

# THE PASS

HE'S WAITING. WATCHING.  
YOU COULD BE NEXT.

A person in a dark hoodie is walking away from the camera down a dirt path in a field of tall grass. The sun is low on the horizon, creating a golden glow and long shadows. The sky is filled with dramatic, dark clouds.

EMMY ELLIS

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# Chapter One

## DOWN MEMORY LANE

His subconscious had a terrible voice, jarring, unsettling. When it shouted, it wasn't so much angry as wanting to stop him from walking into a mistake that would get him locked up. A quick, strident blast of words usually had him halting what he was doing to consider his next step, maybe alter his plans. Whispering had the same effect, although that chilled him, because then he *knew* he'd fucked up. Whispers were urgent. They got the message across with unfailing accuracy. Some might call it his gut instinct.

His father had claimed it was God.

***“There’s a time and a place.”***

In the darkness of the Pass, a stretch of parkland between two housing estates, he crouched beside the body, stopping the act of undressing the woman, pausing with his gloved hand outstretched. She rested on the bank of the stream, on the winter-frosted grass, the somewhat violent crash of water over rocks adding a background symphony to the viciousness he'd just committed.

“Yes, there’s a time and place,” he muttered, “but I thought this *was* the time and place.”

He didn't like being confused, out of sorts. It reminded him of his childhood; he'd had to watch what he'd said, how he'd acted, too afraid to put a foot wrong.

No one would come along here, not tonight, not in the winter, and *especially* not down by the stream, so he *could* do what he wanted now, but...

A balaclava hiding his identity, he'd already violated her down an alley, in what some would claim was the worst way, but he'd been about to do it again, here. He wanted to see her tits. That voice, though... It had a point. This *wasn't* the right location to have another go at her.

He hefted her bottom half into the water. She seemed heavier than before, death adding weight to her bones and muscles, so he didn't bother putting her top half in. He only needed her upper thighs and vagina submerged, the stream helping to erase any trace of him, although it might not hide the fact he'd worn a condom.

Out of puff, he risked turning on his phone torch —“**Don't!**”—lowering the light's intensity so he could view her, so he could *remember* her this way. Maybe he *should* have put her whole body in. Then her hair would fan out in the water, writhing, as if alive and angry over what he'd done, her arms bobbing with the sway of the vigorous current, the depths appearing fathoms deep and murky. Although the stream was shallower in this part, the shadows outside the beam of light lent a dreamlike slant to the scene, and her legs appeared to float on the gurgling sea.

He snapped a picture, then switched to video mode. His heavy breathing would likely distort the sound of the stream, but when he viewed it later, eyes closed, those breaths would give the impression he *had* shagged her here, him panting through the act. He could pretend, he'd done enough of that lately, relying on fantasies to keep him going until he got to the point where he could kill the woman he *really* wanted to kill.

Phone in his pocket, the darkness swarming around him once more, he experienced a reluctance to leave. Once he did, the next phase would come, where he waited for the body to be found, then he'd act as shocked and sickened as everyone else in Simwell, the news spreading through the town. People still talked about his previous victims, worried glances thrown around, as though the man who'd done such hideous things lurked right behind them, waiting to pounce.

***“You've made a mistake.”***

He gritted his teeth, ignoring the voice, but that didn't last long.

“What mistake?” he asked quietly, desperate to know now; *that* whispered warning wasn't something he could dismiss, much as he wanted to be stronger than his subconscious and shove any advice aside. To think of himself as untouchable, un-catchable

***“Your last planned victim isn't the right age.”***

“Fuck. Fuck.”

***“All the others have been young, so when you kill HER, she might not be seen as one of your victims. She won't fit the profile.”***

He should have considered that. Should have *known*.

He nodded, accepting he'd messed up. “Fine. I'll pick an older one next. Or later down the line anyway. Satisfied?”

No response.

Time to go.



# Chapter Two

## DETECTIVE INSPECTOR MONROE

His team had agreed: the woman by the stream had been the worst. Maybe it was the state of her skin. He'd been angered by it—if Helen Bradbury had been reported missing quicker, someone might well have found her before the skin had sloughed away. With the other women, their absence had come to the police's attention faster, the day—or two—after they'd last been seen or heard. No need for the public to help search because the uniforms had got to the victims first. But Helen? Left there for weeks, unnoticed, the weather, foraging wildlife, and stream water doing a harsh number on her. He couldn't think about it in depth without becoming uncomfortable—*not here, in the incident room*—in front of all those expectant faces. Faces that held similar expressions: *What's the agenda for today?*

Monroe cleared his throat. “As we've got a lull in major cases, we're back on Operation Dove, the Strangler. The DCI wants us to go over everything in minute detail again. Our man has been quiet for a while now.” He grimaced. “It's been seven months since the last murder. What do we make of that?”

DS Steve Kershaw spread his legs apart under his desk. “One, he's been caught for something else and is in the nick. Two, he's away for work. Three, he's moved out of Simwell. Four, he's unable to get out and kill anyone—could be in hospital or at home, poorly. Five, he prefers killing from June to December.”

Helen had been found in late December, although the pathologist had worked out she'd been murdered in early

November. Monroe kept his thoughts on the June-to-December theory to himself for now. He preferred to see what the team had to say before he stepped in to correct them—and to observe if whoever voiced such things realised their mistake and how quickly they did that. It gave him an insight into their ability to do their job so he could act accordingly in the future. He'd studied them all, knowing their foibles and strong points. It helped him when dishing out actions. Some of them weren't suited to certain tasks.

DC Neil Oswald drummed his fingertips on the filing cabinet beside his seat, the noise tinny and irritating. He caught Kershaw staring at him, smirked, and stopped. "He might have been working in Simwell then left in November after he dumped the body. He could come back this month—it's June again now, don't forget. Or he could live here permanently and June to December means something to him. He's got to have control of his urges if that's the case—half a year on, half off."

*Even Neil's got the timeline wrong. Why are they focusing on half a year when it's more than that?*

"Then he's a proper dangerous bastard," Kershaw said. "If he can control himself for long periods of time without killing, he's top level. Usually, they escalate, the time between murders getting shorter."

Neil sighed. "Something in my gut's telling me he took a break and will start again."

Kershaw inhaled through his nose as though he wanted to lump Neil—these two hadn't been getting on for a couple of years, although Monroe didn't know why.

"Think about it," Kershaw said. "For whatever reason, he might only have had six months to kill people. He might not *need* to kill anyone else because he's already got rid of those on his list, if he has one, so it being June again probably doesn't mean anything."

Monroe filed that snippet away, too. He'd disabuse Kershaw and Neil of their notions shortly.

