

A STANDALONE SHORT PSYCHOLOGICAL THRILLER STORY

THE PLAN



MIRANDA RIJKS

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A GRIPPING STANDALONE SHORT
PSYCHOLOGICAL THRILLER
MIRANDA RIJKS

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ONE

‘What time will you get there,’ I ask. My fingers tense around the steering wheel as his voice booms through the hands-free.

‘I’m not going to make it.’ He sounds officious and with zero hint of regret.

‘You are bloody joking!’ I yell, my voice echoing around the inside of my Audi. ‘You promised me.’

‘And I couldn’t foresee that Charles would need me to read through the contract for a merger that’s happening tomorrow. I’m afraid this is rather more important than your little charity do. Multiple millions of dollars and the livelihood of a thousand people depend on it.’

Here we go again. Myles rubbing it in that his job is so very important—much more important than mine. I slam my finger on the end call button, quaking with fury. No, more than that. I’m raging. He promised he wouldn’t let me down, and once again, he has.

My husband may be a corporate lawyer, earning obscene sums of money, but my work brings people joy. I own a dress shop that sells size-inclusive clothes made by independent designers. We have sweaters knitted by hand and one-off garments made by up-and-coming tailors. The items aren’t cheap but they’re unique, and people are happy to pay for individualism. It’s a privilege to support artisan makers and the slow-fashion movement, even if it isn’t the most lucrative of endeavours.

Today, we’re hosting a fashion show for charity. Each of our designers has donated one item and the money raised will go to an environmental charity. Last year, we raised over twenty thousand pounds for the charity, and this year I’m hoping for more. The optics matter in fundraising, and I needed Myles at my side. It’s helpful to wheel out the corporate sponsors at events like this, not least because they have the deepest pockets.

The Peak District road stretches before me like a narrow, winding ribbon, but I know these lanes like the back of my hand. I floor the pedal,

making the Audi growl as it claws its way uphill, stones pinging against the undercarriage. Yes, I'm driving too fast, but I'm angry and in a hurry.

Without warning, a flash of cobalt streaks across my window, too low and too swift. A bicycle's front wheel spins into view, the spokes collapsing in on themselves with a scream of metal. I yank the steering wheel left, then right, trying to avoid the blue of handlebars and rubber. The car skids, gravel spraying, before the brakes bite. There's a sickening thud. My heart hammers.

The Audi halts half on the grassy verge, half on the road, the engine idling. I sit, chest heaving, stomach lurching. My pulse roars in my ears. I'm trembling from head to toe as I switch the engine off, too terrified to look in the rear mirror; too horrified to get out of the car and see what I've done.

But I must. I'm not a bad person. If there's a child lying there, it's my responsibility to take care of them. I force my eyes upwards to look in the rear-view mirror and see the mangled tyre of a bike.

'Oh no,' I mutter. I take some moments to calm my ragged breathing, then I open the car door and step outside onto the soft, muddy verge. My legs feel as if they can't support me as I force myself to walk back up the road to the bike. There's litter along the verge. A discarded sweet wrapper, a couple of beer cans and most weirdly of all, what looks like the arm of a mannequin, scuffed and broken.

And the bike.

It's not child size but not adult sized either. The front tyre is mangled, I assume from where I hit it.

'Hello,' I call out, my voice high-pitched and reverberating through the trees. I peer at the verge, the hedgerow, back out onto the road. But there's no one here. Nothing but my own racing breath.

'Hello,' I shout again. 'Are you alright? Are you hurt?' My heart is hammering now. A kid or a teenager was riding that bike just a couple of minutes ago, so where the hell are they now? I search all around, except I see nothing other than tree branches and litter. No person. No blood. No torn fabric. No sign that I hurt anyone. I walk farther, making bigger concentric circles but there's nothing. No footsteps or drag marks.

How is that possible? Have they run off? If so, then no harm is done, other than a damaged bike.

I freeze at the sound of an oncoming car. Instinct pushes me back into the tall clump of shadowy trees. It's not a car but a blue van and the driver doesn't even slow down, doesn't even glance at my parked car.

It's my cue for getting out of here.

I shout once again. 'Are you alright?' My voice is swallowed by the trees.

When everything falls silent, except for the gentle whistle of the wind and the occasional birdsong, I run back to the car. My trainers are covered in mud, as is the hem of my raincoat. I'm freezing cold now, so I start the car and turn the heating up to full blast. With one final glance in the mirror, I reassure myself that there is no dead body lying in the verge, no unconscious child whom I'm leaving to die alone. I start the car, pull out into the road, and drive steadily into town. Except my hands are shaking and my stomach is clenching because I can't be sure I haven't done something absolutely terrible.

I'm late now. It's not like I have time to drop into the police station and tell them about a crime I may or may not have committed. Sponsors, designers, and models, as well as local dignitaries and wealthy guests, are waiting for me. I wanted to check that the champagne was on ice, that the canapés were properly prepared, and that the clothes fit the models, but I will have to trust that the caterers have done their job well and my assistant Rosie has everything else under control. I chuck my muddy trainers into the back of the car and slip on my bespoke stilettos, hurrying out of the car park and down the street towards the gallery, my legs still so wobbly, it's a wonder I can walk.

I don't know how I get through it. Two hours of purgatory where I force myself to plaster on a smile and pretend that everything is completely normal. I am sycophantic towards potential donors and supportive of the designers. We're five minutes from starting the fashion show when Rosie hurries over to me.

'Clara,' she whispers. 'You've got mud on the hem of your dress. Shall I try to wipe it off?'

I tell her I'll do it, and hurry to the toilets. The memories of that thud ricochet through me as I try to dab off the mud with a wet piece of paper towel. I touch up my lipstick and dab on some more concealer under my

eyes, then stride back out to the shop with an artificial confidence and a fake smile.

A small army of volunteers has assembled along the runway. Rose-gold floorboards stretch between racks of embroidered dresses and hand-knit cardigans. I clap wildly as the models strut along the catwalk, and a local celebrity reads from a script, describing the clothes and encouraging people to bid for them. She is witty and good at her job. All the pieces go for well above our reserves and I'm confident we'll beat last year's fundraising total.

LATER, when I'm back at the car, I peer at the front bumper looking for damage but it's too dark to see anything. I climb inside and replace my heels with the muddy trainers. As I start the engine, I realise with a sinking heart that I will drive past the spot where I hit the bike. It's inky black outside now, and I take the road slowly. Much slower than normal. I'm glancing across the road, looking for the discarded bicycle or, God forbid, a police cordon and blue flashing lights. But there's nothing to mark the spot where I hit—or didn't hit—someone. I don't spot a glint of metal or anything out of the ordinary. Cold droplets of fog cling to my windscreen, and I realise I don't even know exactly where the accident happened.

MYLES ISN'T HOME, which is no surprise. He'll likely still be at his desk in his shiny glass office in the centre of Manchester, pouring over those life-or-death documents, perhaps with a cheeky beer at his side. In a way, I'm glad he's not here. I kick off my muddy trainers and then decide to rinse them in the sink in the utility room. I watch as the dark rivulets swirl down the drain. Am I washing away proof? Evidence of lives changed forever?

Our house is beautiful. Newly constructed with sleek lines and lots of white plastered walls. During the day, the views are something else, reaching right across the hills. Tonight, the fog obliterates any lights. It makes me feel exposed, not being able to see outside. We didn't bother with curtains when we decorated the house and now, I regret it.

I head for the fridge and remove a bottle of white wine, pouring myself an extra-large glass. I've eaten a few canapés, and although I should be hungry, I'm not. Taking the glass with me, I pad into the living room, my bare feet sinking into the thick piled carpet. I collapse onto the white sofa and grab the television remote. It goes straight to the news, the last channel Myles watched before he left for work sometime before 6 a.m.

After the national weather, it switches to the local news. The newsreader is a woman with terrible dress sense; a highly patterned blouse in shades of pinks and burgundy that clash with her auburn hair.

‘Leo Burnham has been missing since this afternoon when he failed to return home from school. Friends and teachers confirm that the twelve-year-old left Slownes Primary School as normal, but he hasn’t been seen since. Any sightings of Leo should be reported to the police. Leo has blond curly hair, blue eyes, and was believed to be wearing a black hoodie and black jeans.’

I jab the remote control to turn off the television.

Was that him? Was that the boy I hit? Except the newsreader didn’t mention he was cycling home. It must be him. Leo Burnham, whose parents are distraught that their beloved son hasn’t returned home after school. I drop the remote. My phone trembles in my grasp as Google Maps loads. Slownes Primary School is a mere two miles from the road where I had the accident. That’s all.

Oh my God. What have I done?

TWO

Myles calls me. 'How was the fashion show?'

'Fine.' I'm not in the mood for conversation.

'I'm going to sleep in the office tonight. Still got another hundred or so pages to get through.'

'Right,' I say.

There's a beat of silence. Normally I chastise him for working such long hours, or if I'm feeling warm towards him, I sympathise. This evening, Myles isn't important.

'You're still pissed off with me,' he says.

I tuck a strand of hair behind my ear. 'It's nothing to do with you.'

'What is it then?'

'We'll talk tomorrow, okay? I need to go to bed.'

'Didn't you raise enough money? I can chip in, top up the kitty if you want.'

I sigh. 'It's not that. We did really well. I'm just tired.'

I hang up before he can push further.

MYLES and I have been married for six years. We don't have children. I had a miscarriage three years ago and despite half-heartedly trying to start a family, nothing has happened. Myles has mentioned IVF but I'm not ready. Not yet. I'd love to have kids, except I'm under no illusion; their upbringing will be one hundred percent my responsibility. Myles's job is too all-consuming. I'm resentful of that, except I know I shouldn't be. He made it very clear to me when we started dating that he was married to his work first and foremost. Of course, it affords us this wonderful way of life; the house, the holidays, the cars. But there is a large price to pay. And for a while now, I'm wondering whether this is what I really want.

If our lives were more modest and my husband was more available, might I have shared today's disaster with him?

I don't go to bed. Instead, I pad downstairs in socks, the hall light casting long shadows on the hardwood. In the garage, the overhead strip

lamps buzz to life. Slowly, I walk around the Audi. There are scratch marks and a dent on the front driver's side bumper where I hit the bike. I run my fingers over the markings and see the tiniest fleck of blue paint. My stomach flips.

Grabbing an old rag from the shelf on the wall, I scrub at the bumper, removing any trace of mud or paint or foreign objects. But the dent and the scratches remain. Does this make me a terrible person? Probably. Except, what would you do? Would you reverse out of your garage and head to the police station to tell them you left the scene of an accident, and it's quite possible that the missing boy, Leo Burnham, is in fact dead, thrown off his bike into the undergrowth. Perhaps they'd like to check your car for evidence? And then when they find the lad, you'll be prosecuted and will face several years in jail. You'll lose your marriage, your friends, your business, and everything you've spent the last decade building up.

I fight down nausea as I switch off the light and lock the garage. Are there any mitigating circumstances for leaving the scene of an accident? I tried to find the boy; I really did. Perhaps I should go back there now with a strong torch and search harder. Except I don't. I take a hot shower, swallow down two sleeping pills and head for our big bed with its smooth linen sheets.

I sleep, but it's not the dreamless sleep of sleeping pills. I replay that thud, the terrible noise of impact over and over, with dreams of jeering boys encircling me, taunting me, threatening me. When I awake, I'm covered in a layer of sweat, the guilt embedded in every cell of my body. A glutton for punishment, I switch on the local news. Leo Burnham still hasn't been found. And with every passing hour, my future becomes increasingly dismal.

I search for local garages; the sort of establishment that will fix things without too many questions. I find one that I've passed a few times in the back streets of South Manchester, forty-five minutes away from where we live and somewhere no one knows me. I go early and pull into their yard. I've dressed down in old jeans and a battered jacket with holes at the elbows. There's just one mechanic in the open shed, wearing grease-splattered blue overalls. His beard is a grey tangle and his hands are smeared with engine oil.

‘Good morning,’ I say as brightly as I can muster. ‘I was wondering if you could help me. I hit a deer a couple of nights ago when I was driving up in the hills. I’d rather not claim it on insurance—my husband will kill me. Do you do discreet, cash-only repairs?’

He tilts his head and gives me the once over. ‘No discount for cash if that’s what you’re expecting,’ he says.

‘No, I just need it fixed quickly and without any paperwork.’

He frowns, and for a moment I fear he’s going to decline the work. ‘Alright then,’ he says. ‘Let’s have a look at the damage.’

He tuts as he studies the bumper, running his finger over the dent just as I did last night.

‘Eight hundred quid cash and I’ll have it done for you by the end of the day.’

‘Thank you,’ I say, gratitude and relief making me want to hug this stranger, even though I’m sure he’s charging me at least double the real price.

‘Don’t want to upset your old man, do we?’ he says with a wink and a grin.

What I haven’t thought through is that I’m now stuck in the back and beyond of South Manchester. Wrapping my coat tightly around me, I walk towards a row of shops, and then call for an Uber. I spend the day wandering around Manchester’s shops, aimless, buying nothing except endless cups of coffee and taking out far more cash than I’m used to.

At the end of the day, I return by Uber, and ask the driver to drop me off a few streets away from the garage. As I approach, I see my car parked in front, perfect and gleaming.

‘Good afternoon,’ the kindly mechanic says. ‘We’re all done. I’ll just get the paperwork written up.’

‘No need for that,’ I say. ‘Rather the hubby doesn’t catch wind of what I’ve done.’

