

Seeing Red

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Series Editor: Peter Lancett

Published by Ransom Publishing Ltd.

51 Southgate Street, Winchester, Hampshire SO23 9EH, UK

www.ransom.co.uk

ISBN 978 184167 696 8

First published in 2008

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Cover by Flame Design, Cape Town, South Africa

A CIP catalogue record of this book is available from the British Library.
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Carve his name with pride

I can't look her in the eye as I say it, because while it's never really occurred to me before, I realise that there's some truth in what she's saying, maybe.

She laughs out loud.

'Oh come on. Tell me you do it on purpose – you must do.'

'Actually, no. I mean, I'll take your *goddam* word for it. But no, I don't do it on purpose. *Really I don't.*

This time she sees that I'm making a joke of it all and she smiles.

'You don't mind if *I* call you Holden though?'

'Well, the thing is, yes I do. I'm happy with my own name. And in any case, I'm in no way as cynical as Holden Caulfield.'

And I think that's the truth. Holden Caulfield is a cynical, complex and contradictory person, wouldn't you say? I'm really

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quite simple and straightforward. I don't think I'm like him at all. Really, I'm not.

'I'm going to call you Holden anyway. I think it suits you.'

She swings her feet out of the brook and rests them on the tinder-dry grass. Water droplets trickle down her ankles and sink into the ground. I take the Claytons linen handkerchief from my pocket and offer it to her.

'What's that for?'

'To dry your feet with. I don't imagine you're carrying a towel around with you in that bag.'

She seems genuinely astonished.

'You're quite a gentleman, Holden. Thanks.'

I watch her as she carefully dries the water from her toes with my handkerchief.

'You know something. While we're on the subject of names, I don't actually know yours.'

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She stops dabbing at her toes for a moment and looks up.

‘Really? But we’ve been going to the same school for years.’

‘I’ve seen you around from time to time, but that’s all.’

I don’t know whether or not she’s hurt by this. It’s hard to tell. I don’t feel comfortable enough to tell her that I’ve fancied her for a long time and kept it all to myself.

‘Sylvia. You can call me whatever you like.’

The mood has definitely grown a tad heavier.

‘Sylvia is good. It’s lovely.’

And if you want to know, I truly think that it is. It has the ring of tiny glass bells to it when you say it. They’re barely audible drifting on a background breeze. That’s how it feels to me.

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‘No wonder you feel happy here. This is your environment isn’t it?’

‘What do you mean?’

She’s handing back my handkerchief but she’s looking directly into my eyes. Her question isn’t a challenge; it’s a genuine request for knowledge.

I squeeze the handkerchief gently in my hand for a moment, feeling it damp and soft, and for some crazy reason valuing it more because it has touched her feet.

‘Well we’re here, in this woodland, and Sylvia comes from the Latin word *Silva*, which means woodland. That’s what I meant.’

Now she smiles.

‘Yes it does. I bet there’s only you and me at that whole goddam school who would know that, wouldn’t you say?’

I’m not going to rise to that.

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‘Maybe. But listen, just in case you ever feel like using it, my name’s...’

‘Tom. Yes I know.’

I must look surprised. I *am* surprised.

‘Oh, come on. Look at yourself. Everybody knows Tom Hathaway. It’s not like you go out of your way to blend in, is it?’

I have to admit this. To myself, if not to her. I must say, though, that I truly had no idea that I was some kind of school *celebretard*.

‘I’m still going to call you Holden though.’

‘Whatever.’

I’m getting used to the idea now. And what I like is that I’m getting the feeling that Sylvia and I are going to see more of each other, and I’m really going to like that.

We’re walking through the trees now and it’s late in the afternoon. She’s tucked

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her shoes into her bag and she's walking barefoot.

'Do you hate the movies as much as Holden Caulfield hates them?'

'No.'

And it's true, I don't. I quite like them actually. Not all of them of course.

'So would you like to go with me sometime?'

Would I?

'Sure. That sounds nice.'

She seems genuinely pleased and that pleases me.

'Would you like my telephone number? You could call me...'

She's sounding a little hesitant now, as though she's put herself out on the line and she's not sure what my response will be. It's

kind of touching, actually, since this is the first time in the whole day that I haven't felt that she's one step ahead of me.

I take the phone from my pocket and offer it to her.

'Here, put your number in this.'

She reaches out to take it with her left hand and that cute embroidered cuff rides up a tad and I can't help but stare. She notices and pulls her hand back but it's too late because I've seen. On the inside of her wrist and extending up her arm farther than I can see there are scars. Some of them look old and some of them look newer. But they are all from deep cuts and that is for certain. I've never seen anything like it, I swear to God.

She's turned away from me and I'm standing, holding out the phone. What can I say? Should I say anything? I don't want to talk to the back of her head. And do you know what? I think she's started to cry. I really do. And it damn near breaks your heart, doesn't it, to see a girl like that crying?

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‘Hey, don’t cry.’

She’s not sobbing or anything, but there are tears rolling from her eyes as she turns to me.

‘Let’s just go home and forget that today ever happened.’

That’s not what I want.

‘There’s no need for that. And anyway, I thought we were going to the movies sometime.’

Even I’m smart enough to realise that it’s the wrong time to ask about those scars.

The tears are still trickling down her face and I am glad for her sake that she is not wearing make-up, because she’d be looking like Alice Cooper right about now if she was.

‘You’d still want to go? Even now?’

‘Sure I would. Why wouldn’t I?’

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She's pretty vulnerable now, not the confident happy girl who led me into this place earlier. I want to hold her, but I daren't, not just yet.

'You've seen. And you still want to go to see a movie with me?'

'Of course I do. Nothing's changed.'

And it hasn't. I really *do* want to go out with her, no matter what.

'Then I want you to see.'

She begins to unbutton that cute little embroidered cuff.

'There's no need...'

'No, really, I want you to see. I don't want you to think that I've got anything to hide.'

Still the tears are running down her pale cheeks as she rolls up her sleeve. I reach out with my handkerchief, still a little damp from drying her feet, and gently wipe them

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away. The goddam handkerchief will take on the aura of a holy relic before the day is through at this rate.

God but it's a terrible sight to see. It really is. There are criss-crossing scars all the way up to the inside of her elbow. And some of the scars are like letters and they spell out a word that you can read as plain as anything. And I swear to God that the word that they spell out is *Tom*.