Neil went on. “There were no links between the victims other than they were all in the younger age bracket, had brown hair, and lived alone. None of them knew each other, so *how* are they tied to the Strangler? *That’s* what we’re missing.”

Kershaw glowered at the change of subject. He liked to thrash things out to a conclusion, and Neil had blocked it.

Monroe clapped to prevent a row. “Right, I want a search done on any recent imprisonments and the crimes that went with them—also the ages of the offenders in question so we can crosscheck them with our Strangler profile. Him being away for work—someone get on with looking up all businesses in the area where that would be a requirement of employment. Short-term jobs, that sort of thing.”

Groans went round.

“I know, I know, it’ll take up precious time, but we’ve got nothing else to do at the minute. We’ve exhausted all other avenues in this case. No DNA, no hairs, no fingerprints, no witnesses apart from the raped women he didn’t kill. All we know for sure is he wore a condom, spoke with a local accent, and ranges between five feet nine and six-five—none of them could even pin down a specific height. Kershaw, I need you to get information on all house sales within the past four months in case his place sold before the last murder and he didn’t move out until recently.”

“He could be renting, though,” Kershaw said.

“Then get on to the estate agents and private landlords. Neil, check all hospital admissions for males between sixteen and seventy. A tall order, I realise that, but although our profiler suggested the Strangler is between thirty and sixty, we can’t take it as fact. We’ve been burnt on that one before.”

DC Claire Noakes snorted. “Yeah, she reckoned that bloke exposing himself to girls at the school was in his twenties. He was eighty-two! No offence to Bianca, but she must have been on something when she worked that profile up.”

Chuckles erupted.

“We all make mistakes,” Monroe said. “None of us are squeaky clean, are we.” He threw a stern glare at his team and the few uniforms he’d poached to help out. “It’s called learning as we go along, so cut Bianca some slack. Okay, sort it out between you who’s doing the other points. I’ll pore over the file again to see if there’s anything that’s been missed.”

Kershaw raised his pencil. “Just so I’m clear, after the last Strangler chat we had in March, we’re going with the consensus that Louise Foll, although stabbed *then* strangled, was his first murder victim, yes?”

Monroe nodded, hiding his frustration.

Kershaw went on. “The stabbing part of it isn’t the offender’s MO. All the others were just strangled and left at the Pass. She was found dead in her home.”

Claire tutted. “We went through this yesterday at lunch. Did you have your head up your arse or what?”

Kershaw’s cheeks reddened. “As we were just shooting the breeze between us, I didn’t think I had to pay attention. Anyway, I had shit on my mind.”

“Don’t we all,” Claire said, “but with a killer running around out there who’s gone quiet, we kind of have to put our own issues to one side while at work.”

Monroe detected her sarcasm and smiled—she was good at putting people in their place.

“Technically,” Kershaw bit back, “we weren’t on the clock. It was our lunch break.”

Claire spouted, “A police officer is never off duty.”

Monroe considered whether Kershaw was becoming a problem. “No in-fighting. Like I said, we all make mistakes, and if Kershaw wasn’t up to par yesterday, then Claire, maybe you can repeat what was said.”

She gave Monroe a wink; she’d gladly repeat it. “We came to the conclusion that Louise was his first victim. She was left on her bed, just how the previous rape victims had been, so there’s a link with that. Although she was stabbed *and*

strangled, and the others were all attacked in their homes first, *then* taken to the Pass, we reckon the stabbing was a mistake.”

“Why?” Kershaw asked. “Remind me.”

“Because of a smaller wound being present—come on, you can’t have forgotten *that* already. It was more of a nick compared to the others, so we guessed the knife had only been used as a threat, but it went wrong. She could have kicked up a fuss and pissed him off, so he got arsey and went to town on her. Remember, the knife wounds didn’t kill her, the strangulation did—it’s in the report if you want to refresh your memory. He might have been disturbed at Louise’s before he could move the body and he had to abandon her or, after keeping an eye on the investigation via the news, he realised that by leaving Louise at her house, he’d made an error, therefore, the rest were taken to the Pass.”

“What error, though?” Kershaw asked. “I mean, whether there’s a body in a bed or not, forensics can still work out what went on there.”

Claire sighed. “But not having a body in situ in the homes means we *don’t* get the full picture, no matter whether we can work out what went wrong, or surmise, especially those who were only strangled. With Louise, we had the benefit of blood spatter and her being left in the house to know what must have gone on. With the others, it was a lot of supposition, going by the ripples in the covers, for example, to work out how they’d been lying on the beds.”

Kershaw frowned. “But it still doesn’t say she was his first victim. Sorry, but I don’t agree with you. There could be a second killer out there who’ll get away with it because the Strangler will get the blame.”

Monroe held a hand up. “Let’s not argue the toss. We’ll keep Louise as the first victim anyway, just in case she is. If we disregard her, we could find ourselves in hot water later down the line. Okay, I want you, Claire, to go through all the rape victims’ statements again. We *do* agree”—he pointedly stared at Kershaw—“that those women who were raped between January and May of last year were the Strangler

gearing himself up to escalate to murder. They were his test subjects, and while they have immense trauma to deal with, they're still alive and a source of information for us. There could be more women out there who've chosen not to come forward—maybe we should do another television appeal on that; I'll have to see what the DCI feels about it. And, Kershaw and Neil, while I respect your thinking, I want to clear something up. The June-to-December theory is incorrect. He *didn't* only have six months to get the job done, so to speak. It was January to *November* because he was raping women for months prior to committing murder. And Helen wasn't attacked in her home like the others, so we didn't have an initial crime scene to check. The best we came up with was fine grit embedded in her hair from brick, those used on the houses on the Ring estate, so we assumed she was raped against a wall.”

Kershaw blushed. “I was only throwing stuff out there to get us all thinking.”

Claire threw a balled-up piece of paper at him. “Whatever. You're just covering for the fact you've forgotten some of the main points.”

“Piss off.” Kershaw folded his arms.

Monroe shook his head. “Pack it in, both of you. We're no good to the victims and their families if we're griping at each other. Go to work. We've been tasked with finding this killer. Get on with it.”

Kershaw, clearly disgruntled, pulled up a window on his computer. While he tossed out different scenarios to get everyone thinking of other avenues to go down, something Monroe had been teaching them all to do, when he annoyed them so much that the rest of the team wanted to punch him in the face, it slowed them all down.

If Monroe didn't know better, he'd say Kershaw was deliberately trying to derail the investigation, throwing spanners in the works.

Monroe walked into his office. He sighed, woke his computer up, and clicked the tab named OPERATION DOVE. He'd

start from the beginning, going through everything to see where he'd messed up. He was the SIO here and took responsibility for everything that went on. He *had* to see where he could improve, do better. It might be his head on the chopping block if he didn't.