‘Ah, yes. Alright then.’ I hand him the cash and he returns my car keys.

I’M HALFWAY home when Myles calls.

‘I’ve booked us a table at The Fountain Inn for supper,’ he says. ‘Thought I should make it up to you for missing the charity event.’

I should be delighted that he has taken the initiative and that he understands how annoyed I was, but tonight I just want to bury my head

under the duvet.

‘I’ll meet you there,’ he adds.

I’m about to protest that I’m tired, that perhaps we could go another night, but the call cuts off. I could ring him back, argue with him perhaps, but I don’t have the energy. Sighing, I continue the journey home.

We live on the outskirts of a small village called Slownes. It has pretty stone cottages and a fast-flowing river running through the centre, along with a cluster of independent shops. Slownes, like many villages around here, is a close-knit community, one where you’re not truly integrated unless you’re at least third generation. But on the whole, people are friendly and I’ve made a handful of local friends in the two years we’ve lived here. As I enter the village, I see posters everywhere. Photos of Leo Burnham are plastered on every other lamp post along with the word *MISSING* and a telephone number, presumably belonging to his parents. My stomach clenches and guilt gnaws at me, making my head throb so much I wonder if it’s going to explode.

At home, the house is dark. I hurry inside and take a shower, changing into a smart pair of trousers and a pale blue cashmere sweater. I look at myself in the mirror, appalled at how very normal I appear, so I tug off the sweater and replace it with a black one. It’s just a ten-minute walk to The Fountain Inn and Myles is always on time. That’s the lawyer in him. Wearing a thick coat and hat and carrying a torch, I head out, walking along the side of the road, the torchlight bobbing up and down. Headlights race towards me and for a heart-stopping second, I think I’m going to be hit by a car. I jump up onto the verge just in time, and then realise the car was a good metre away. Breathless, I think it would be justice indeed if I was hit. Perhaps I deserve it. Pulling myself together, I walk briskly until I reach the pavement and feel able to relax. Except, as I walk into the Fountain Inn’s car park, I see more posters of Leo, and I wonder if I can do this. If I can have a dinner with my husband as if everything is normal.

Myles pulls into the carpark a second after me.

‘Darling,’ he says, bounding out of his car. He flings open his arms and pulls me in for a hug, kissing me on the lips. ‘Forgive me.’

I relax into him, grateful for his familiar security.

‘I could have picked you up from home, but I guess you enjoyed the walk.’ Normally that would be the case, but not tonight. ‘Let’s go eat.’ He

keeps his arm around my shoulders as we walk inside.

The pub is upmarket, with navy blue panelled walls, copper light fittings, and plush velvet chairs. We walk past the wooden bar where Myles raises his hand to a couple of men nursing pints. My husband knows more people than me because he frequents the bar here at least once a week, and always when Manchester City are playing.

‘Terrible what’s happened,’ mutters one of the men.

Myles turns to me, frowning.

‘The missing boy,’ I say.

‘Oh, that,’ he replies, almost dismissively.

‘You don’t expect that kind of thing to happen somewhere like this,’ another of the men says.

I shiver.

‘You alright, darling?’ Myles asks.

‘Just a bit chilly,’ I reply.

‘Catch up with you two another time.’ Myles waves at the men.

‘If the wee lad doesn’t show up by tomorrow, we’ll be organising a search. We’ll let you know.’

‘Sure thing,’ Myles replies so casually I want to shake him.

We find a table and a server appears almost instantly. My appetite has gone, but I’m conscious I’ve eaten very little the past twenty-four hours, so I order a fish pie and no starter. Myles orders enough for a football team. Every snippet of conversation I overhear from adjacent tables seems to be about Leo; grave faces, whispers of searches. I’m distracted and Myles notices. I wonder whether, when people look at me, they see the guilt across my face, if they can hear what I hear, that thud and screech of metal that’s playing on repeat in my brain, despite the piped music and loud voices.

‘What’s up?’ Myles frowns at me.

‘I’m feeling a bit under the weather,’ I tell him. ‘Probably the anticlimax following the charity event.’

He finishes off the best part of a bottle of wine, so I drive his car the short distance home, carefully pulling up into the garage alongside my Audi. Myles witters on about something and nothing, and is out of the car quickly, reaching in the back for his briefcase. He walks in front of my Audi to get to the door that leads into the house, but before he inserts the key into the lock, he turns and frowns.

‘Why is your car looking so clean?’

‘I got it washed.’

He runs his hand along the front bonnet. ‘Except the little scratch you’ve had for ages has gone, as has the dent at the front.’

Why the hell does he have to be so observant?

‘Got me,’ I say, bending down to tie a shoelace so he can’t see the flush of my lie. ‘I had a little contretemps in Sainsbury’s carpark, and I got the bonnet touched up.’

‘Your fault?’ he asks, turning the door key into the house.

‘Yup. The bollard won. I didn’t want to claim on insurance, so I just got it fixed. It’s nothing.’

Myles sighs. Despite having a considerable bank balance, he doesn’t like to waste money.

‘I paid. My account,’ I add.

Later, Myles is taking a shower, and I’m downstairs locking up. My nerves are still frayed, and I’m tempted to knock back a quick brandy, except I don’t trust myself. What if I say something by mistake, or the alcohol makes me talk in my sleep? I’m trudging up the stairs when my phone beeps with an incoming text. I glance at it and then look again, pausing on the landing.

I don’t recognise the number.

And I certainly don’t understand the message.

Some things you can’t fix.

I stare at the screen. My heart slams against my ribs, and the staircase tilts beneath me. Is this message meant for me, or has it been sent by mistake? Is it some weird spam? No. Someone knows. Someone saw me. Someone might be watching me right now.

I punch the number into Google, fingers slipping with sweat. No results. I hit call, pressing the phone so hard against my ear it hurts. Except the phone goes straight to voicemail. Whoever sent this is out there, waiting. Watching. I hang up without speaking, feeling the walls of my life begin to collapse inward.

THREE

It's Sunday morning and I'm exhausted from lack of sleep. My eyelids feel like sandpaper.

'I'll grab the papers,' I call to Myles, who's in the kitchen measuring coffee grounds with military precision. He grunts his approval without looking up.

It's his Sunday ritual, copied from his father: coffee, newspapers, fire crackling, a roast dinner. Although he could easily read the papers on his iPad, he claims to like the feel of the thin pages. Normally it's Myles' job to collect them, but I need to know if Leo has been found.

As I approach the village shop, which is the hub of our little community, I see a group of maybe twenty people huddled together. Their faces are sombre, hats pulled down low over foreheads, many of them holding or leaning on sticks. My heart sinks. I park the car a few doors down from the shop, button up my coat to the throat and step out into the fine, cold mist that clings to everything.

'Clara!' Deidre waves at me, beckoning me over. She's a rosy-faced, officious woman, wife of a local sheep farmer, who took me under her wing when we first moved here. Deidre is also the driving force behind all community events. Ever since Myles donated to the playground fund, she's treated me like her personal money box for village improvements. Unfortunately, I'm now on her fundraiser WhatsApp group that pings day and night with fundraising schemes for village improvements. I do my best to take part, desperate to prove we're not just the rich outsiders on the hill with more money than community spirit.

Deidre is dressed in her long, mud-splattered Barber jacket that's seen a couple of decades of country winters, and green wellington boots planted far apart. I stride towards her. She's the sort of woman who does everything briskly and doesn't appreciate slouching.

'Not good news, I'm afraid,' she says in a low voice. 'Young Leo still hasn't come home.'

‘That’s awful,’ I mutter.

‘We’re organising search parties, and I knew we could count on you to take part. Thanks for coming.’

My tongue feels thick. I came for the newspapers, not this. My phone sits heavy in my pocket, turned off after that message, as if shutting my eyes could make it all disappear. Cowardly fear, I suppose.

‘What can I do?’ I ask.

‘Meet Marie. She’s Leo’s Mum.’ She turns to a slight woman, standing to her left, who seems to be folding in on herself. Thin strands of mousey, lank hair poke out from under a blue beanie, and her face is etched with exhaustion.

‘Marie, have you met Clara yet?’

Marie shakes her head and murmurs, ‘Thanks for coming.’ Her anorak has a torn pocket.

I try to smile but reckon it comes out more like a grimace.

‘Right, everyone,’ Deidre says, clapping her gloved hands. ‘We’re going to split up into twos, knock on everyone’s doors, and show photos of Leo.’

Another woman I don’t recognise hands out A4 printouts, the same ones that are affixed to the lamp posts around town.

Deidre continues with methodical efficiency. ‘Some of us will walk the fields, others do the streets. We’ll meet up here again in three hours. Any sightings, call me and I’ll ring the police. Good luck and let’s find our Leo.’

Marie sniffs.

I step to one side to call Myles. ‘Sorry, but I’ve got caught up in the search for the missing boy. I’ll be out for three hours. Can you take the chicken out of the oven in ninety minutes? Eat without me.’

Myles sighs and whines about not having the newspapers but he doesn’t try to talk me out of doing my bit for the community.

By the time I finish the call, everyone is paired up and fanning out in different directions. The only two left are Deidre and Marie.

‘Come with us, Clara,’ Deidre says. My heart sinks. ‘Let’s scour the fields on the other side of the school.’

Marie turns to look at me, and I wonder if she sees the guilt that’s spilling out of my every pore. ‘Thank you so much for helping,’ she says. ‘Everyone’s being so kind.’

‘I can’t believe you two don’t know each other,’ Deirdre says.

I manage a tight smile. ‘Wish we were meeting under better circumstances,’ I say.

‘You live up at Friary Place, don’t you?’ Marie says.

I nod, embarrassed as I always am when people realise I live in the imposing new build on top of the hill. I’m still not used to being surrounded by such space and luxury. My beginnings were a lot humbler.

‘If you ever decide to move, let me know,’ Marie adds. ‘Not that you’d want to move from a stunning house like that, would you?’

‘Marie works for Fellow Moves,’ Deidre explains. ‘In the lettings department, don’t you, dear?’ Fellow Moves is an estate agency that specialises in the lower end of the market, both in sales and rentals. I’ve met a couple of people who work there.

‘Yes, but I’m in admin really. I don’t show people around houses.’

Something in her tone makes me uneasy. ‘Where do you live?’ I ask.

‘Pennington Way.’

I know it. An estate on the outskirts of Slownes, comprised of small two- and three-bedroom new builds. I visited a few months back when I went to see a lady who does dressmaking and clothing repairs.

‘Actually, I know Elise Crowbent,’ I say, which is rather stretching the truth considering I’ve only met her twice.

‘Ah, lovely Elise,’ Marie says. ‘She’s our next-door neighbour. She helps me get the kids to school when my car won’t start.’

‘Still having problems with it?’ Deidre asks.

‘Yeah, the banger is off the road more than it’s on it. A pile of old rust.’

We clamber over a wooden stile and into a sodden field that runs alongside the main road. Each step sinks into the mud, pulling at my boots. We fan out, three-feet apart, hoods drawn against the persistent drizzle. No one speaks as I take the position closest to the road.

Minutes pass before I realise we’re heading towards the top of the field where the woods begin, perilously close to the spot where the bicycle crumpled beneath my car.

‘I don’t know what’s worse,’ Marie says, as we stop to catch our breaths. ‘Finding nothing or finding something. All I want is for my Leo to come home.’

Deirdre puts an arm around Marie's shoulders, and I realise that Marie's face is wet. I'm not sure if it's tears or the rain. Maybe both.

'It's good of you to help look for him,' Marie sniffs.

'Of course. That's what community is for. To help each other in times of need,' Deidre chirps, her voice too bright for the moment.

We carry on stomping up the hill, but Marie's pace has slowed. Her shoulders slump forward as she trudges behind us, forcing Deidre and me to match her exhausted rhythm.

'It's so kind of you to give up your Sunday morning, Clara,' Marie says. 'And we don't even know each other.'

Marie's gratitude makes my guilt almost unbearable. The temptation to run off down the field and never see these women again is overwhelming. Except I can't.

'Let's climb over the fence and walk along the edge of the road,' Deidre suggests.

Nausea grips my stomach.

'Haven't the police already looked here?' I ask.

'Yes, but fresh eyes might spot something they missed.' Deidre carefully pulls down on the taut barbed wire fencing and helps Marie clamour over it. Her coat rips on a metal claw, except neither woman seem to notice. I feel like the wire should dig deep into my skin, scarring me for the horror that I've committed. Am still committing. Except I climb over unharmed. We walk up the road. I can't work out exactly where I hit the bike, but I feel my skin crawl and prickle at the back of my neck, as if someone is watching; as if they know what I've done.

We meet up with two other women. I don't know them, but Marie and Deidre do.

The taller one, wearing a waxed hat that frames her long, horse-like face, shakes her head. 'We've walked up the hill and back down again, had a good prod through the verges but there's nothing there.'

Marie's jaw seems to sag further and her neck sinks into her shoulders. My heart bleeds for this stranger.

'Might as well head back then,' Marie says, her voice weak. 'Thanks for trying.'

'Are you sure, love?' Deidre asks, laying a hand on Marie's arm. 'We can carry on looking.'

Marie glances at the darkening sky. 'We'd better stop. It's tipping it down, and you've all been so kind.'

The five of us turn and head down the hill, everyone looking dejected.

As we pass the sign to the village, I see a huddle of people ahead of us, but it's a man loitering on the other side of the road who catches my attention. He's leaning against the trunk of a tree, smoking, hair plastered to his face from the rain. And his eyes are firmly fixed on Marie, watching her every step.

