duncan exclaimed, the tension bursting out of him. “Sherry! You scared the crap out of me!”

“Sorry,” she gurgled wetly. Duncan peered over the side of the hull but couldn't see her. He was surprised she'd left the shelter of the air pocket, but relieved she was in the open water. If the croc got her while she was separated from the boat, Duncan was less likely to fall in.

“Where are you?” he asked.

“Back here.”

Duncan cautiously raised himself up on his forearms, and looked behind. She was on the right hand side, at the blunt back-end of the vessel (which Duncan suspected was called the aft, but he wasn't sure).

From the little he could make out in the gloom, Sherry looked like she was struggling; her face was barely above water.

“What do you want?” he said, voice harsh.

“Oar,” Sherry said. Her face slipped briefly beneath the water before emerging again. She gulped air for a moment before continuing. “I've got an oar!”

Duncan peered closer, careful not to lean too far. So that was why Sherry was struggling to stay buoyant; she was holding onto an oar, and the heavy rubber handle was dragging her under.

“What good is that now?” Duncan demanded, feeling a pang of discomfort as Sherry slipped under again. It wasn't nice, watching her slowly drown.

Sherry didn't – or couldn't - answer. Instead she dragged the weighted handle of the oar up against the hull, keeping hold of the oar blade. With the heavy end out of the water and propped up against the boat, Sherry was able to keep her head above water.

“You could paddle back,” she gasped, her speech staccato with exhaustion. “Let me pass it up to you.”

Huh. That, Duncan considered, could work. He could lay on his front, as if on a surfboard, and paddle either side of the hull.

“What about you?” he asked suspiciously. “You can't come up here, it's not stable enough.”

“I'll go back under,” Sherry said. “I can hold onto the bench and kick my legs. Like a motor. We'll go faster.”

Under normal circumstances, that wasn't a bad idea either. But Sherry clearly hadn't considered that kicking her legs hard enough and long enough to help propel the boat to shore would *definitely* attract the crocodile.

Sherry was out of options, she just didn't know it. But Duncan wasn't. Ideally, he would row back alone, with gentle, quiet strokes of the oar, and she'd stay here and tread water. But she wouldn't agree to that, so...

“OK,” Duncan said. “Let's do it. Pass me the oar.”

He'd just have to hit her over the head with the paddle and leave her out here. He wasn't trying to kill her or anything, just stun her long enough for him to get away.

Duncan briefly considered that the events of this night might be on his conscience for a long time to come. But he might not *have* a long time to come if he didn't do it.

“Bring it up here. Bring it up this end.”

If she was closer, he could get a clear swipe at her.

But she'd already started to push the rubber handle of the oar up the side of the hull, down by his feet. Stupid cow. On the other hand, Duncan could barely see her, but from the grunts of effort and the occasional gurgle as a push ducked her under the water, he realised a clear swipe might not be necessary. She was probably too weak to swim back under the boat, especially if it was already moving.

The handle nudged Duncan's calf

“Take it,” Sherry said, voice cracking with exhaustion.

“I can't reach it from here. Bring it round the front. The *front*.”

“Can't,” gasped Sherry.

Duncan huffed a little, then slowly, carefully pushed himself upright. He straddled the hull, his feet dipping into the water, and reached down towards the handle of the oar.

“Got it?” Sherry asked, once he had grasped it with one hand. His other gripped the keel.

“Almost,” he said, and tried to pull the oar higher... but there was resistance. “Let go,” he complained, just as he felt something cold close around his calf. He looked down, confused, as Sherry gripped his leg with all her remaining strength, and pulled.

It was an imperfect plan. She'd intended to drag him off the hull and into the water. He would drop the oar as he fell, but Sherry had tied the blade end of the oar to the oar-lock, so she could retrieve it later. Once he was in the water, Sherry would stab him with the pair of scissors she'd found in the First Aid kit. She'd have to stab him somewhere disabling, like his eye, but she tried not to dwell on that part of the plan, in case her nerve failed. With Duncan out of the way, she would grab the oar, climb onto the hull, and paddle to shore.

Maybe calling the plan 'imperfect' is too kind. 'Wildly unrealistic' might be more accurate. For a start, his leg was slippery and her hands slid downwards as soon as she pulled. It might've been enough to pull him off the boat, had he not gripped the keel with both hands to steady himself. The only part Sherry accurately predicted was that he'd drop the oar. What she failed to predict was the way in which it would smash into her face and break her nose.

"You crazy bitch!" Duncan roared. Sherry flailed in the water, blinded by pain, blood streaming down her throat from her nose. Once more, she grabbed at his leg, this time it was to save herself, and this time, her wild flailing succeeded in sending them both into the water, entangled in each other.

As soon as they surfaced, Duncan groped for her in the dark and with teeth clenched, he wrapped his hands around her throat. She kicked at him, landing a glancing blow on his crotch. The air left his lungs but he maintained his hold, sending them both back under.

Shrouded in the inky darkness, Duncan's hands still squeezing, Sherry groped for the back pocket of her denim shorts and found the scissors. They were brand new, undulled by use. The resistance of the water slowed their progress, but not enough. Duncan barely registered that she'd plunged them into his neck until he tasted his own blood, and finally his grip on Sherry loosened.

By this point, neither knew which way was up. Their lungs filling with blood and lake water, panic gave way to an eerie calm, and they slowly drifted to the bottom of the lake.

"Oooh, spooky," Jim said, twin jets of weed smoke pouring from his nostrils. He frowned, deep in thought. "So did they die?"

Bradley sighed. "No, Jim. They didn't die. And they both still work here, in fact. In payroll."

"They do?" asked Jim, eyes wide.

"No, you plum. Jesus." Bradley turned to the pale girl. "What did you think of the story?" he said.

"It's all true. It's a true story. I mean, no-one was there when it happened, so I had to add a few embellishments, but that's basically what they think happened. Did you like it?"

She didn't look happy. "So there wasn't a crocodile in the lake?" she asked, quietly.

Bradley shrugged. "Probably not. I think they need a warmer climate to survive. And better access to meat."

Jim stood, listing to the side as he did.

"Ahh. Meaty meat. I'm hungry," he said, and left in the direction of the Lake House without so much as a glance back.

"Thanks for the entertainment, Brad!" Bradley shouted. "No problem, Jim, my pleasure! Prick," he added, winking at the girl. "What's your name anyway? I keep seeing you around but we've never spoken."

"I can't believe there wasn't a crocodile," she said, standing. "It was all for nothing." She wrung her hands, gazing out over the water with haunted eyes.

"Hey, hey," Brad said, reaching towards her. "It's OK. It's only a story."

But the girl was already striding towards the lake edge. He noticed she was barefoot, and her hair was hanging down her back in wet ropes. Bradley jumped to his feet. "What are you doing?" he called, as she waded in. "No, no, don't do that!" he shouted, alarmed. He followed her. "It's too cold!"

Bradley was in up to his thighs when the girl's head disappeared below the waterline.

"Shit!" he cried and splashed out further. "Help!" he called, but no-one was close enough to hear.

He swam out, turning in frantic circles, straining his eyes in the gloom for any sign of her. His sneakers filled with water, weighing him down. In his panic, Bradley barely registered the cold hand that closed around his calf and pulled...

Jim carried a lot of guilt with him after that summer. He should never have left Bradley on his own on the beach that night. But he could never have known the boy would go for a midnight swim, on his own, during such a cold summer.

Not when everyone knew there was an escaped crocodile in the lake.