# Chapter Three

## ROMAN

He didn't like his wife anymore. Sandra got on his wick, always moaning about something or other. A pest, that's what she'd become, one of those harpies she'd moaned about when they'd been younger, taking the piss out of them for getting old before their time. Funny how she'd changed. Funny how *he* had, going from a dutiful husband, father, and employee to a killer.

Sitting in his deckchair at the allotment, he sucked his bottom lip. His marriage wasn't great. Sandra had taken to turning her back on him in the bedroom department. He couldn't remember the last time they'd *done it*. Was it any wonder he'd gone elsewhere to ease the tension down below?

The other women didn't say cruel things once it came to getting down to business. In the end, they let him get on with it. Granted, it took a while for them to twig he was going to have his way whether they liked it or not, but that was the thrill, wasn't it? All part of the fun and games. And no kissing with them. It could leave his DNA.

He stared at the clear-blue sky. Days like this transported him back to his younger years, before Sandra, where instead of watching his plants grow, he'd be on a beach getting a tan for a week every summer. Admiring the ladies in their swimming costumes. Sandra used to look good in a two-piece. Not these days, though. She was all saggy skin and stretch marks. Not even the best swimsuit would hide her love handles.

She'd let herself go.

Christ, *why* was he still with her again?



***“You know why.”***

The kids had left home, moving to the far reaches of the country, so a divorce wouldn't affect them that much. The thing was, his other relatives frowned on it. Staunch Catholics. His father, especially, a man he didn't see much for various reasons. Ones he didn't want to contemplate today.

There was only one alternative.

He'd have to kill Sandra, and he'd been working towards that for a long time now. Too long.

“All right, Roman? Lovely day for it.”

Roman turned. Martin, his next-door neighbour and ex-colleague, stood close by, blocking out the sun. Roman's sunglasses sharpened Martin's shape a little—he'd splashed out on polarised lenses last week, two hundred quid, much to Sandra's chagrin, which was a cheek, considering what *she'd* just bought.

Martin smiled down at him, hands on hips. In a cream vest top and khaki shorts revealing knobbly knees, long white socks pulled high, and Jesus sandals, he was a right old sight. His bucket hat, while trendy on Man City fans, added ten years to the bloke. Roman got the sudden insight into how Sandra must view people. Critical. Picking fault. The difference was, *he* wouldn't tell Martin he looked a dickhead.

Roman didn't have that casual aura about him. People said they saw him as suave, his workday suits giving him an authoritative air. His clothes today—black Nike shorts and short-sleeved shirt, his Air Max trainers, his baseball cap with a tick on the front—were a far cry from his friend's clobber.

“Yep, nice day,” he said.

“I've got my special *tea* if you want some.” Martin's bushy eyebrows quirked high, and he held up his Thermos.

*I shouldn't drink. Can't risk what it makes me do.* “Go and grab your deckchair, then.”

Martin handed the flask over and ambled off to his patch. He disappeared into his shed, then emerged, lugging his chair

over and setting it up beside Roman's.

Martin passed over a second plastic mug. "We could be in the Med with this weather." He flopped into his seat.

So Roman was doing the honours, then. Martin was such a lazy bastard. Roman poured a measure of whiskey for his buddy and used the flask cup for his own. Thermos on the ground with the stopper screwed tight, they gazed ahead.

"Those houses are an eyesore," Martin grumbled. "Should have been torn down by now. When was that meant to happen? Last year sometime? Yet people are still ruddy living in them."

Martin had turned into a moaner since his early retirement. Every subject seemed to have a negative connotation these days. Roman reckoned he was depressed, missed his job. Didn't feel important anymore.

"Hmm." Roman brought to mind when he'd been inside one of those houses, strangling the life out of Louise. "You'd think they'd have got their arses into gear on that, seeing as they're prefabs from after the war, not to mention the murder."

"Too right. We've talked about it before, but blimey, it bears repeating. That particular house has stood empty ever since. No one wants to live in a place where someone was killed. Poor cow."

Roman didn't think she was a poor cow, and he *hated* that phrase. She'd been gobby, snippy, and reminded him of Sandra. Killing her had killed his wife, or it had felt like it at the time, but then he'd gone home, and Sandra had still been there. Alive.

*Bollocks.*

His foray into the dark side was all her fault. She deserved everything he was going to dish out to her. Once he'd practised on one more victim, she'd be next. He'd do a couple of others after, to get the police thinking she was the serial killer's victim. He'd claim the life insurance and be home and dry.

Free.

Martin slurped his drink. Let out an *ahh* once he'd swallowed.

Sandra didn't like Roman doing that. She didn't like so many things, the moody bitch.

"How's the wife?" Martin stretched his tanned legs out. "Haven't seen her in a while."

Roman would bet, when Martin took his socks off, he'd have sheet-white skin underneath, his toes pasty, his nails going yellow with age. He was what, sixty-five? His hair, a wire-wool, dull grey, sat on his shoulders. An Oasis fan, that much was obvious, his round sunglasses a copy of Liam Gallagher's. He even owned a green parker with fur on the hood, which he roamed around the allotment in during winter. Keeping himself young, he'd said, by basing his fashion on the singer. It didn't make sense. Gallagher wasn't a spring chicken.

"Ah, she's the same as usual." Roman flapped his shirt to get some air onto his chest.

"Still no joy in the sack, then?" Martin asked.

"Nope."

"Me neither. I tell you, these women... They hook you, reel you in, then when they get a ring on their finger, they back off after the honeymoon phase. Unless they want kids. My Rachel, she was all for it when it was something *she* wanted, then once the nippers arrived, she went off it. Eighteen bloody years it's been, me begging to get my leg over and only being given a quickie every now and then. Never thought I'd have to see to myself once I was married, but there you go."

Roman saw to himself. In the shower, where Sandra wouldn't know he'd been 'fiddling', as she put it. Then there were the rapes...

He prepared himself for Martin to go on and on about his marriage, like he always did. Same shit, different day.

"I mean, sex isn't just about sex, is it?" Martin continued. "I'm in touch with all that emotional stuff, and being close to

Rachel is part of it. She feels differently, especially when she's been to have her barnet done. Says it'll mess up her hair."

"They're a weird breed."

"You're telling me." Martin glugged at his whiskey. "There's been many a time I've had fun by myself in my shed over there."

Roman didn't want to think about that, Martin tugging on his sausage amongst his gardening tools. "Err, too much info, pal."

"If I can't talk to you about it, then there's no one. No one who understands anyway."