'Piss off!' Marie shouts across the road, waving her hand at him. 'If you're not going to join in the search for your own son, then just piss off!'

'Who's that?' I whisper to Deidre.

'Marie's ex-partner, Steve. He's trouble.'

'In what way?'

'A no-gooder. Drunk half the time, scrounging off Marie for money, in and out of work. They've been estranged for a couple of years, but he still shows up from time to time.'

'Quite a lot actually,' the tall woman says. 'He's got partial custody of the kids. They say he's living in Dollington now.'

Marie stomps ahead of us, the tension visible throughout her body. She reaches into her pocket and removes a phone.

When we reach the huddle of people, Deidre claps her hands together. 'I'm going to set up a WhatsApp group so we can all stay in touch regarding new developments. And if our Leo doesn't show up soon, perhaps we can organise another search. I know we all want to do everything we can to support Marie.'

But Marie isn't listening; she's on her phone, deep in conversation. And it strikes me, I wonder if she's talking to the police.

MY TEETH CHATTER as I nip into the shop to buy the newspapers and then trudge towards the car, rain seeping through my coat. I reach for the door handle when something white catches my eye – a small, folded square of paper wedged underneath my windscreen wiper. I pluck it out and climb into the car. The drizzle has dampened its edges, but the paper has been folded over and over so the handwritten words written in black marker pen are readable. Thick black block letter words scream: WE SAW WHAT YOU DID.

What the hell?

It was one thing receiving an anonymous text, but this is so much worse. Someone stood right here, at my car. They know which vehicle is mine. They could have followed me home. I glance at the cars parked behind me and on the other side of the road, but I don't see any pieces of paper wedged under their windscreen wipers.

I'm trembling as I switch the engine on and turn the car around. When I finally manoeuvre out of the space, an impatient man in a black Range Rover rolls his eyes and mimics a yawn. I put my foot on the accelerator and head home.

The note burns in my pocket as I burst through the front door.

'You were out for ages,' Myles calls at me from the living room, the television blaring. From the sounds of it, he's watching a football match. 'There's food in the oven.'

'Thanks,' I mutter, as I hurry upstairs. I peel off my sodden clothes and remove the note from my pocket, staring at the words until they merge together. It could be a prank or a mistake, or someone could have witnessed the accident. I think of Marie's partner, Steve. Could he have left the note, but if so, why hasn't he accosted me or gone to the police? None of this makes any sense. Gingerly, I pick up the piece of paper, flicking open the pages of the book I'm reading, and slot it inside for safe keeping.

FOUR

It's taken a few hours to calm myself down, but now I'm snuggled up under a blanket on the sofa, reading the newspapers. It makes me chuckle how Myles and I have morphed into his parents. Sunday lunch, reading the papers, music playing gently in the background, the fire crackling. It's quite the scene of antiquated domesticity. From time to time, Myles shares a quote with me or comments on the absurdity of world affairs.

And then, shortly after 4 p.m., the doorbell rings. As we're not expecting anyone, Myles is the first to jump up from the armchair and pad bare footed to the front door.

Male voices drift in, followed by footsteps. When a uniformed police officer appears in our living room doorway, my stomach drops. I stand too quickly, my gaze bouncing between him and Myles.

'This is Police Constable Adam Hall. He and his colleagues are doing door-to-door enquiries about the missing boy.'

'Oh,' I say, my heart thudding in my chest. 'Can you I get you a tea or a coffee, Constable?'

'I'm fine, thanks. This shouldn't take too long.'

Myles gestures for the officer to sit on an armchair. This is my chance to confess about hitting something, about the bicycle. But the words stick. I picture Myles' face transforming with horror, realising that he's married to a murderer. Our lives crumbling: divorce, banishment, scandal, losing the shop, my name in headlines. And for what? I don't even know if I hit him. If I had, wouldn't they have found him by now?

'You're probably aware of the missing lad, Leo Burnham.'

'Yes,' I say. 'I was part of the search party looking for him this morning.'

Say it. Don't say it. Say it. The words roll around my brain.

'We're asking all the locals where they were at the time of his disappearance and whether they have seen anything suspicious.' Constable Hall turns to Myles first, which gives me a couple of moments to try to

compose myself. My hands tremble so violently that I trap them beneath my thighs.

‘Your name, sir?’ he asks.

‘Myles Cade and this is my wife, Clara.’

He produces a notebook and scribbles down our names. ‘And where were you between 3:15 and 6:00 p.m. on Thursday afternoon?’

‘At work in my offices in central Manchester. I’m a corporate lawyer with Freedman, Stokes, and Beswick, and I was working with my team on the contracts for a big merger. I stayed the night in the office and didn’t return home until Friday early evening.’

‘What time did you go to work on Thursday morning?’ he asks.

‘I left here at 5:30 a.m., as I always do.’

‘And what car do you drive?’

‘A black Mercedes.’ Myles gives the officer his registration number.

‘Thank you, sir.’ The officer turns to look at me and I feel faint.

‘And Mrs Cade, please, can I have your movements for Thursday afternoon?’

‘Yes, of course,’ I say, wondering if he can hear the unnatural vibrations in my voice. ‘I was getting ready for a charity fashion show I was organising for my clothes shop in Buxton. I’m not sure exactly what time I left home, but it was probably around 4 p.m.’

The officer’s eyes widen imperceptibly. ‘Did you see anything untoward on your journey?’

‘No, nothing. But then my mind was on the planning for the night ahead. It’s one of our most important evenings of the year, raising funds for charity and all of the local great and good were attending.’

‘And what car do you drive, Mrs Cade?’

‘An Audi Q5.’

‘What colour?’

‘It’s white.’ I catch my breath and give him the registration—there’s no hiding it.

‘And which route did you take from here to Buxton?’ he asks.

‘Um, the back way, on the B3674 through Slownes and out the other side.’

‘That’s exactly the way young Leo cycles home from school.’

‘Yes, I suppose so,’ I say quietly.

‘And you didn’t see a lad on a bicycle?’

I shake my head. ‘Sorry.’

My decision is made. *Don’t say it.*

‘Did you notice anything out of the ordinary on your journey?’

I think of the battered bicycle, the rubbish, that weird mannequin arm, yet I say, ‘No.’

‘It’s just that a car was sighted in the vicinity and has been described as a white Audi. Could that have been yours?’

‘Um, I don’t know. I suppose... but I saw nothing.’ I recall the blue van that passed me. Have the police tracked down the driver and did he report me?

‘What time would you have arrived at your shop?’

‘I guess around 4:30 p.m. I can’t be precise.’

‘And guests started arriving at what time?’

‘5:30 p.m., although the caterers and models were there earlier.’

Myles interrupts. ‘Have you got any concrete leads?’ I’m grateful for the interruption.

‘We’re at the information gathering stage right now.’

Myles presses on. ‘Could the boy have run away?’

‘We’re exploring every possibility. But it is very out of character.’

‘Where do his parents live?’ I wonder why he wants to know.

‘In Slownes.’ The officer snaps his notebook shut, tucks it into a pocket and stands. ‘If you think of anything else, anything at all that might be relevant, Mrs Cade, then please let me know.’ He hands me a business card.

Myles sees him to the door. As soon as it clicks shut, Myles strides back in, brow furrowed. ‘What on earth was all that about?’ His eyes are narrowed and his lips thin.

‘I don’t know,’ I say. ‘Surely I’m not the only one with a white Audi around here.’ I stand. ‘Do you want a cup of tea?’ I ask. ‘I’m going to make myself one and lie down. I’ve got a headache.’

Myles’s eyes bore into me and as I pass him, he puts out an arm. ‘I know you, Clara. You’re being evasive. What aren’t you telling me?’

‘Nothing,’ I say, crossing my arms over my chest.

‘Did you really bash your car on a bollard?’

‘For goodness’ sake, Myles. You’re not actually accusing me of lying to you, are you?’

‘I just think you’re holding out on me, like you normally do.’

‘Like I normally do?’ I reiterate. ‘What does that mean?’

‘You keep everything close to your chest. You don’t share stuff with me,’ he says. ‘It’s like we don’t really talk anymore.’

‘Probably because you’re always working,’ I snap.

‘That’s not fair and you know it.’

‘Look, I really don’t want to have an argument right now. I need to take some painkillers.’

I lie on our bed, my arm covering my eyes. What have I done? I should have told the truth, except now I’ve lied to everyone. How long will I go to prison for? I pick up my phone, my thumb hovering, tempted to search for prison sentences, but if the police go through my search history, isn’t that an admission of guilt? Or, at the very least, an indication that I’ve lied about something.

My phone pings. It’s Deidre sending a message to the newly set-up WhatsApp group named: *Bring Leo Home Now*.

FYI, the police are doing house to house enquiries. There has been no update. We’re doing another search at 6:00 p.m. Please bring torches—head torches if you have them. If Leo still isn’t found, we’ll be doing another search at 7:00 a.m. tomorrow morning. Please join us.

I can’t bring myself to go out again. It’s true that I really do have a hammering headache, but I know it’s caused by guilt and worry. I’ll join the 7:00 a.m. search if Leo is still not found.

WHEN MYLES COMES TO BED, I keep my eyes closed and my breathing steady. He leaves early, as normal, and again, I pretend to be asleep. Except I’m fully alert, so when I hear the crunch of his tyres driving away from the house, I switch on the light and get dressed, pulling on joggers and a thick hoodie.

The WhatsApp message from Deirdre arrives at 6:00 a.m. on the dot.

No news overnight, I’m afraid to report. We’ll meet on Pennington Way at 7:00 a.m. Please tell everyone you know.

I decide to go for a run first. I need to clear my head and get myself into a more positive state before joining the search. It’s my form of meditation, feeling my feet pounding the earth, steadying my breathing into a regular rhythm, and being able to empty my head of all the negative thoughts. I find myself heading into Slownes. The early morning light is a pale grey and

most windows are dark or covered with curtains as I run past. It's not my normal route, but I feel the need to stay on pavements, as if it might be sweet justice that I get run over should I choose to run along any roads. Without thinking, I turn onto Pennington Way. I'm not sure what I expect to see—a police officer positioned outside Marie's house or Leo slinking home? A dog barks from behind a fence but otherwise, it's quiet. Which was Elise Crowbent's house? Number four or number six? But then I see a rusting silver Ford Fiesta, one tyre completely flat, and I wonder if this is the old banger that Marie was referring to.

The skin at the back of my neck prickles. I shouldn't be here. I catch the shadow of someone slipping down the side of a house. A light comes on in the upstairs window of the house I assume is Marie's, and I turn and run back the way I came. My phone pings, and my heart misses a beat. It's too early for someone to be messaging me. Panting, I stop under a street lamp, one that bears the poster of missing Leo. I tug out my phone. There's another message.

YOU WILL PAY FOR THIS.

I glance around. Who is doing this? Steve, Marie's husband? Did he spot me?

FIVE

I'm tempted to head straight home, except I'm too late. It's already just before 7:00 a.m., and the same stalwarts as yesterday are gathering on the corner of Pennington Way.

'Clara,' Deidre raises a hand at me. 'Good of you to join us.'

Only Marie isn't here. People are quieter than yesterday, less hopeful and more concerned. After all, we're dealing with the disappearance of a boy. Next time, it could be their child.

Once again, Deirdre takes charge. She claps her hands.

'We'll concentrate on the area around the school this morning. Pair up, please. I know that you've all got busy mornings ahead, so we'll search for an hour and then congregate back here. Marie sends her thanks, but the poor lady is exhausted, so we'll do this without her.'

I latch on to the tall woman from yesterday. She introduces herself as Fiona and explains she's a receptionist at the doctor's surgery. That's good. She's bound to know the local gossip. Disconcertingly, she also appears to know who I am, although I've only ever visited the local surgery once, a couple of years ago. I suppose I'm still the newcomer around here.

'Do you know Marie and her family?' I ask as we head off at quite the pace.

'I've known her lads since they were born. Little rascals, the two of them, but Leo has matured a lot of late. Probably because he's taken on the role as the man of the house.'

'What happened between Marie and her ex?'

'Steve. He's a nasty piece of work. Marie always defended him, bless her, but you don't get bruises like that from walking into cupboard doors.'

'That's awful,' I mutter.

'There was talk of a restraining order, but I think that's calmed down. The boys see their dad regularly and, from all accounts, he's a good enough father.'

We're quiet for a while as we stride along the pavements. I'm not sure where we're heading, but Fiona appears to be on a mission.

'There was a bit of an upset a few months back,' Fiona continues. 'Apparently, Steve disappeared with Leo one weekend. The lad didn't tip up at school on the Monday morning and Marie was beside herself with worry. But then Leo strolled in late that evening telling her he and his dad had been out fishing.'

'Could Steve have something to do with Leo's disappearance?' I ask.

Fiona shrugs. 'I'm sure he'll have been the first person the police talked to. It wouldn't surprise any of us if he was involved somehow, but the detective in charge is adamant Steve has nothing to do with this. I guess they've got their sources and evidence.'

Before long, we reach the far edge of the village and begin climbing up a hill flanked by dense woodland. Fiona brandishes a wooden stick, poking through leaf litter and tangled undergrowth as we go.

'Have you lived in Slownes long?' I ask.

'Born here, die here.' She nods firmly. 'Gets in your blood.'

A chill creeps up my spine.

'And Marie and Steve too?' I ask,

'Oh, yes. Steve sat behind me in school. Always had detention.' She pokes at a pile of leaves.

