

## NO HARM DONE

The mistake people always make is thinking I wanted to hurt Jacob. If I'd wanted to do that, I'd have left him sitting in the sand with wet pants on, and snot caked up to his little blonde eyebrows – while his dad drank beer from a can and his mum read Jackie Collins. Poor little chap, no wonder he'd grizzled all afternoon.

Some people don't know how lucky they are; 'Give it a rest Jacob. Why's my boy whining like a girl, Stella?' his dad said more than once. Being spoken to like that only made him cry harder of course.

Then his mum took him for a paddle and I wanted to nip his little pink legs, press my lips against his round tummy and blow a big raspberry, just to hear him laugh; kiddies always laugh at that. But I didn't dare walk down to the water's edge; just stayed in the dunes. Watching.

The best thing about Bradstone beach is that even when the sun shines so hard it burns your eyeballs just to look at the sky, there's never a crowd. People prefer sand to shingle don't they? Not me. Fair enough, without a rug and flip-flops, it can bruise your bum and cut your feet, but give me shingle any day; you don't end up with grit in your cheese and pickle baps, or making a right mess in the car. It's quite a drive home from Bradstone and nobody wants to chafe all the way back, do they?

Another reason I like it, is because it's so old fashioned, as if it's stuck in the 50s. There's a free car park, a van-type thing that sells tea, coffee, chocolate biscuits wrapped in foil – that sort of how's-your-father, and public toilets, which are always a bonus. There are no cafes, no arcades, no pubs and no nosy-parker CCTV.

Three times I went there last summer. Just read my book in the dunes, on my plaid blanket. I took quite a feast with me; sandwiches, crisps and a flask of tea (no point wasting money at the van, and you never know how clean those places are). Nobody bothered me – nobody ever did then.

I went to the theatre once...saw some lady comedians; the one in charge said middle-aged women would make great spies because we are completely invisible – and then the lights went down and they did a sketch pretending to be ninjas or something. We all laughed at that, but in that sad knowing way when it's actually true.

Perhaps that's why I managed to get cuddles with young Jacob; I said 'Good Afternoon' to his mum in the lav, but she didn't even acknowledge me...stuck up bitch.

And then a chance, a ray of hope, and I took it. The boy's dad was packing the car boot, moaning and swearing under his breath and his mum had gone back into the ladies for something

– probably forgot her hair brush or lipstick – she looked the type... and the baby was alone, and smiling at me.

His little sunburnt body was hot in my arms. I only put my hand over his mouth in case he cried, but he didn't make a sound – just looked at me with eyes as round as moons.

'Mummy,' he said, once we were in the car, then again; 'Mummy?' And then he had a little weep, so I gave him a key ring to play with that had a funny rubber mouse on it and he was quiet for bit then.

If I'd planned it (like they said) I'd have put a kids' booster seat in the back, not to mention some proper toys and some sweets and lemonade.

The traffic was light along the coast road so we were home by quarter-past six. Outside it was still lovely and bright but all the heat had gone out of the day and Jacob was shivering now as well as crying. After I'd given him some bread and butter soldiers and some milk, I ran him a bath and sang to him while he had a splash about, but he just screamed harder.

I went to Kenny's old room and found his best Teddy Bear – Bobby, he called it – and some little jarmies that were only a bit too big, even if they were old fashioned looking, and then I snuggled him on my lap while we watched the telly. He settled then. Bless him, I think he was worn out with all that fresh air.

I was still holding him, rocking him a bit, when the news came on. They said that a little boy had gone missing at Bradstone beach, and that police were looking for a blue hatch-back (no mention of the make) and were keen to interview a women of around 60 with short greying hair (which was a bloody cheek - me being only 57). So the telly went off then, as you can imagine.

He slept in the big bed with me that night – it was much too dusty in Kenny's room and anyway, I didn't want him to wake up frightened in a strange house on his own.

It was four in the morning when the police broke my front door down. Shouting and stamping around, waving guns! Poor Jacob was terrified. There was no need for all that.

If my Kenny had been here, he'd have had something to say about that; he'd have stuck up for his old mum. He'd have been 38 now.

I can tell by your face that my visit's nearly up...and the way you pull your shoulders back a bit, and start fishing for your handbag. You do know, don't you, that I'd never have hurt a hair on that boy's head. I'm only in here because they think it's the second time, but that time in the post office... well that was just a misunderstanding. Poor little Jacob actually *needed* me.

With parents like that? I should coco.

Anyway, do your best, love – put in a good word for me with the governors, won't you? Thank you for the magazines and the wine gums. See you next month then? **The End**