Martin topped their drinks up, even though Roman had hardly touched his. If he drank it too quickly, he'd be half-cut and stumble down a road he couldn't afford to travel today. Sandra wasn't out this evening, no girls' Saturday night or Ann Summers party to attend. And that was another thing. She went to those saucy get-togethers, and money came out of the joint account to pay for whatever she'd bought, but he hadn't seen hide nor hair of it. Was she getting sexy underwear for someone else? Or did she have a vibrator, using it when he wasn't at home?

The idea pissed him off. He'd been there, ready and waiting, but she didn't want to know. Maybe he should have a root around. Find the stuff. Confront her.

"Do you think Sandra's capable of having an affair?" Roman asked.

"Everyone is." Martin adjusted his sunglasses; they'd slipped down his nose, his face damp with beads of sweat. "I don't care what they say, in some circumstances, anyone's up for a shag on the side."

"I don't agree. Look at you. Never strayed. You'd leave first before moving on to someone else. You could have cheated a hundred times but didn't. Then there's Vernon at work. He stayed loyal."

"So he says. I always thought he was a bit of a bullshitter myself. But to answer your question about your woman, yes,

of course she's capable. If she's refusing to do it with you, she's possibly seeing someone else."

"Do you realise what you've just said? How it could apply to Rachel, too?"

Martin sighed. "Yep. I reckon she's thinking of having it away with that bloke down the veg shop."

"Eric? Knob off!"

Martin laughed. "Honestly, she turns into a girl when he hands over her bananas. All giggly and shit. Drives me mad, because she used to laugh at me like that. She's forgotten I remember, that I know the signs for when she fancies someone."

"Are you bothered?"

Martin shrugged, his go-to gesture when he didn't want to reveal his true feelings. Roman knew him too well not to know Martin was killing himself inside, imagining her with Eric amongst the apples and pears. They both had analytic minds, had to for their jobs. Just because Martin was retired, it didn't mean he'd forget how to solve problems.

Roman pressed on. "It must hurt, knowing she might want to be off with someone else. I'd want to kill her if it were me."

"Steady on, mate..." Martin gave him a dodgy side-eye. "I might have to ring the police on you if you talk like that."

Roman rolled his eyes. "Behave your-bloody-self."

They settled into silence for a while, Roman somewhat mollified that it wasn't just him whose wife had gone off the boil. Sandra blamed it on the menopause. She was in the middle of it now, all that hot flush business turning her cheeks red at random times, her stomach bloating. He switched off when she talked about it, nodding every now and then so it seemed he had sympathy.

His mind wandered to Helen. She'd struggled like buggery to begin with, trying to bite his hand that had covered her mouth. On that cold winter night, he'd dragged her into an alley and taken what he wanted under the safety of darkness.

The Pass acted as a thoroughfare between two estates, a long stretch of winding path bordered by grass and woodland, a stream halfway along, down a left-hand slope if walking from his estate. He recalled dumping her body, half in, half out of the burbling, chilly water.

Once the police had found her, the skin on her bottom half had slipped away when they'd moved her onto a large piece of plastic sheeting. Roman had watched it happen as he'd approached the scene along with many other people around here, those who'd helped in the search to find her. Rubberneckers had been denied seeing any more as a tent had been quickly erected around her, something he'd thought they should have done *before* they'd moved her.

“Are you going to sit and nurse that all bloody afternoon?” Martin pointed to Roman's cup.

Roman took a gulp. The whiskey burned, whispering promises of what he could do if he helped Martin finish the Thermos. Go out tonight. Choose a woman. Shag her. Kill her.

No, he couldn't. Sandra would ask where he'd been. He needed to be able to say he was at home whenever he'd committed murder, without her there to dispute his alibi—he chose to play on the nights she went out. Besides, she'd organised a bloody barbecue for this evening. She'd got a hot tub, dishing out a hefty deposit and putting the rest on tick, and wanted to show it off.

“Just not fancying it,” Roman said. “We haven't got any ice for a start. You know I like my ice.”

“Why didn't you say so sooner?” Martin got up and tromped over to his shed, waving at old Taffy who tended to his runner beans.

Roman imagined the interior of Martin's 'man cave'. He had a fridge with a little freezer at the top, rigged up to a generator. Also, a telly and DVD player, and now Roman came to think of it, those DVDs might not be the films he'd once thought, seeing as Martin had admitted to tugging one off in there.

They shared a secret. Along with two others, their neighbours, Dave and John, they belonged to a Session messaging app group which traded pornographic images, misogynistic memes, and links to where certain films could be purchased for cash in the backs of businesses. If Martin had been stupid enough to visit one of those places and paid using a card... He wasn't that thick, was he?

Roman rested his head back and closed his eyes. Maybe he could get Sandra drunk later, and once their guests had gone, his wife in bed, he could go on the prowl.

The sound of ice plopping into fluid had him opening his eyes.

"There you go." Martin sat again. "We may as well get oiled up so we can cope with the barbecue later. No offence, but you know those sorts of gatherings don't do it for me. I tried getting out of it, but Rachel insisted I go."

"I don't like them either. I'm hoping some emergency comes in at work so I can leave. That or I'd prefer to be down the Orange having a pint." *Or at the Pass, my hands around someone's throat. It's been a while.* He'd stopped murdering since November through fear the police would get too close.

"Yep," Martin said, "but we'll suffer through it, like always. Rachel said we're meant to bring swimming gear. Is that right, or is she pulling my leg?"

"Nope. It's for Sandra's hot tub. She bought one big enough for ten people. I don't know about you, but I don't want to sit there, half-naked, with that lot."

"Me neither."

Roman gritted his teeth, sick of doing things he didn't want to do. Sandra tugged the strings, and he danced to her tune.

*Not for much longer, though, eh?*

# Chapter Four

## THE INTRICACIES OF CHILDHOOD

*Roman sat in the church of St Mary Magdalene and swung his legs. In the front pew with his dad on one side, his mum on the other, he felt trapped. He hated going to church. It smelled funny, and all the hymns got on his nerves. His school wasn't much better—they sang hymns in morning assembly, and the headmistress bleated on about God and the Saviour. If God existed, why couldn't anyone see him? What was he, a ghost?*

*He wanted to run, get outside in the sunshine, play football with Timmy and Gareth, the Abarough brothers who didn't have to go to stupid church and got to mess about on Sunday mornings instead. Dad wouldn't have it, though. He insisted they sat here and wasted time.*

*"He's a dark one, that Roman," Mrs Inglebert muttered in the pew behind him.*

*"Hmm," Mrs Vager agreed.*

*"Did you see the way he looked at the priest? Shocking. Like he's got the Devil inside him."*

*Roman hadn't wanted to eat the wafer or drink the wine, that's why he'd scowled at the priest. He glanced up at Dad to see if he'd heard them. He must have. Dad gritted his teeth, and his cheeks had gone all red. He turned to glare at the women.*