'What does Steve do?'

'Honestly, no one really knows. Claims he's a mechanic but what he fixes is anyone's guess. Money is always short in that household despite Marie working all hours. Wouldn't surprise me if Steve drinks it all away. He frequents a pub in Dollington and, by all accounts, is there from 5:00 p.m. to closing time every night.'

Forty-five minutes later, we've found nothing of interest except a dozen empty tins of lager and torn crisp packets, which Fiona has picked up and put in a black bin liner. We head back to Pennington Way. My heart jolts as I see Marie up ahead, rocking in Deidre's embrace. Fiona and I look at each other and both pale.

Fiona hurries forward and she touches Deidre on the arm. 'What's happened?'

Marie pulls away, wiping mascara from her cheeks. Deidre sighs.

‘Oh nothing, really. Steve was here giving Marie an earful about what a lousy mum she is. The man should be searching for his son instead of harassing Marie.’

Relief washes through me. It’s obvious that no one has a good word to say about Steve. Maybe he’s the monster here, not me. Maybe Steve has done something unthinkable to his son. If that’s the case, then I’ll be off the hook.

The time has come for me to find out more about Steve Burnham.

DOLLINGTON IS the next village over from Slownes; it’s a shabbier neighbour. Once a mining village, it’s never cast off its dowdy image. I’ve driven through it but there’s been no reason for me to hang out there.

After a draining day in the shop, I divert to Dollington, and inch along its lone main street. There’s only one pub here called The Three Pennies. I park my car on the other side of the road with a good view of the pub’s front door, very conscious that my gleaming white Audi stands out like a sore thumb. I cross the road and push through the heavy door. Inside, it’s dim and there’s a stench of old beer and cigarette smoke, odd since indoor smoking was banned decades ago. At first, all I see is the bar lady, a woman whose hair looks like it was frozen in the Eighties.

‘Alright, love?’ she asks without looking up.

I step towards the bar, and then I spot him. Steve is perched on a bar stool at the far end, his hand clasped around a pint of beer, his eyes glazed over and staring off into the distance.

‘Could I have a glass of Coke, please,’ I ask.

The woman’s lips twitch, and I imagine she’s wondering what a posh bird like me is doing in a place like this, but she says nothing. She grabs a none-too-clean-looking glass and pours in a Pepsi. I don’t like Pepsi, but I don’t quibble. I tap my debit card on the card reader and take the glass to the far side of the pub, wondering whether I’m going to have to stay here all night. Or perhaps I could go home and return later. Steve carries on staring straight ahead, a morose expression on his face. Not once has he glanced in my direction.

After about fifteen minutes, Steve shoves back his bar stool back and stands up.

‘See you later, Pam,’ he mumbles to the woman behind the bar. He walks unsteadily towards the door.

I wait a beat and slip out after him. He stops to light up a cigarette, and then carries on ambling slowly. I keep as far back from him as I can, and before long, I've no idea where we are. He turns and walks along a dark alley, and as I follow, I feel a nugget of fear. Am I safe? What if he turns and sees me here? I hang back in the shadows, but then see we're approaching a row of old-fashioned garages, low buildings with flat iron roofs and shabby up-and-over doors. Steve stops, fishes a key from his pocket, and pulls a door open. Light floods out as he turns on a switch, but then it quickly fades as he pulls down the garage door with him inside.

What is this place? Is it his workshop or is he actually living here? It's not like I can knock on the door and ask to be let in. I hesitate for a few minutes, wondering whether to stay or leave, but then the door opens again and out he comes, carrying a plastic supermarket bag. He glances in my direction, or so it feels, and then closes the door behind him. My heart lurches.

I turn on my heel and race out of the alley.

Back on the street, I try to walk at a steadier pace, not wanting to draw attention to myself. I take out my phone, locate where I parked the car, and follow Google Maps. Once I'm in the car, I lean my head back against the headrest and let out a groan.

I CAN'T SHED the thought that Steve is up to something, something no good. I sit in the car for a few minutes debating what my next move should be. But then Steve reappears, the bag dangling from his arm as he heads back into the pub.

Ten minutes later, I'm standing outside his garage. Except how the hell am I going to break in? I don't have any tools and even if I did, I wouldn't know how to use them. Glancing from left to right to be sure no one is out here or watching me, I grab the garage door handle and then almost pass out from fear, immediately releasing my grasp.

There's a loud high-pitched shriek. I freeze. The sound comes again, and it's only then I realise it's the cry of a fox. I need to get a grip. After taking a few deep breaths, I grab the door handle again. I try to turn it clockwise and then anticlockwise, except it doesn't budge. But just when I'm about to give up, the door dislodges and before I can overthink it, I'm lifting it up so that there's just enough space for me to crawl underneath.

Inside, I freeze. What if there's someone in here? My ears strain to listen, but all I can hear is my own ragged breath. I turn on my phone's torch function and spot a light switch on the wall. Tugging the door closed again, I flip the switch. The bright fluorescent light buzzes to life and makes my eyes hurt. It's a small space, just big enough for a compact car, except this place isn't being used as a garage. There is a single mattress on the concrete floor, along with a shabby-looking duvet and dirty pillow piled on top. Next to it is a rickety wooden table and a metal stool, and a pile of clothes discarded like rubbish on the floor. But my eyes are drawn to the breeze-block wall.

There's a large selection of printed photos taped to the wall. There must be thirty or so print-outs and they're all of Marie and Leo. These aren't posed photos, but shots taken without the subjects' knowledge. The two of them are going about their day-to-day business—Leo in school uniform, chatting impishly with a friend; Marie carrying heavy shopping bags, exiting the Co-op; Leo on his bike. That bike. And then, to my dismay, I see a couple of photos of a white Audi parked up on the edge of the forest. The road where I hit Leo. How is that possible? I stare closer. The license plate is too blurry to read, and no one's inside, but it's unmistakably my car. Was Steve there too, watching? And if so, why?

None of this makes sense. As I lean closer to the pictures, my foot bumps against something under the table. I bend down and find a life-size mannequin, one of those that are used for first-aid training. There are scrapes and dirt patches on the body, and although this mannequin has all its limbs, it reminds me of the weird arm I found on the side of the road.

I'm now frozen with terror, sure that Steve is up to no good. None of this makes any sense. I snap a few photos of the wall of pictures with my phone. But I need to get out of here. Fast. If Steve finds me... it's not worth thinking about. I switch off the light and using the torch on my phone, tug the door upwards, and shimmy underneath.

I sprint back to my car, stumbling and righting myself, hurrying until I'm sitting in the driver's seat, breathless and relieved to be safe. I need a few moments to calm down, to think through what I've seen. Why is Steve taking photos of his son and his ex-wife? Why does he have photos of my car? And what was he doing with that dirty mannequin? He's definitely up to something sinister, and I'm convinced he's behind the notes and texts to

me. Is he planning on blackmailing me? If so, should I go to the police now and pre-empt this, or do I sit tight and see how his scheme unfurls? But are these photos sufficient proof for the police? Surely, I'm going to need more evidence to tie Steve to any crime?

SIX

The next morning I'm in the shop flipping through the portfolio of a young up-and-coming knitwear designer. I admire the chunky knits and the way she uses recycled yarn. Her sweaters drape beautifully—wearable art that could bring in serious foot traffic if I can convince her to trial with me before the London fashion houses snap her up. It's a relief to be thinking about something other than the missing boy. Leo Burnham's continued disappearance is still the lead item on the local news. Deirdre organised another search party first thing this morning, but I sent her a message regretting that I was unable to make it. Following the meeting with the designer, I have my regular weekly get-together with my bookkeeper Giles in my small office adjacent to the shop. We're deep into the numbers when my phone pings with a message.

I grab the phone without thinking, but when I read the message, my chest constricts.

'Everything alright?' Giles asks.

'Yes, just a personal thing.' I turn the phone over, so the screen is facing downwards. Except it isn't alright. I have just received a photograph of my car parked up on the side of the road where I hit the bike, the same photo that Steve had hanging on his wall. The accompanying text says:

Tell them before we do.

Tell who? The police? Marie?

It's hopeless. I can't concentrate, so I cut the meeting short, telling Giles I have to make some phone calls. When he's left my office, I close the door and, with trembling fingers, open my phone. The photograph has a time stamp on it. Except the photo's timestamp reads 3:34 p.m. last Thursday, which can't be right, because I'm certain I parked up on that road later. Frowning, I log onto my online mobile phone account where it lists all the calls that I've made and received. I scroll through to last Thursday, and see Myles called me at 4:13 p.m., just two or three minutes before the crash.

This photograph could not have been taken at 3:34 p.m., so the time stamp must be wrong on Steve's phone. I'm sure he's behind these threatening messages. But what can I do about it?

The rest of the day drags. I can't concentrate properly and end up telling Rosie that I have a migraine. Back at home, it's even worse. I feel vulnerable all alone in this big house with its expansive windows where anyone could look in. I make myself a cup of tea and head to the study, a room Myles and I share. It has a floor to ceiling bookcase on one wall and a large glass desk facing the window with our beautiful views of the rolling moors and rocky outcrops in the distance, with the scattering of houses below. I print out the messages I've received, remove the piece of paper with the handwritten message from my book and lay them out across the top of the large desk. Seeing the text messages so large makes my pulse race. I'm about to send the photos I took of Steve's wall to print when I hear the crunching of tyres on the drive. I scoop up the pieces of paper and shove them into a large brown envelope, sliding it under the printer. I'm not expecting anyone, and I glance around manically looking for something with which I can defend myself.

Instead of the doorbell, Myles's voice winds through the house.

'Clara?'

Relief floods through me and tears spring to my eyes. I pat my upper chest to calm myself down and stride into the hallway.

'You're back early,' I say. I remember how I used to greet him with a kiss. These days, we barely touch each other.

'Thought we could order in food and watch a film.'

Sometimes Myles forgets we live out in the sticks. The choice of a takeaway is Indian food from the tandoori in Slownes or nothing. It's hardly gourmet, but at least it means neither of us has to cook.

'Do you want me to order?' I ask.

'Yes. I'll have the normal.' He heads for the shower.

Half an hour later, there's the sound of a scooter pulling into our drive, followed by a high-pitched sounding of a horn. I hurry to the front door and accept the large brown bag filled with boxes of food. It smells good, probably better than it'll taste. I take the boxes into the kitchen, unpack everything, and put the dishes on a tray. It's a treat to eat in front of the television.

Myles is already lounging on the sofa, flicking through Netflix. We eat together as we watch some action film that has much too much violence for my liking. When Myles's phone rings, he pauses the film, says a few words to someone on the other end and sighs, turning to me.

'I've just got to check a document. I'll be ten minutes at most,' he says, unfurling himself from the sofa.

'I'll clear up then,' I say, gathering the bowls and plates.

I'm in the kitchen, loading the dishwasher when Myles enters behind me.

'What are these?' His voice is cold.

I turn around and let a glass slip from my fingers. It shatters into hundreds of shards on the limestone tile floor. Myles is holding the pages that I printed out.

I freeze.

He asks again. 'What are these?'

'Um, I'd better clear up this mess,' I say, trying to deflect, to buy myself some time to think.

'Leave it,' Myles says, his voice taut. 'Is this your car parked up on the road near where that boy disappeared? And who sent you these messages?'

My husband knows me. He can tell when I'm lying or being evasive.

'I can explain,' I say, rubbing my knuckles into my eyes. 'I think I might have hit something on Thursday.'

'What the hell, Clara!' Myles booms.

'I didn't hit the boy, at least I'm 99% sure I didn't. I stopped the car, searched everywhere, called out and there was no answer. I wouldn't have left a kid bleeding out on the side of the road, Myles!' Except I may well have done that, either advertently or inadvertently.

Myles is staring at me as if I'm a stranger. A look of dismay morphs into disgust.

'Is that why you had the car repaired? I thought your story about hitting a bollard didn't stack up. What idiot hits a bollard with the front of the car? Oh God, Clara. What have you done?'

He flicks through the pieces of paper. 'And what are these notes? Who's threatening you?'

'Steve Burnham, I think.' My voice is barely a whisper.

'But why didn't you go to the police? Or tell me the truth?'

‘Because I was scared. I still am. And now I’ve dug myself into this enormous hole I don’t know how to get out of it.’

‘Was there blood on the car?’ Myles’s eyes are so wide, they’d be comical if this were under other circumstances.

‘Of course not!’ I exclaim. ‘I hit something, but it wasn’t a person. I promise.’ Except that’s a hollow promise, and I think we both know it.

‘You’ve got to report this to the police,’ Myles says, pacing up and down the living room. ‘I’ll call Robin Goldberg. He’s the best criminal solicitor I know. In fact, we can go see him now and sort this.’

‘Please, no. I can’t!’ I say.

‘I need to protect you.’ Myles gesticulates with his arms. ‘I don’t know what you’ve done, but this isn’t just on you. It’s on me too. You’re my wife.’

‘I know.’

‘And who do you think is sending these?’ Myles asks, jabbing a finger at the print outs.

‘I told you. Steve, the father of the missing boy. He’s really suspicious. Everyone says so.’

‘Seriously? Everyone says so.’ Myles’s voice is dripping with sarcasm.

For a brief moment I think about telling Myles everything. How I broke into Steve’s garage, how I found that weird mannequin arm on the side of the road, and the battered bike that no one has mentioned. But my husband is so black and white in his thinking, and he’s disgusted enough with me as it is. I can’t make this situation worse.