*Roman smiled.*

*At the end of the service, they filed out of church, Dad stopping to speak to Father Brown and place ten pounds in the*



*collection tray. Mum talked to Mrs Willington from down the end of their street, and Roman grew more and more frustrated.*

*Finally, they moved on. Another quick stop for Dad to natter to Mr Deeding who he worked with, then they got in the car. Roman brightened. After church, Dad always drove to the café, and they had ice cream with wafers sticking out of the top in the summer. In winter, always bacon baps with HP sauce.*

*Hot Brew Café seemed to vibrate there was that much chatter. Mum, a skinny ship in full sail, breezed between tables and found them one at the back, tutting that empty teacups and a plate full of crumbs hadn't been cleared away. Dad sorted that, taking them over to the counter, and Roman sat on the booth seat, grabbing the menu to choose which ice cream he'd have today.*

*"Before your father gets back, I want to have a word with you," Mum said. "He's instructed me to deal with your misdemeanour."*

*Oh God, the old women at church.*

*Roman squirmed. "They're lying. Them women are always lying."*

*"Those women, not them, and I'm sure they wouldn't make it up. Did you stare at Father Brown funny?"*

*"No."*

*"I should hope not. It's very disrespectful. Now then, what are you having?"*

*"Strawberry, please."*

*Dad returned and sat opposite, the leather padding on the seat hissing and squeaking as if he'd farted. Roman laughed, earning himself a glare.*

*"Decent boys don't laugh at things like that," Dad said.*

*Roman didn't want to be a decent boy if it meant he couldn't have any fun. Everything was about what it looked like to other people—how he behaved, how he spoke, how he*

*breathed. He hated it, wished they weren't his parents. Hoped they'd die.*

**“That’s not a very nice thing to think.”**

*The voice, the one that belonged to the God he'd never seen. That's who Dad had said it was. “God is always listening, son. Always watching.” Roman wanted to do everything God told him not to, just so he wasn't controlled.*

*“Did you have a word with him, Doreen?” Dad asked Mum.*

*“Yes, I did. He won't do it again.”*

*Roman opened his mouth to say he hadn't done anything that bad in the first place, but if he did, Dad would smack him when they got home for being rude. What Roman didn't get was, if his parents were such good people like they said they were, then why did he get a wallop?*

*He was sure Father Brown would have something to say about that.*

# Chapter Five

## RACHEL

The Pass had frightened her ever since the dead women had been discovered there, but it cut so much time off her journey home from work that she'd chosen to walk down the winding path today anyway—she had cakes to bake before the barbecue. It would be okay, what with it being summer and no murders for a while, and plenty of people were about. They lounged on the grass, picnics out in front of them, or some read books lying on their fronts, sun cream glistening on red skin. A few had even brought camping chairs to sit on and enjoy the sunshine. This afternoon was her first time choosing this route since she'd switched to the main streets—Martin had warned her of the importance of keeping herself safe. Going through the Pass in the cold winter mornings wasn't something she'd been prepared to do after the last body had been found, yet prior to the murders, she'd thought nothing of it. Simwell had once been a safe place.

She shuddered and erased the image of that woman in the stream.

Rachel couldn't remember the last time she hadn't worked on a Saturday. She had Mondays off instead, so it wasn't too bad, but just once, she'd love to kick back like these people and forget her troubles for a whole weekend. At forty-five, she was much younger than her husband. Years back, the twenty-year age gap hadn't bothered her. She'd been too busy being chuffed at the fact an older man had given her the time of day. Now, the gap seemed to yawn wide, him an ageing Oasis fan who tended to his veg whenever he got the chance, her desperate to live life to the full and *do* something...something spontaneous and fun.

He was holding her back, bedding down into early retirement as much as his plants bedded into the earth. Where had her fun-loving husband gone? Where had *she* gone?

Eric, who owned the greengrocer's shop on High Street, had taken a shine to her. The same age as Martin, he'd been flirting for a while, and she'd flirted back so he didn't think she was rude. Now, though, she had the idea he'd got the wrong end of the stick, because he'd not long collared her when she'd nipped in after work to buy a watermelon and grapes as part of her barbecue contribution to go with the strawberry gateau she'd purchased in the Tesco Express.

He'd pulled her to one side of the counter, away from the other customers and staff.

"Fancy meeting up for a drink?" he'd asked quietly and with a disturbing wink that stuck his sweat-dampened eyelashes together for a second. "Martin doesn't need to know. It would be our little secret. We could go out of town, maybe to the Dipping Duck in Wald village?"

"Um, that's not appropriate," she'd said, shocked and unsettled.

"But I thought..."

Her stomach had clenched. "Sorry, you must have got your wires crossed."

"But you..."

She'd slapped a tenner on the counter, grabbed the melon and the brown paper bag of grapes, and rushed out.

Shame heated her cheeks now. What had she been *thinking*, giving him the wrong impression? Why couldn't someone her own age fancy her? Did Eric think, since she was married to Martin, that she liked old men? Because that's what Martin looked like. Yes, he tried to act young, but this morning, when he'd pulled his socks up his shins in those fucking Jesus sandals, she'd cringed.

She sighed, following a bend in the path. The nearby stream, hidden behind bushes, burred, reminding her again of that poor woman, Helen. The months since her murder had

gone by so quickly, and Rachel worried time passed faster now she was growing older. She had so much more to do, and she wasn't prepared to spend her remaining years on this earth talking about lettuce growth with her boring-as-eff husband, repressed and frustrated. She'd thought his new topics would be a Godsend after having to listen to him go on and on about work when he'd been employed, but she actually preferred the tales of the goings-on at his job. Only now did she realise they were infinitely more interesting. She loved him, always would, despite the awful thing she'd discovered about him last week, but she wasn't *in* love with him—and perhaps never had been. The benefit of maturity had shown her that she'd *thought* she'd been in love when she hadn't.

Shit, what a mess.

Her weighty shopping bag in her free hand and the watermelon, heavy under her arm, slowed her steps, not to mention the unrelenting heat. The sun still beamed down as if it were noon. Her exposed skin and the top of her head burned, and she cursed not putting sun cream on. This morning, when she'd left for work, it had been cool but had warmed by the time she'd reached Trends. She'd worked in the clothes shop since she'd left school and was now the manager, but to be honest, it bored her to tears, as did most things these days. Everything was the *same*. She should have gone to college, studied, but she'd been too eager to earn her own wages instead of taking pocket money from her parents.

Now, stuck in a rut, she'd come to a crossroads. Should she do an evening course, secure a better job, then leave Martin and start again? That would be classed as using him, though, wouldn't it? *But I've been using him for years...* He had a bloody good pension, and she'd need that if she reduced her hours at work to study. Their children flying the nest meant she had nothing left to occupy her. Eighteen now, her girls, Alice and Emma, rented a flat together in Nottingham where they attended university, something she'd coerced them into because of her regrets at not furthering her education. They'd recently announced they weren't coming home like other students did in the holidays, Nottingham was their world now. The twins had filled her life with happiness, and now they'd

taken it with them in their suitcases, miles away. She'd brought them up to be self-sufficient, and they thrived, not seeming to need her anymore, their messages infrequent, yet their social media pages buzzed with selfies and descriptions of nights out. Another reason for sending them away was to get them as far from this town as she could. Too many women had been murdered, and she'd worried for their safety.

How many bodies was it now? Five? Six? Six, that was it. The Strangler had put the fear of God into every woman around here, although Rachel didn't think *she* had anything to worry about. She wasn't young for a start. All the victims had been between eighteen and twenty-five and stunning. He'd raped them before their deaths, a snippet she wished she hadn't been told. How awful for them, and their families, to go through that.

She quickened her pace, the babble of the stream behind her now, the sense of eeriness leaving once she rounded another bend and even more people came into view. Ahead stood the Ring estate where she lived. A few kids played rounders—God, she'd loved that at school—and a family knocked a tennis ball about between them. Gone were the days when she'd done that with her girls, although they'd preferred a shuttlecock. Martin had never been one to bother with that sort of thing, preferring to prop the bar up at the Orange during his time off.

Her thoughts drifted to Sandra, her best friend. She wasn't happy either. Over a cup of tea at Sandra's last week, they'd laughed—and cried—over the thought that they were embroiled in a midlife crisis, the pair of them full of regrets and wishing they'd taken different roads, chosen different men who'd had more time for them.

Sandra, well into the menopause and on the verge of going on HRT, couldn't stand to lay eyes on her husband anymore. She'd said she looked *past* him if she had to glance his way, and how she stopped herself from punching him was anyone's guess. Recently, she held him accountable for her dissent by always being at work, for not being present when at home, his mind elsewhere. Perhaps it was the hormones highlighting

Roman's flaws, Rachel had suggested, but Sandra had insisted that no, hormones had nothing to do with it, but rage at her life and the choices she'd made, did.

Rachel felt the same way about her situation. About herself.

They *could* change things, so it wasn't as if they were completely stuck. How did you approach it, though? How did you go up to your husband and tell him he bored you, didn't excite you, and you needed a man who didn't love vegetables more than you? How could you phrase that so it didn't come off as mean? We've grown apart?

"Rachel! Hey! Rachel!"

She stopped, whipped her head to the right. One of her regular customers got up from her blue tartan blanket and rushed across the grass in the red shorts and top she'd bought from Trends this morning. Zoe was so bubbly she was annoying—only because she was everything Rachel wasn't. She always walked into the shop when Rachel wasn't at her best, tugging her towards the changing rooms to get her advice on various outfits, always needing reassurance.

Rachel planned to keep the conversation short. "Hi! Enjoying a bit of downtime, are you?"

Zoe panted from the exertion. "Oh, your hair looks nice."

"Thank you. I had it done after I saw you this morning."

"I just wanted to show you my outfit." Zoe twirled in a circle. "What do you think?"

She'd already modelled it in the shop earlier. Maybe she'd forgotten.

"Looks lovely." A sequined boob tube wasn't Rachel's idea of a decent top, and those short-shorts showed far too much leg. God, she sounded so *old*, thinking like that. Who the hell was she to criticise anyway? Hadn't she favoured miniskirts and cropped tops when younger? Didn't her daughters? She bordered on turning into Martin, seeing negatives everywhere, so switched her mindset. She didn't

want to be like him if she could help it. “If you’ve got it, flaunt it.”

Zoe’s laugh, breathy and showing how eager she was to get a positive reaction, floated in the air between them. “You think I’ve got it, then?” She cocked a hip and stuck her boobs out.

“It’s what *you* think that matters. Anyway, I must get on. I’ve got a barbecue to go to.”

“Have fun!”

Rachel pushed on down the path. Had she ever had a figure like Zoe’s? Of course she had, she just hadn’t appreciated it at the time, too busy seeing imperfections and wishing she could look like so-and-so instead. What a lot of wasted years, tormenting herself that way. She wasn’t even pretty enough or slim enough to attract a bloody serial killer these days. What a sobering thought. She’d spent the best years of her life with Martin, and for what? To end up miserable, and all because she wouldn’t have been able to stand the stigma of being a single mother if she’d left him when she’d realised she’d made a mistake.

She had to do something about her shitty life, one she’d caged herself into willingly, hence having her hair done earlier. It had brightened her mood, and the new style took a few years off her.

She passed the last bend, on the home stretch. The sunbathers thickened in abundance, clearly parking their arses closer to their estate rather than going farther into the Pass. A foil-tray barbecue smoked on a tree stump, something prohibited by the council, but the family in question had no fucks to give when it came to rules. The Collins lot played by their own, something Rachel wished she’d done. It wasn’t too late to start, though. She could do this, begin again.

She headed down the alley between two houses and came out on Haven Avenue, full of homes belonging to the well-to-do, large and spacious, gleaming SUVs presenting as hulking masses on the block-paved driveways. She’d long given up hope of buying a home in Haven, and while house prices around here weren’t too steep, they could only afford their



small three-bed. Ten years left on the mortgage, and they'd be free of that bill, but she couldn't wait that long to sell up and split the equity. A decade into the future before she spread her wings and left? No.

Rachel cut through into her street, Kiddleton Rise, the watermelon seeming to weigh a ton, her bladder protesting now her body knew a toilet was within reach. She fished her keys out of her handbag and entered the house, thankful for the coolness in the hallway compared to the relentless sun on her back. She dumped her things on the kitchen worktop then rushed towards the little loo, cursing herself for forgetting to close the front door.

Roman stood there, holding up a blue cardboard box of canned lager.

"Fuck!" she blurted, her heart going mental. "You scared me."

"Sorry, should have knocked." He eyed her up and down.

"What's the matter? Have I got sweat patches?" She lifted both arms to check her blouse for stains.

"No." He smiled. "You seem different. Younger."

While that gave her a little boost, it was weird coming from Roman, who'd never mentioned what she looked like before. Now she knew certain things about him, it made sense that he'd be staring at her *like that*. How he'd stare at *any* woman that way. Uncomfortable now she'd thought of it, she managed, "Err, thanks?"

"Your hair..."

"Oh, I went to the salon in my lunch break."