‘I don’t know what the hell you’ve got yourself mixed up in, but I don’t like it.’

‘Me neither!’ I exclaim.

‘Put your coat on. We’re going to see Robin.’

‘No. Please don’t make me.’ I sound like a pathetic child, and I hate myself, even more than I have over the past few days.

‘If you refuse, you’re making me complicit in a crime,’ Myles says. ‘I’m a lawyer, Clara. How do you think this will look on me? I could be disbarred.’

I have no words. But I do have an overwhelming desire to keep this from the police, at least until I can work out what really happened and who’s behind the threats. We’re both silent, but Myles continues pacing the

room, running his hands through his hair, a vein on his forehead pulsing manically.

‘I can’t do this,’ he says, eventually. ‘I’m going to Manchester.’

‘But—’ I exclaim.

‘When you decide to talk to Robin Goldberg and the police, let me know. I’ll get you the best criminal solicitor, but until then, I’m out of here.’ With that, he strides out of the room and runs heavy-footed upstairs.

I can’t move. It’s as if my feet are tethered to the carpet and my brain has frozen. Is Myles really leaving me over this? Is our marriage broken, or is this a temporary blip? I thought we were meant to be a team, but then I groan. We haven’t been a team even before this. I listen as he slams the front door, and then watch out of the window as his car’s rear lights fade into the darkness.

I’m not sure I have ever felt so alone. Is Myles right? Should I go to the police and let them handle everything, even if it means prosecuting me for a crime I may or may not have committed? I wander aimlessly through the house, trying to suppress tears. I grab my phone and call Myles, ready to beg him to come home so we can discuss things further. Except his phone must be off as it goes straight to voicemail.

I see that I’ve got a missed WhatsApp message from Deirdre’s group.

We’ve set up a GoFundMe page to raise money for Marie during these incredibly difficult times. Please donate as much as you can. Here’s the link.

I go onto the fundraising page and see that nearly one thousand pounds has already been donated. Deirdre has given £100, as has Fiona, which seems very generous. I do the same, and then wonder if I should have given more. I go onto Facebook and look at the postings on *Slownes Now*, the village group. Every message is about Leo, including a link to a television report given by a police detective where he states that the first twenty-four hours are the most important in a missing child’s case. The implication is that now, five days on, Leo is unlikely to be found alive.

An email comes through.

Hi Clara, thank you so much for ur donation and ur help. Marie x

Without giving too much thought, I write a reply.

Let me know if I can do anything more to help. Best wishes, Clara.

I don't expect a reply and I don't get one, but I do want to speak to Marie, to find out more about her ex-husband. The next morning, I go to Buxton and buy a selection of goodies, food stuffs, and bath salts. I put them in a floral box and tie a ribbon around it. Then I head back to Slownes. I park on Pennington Way, and carrying the box, get out of the car. I notice that Marie's car has been moved and the flat tyre is mended. Walking up the path to her house, I have a moment of doubt. Except just as I hesitate, Marie's front door opens. She's standing there, wearing an oversized sweatshirt and fluffy slippers. Make-up free, her hair is greasy and lank. I suppose that's what grief and worry does.

'I brought this for you,' I say, holding out the floral box. Is this bribery, I wonder?

'Oh,' she says, accepting the box without saying thank you. We both hesitate for a moment until eventually she says, 'Do you want to come in?'

'I'll only stay for a couple of minutes,' I say.

'Do you want a cup of tea?' She turns before I can answer.

I follow Marie through the narrow hallway, cluttered with trainers and anoraks and skateboards. The kitchen at the back of the house is just big enough for a table with four chairs. The place is filthy. Dirty plates and mugs are piled up on the drainer, empty food cartons are littering the table, and the floor feels sticky underfoot.

'Sorry for the mess,' she murmurs.

I know I shouldn't be judging. She must be tearing apart with her son missing.

'How are you?' I ask, looking at the photos of her two boys plastered all over the fridge.

'Yeah, you know. It's hard.' She sniffs and then switches on the kettle. 'It's so quiet without Leo.'

'I can imagine,' I say, hovering in the doorway. 'And how is your other son coping?'

'Benny is eight and he doesn't understand where his big brother has gone.'

'Have the police got any leads?' I ask, digging my fingernails into the palms of my hands.

'Not really. Don't trust the coppers anyway. That's why I'm so grateful for everything Deidre's doing.'

‘And your husband. How is he bearing up?’

‘My ex, you mean. Dunno and don’t care.’ She pours boiling water into a mug that doesn’t look clean. ‘Milk and a couple of sugars?’ she asks.

‘Just the milk, please.’

‘Have a seat,’ she says, pointing at the table. There is clutter on all the chairs. I pick up a pile of envelopes and place them on the table. I spot several envelopes stamped with *Final Demand* in red and decide to up my contribution to the GoFundMe page. As if she’s mind-reading, Marie says, ‘People have been really generous. I’ve got an alert on my phone so every time some money comes in, it pings. Deirdre set it up for me. At least it means I don’t have to worry about work for a bit.’

‘Has Fellow Moves given you time off work?’

‘Yeah, but I’m not sure for how long. I take off too much time as it is whenever the boys are sick.’

‘Is there anything else I can do to help?’

‘Look, I don’t mean to be rude, Clara, but I’m not sure what you up in your fancy house can do for me other than give me handouts. Don’t get me wrong, I appreciate your gifts, but it’s not bringing back my Leo, is it?’

I’m silent because she’s right. I don’t belong here. The only reason I’m at her house is because of my guilty conscience. I take a sip of the boiling tea, and then pull my phone out of my pocket.

‘Oh, goodness,’ I say. ‘I’m afraid I’ve got to get a move on. I’m late for a meeting at the shop. But let me know if I can do anything further.’

She stares at me, her eyes narrowing slightly, and I wonder what she thinks of me. I stand up, and with an awkward little wave, I head out of the kitchen, down the short corridor, and let myself out of the front door. I shouldn’t have come.

SEVEN

Myles is avoiding my calls. I haven't heard from him since he left the house yesterday evening. I'm almost certain he won't speak to the police without discussing it with me first, but I'm uneasy on so many levels. He's always been supportive of me and even at our lowest points, he never walked away. I understand his worry and disappointment, but I don't know how to fix this. I can't go to the police; not yet. Of course, that doesn't mean the police won't turn up to question me again, and that terrifies me.

I'm at my desk at work, while Rosie is out front in the shop. It's quiet and we barely have any customers. Supposedly working, I'm glued to the local news channels and social media, endlessly scouring my phone, desperate for any updates and reading through comments about Leo's disappearance with a morbid voyeurism. And now there's a live televised briefing from the Derbyshire police. I've shut my office door and am watching on my laptop with the sound turned down low.

Detective Inspector Haydn McWalsh is at the podium. Adam Hall, the police constable who interviewed me, is nowhere to be seen. Too junior, I presume. McWalsh stands in a room full of journalist, flashing cameras, and heckling voices. As soon as he opens his mouth, the room falls silent.

'As of today, we are treating the disappearance of Leo Burnham as a possible abduction. Further information has come to light to suggest that Leo has been taken against his will. I am unable to take any further questions at this time but urge members of the public to contact us should they have any relevant information. Thank you.' He steps away from the microphone and immediately there's a roar of questions.

A woman's voice rings out, shrill above the other voices. 'Do you have a suspect?' Another voice asks, 'Is that all you're saying?' The clip cuts back to the newsreader.

I let out a shaky sigh, relief washing over me so hard I'm almost dizzy. This has to be good news for me, although I feel terrible for Leo and Marie.

If it's an abduction, I didn't kill him. Someone else is holding Leo and hopefully, he's still alive. This whole situation has nothing to do with me.

I stand and pace my tiny office. I was right not to let Myles force me to go to the police. But I do have information; information that could be relevant for the police, except everything I've done puts me in a bad light and makes me appear suspicious. There's no way I can march into the police station and admit I left the scene of a potential accident or broke into Steve's property. But I could pass the tip along anonymously.

I tell my assistant Rosie that I'll be out for an hour. Taking my laptop, I leave the dress shop and head for a coffee shop. There are plenty to choose from, packed with tourists and locals alike. Buxton is a lovely spa city with honey-coloured historic buildings, the famous opera house, and Devonshire Dome, except today, I don't even glance at them. I pick a cafe that claims to serve the best cakes in the Peak District and settle at a table near the back. I'm no technical wizard so I just hope that by sending the email from an anonymous Hotmail address in a public space, it will keep me untraceable. I set up a new Hotmail email account first, using random letters and numbers, and then compose the email.

Hello. You need to be aware that items were found on the side of the road near where Leo Burnham disappeared. These include the arm of a mannequin and a battered bike. Leo's dad, Steve, has been sending threatening blackmail notes to Slownes residents. Search his lockup garage and you'll find the evidence.

I type in the email address on Police Constable Adam Hall's business card and with a hammering heart, I press send. I then pick up my phone and send a WhatsApp message to Myles, begging him to come home, to talk to me. I wait to see if the little ticks turn blue. They don't.

A FEW HOURS LATER, I'm back in the shop, trying to be polite to an older lady who is trying on at least half our collection. Rosie is in the back, putting labels on clothes. My phone rings and I hurry through to the office to ask Rosie to swap places with me. It's Deidre.

'Hello,' I say hesitantly.

'Hope you don't mind me ringing, but Marie rang me earlier and mentioned you went around to hers. Very kind of you, by the way. The thing is, she's gone missing. She wasn't at school this afternoon to pick up little Benny and no one knows where she's gone.'

‘Goodness,’ I whisper. I didn’t see this coming.

‘Did Marie say anything unusual when you saw her? You might have been the last person to set eyes on her.’

Oh no. Does this mean suspicion falls on me again?

‘She didn’t say very much, to be honest. And there was no hint she was planning to go anywhere,’ I reply truthfully.

‘Right. Well, we’ve notified the police and they’re looking into it.’

I swallow. ‘What do you think’s going on?’

‘Blow me, I’ve no idea. Well, actually, I have. I’d bet my bottom dollar that that ex of hers has something to do with it. The police are looking for him. We’re holding a candlelight vigil at 7:00 p.m. in the churchyard. It was Marie’s idea, so let’s hope she turns up for it. The local vicar will lead some prayers, and one of the detectives will say a few words. I trust you’ll be there. Bring a candle or two.’

‘Of course,’ I promise, even though it’s the last place I want to be.

IT’S difficult to find parking. All the residential streets near the church are chock full of cars so I have to park several streets away. By the time I arrive in the churchyard, the service has started. What strikes me most is how many people are here. There must be several hundred, pretty much the whole population of Slownes. There are also a couple of cameras perched at the back, sent from the local TV stations, I assume. The vicar stands on a podium underneath an expansive ancient yew tree that has been lit from underneath. The whole scene is rather beautiful with so many flickering candles and people huddled together dressed in woolly hats and gloves. I’m not religious, but I feel like I should be repenting. Everything here could be my fault. If I’d spoken up earlier, could this situation have played out differently? The vicar is talking about Leo and the Burnham family and then he gives a short reading from the Bible, followed by the Lord’s Prayer. After a minute of silent reflection, he steps off the podium and a uniformed detective takes the microphone.

‘Thank you all for being here tonight in support of Leo Burnham and his mother, Marie. I am aware that the village of Slownes is tightknit with many of you knowing each other, and on behalf of the Burnham family, we are very grateful for your support. As you know, Leo is still missing. We were hoping that Marie would be in attendance this evening, but

unfortunately, she doesn't appear to be here. Marie, if you are here, please let us know.'

There are a few gasps, and then an oppressive silence. The detective carries on talking.

'We now believe that Steve Burnham may be holding his ex-wife Marie against her will. Earlier this afternoon, her car was found seemingly abandoned near the footpath that runs over the hills between Slownes and Dollington, known locally as the Spearhead Trail. Marie's phone is switched off, and she has failed to collect her younger son from school. This behaviour is completely out of character. Needless to say, we're worried for the safety of both Leo and Marie. Steve Burnham is also out of contact. If anyone has any information about the whereabouts of any members of the Burnham family, please make contact with myself or my colleagues. Thank you.'

Questions erupt, but the detective switches off the microphone and steps down from the stand.

I head back to the car. I don't know many people here and frankly, I can't face talking to anyone. The whole situation is a mess and I'm pretty sure that once Deidre tells the police that I was, supposedly, the last person to see Marie, they'll be knocking on our door again. The lies have become so overwhelming, it's as if I'm a fly stuck in a bowl of treacle that's slowly choking me. I wonder if the police have found Steve's garage yet, and if so, does he still have the photos of my car on the wall? What will they make of that? And is there any relevance that Marie vanished after my visit?

I drive home wondering if Myles will be there waiting for me. He's not. The house is shrouded in darkness. Nothing feels safe anymore. This lovely house that was once my refuge is too big and exposed. Still, where else can I go?

I unlock the house and switch on lots of lights, uncertain if I'm safer in brightness or darkness. I call Myles and to my relief, he answers.

'Are you coming home?' I ask.

'I'm sorry, but I've got too much work on. I know we need to talk, Clara. I'll be back tomorrow evening. Have you given any more thought to going to the police?'

'Yes and no. I'll make my decision tomorrow. But things have moved on. The police now think Leo was abducted and his mum is missing, so

none of this can be my fault.'

'Alright,' he replies, doubt evident in his voice. 'But don't do anything without running it by me first. As I said, I'll find you a good lawyer. He'll need to accompany you to the police station when you make your statement.'

If I make a statement, I think.