"A new style and colour. The blonde suits you." He grinned. "Why did you dye it? So the Strangler doesn't come after you?"

His chortle got on her nerves. He should understand how women had the constant worry of having to protect themselves everywhere they went, Sandra banged on about it to him enough, so laughing was out of order. Mind you, since her

discovery had shown her his feelings about women, how he saw them as sex objects, she wanted to slap him.

“That’s not funny,” she said.

Roman appeared suitably told off. “I’ll, err, just pop these in the fridge, shall I?” He moved to come inside.

That wasn’t unusual, Roman and Sandra often knocked then walked in, calling out to let them know they were there, but today it felt off. She didn’t want to be alone with him. Didn’t trust him anymore.

“Um, okay, yes. I’ve got to nip to the loo…” She gestured to the toilet door.

“Don’t mind me.” Roman breezed in and disappeared into the kitchen.

“Martin!” she called upstairs. “Roman’s here.”

“He’s still at the allotment,” Roman shouted through. “Said he had a few things to do in his shed.”

“Fucking hell, he’d live there if he could,” she muttered and went into the loo. She hiked her skirt up, knickers down, and sat. What the hell did her husband do in that shed? But if she thought about last week’s findings, she had a good idea. “Filthy pig.”

She shivered at the grossness of it and finished up, washed her hands, and joined Roman in the kitchen, purposely leaving the front door open in the hope that Sandra nipped in and carted her husband away.

And why was Roman bringing the lager here? The barbecue was next door.

He’d finished loading the cans into the fridge and stood rolling the cardboard container up then popped it in the recycle bin. “I should have explained. We haven’t got any room in our fridge, so Martin told me to bring it here.”

“Oh. Right.”

“Got your cossie all ready, have you?” He rubbed his hands together.

Was it her imagination, or did he just leer at her? He'd certainly licked his lips.

“Um, yes, although I doubt I'll get in the hot tub.”

*Not now you're looking at me like that. But if I don't get in the tub, Sandra might be offended. Bloody hell! Should I tell her he's being a perv?*

What he got up to had been playing on her mind for days, but she didn't want to hurt her friend by informing her about it.

*Like I'm hurt.*

“You should,” he said. “It'll relax you. Get rid of all that tension.”

“I haven't got any tension, especially because my weekend starts here.” She had tension all right, just by being in his company, but she'd never let him know that—unless he stepped over the line. She waved towards the hallway. “I don't want to be rude, but I need a shower and to get ready, so...”

“Oh. Yes. Sorry again. See you later, then.”

He strutted out in his debonair way, and she followed, shuddering at the creepy vibes she'd got from him.

Front door closed, she let her shoulders slump.

*He did stare a bit too much, didn't he?*

“Oh, I don't know,” she grumbled and stomped upstairs for a shower, hoping the water would wash away her thoughts and get her in the mood for a barbecue she really didn't want to go to.

# Chapter Six

## MARTIN

In the shed, he cleaned himself off and zipped his shorts up. The whiskey had heightened his libido, so he'd browsed a few of the porno images on the Session group and sorted himself out down below once Roman had gone home. It would save him getting saucy feelings in the hot tub later—he'd have no choice but to get in, Sandra would put pressure on him, which was probably one of the reasons why Roman had gone off her lately. The woman was positively pushy these days.

“You need to calm down, love,” he said, imagining she was there with him. “Sort out your attitude, else you'll find yourself on your own.”

Roman had never told him he wanted to leave his wife, but Martin had the sense he was thinking about it, and Sandra moping around or being snippy must be taking its toll. As for Roman asking whether Martin reckoned she was having an affair... Sandra had been a tasty woman back in the day but in the past couple of years had let the side down.

Shit, that wasn't nice. He hated that his mind always went to negative connotations. He had to stop thinking that way, get more of a glass-half-full attitude. And he had to stop ogling other women an' all. He blamed the Session group's content—if his mind was on tits and arses, he wasn't thinking about the one thing he didn't want to think about, the thing related to his PTSD. Not that any of the women he eyed at the Orange would fancy him. He still felt young inside, forgetting that the packaging didn't reflect the contents. Anyway, he shouldn't be staring at anyone who could be his kid. Some of the pictures

and links related to minors, and it sickened him. Kids used as sex objects was wrong.

But with regards to looking at the others, the older ones, the *legal* ones, it didn't mean he was going to *do* anything, he just browsed what was on offer and relived it in his shed.

His wife would be mortified if she found out.

She was different this past week, his Rachel. Much more so compared to before. Distant, agitated, as if life had handed her a shitload of private dilemmas to deal with, ones she clearly didn't want to share with him. She'd been 'off' since the twins had been born and had changed once again when he'd retired.

He threw his tissue in the bin. "Yeah, she changed after I took the pension."

She'd earned more than him once. He'd been signed off, PTSD after a harrowing event at work, his sick pay a joke, and Rachel's promotion to manager and her working overtime meant they didn't lose out on too much. Maybe being the proverbial breadwinner for a few months had got on top of her, but wasn't that what men put up with all the time? The main provider, expected to keep the family afloat? He reckoned it had done her good to stand in his shoes for a bit, although he shouldn't be too harsh, she'd always worked, contributed.

He left the shed, locked up, and wandered over to old Taffy. "Sun's still being a mad bitch, then."

Taffy stopped digging a patch of earth and leant on his shovel handle, his white whiskers thick today. "Reckon it might be too much for my beans. Been wondering whether to cover them up."

"I expect they'll be all right if you keep them watered more than usual."

"Yeah. Anyway, I'll let you get on."

The universal term for: Piss off now.

Martin raised his hand in a wave and strode off. One of the twins had messaged him earlier, saying they wouldn't be making it back for the barbecue, seeing as it wasn't for a

birthday or anything. He supposed it *was* a bit of a way home on the train just to eat some burgers, and being with their parents definitely wasn't on their agenda now. He remembered feeling the same way when he'd got his bit of freedom at college. His mum and dad could go and fuck themselves for all he'd cared, although he wished they were still around. Dead, the pair of them, five years ago.

To stave off maudlin thoughts, he whistled 'Wonderwall'. Entering Kiddleton Rise, he had a quick gander at Dave Watson's front garden. This morning, when Martin had set off for the allotment, Dave had just been getting stuck in, a job his missus had set him—to dig up the grass and put tarpaulin then gravel down instead. Martin had to admit, it did look nice, and a poke of jealousy seared through him. Maybe they could do something like that, him and Rachel. A holiday on their own might work, too.