'I'm sorry about everything,' I add.

'Me too,' he says, and honestly those two words are music to my ears. Perhaps Myles isn't going to walk away from us.

I have another restless night and awake with aching bones, as well as a weird epiphany. I've walked the Spearhead Trail, the footpath that the police detective mentioned yesterday evening, and it runs close to where I think I hit Leo's bike. What if Marie returned to that spot? It seems too much of a coincidence to me. So, I decide to walk the footpath, to see if I can find anything, however unlikely that seems.

After studying the map, I work out where I can park my car to get onto the trail and be near the road. It's a clear day, yet it seems wrong that the sun is shining and the sky a pale shade of blue. I pull on warm clothes and head out. When I reach the layby, there's already a Land Rover Discovery parked up, so I ease my Audi into the pot-holed space behind it. As I'm getting out of the car and pulling on wellington boots, a woman arrives with a German Shepherd on a leash.

'Beautiful out there today,' she says, her cheeks ruddy and her breath making visible puffs. 'But it's muddy after all the rain. Enjoy your walk.' The dog hops into the boot of the car. I smile and head towards the sign for the footpath. It takes about twenty minutes to reach the road. I wonder if Marie's car is still discarded further up, but I don't dare go there. What if there are police around and they work out who I am? It's a hunch, and I might be completely wrong, but did Marie return to the site of my accident? As I approach the bend, my heart begins to hammer. I cross over a fence and walk along the side of the road, keeping to the verge. It's difficult to be sure exactly where I found the mannequin arm. The ground here has surely been searched multiple times both by the police and Deirdre's army, so the chances I'm going to find anything are slim. But it's worth a shot.

I'm scouring the ground, kicking at leaves with my boots, eyes scanning every inch. And then I see it. Something glistens up ahead, half visible

under a pile of loose tarmac. Crouching down, I see a phone, almost buried, as if car tyres have kicked up debris to cover it. With my gloved hands, I reach for it and step back off the road, under the shadows of an oak tree. The screen is smashed but it's the phone's case that confirms I was right. It's a custom case with a print of two boys: Leo and Benny.

This verge and section of road have been searched multiple times, including by me, and for sure Marie's phone would have been found if it had been here then. It must have been dropped recently. I hold it gingerly, wondering what I should do now. Then, without thinking too much, I press the side button and the phone flickers to life. It's still working. My heart races. The screen is too fractured to see anything, but at least it's still functional. Excited, I pocket the phone and hurry back towards my car. What should I do next?

EIGHT

Of course I should take the phone straight to the police. I hear Myles' voice in my head, instructing me to do just that. But they'll ask questions. What was I doing looking for Marie's phone? Did I really find it on the road or perhaps I took it from her home? And why am I so interested in the disappearance of Marie and Leo? So many questions, many of which I don't have the answers to. So no, I can't take it to the police.

I sit in my car, rolling the device in my hands. I wish I could see the screen. I need someone who is tech-savvy, who will unlock the phone for me without asking too many questions.

I draw a blank. Myles and I are so very middle-class with our educated, posh friends and our desperation to be above the law. Except I wasn't brought up like that. My parents were working class; they scraped by, and then, when I was just twelve, Dad died and things got so much worse. The same age that Leo is now. But Mum had ambition for me. I was academically able, so when a teacher suggested I try for a scholarship at the local fee-paying school, Mum leapt at the idea. I won a full scholarship. Except children are mean and I suffered years of bullying, always the poor girl wearing the hand-me-down clothes, never invited to birthday parties and unable to go on school trips because Mom didn't have the money. I may have been miserable, but with hindsight, that education set me up for life. I went to university, got good jobs, met Myles. It wasn't the same for Dave, my brother. He was in and out of trouble.

We haven't spoken for five years, not since Mum's funeral, when Dave called me a stuck-up bitch and Myles and Dave nearly got into a punch up. But perhaps now is the time to bury the hatchet. If anyone will know how to contact someone on the dark web, it'll be my brother. And despite the bad feelings between us, we are still each other's only blood relatives. It's worth a telephone call.

His phone rings for so long I wonder whether he's decided to ignore me, or perhaps this is no longer his number. Just when I'm about to hang up, he

answers.

‘The prodigal daughter returns,’ he says.

‘Hello, Dave. How are you?’

‘I’m very well and how are you?’ he asks with a faux posh accent.

‘Fine. Where are you living now?’

‘Why do you care?’ he asks.

‘Okay, let’s cut the crap,’ I say. ‘I know things are shit between us for a million and one reasons, but I’ve got a problem and I was wondering if you might be able to help me.’ I notice that I slip back into my Mancunian accent when I’m talking to Dave, profanities easy on my tongue.

‘Finally, some honesty,’ Dave says. ‘Spill.’

‘Do you know someone who could fix a phone’s screen and get access to its data?’

‘I’m assuming this isn’t your phone we’re talking about.’ There’s an edge of laughter in his words.

‘No, it’s not. And yes, what I’m asking is illegal.’

‘Oooh, how exciting. Has your fancy hubby been playing away?’

‘It’s nothing to do with Myles,’ I snap.

‘Alright, keep your knickers on. What’s in it for me?’

‘I’ll pay you. Name your price.’

‘Wrong answer. I don’t want your bloody money, Clara. When will you learn?’

‘Sorry,’ I say, wondering if he’s going to hang up on me. ‘Are you still living in Manchester?’

‘Yes.’ He pauses for a moment. I wonder if he’s also noticing how we both slip into our childhood roles, leaning into an argument at the slightest provocation. ‘I’ll sort the phone. Are you still in that fancy house on the hill with your posh lawyer hubby?’

‘Yes,’ I reply quietly, wondering how he knows where I live.

‘Tell you what, I’ll come over to yours and you can show me around your mansion. I can be there in two hours’ time.’

He doesn’t give me the chance to reply before he hangs up. I’m left staring at the phone, wondering whether this mess I’ve found myself in will heal the wounds between Dave and me or crack them open further.

THE ROAR of a motorbike tugs me towards the kitchen window, which looks out to the driveway. If I wasn’t expecting Dave, I’d have no idea that

this was my brother climbing off a big motorbike, clad in full leathers. He removes his helmet and ruffles his thick mop of hair before taking a bag from the pannier and striding towards the front door. I open it before he presses the bell.

He eyes me up and down. 'Looking good.'

'You too,' I say, and I mean it. His face has a healthy glow and he's put on weight since I last saw him.

'I'm off the drugs,' he says. 'You gonna let me in?'

I'm relieved to hear that, so I step back and let Dave pass me. He unpeels his leathers and dumps them on the bench in the hall, along with a leather messenger bag. Underneath, he's wearing skinny jeans and a black T-shirt. His arms and chest are toned, and he grins at me with that frustrating but endearing smile.

'Want a drink?' I ask.

'Builder's tea, please.' He follows me into the kitchen and lets out a whistle as he gazes at the marble island unit and top of the range appliances. 'Where's the phone, then?'

I slide Marie's phone across the marble towards him. 'What are we looking for?' Dave asks as he picks it up.

'I don't know exactly. Photos, videos.'

'Right. I'll get my laptop.' He strides out of the room and is back a moment later. Perching on one of our leather stools, he takes a laptop out of his bag and places it on the island unit.

'Are you doing it yourself?' I ask, unable to keep the surprise from my voice.

'A lot has happened over the past few years,' Dave says, without looking up at me. 'I got clean, learned a few tricks—I'm a whizz with computers now. Seems I've got a talent after all.'

I'm both surprised and not surprised. Dave was always bright, but he hooked up with the wrong kids and unlike me, was never encouraged to use his intellect.

'Legal or illegal stuff?' I ask, passing a mug of tea towards him.

'A bit of both, but don't worry. It's nothing that will land me in the slammer again.'

He attaches a cable from the phone to the laptop, and I watch in awe as his fingers fly over the keyboard. Less than a minute later, Dave says,

‘Bingo’.

‘What, you’ve already done it?’ I ask.

‘Yup. All I needed to do was install some software. So, what do you want to look at?’ I pull a stool over and sit next to him. ‘We’ve got the data on the phone’s internal storage and there’s a linked cloud backup. Want me to download both?’

‘Yes, please.’

‘Looks like we have some video footage from a car dashcam,’ Dave says.

My heart pounds. Is this footage from Marie’s car? And why would she have a dashcam? Her car is an old rust heap, hardly worth stealing. The video loads onto Dave’s laptop.

‘Any particular date you want to view?’ he asks.

‘Last Thursday. Start at the beginning of the day.’

The footage starts off on Pennington Way and captures the voices of the people in the car.

Marie’s voice is harsh. ‘You’re a thoughtless idiot, Leo,’ she says. ‘Letting your football shirt get ripped like that. I’m not made of money, you know.’

‘Dad said he’ll pay.’ Leo’s voice is still boyish but there is the occasional cracking sound, hinting of the man he will become.

She snorts. ‘Since when has your dad ever paid for anything?’

‘He bought me my Nintendo Switch.’ That voice is of a much younger child, coming from the rear of the car.

‘You mean he nicked it,’ Marie says.

The video shows the car driving along some residential streets before pulling up outside the primary school in Slownes. The boys get out of the car. Marie doesn’t say goodbye to them, and they don’t say goodbye to her. Then Marie drives to Tesco’s and leaves the car in the supermarket car park for about an hour. Finally, she returns home.

The next video is at 2:55 p.m. Marie drives in silence, and then Leo gets into the car.

‘Your brother is with a mate until later,’ Marie says. There’s no response. To my bemusement, she starts driving out of Slownes towards the road where the accident happened. Just before the bend, she pulls up onto the verge, almost hitting a tree on the left.

‘Stay here,’ she says.

I can hear her rummaging around in the back of the car and then the video captures her carrying something.

‘What the hell is that?’ Dave asks, peering at the laptop screen.

‘It’s a mannequin. One of those things used to train people in resuscitation and the like.’

‘Looks creepy as hell,’ he mutters.

In the video, Marie lets the mannequin drop to the ground, half on the road, half on the verge, then she returns to the car. This time she wheels out a bicycle. I hear Leo’s voice in the background.

‘What are you doing with my bike, Mum?’ he asks.

‘Nothing for you to bother yourself with.’

‘But that’s mine!’ he whines.

‘Get back in the f-ing car,’ she shouts.

A couple of minutes pass where Marie is in and out of the dashcam shots, but it looks like she’s arranging her props and filming them with her phone from different angles. We’ll need to find that footage too. And then she walks back to the car and turns on the radio.

‘What are we waiting for?’ Leo asks.

‘Shut up,’ Marie says.

‘Nice, mother,’ Dave quips, sarcastically. I have to agree with him.

And then it happens.

My white Audi swings into view, clipping the mannequin and the bicycle. The car skids to a stop and I see myself in the driver’s seat, just a white face, wide terrified eyes, hands on the steering wheel.

‘Is that you?’ Dave asks, peering closer at the laptop screen.

I don’t answer. I watch with horror as, after a long minute, I get out of the car and grip the top of the car door as I try to catch my breath. It’s clear who I am now. I walk to the side of the road, eyes frantically looking for something. My mouth opens as I shout, but the camera doesn’t pick up my words. There is no injured body, no blood, only staged plastic and debris.

And then I disappear from view of the camera as the blue van speeds past. Shortly afterwards, I’m back in my car and pulling away.

‘What the hell was that all about?’ Dave asks.

‘I think I was set up,’ I say, my voice cracking.

‘Do you want to watch some more?’

I nod.

The next footage is of Marie driving the car back into Slownes, but she carries on driving through the village and out the other side towards Dollington. She parks up on a residential street of attached houses, once miners' cottages. From the camera angle, they look small, probably just one up, one down, and mostly they're in a poor state. Doors with peeling paint, trash dumped on the pavement. Nothing happens for a couple of minutes until a man walks up to the car and bangs the roof. I only get a quick glimpse of him, but I'm pretty sure it's Steve.

'Hop into the back, Leo,' he says before asking, 'How did it go?' I hear him puff on a cigarette and can almost smell the cloying scent.

'To plan. Got lucky. It was a woman and she looked shit scared.'

'What do you mean?'

'That we struck gold. She's rich-looking, fancy car, and I swear to God she looked like she was going to faint. I think she genuinely thought she'd killed a kid. But you know what? Rich bitch that she is, she just drove off! Didn't stop to call the emergency services or anything. Think what we can do with that, Stevie.'

'Except we don't know who she is.' There's a pause and an audible inhale of a cigarette. 'The thing is, Marie, I've got cold feet.'

'What? Don't be an idiot. This is going to make us rich. We'll get donations, sympathy money. And when we work out who she is, we'll blackmail her.'

'I dunno,' Steve says. 'Don't think we should do this anymore.'

'This was your bloody idea in the first place! Of course we're doing it.'

'I don't want to be involved,' Steve says.

'We talked about this. But if you don't give a toss about the money, I'll keep it all. Makes no difference to me.'

'You're putting the kids at risk,' Steve says.

'What are you talking about?' Leo's voice pipes up from the back.

'Stay out of it,' Marie snaps.

'I'm going now,' Steve says. 'I can't risk any trouble with the police, Marie. It's too dangerous them sticking their noses into our affairs.'

'You're pathetic,' she sneers. 'Get out the bloody car then.'

We hear the car door click open, and then slam shut. Then it sounds like another door opens, and Leo's voice yells. 'Dad! Wait!'

Except Steve doesn't wait for Leo. He's striding across the road, his shoulders hunched, walking away from the boy, who is standing there in front of the car with an expression of anguish.

'Get back in the car, Leo!' Marie's voice sounds disembodied. Leo is out of picture for a few moments, but then there's the sound of scuffling. Leo appears again, a rucksack on his back and he's running at full pelt in the opposite direction to his father, his legs pumping up and down until he disappears around the corner and out of sight.

The footage ends abruptly.

NINE

Dave snaps his laptop shut and swivels to look at me. 'What have you got yourself caught up in, sis?'

'I don't know. I think I was in the wrong place at the wrong time. I was terrified I'd killed a boy and left the scene, even though I did try to look for him and found no one. But now I know that I didn't hit anyone. It was a set up.'

'Bloody hell. I thought my own troubles were bad, but this... it's something else.'

'Have you heard about that missing schoolboy, Leo Burnham?'

'No. But I don't follow the news much. It's too depressing.'

'Those'—I point to the laptop screen—'are his parents.'

'And the boy in the footage is Leo?'

'Yes.'

'What are you going to do with this information? You know you can't take this footage to the police. It isn't legal what I just did.'

'I know that, Dave. Don't worry. Let's see what else is on the phone. The thing is, it's not just Leo who has disappeared, but Marie has gone too. The police are looking for both of them.'

'And you think Steve here might have something to do with it?'

I decide to tell Dave everything; about how I tracked Steve down and went into his garage. I show him the photos I took of Steve's wall of photos and copies of the threatening messages I've received.

'Does Myles know about this?' Dave asks.

'Mostly, no.'

'Just as well.'

'Why do you say that?' I know that Myles doesn't approve of Dave. He couldn't fathom how I could have such a rough brother, and Dave thinks Myles is an idiotic toff. I knew from the second they met that they wouldn't get on, and when everything kicked off at Mum's funeral, Myles was the person who convinced me my life would be better without Dave in it. At the

time, I agreed with him, but now I regret that. Despite everything, we're each other's only blood relatives, and that means a lot. And now that he's off the drugs, I can see the boy I grew up with. I've missed him.

My phone pings. It's my husband, telling me he's on his way home.

'Myles will be here shortly,' I tell Dave.

He scowls. 'Then I'd better head off.'

'You don't need to go, you know,' I say, placing my hand over Dave's forearm.

'Yes, I do, sis,' he says. 'Look, I'll zip up everything from this phone and send it over to you via a secure link. But I don't want you to get in any deeper in this abduction stuff. Keep your head down and stay safe.'

'What should I do with Marie's phone?' I ask.

'Wipe it clean of fingerprints and drop it somewhere. That's what I would do.' He shuts down his laptop, puts it into the messenger bag, and walks out into the hall. I watch as he tugs his leathers back on.

'Don't be a stranger,' I say. He steps forwards and pulls me into a hug.

'Take care, Clara. And when you decide to leave Myles, let me know and I'll be there for you.'

I stiffen.

He throws me a look I can't decipher. 'Call me if you need any more help.' And then he's slipped out of the door. A moment later, his motorbike roars to life and I watch until he's out of sight, the sound of his bike fading into the distance. He leaves me feeling surprisingly bereft but determined to get my brother back into my life.

When he's gone, I hide Marie's phone in my washbag and wait for Myles to return home.

THE HONEST HEART to heart with my husband doesn't happen. He walks into the house looking almost grey and holding his head.

'What's up?' I ask with a frown.

'I'm not feeling well. Going to bed. I think I've got a fever.'

I make Myles some broth and toast and carry it up to our bedroom on a tray. But he's curled up in bed, already fast asleep.

The link from Dave arrives an hour later along with a message: *Don't do anything stupid...*

I sit in the living room and download everything onto my laptop. There is a lot of data. Emails, text messages, WhatsApp messages, videos,

photographs, and notes. From the look of all this evidence, Marie is a manipulative planner.

There are hundreds of messages between her and Steve. Although they gave the impression they were estranged, these messages suggest the opposite. The two of them were working together to stage the abduction of their son as a stunt to raise money. Lots and lots of it. I click onto the fundraising website and see that the total now stands at £5,682—the additional donations no doubt due to the increased publicity surrounding Leo and Marie’s disappearance. As I’m looking at it, the total increases again and again.

In her drafts folder, I find a couple of half-written emails, unsent, vowing to vanish for good. I’m not sure who she intended to send them to, and it’s not clear whether her sons were meant to be disappearing with her.

There’s another file in her search history, and this proves most interesting of all. She’s been onto Google Maps several times zoning in on a location that appears to be in the middle of some remote hills; no roads or buildings, just coordinates. Is this where she’s hiding?

Another message arrives from Dave.

There’s a device linked to her phone, probably a laptop or iPad. I’ve tracked down the coordinates but you’re not to go there by yourself. I’m tied up tomorrow but can come with you the next day. Dx

If Dave thinks I’m going to wait for another twenty-four hours, he doesn’t know me as well as he thinks.

Myles is still asleep when I head upstairs. I gather some clothes and take them to the spare room, along with my washbag and the phone buried deep inside it. Before falling asleep, I briefly think of calling Myles’ solicitor or going to the police. I rule it out almost immediately—I’ve done far too much to come out of this unscathed.

AS DAWN BREAKS, I get up and once again get dressed in thick clothes, ready for a hike out onto the moors. I wonder whether I should let Myles or Dave know where I’m going but then again, what would they be able to do about it? Instead, I leave Myles a note saying I’ve gone for a hike and telling him to call me if he needs anything.

With a thermos of tea and some breakfast bars packed into my rucksack, along with an additional fleece, hat, and gloves, I set off in the car. About forty minutes later, I’m deep into The Peak National Park. I leave the car

and head off across a field, following the GPS on my phone. Soon enough, I'm on the moors, my feet sinking deep into peaty bogs, following ancient and dilapidated dry-stone walls. It's a long, slow, and difficult walk, during which the only living things I meet are several flocks of sheep and a bird of prey. There are no houses out here and no roads. Close to an hour later, I'm hot and tired, but according to the map, I'm nearly there. Up ahead, I see a small, ramshackle stone hut. It's built out of large brown-grey stones, single-storey, and was obviously used as a cowshed or for hay storage. The place looks completely derelict, with a single door at the front, a collapsed roof, and no windows. Surely this hut can't be habitable?

I pause for a while and perch on a boulder, taking a long slug of tea from my thermos. I'm not sure what I was expecting, but it wasn't this. I get up after packing away my tea and approach from the side, walking slowly and as silently as possible. As I get closer, I see that the door is made from wood, and it's closed. There is a window on the far end, but the glass is shattered, so the interior must get some light. I pause outside the door, wondering if it's safe for me to go in. My heart is pounding, and I bite my lip, deciding what to do. Except I haven't come this far to leave now. I put my hand on the door, expecting to feel some resistance.

There is none. The door swings open with a screech. I stand in the doorway and stare at the woman seated on the ground, wrapped in a sleeping bag.

'What the hell are you doing here?' Marie's eyes blaze as she scrambles up, coiled like a wild animal ready to spring.

'I know what you did,' I say. My voice sounds calm even if I feel anything but.

'What did I do, then?' she sneers.

I pull Marie's phone from my pocket and hold it up. She lunges for it, but I'm quicker and shove it deep into my pocket.

'I've seen everything on your phone,' I say. 'And I have multiple backups. I know you and Steve faked the accident. I know you put Leo's bike on the road and placed the mannequin there to look like a person. And you've abducted your son so that you can raise money through fundraising and play on people's sympathy. I also know you've fallen out with Steve and now you're in hiding.'

Her eyes narrow at me and then she spits, ‘And what are you going to do about it?’

‘Get you to confess to the police.’

She laughs at me. The sound is scornful and piercing. She pushes something under her sleeping bag with her foot as she cackles away. I realise it’s her laptop.

‘Except you’re pointing the finger at the wrong person,’ she says. ‘It’s Steve who set all of this up. He’s got Leo, and he’s got dirt on you.’

I take a step back. ‘What do you mean?’

‘He took extra footage of you leaving the crime scene. He knows exactly who you are Clara Cade, and he’s coming for you.’ A cold shiver runs down my spine. ‘Except why should I let him have all the fun? Now that you’re here, I’m going to finish off what we’ve started.’

I take a step backwards. I shouldn’t have come here. Marie is deluded, dangerous even.

‘There’s nowhere for you to run.’ Her laugh is harsh and manic. She jabs her finger at me. ‘You see, you’re the brains behind all of this; me and Steve are just the poor, unwitting accomplices.’

‘What?’ I whisper, frozen to the spot now.

‘We’ve got those clips of you leaving the scene of a terrible accident, touching the bike and the mannequin. We know you want out of your marriage and that you need money.’

My jaw drops open. What does this woman think she knows?

Marie is grinning now, hands on her hips, evidently pleased with herself. ‘I’m not an idiot, you know. I’ve pre-scheduled emails to go to the police saying that if anything happens to me or Steve, they’re to investigate you. That you are the mastermind behind Leo’s abduction and that you’re going to take all the fundraising money, which, by the way, is now nearly ten grand. There are video clips, emails, it’s all there pointing at you. All the proof.’

‘But why would I do any of that?’ I protest. ‘It makes no sense.’

Her eyes glitter. ‘I know what you’re planning, Clara. You need the money as much as I do.’

‘You’ve got the wrong person,’ I say. Her words don’t compute. ‘What do you think I’m planning?’

She doesn't answer, but her eyes are flashing, and panic grips me. Does Marie intend to hurt me? Have I been lured here? Did she know that I found her phone, that I'd track her to this crumbling stone hut in the middle of nowhere?

And then she lunges for me, fingernails scratching my cheeks, grabbing at my hair, kicking me in my knees. I hit the ground hard. She yanks her phone from my pocket. I scramble to get up, ignoring the burning pain.

'Where's Leo?' I ask, breathlessly.

She's jabbing at her phone. 'You lied, you bitch. You couldn't get access to my phone because the screen is broken.'

I don't tell her that I got into her phone another way.

'Where's Leo?' I repeat the question.

'Probably with Steve.' I wonder if that's true. I didn't see any evidence of a boy's belongings in Steve's garage, unless he's taken Leo somewhere else.

'And Steve?' I press. 'I know he didn't want you to carry on with this crazy mission.'

'You know nothing!' She swivels around. 'He's a useless idiot. If it wasn't for him, I wouldn't be in this mess.'

'Then why send those threatening messages?'

'What messages?'

Except before I can answer, she's picked up a thick plank of wood. I have no time to duck. No time to do anything. Pain explodes inside my head and the world goes black.

TEN

I awake, completely confused. Where am I? The ground is hard, and my head is pounding so much, I feel nauseous. The world spins as I sit up, and I keep my eyes closed for a long while until the dizziness eases.

And then it all comes flooding back. Marie's blow to my head, this derelict hut on the moors. Gingerly, I open my eyes and glance around. Marie has gone. I touch my head and find a huge bump, sticky with blood. Every bone in my body aches, but my head most of all. I shiver with cold. My backpack lies on the floor next to me, so I shift ever so gently towards it. Except I realise Marie has been through it and my thermos is empty, a big puddle of tea staining the stone floor. Panicked, I fumble through my pockets until I unearth my phone in my back jeans pocket. Relief floods through me. Marie must have taken her own phone, but she didn't find mine. With trembling fingers, I dial the emergency services.

The mountain rescue team finds me nearly an hour later. I'm so cold now, I'm losing feeling in my fingers and toes, shivering, barely able to speak. They wrap me up in a reflective blanket. I insist I'm fine, that I can walk, that they must call the police. But when I try to stand up, my legs give way. They settle me on a fully-body vacuum mattress to stave off hypothermia. I wonder if they think I'm delusional from cold.

I lose track of time. I'm loaded into an ambulance and driven to the hospital.

'Please call the police,' I beg the paramedic. 'I need to see the detective in charge of the missing boy case, Leo Burnham. His mother hit me and she's trying to frame me.'

I'm not sure the paramedics fully believe me, but when we arrive at the hospital, I'm transferred into a private room where I'm given a full check over by a young female doctor. Ten minutes later, there's a knock on the door and in walks Detective Inspector Haydn McWalsh.

'Hello, Mrs Cade,' he says, pulling up a plastic chair and positioning it next to the bed. 'How are you feeling?'

‘Alright, other than my head.’

He leans forward. ‘We have reason to believe you’re involved in the abduction of Leo Burnham, that you left the scene of an accident and you’ve committed charity fraud.’

‘No,’ I exclaim. ‘You’ve got it all wrong. I’ve been set up. It’s Marie Burnham who has done everything and she’s blaming it on me. She hit me over the head. You need to find her.’

He raises an eyebrow. ‘We’ve already located her. She was found wandering the moors in a disorientated state.’

‘Did you check her phone? She sent messages and videos making it look like I hit her son’s bike and fled the scene of the accident.’

He hesitates. ‘Yes, we have those. The evidence suggests...’

I cut him off. ‘That it was my fault. And yes, I did leave the scene and I know I shouldn’t have done that, except it was a set up. Marie planted the bike on the road, and even a mannequin, to frame me. I never struck Leo.’

The detective narrows his eyes. I hand him my phone.

‘All the proof is here. I downloaded the data off Marie’s phone.’

Detective McWalsh’s lips purse but he accepts my phone.

‘I know accessing her data was illegal, but please look through everything.’

He is quiet for a long minute. ‘The doctor wants to keep you here for twenty-four hours’ observation due to your concussion. I, or one of my colleagues, will return to take an official statement. For now, do not leave this hospital; otherwise, I will arrest you.’

I stare at him, my eyes wide, my throat constricting. He has to believe me.

‘There are text messages, too. Marie or Steve must have sent them to me. And Leo, I think he ran away. Please find him. Steve’s living in a lock up garage in Dollington.’ As the words tumble from my lips, I see in the detective’s eyes that he doesn’t believe me.

McWalsh stands up and leaves the room. I let tears seep out from underneath my closed lids. What a mess. What a terrible mess.

A NURSE GIVES me some medication and insists I sleep. Some time later, Detective Inspector Haydn McWalsh and Police Constable Adam Hall are at my bedside. It’s dark outside now and my pounding headache has

lessened. I wonder where Myles is, whether anyone has told him I'm in the hospital.

'We have good news, Clara. Young Leo has been found, hiding in his uncle's Airbnb near Bakewell. He says he ran away when he realised his parents planned to stage a car accident and then claim he was abducted. Marie admits her part, but she still insists you masterminded the scheme.'

'But that's rubbish,' I say. 'I'd never even met Marie until after the supposed accident when I joined the search party.'

'Except Marie Burnham knows a great deal about you.'

I shake my head, and as pain sears through my skull, immediately regret it. 'That makes no sense.'

'Is it true your business is struggling and that you need a cash injection from your husband to turn it around?'

I swallow hard. 'Yes, I suppose so.' But how do they know that and why is it relevant?

'Is it also true that you are-'

The detective doesn't get to finish his sentence because the door swings open and Myles rushes in.

'Clara!' he cries, racing to my bedside. 'Are you alright?' He freezes when he notices the two detectives. 'What's going on?' he asks.

'Your wife can fill you in. We have a couple of calls to make and will return shortly.' The men stand up and leave the room.

'What's happened, Clara?' Myles asks.

'Marie has set me up, made it look like I masterminded the whole abduction of Leo thing.'

'But that's absurd,' Myles says. For a moment, I'm relieved to have his support, but then he says, 'And none of this would have happened if you'd listened to me. I told you to confess right at the beginning and now look at the mess you're in. I'm going to get you a solicitor.' He turns on his heel and leaves the room.

I'm finding it hard to follow what's happening. It's as if my life is skidding out of my control, and it's so slippery I can't grasp onto it. I need Myles to slow down, to discuss everything with me. Except, as normal, he's trying to take control of a situation when he doesn't have all the facts. Right now, I'm craving gentleness and affection, something I should know better than to look to Myles for. I wish Dave was here. He's calm and pragmatic

and would know what to do, except the police still have my phone so I can't call him.

A nurse with chestnut hair and sparkling blue eyes comes in and offers me a little cup with two pills in it, along with a beaker of water. 'Take these,' she says. 'They'll help you sleep.' My head hurts so badly I swallow them without argument.

WHEN I AWAKE, there are voices in the corridor and light seeping through the thin curtains. There's a different nurse next to my bed, attaching a blood pressure monitor to my arm.

'How are you feeling, love?' she asks.

'Alright,' I say.

'Good, because there are a couple of police officers waiting to talk to you. And your husband is here.'

I tense, and she frowns at the blood pressure reading. Perhaps she shouldn't have imparted that news as she was checking me. She jots down the results and puts the equipment away.

'I'll let them in now,' she says. It seems I don't have any choice in the matter.

DETECTIVE INSPECTOR HAYDN McWalsh looks exhausted, but he has a smile on his face.

'Good news, Clara. Thanks to your information about his garage, we have located Steve Burnham and he has also been arrested. According to him, Marie Burnham followed you to your shop after the supposed accident and that's how she discovered who you were. Steve Burnham admitted that they are very short of money and were delighted that a rich person'—he signs those last two words with his fingers, as if they're in inverted commas—'left the scene of the supposed accident. However, he has contradicted his wife's statement and confirms that you were not the mastermind behind the scheme. We will not be pressing charges against you for abduction.'

I let out a sigh.

'The thing is,' he carries on. 'We can't work out who sent you the threatening anonymous messages. There is no record of those messages on either of the Burnham's phones and they deny sending them.'

'Could they have burner phones they're not telling you about?'

I notice that Myles has slipped back into the room. My eyes catch his and weirdly, his cheeks flush.

‘That is a possibility. We’ll run some further checks to see if we can work out who sent the messages.’

Myles whispers something but I don’t hear what he says. I raise an eyebrow at him. Detective McWalsh swivels around to look at my husband.

‘What did you say?’ I ask Myles.

‘It was me,’ he replies, louder this time.

All three of us stare at him.

‘You, what?’ I ask, eventually.

‘I sent you the messages saying, “*Some things you can’t fix*”. And the others.’

‘But why?’ I exclaim.

He walks over towards the window and stands with his back to us, his shoulders tense. ‘Because I knew you were going to leave me, Clara. I saw the rental listings on your laptop. I found a half-written email to your brother Dave, where you wrote that you needed to get out before you disappeared completely. And then when you told me about the accident and I saw that you’d had the car touched up, I knew that was my chance to keep you. I wasn’t trying to ruin you,’ he says, his voice cracking. ‘You were already halfway out the door, but I just needed more time. I thought that if you were scared, you’d stay. I’d be able to help you and you’d realise how much you needed me.’

I stare at my husband’s back, my jaw hanging open. How twisted this situation is.

‘Marie Burnham works for a lettings agency,’ Detective McWalsh adds. I jolt, so focused on Myles, I’d almost forgotten the police officers were still here. ‘Did you ever register to rent a property with Fellow Moves?’ he asks.

‘Probably,’ I say. ‘I registered with lots of agencies. And yes, it’s right. I am looking to leave my husband.’

Myles lets out a little sob.

‘It’s very likely that you will be prosecuted, Clara. But let’s see. When you’re out of the hospital, please make an appointment to come to the police station so we can take an official statement.’ Constable Adam Hall hands me back my phone and a business card.

The moment the two officers leave the room, Myles rushes over to my bed and tries to grab my hand. I pull it away from him.

‘You sent me all of those messages?’ I stare at him in horror.

‘I just wanted you to need me, Clara.’

‘And you thought scaring me was the way to make that happen?’ We’re both silent for a moment.

‘I love you, Clara. I only did it out of love.’

‘No, you didn’t. That’s not love, it’s control.’

‘Don’t you want me?’ A vein pulses in his jaw.

‘No, I don’t. The only person I want right now is Dave.’

Myles’s face contorts. ‘Your no-good brother Dave?’ he asks with a sneer.

‘Get out, Myles,’ I say. ‘Just get out.’

ELEVEN

‘Are you sure about this?’ Dave asks, heaving my two suitcases into the back of his van.

‘Never been surer,’ I say.

‘Except you’ve lost everything.’

‘No, I haven’t. I’ve got my brother back. In some ways I need to thank Marie, Steve, and Myles for that.’

‘But you’re going to have a criminal record.’

‘That hasn’t stopped you,’ I laugh. Dave is right. My solicitor thinks I will be charged for leaving the scene of an accident and for misleading police, but he’s hopeful I’ll receive a suspended sentence, probably with a fine, although I’ll likely have to do community service. It’s almost a relief to know that I’m going to be punished, because what I did was wrong. I should never have driven away from the scene of that accident, but I was too focused on the fashion show, too angry with Myles for letting me down again. I’ve known for the past couple of years that it was time to walk away from my marriage, except I haven’t been brave enough to do anything other than search for rental properties. Yes, I admit that Myles’ wealth and status were attractive, and perhaps the big house and the healthy bank balance kept me tied to him for much longer than I should have allowed them to. I was weak, greedy even. Easy to manipulate too.

So, I have plenty to thank Marie and Steve for. If I hadn’t been driving on that bend on that day, at that time, I may still be in an unhappy marriage. I may not have reconciled with my brother, and I certainly wouldn’t feel the relief I’m sensing for downsizing my life. Even the shop has worked out. Rosie managed to get a bank loan, and for a modest sum, is buying me out. It means I’ll have just enough money to get me through the next few months if I live frugally. Myles is promising to ‘fight me all the way’ on the divorce settlement. Honestly, I don’t care; he can keep his money.

I fasten my seatbelt and watch Dave as he puts his hands on the steering wheel and looks at me. There’s a tenderness there, something lost and found

again. He catches my eye, grins, and flicks the radio on. We set off.

‘Where to, boss?’ he asks, his tone light.

‘Wales, maybe. I want to see the sea.’

‘Bit dramatic, isn’t it?’ Dave says. ‘Running away to the coast.’

‘I’ve got a thing for drama. Haven’t you noticed?’

‘Only since you started bludgeoning mannequins with Audis. And as your delightful soon to be ex-husband has demanded your car back, I’m not sure you’ll be driving one of those any time soon.’

‘You might be right about that, Dave. Honestly, I don’t care.’

As Dave picks up speed, the village disappears and I let out a contented sigh.

THE CHEAT

If you would like a FREE copy of my novella, The Cheat, and the chance to name characters in my future books, please sign up to my newsletter at:

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ROSES ARE RED

She wanted a second chance at happiness. She got a first-class ticket to hell. Lydia Palmer seems to have it all - a thriving business, a beautiful house, a picture-perfect husband and two wonderful kids. But things are different behind closed doors - Lydia is desperately unhappy and wants a divorce.

Then, shockingly, her husband Adam dies.

When her grief eases, Lydia starts online dating and almost immediately meets Patrick. Handsome, successful, loving, he'll make the perfect second husband.

But is Patrick too good to be true? Can you really find prince charming online?

These are questions Lydia is forced to ask when her world begins to collapse. First, the police say Adam may have been murdered. Then her daughter turns against her, her business disintegrates...

Lydia is convinced that someone is trying to destroy her happiness. She's wrong. They want so much more than that...

Get ROSES ARE RED [HERE!](#)

Please enjoy this sneak preview of ROSES ARE RED.

Adam Palmer. He thinks he is so superior, blessed with intellect and good looks. At the top of his game, living in a period English house, surrounded by his loving family. Money is no object for Adam Palmer. Perhaps I should rephrase that. Money allows him to buy whatever objects he desires. You only have to look at the ostentatious Bentley parked outside his front door to know that.

But Adam Palmer is just an animal, as we all are. A creature of habit. He may think he holds all the cards, but he doesn't.

I do.

Because I know him as well as, if not better, than he knows himself.

This evening he arrived home from work. He grabbed a beer from the fridge. He had a screaming match with his wife. Nothing unusual there. It happens most nights. Then he disappeared into the bowels of the house, and

now, ten minutes later, here he is, naked except for a pair of garish yellow-and-green tropical-print swimming trunks, striding towards his outdoor swimming pool. A large blue-and-white striped towel is draped over his left shoulder, a designer brand, no doubt. His Rolex watch is strapped to his wrist. It's an Oyster Cosmograph Daytona made from platinum with a blue face. It costs nearly sixty grand. I know because I Googled it. He is !t for his forty-eight years. Broad shoulders, a well-toned stomach, a dark hairy chest and a confident gait. It's his hair that gives away his age, receding at the temples and on the crown of his head, dark brown waves splattered with grey. I'm surprised he hasn't got himself a hair transplant.

He drops his towel on a sun lounger and then lifts his arms up into the air, swinging them in large circles.

My heart is pumping now. The time has come.

He stretches his left leg and then his right leg, and now he takes five paces to the end of the pool. If he looks, he might see it. A tiny wire that runs across the grout line of the pale stones surrounding the turquoise pool. A thin wire that touches the base of the metal steps. Pace one, two, three... His eyes are fixed on the horizon, that sweeping vista of ancient woodland that surrounds the five-acre garden. He has stepped right over it and hasn't noticed.

I let out my breath and for the first time register the burning pain in my legs. I've been crouching behind a bush for too long. And now, here he is. Ready to go. Climbing up onto the diving board at the deep end of the pool, flexing his muscles, and then, with his hands held together high above his head, he makes a little jump and dives neatly into the pool with a modest splash.

A grin edges at the corners of my mouth. I press the button on my phone. The remote control.

Done.

I'm ready to show myself, to execute the next step.

But there is silence.

Where the hell is he?

I expect gasps and spluttering.

I wait. Ten seconds, twenty seconds, a whole minute. I have a good view of the house and the pool. There is no one outside.

Adam Palmer hasn't surfaced. It's worked. Wonderfully well.

And then I have to control my laughter. It's hilarious, really. He's just sunk straight to the bottom. Now I need to get out of here without leaving any evidence behind. I scroll through my mental checklist.

I pull the wire. It's five metres long and easy to pull back. I coil it up and put it in my rucksack. And now I tiptoe along the perimeter of the garden, darting behind large oak trees and rhododendron bushes, keeping in the dark shadows, holding my breath every time I accidentally step on a twig, until I reach the barbed wire fence that edges the public footpath. I crawl underneath it and then walk briskly along the wooded trail. People walk their dogs along here, but I've got that one covered. If I see anyone, I'll call out for my imaginary Buster – an Irish Wolfhound perhaps, or a Staffie. But I don't see a soul.

I'm safe.

Shame about Adam Palmer.

Get ROSES ARE RED [HERE!](#)

A LETTER FROM MIRANDA

Thank you very much for reading this novella. I was in-between writing books last month and thought I'd write a novella as an *amuse bouche*! I hope you enjoyed it! My next full-length psychological thriller will be out soon.

If you would like a FREE copy of my novella, *The Cheat*, and the chance to name characters in my future books, please sign up to my newsletter at:

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