He opened his front door and stepped inside, sniffing the air. Rachel must have put on a batch of her cupcakes, ones their daughters loved. It brought on a pang of missing them, and he resisted the urge to send them a message in the group chat, one Rachel wasn't a part of. She'd go spare if she found out they'd excluded her from it, but the twins had always veered more towards him than her, and besides, Rachel didn't get their humour and moaned she didn't understand their jokes. She said they were like a secret society.

"All right, love?" he said, going into the kitchen. "Have a good day at work?"

"It was okay. Same as usual."

He eyed the large transparent Tupperware tub she'd put the goodies into, pink icing on top in swirls. "The cakes smell nice."

She snapped the lid on and put the tub in a carrier bag. "Right."

Why was she being short with him?

Her shoving the bag on the worktop and standing with her hands on her hips didn't bode well. What had he done? He ran

through the chores in his head. He'd taken the rubbish out first thing, and he'd hung the washing on the line, exactly how she preferred it to hang. He'd made the bed, opened the window to air the room out, all before he'd gone to the allotment, so what was the problem?

Ah, he hadn't been here when she'd got home, that must be it. He'd forgotten he was supposed to bring the washing in and fold it, ready for her to iron it.

"Well?" she said.

He frowned. "Well, what?"

She raised her eyebrows. "You're unbelievable, you are."

He stared at her walking out and thumping her way into the living room.

Martin followed, completely confused. "If you don't tell me what's up, how can I fix it? I'm not a mind reader." That bugged him. She expected him to know what was going through her head at any given moment.

He found her standing in front of the fireplace, looking into the mirror above.

She spun to face him. "Seriously? You can't see anything different about me?"

"You've got new shorts on?"

"Jesus Christ, I don't know why I bother. I *knew* you wouldn't notice."

"Fuck me, Rach! Give me a break, will you? I've only just got in."

"Yeah, from pissing about on the allotment all day while I've been slogging my guts out."

He wasn't having that. "Now hang on a minute. I've done my stint as a worker. It's not my fault you're younger than me and still have a way to go before you can pack it all in. And I've got a bloody good pension, so you can stop that malarkey. I still more than pay my share, and we're not skint or anything."

She glared at him. “My hair, Martin. I had my hair cut off. You know, *ten inches* of it. It’s even a different *colour*, but you didn’t notice.”

Now she’d mentioned it, he saw the difference. It was a bloody big one an’ all; she’d had it lopped off into a wispy kind of bob. Shit. Since when had he stopped *seeing* her? She was there, but he didn’t particularly pay attention, not like he used to. Christ, there were times he’d stared at her every time she’d walked into a room, amazed by her. Now? She just appeared in his peripheral as part of the furniture. But *she’d* engineered it that way. She’d told him to stop staring, that it was weird and had her feeling uncomfortable. He’d put it down to her figure changing after having their kids, her self-consciousness.

He held his hands out. “Aww, I’m sorry, love...”

“I could walk round naked and you wouldn’t bat an eye.” She massaged her crinkled forehead.

“I assure you, I would,” he scoffed. “You haven’t done that for years, so it’d be a shock.”

“Are you having a pop at me?”

*Be careful here, mate.* “Um, no?”

Her face flared red. “How the *hell* could I have walked around naked with kids in the house?”

“There were times they stayed at your mum’s. And they don’t live here now.”

“What are you saying? That you want things to be like they were?”

“I wouldn’t mind...”

“They can’t, Martin. I don’t feel the same as I did back then. I don’t feel sexy, and I *certainly* don’t fancy you in those bloody socks of yours and those *fucking horrible sandals*! So why *would* I get naked?”

Her words, a massive punch to the stomach, winded him for a second or two. He blinked, trying to piece together what she’d said so it *didn’t* translate to what he’d *thought* she’d said.



Whatever way he put the sentence back together, it amounted to the same thing.

She didn't want him anymore.

"How long have you felt like this?" he asked, gutted.

She must have realised how blunt she'd been, how *angry*, as she covered her face with both hands. "I didn't mean to say it like that."

"But you did say it, so you must feel it."

"Yes, but..." She lowered her hands to her sides. "I could have been a bit more tactful."

He struggled to find the time, that *moment* when her feelings had changed. "What happened, did it all go wrong for you when the girls left?"

"If you must know, before that."

"Years before." A statement of fact, because he'd known, after she'd had Alice and Emma, that he'd fulfilled his job as a husband by getting her pregnant and he wasn't wanted anymore. He just hadn't wanted to face it. "Eighteen years I've been waiting for you to come back to me again, *eighteen years*, Rach, and it's all been for nothing." Tears stung his eyes. How had a spat about her hairdo come to...this? And what *was* this? The end of their marriage? "What do you want to do about it?"

"We'll have to talk about it later. Sandra and Roman are expecting us."

She walked out, head down, and he stared after her. Later? And she still wanted to go to a barbecue now she'd dropped that bombshell? Sod that. He marched into the kitchen, where she'd propped a watermelon under her arm and held the carrier bag.

"How can we go next door now?" Remembering what she'd said, he toed off his sandals, picked them up, and threw them at the wall to make a point. He was prepared to ditch them if it made her happy. Next came his socks. He balled them and lobbed them at the washing machine.

She flinched at his unusual show of emotion. He rarely displayed anger towards her or the girls.

“Sorry,” he said. “I’m frustrated. And hurt. I thought... Well, I had all these dreams in my head that when the twins left, we’d start again.”

She appeared to pity him, although it wasn’t in a nasty way; she still cared for him, he could see that well enough, but the light of love was gone from her eyes. How long had it been missing? He’d been so sure his dreams would be realised, that they’d muck about like they’d done years ago, pre-children, that he’d failed to see that fundamentally, they’d been broken for years. Yes, she’d gone off sex and only gave it to him on high days and holidays, but deep down, he’d thought it was the stress of life, that once they lived alone again, they’d be okay. Otherwise, why would he have stuck around?

“Is it Eric?” he asked, a wicked pit of dread opening up in his stomach.

“*What?*”

“Eric. He fancies the pants off you, and you’ve been flirting with him—even in front of me.”

“That’s no different to what you’re like down the Orange, flirting with women in front of *me*, but no, I’m not with Eric. He’d just an old pervert who’s chancing his arm.”

That stung, old pervert. Did she see *him* that way? “He’s the same age as me.”

“Like I said, we’ll discuss it later. We have to go.”

She seemed to slouch past him, as if chastised, or guilty, or disgusted by him, and he remained where he was, catching his breath, shaking his head in confusion. If she wasn’t seeing Eric, who *was* she seeing? And why had she had her hair done today, of all days? Was it a neighbour? One who’d be at the barbecue?

He stared out of the window into the back garden at the pear tree they’d planted when they’d first moved in. It had seen so many fun times, sad times, and everything in between. It had grown fruit, like they had. It had spread its roots and

branches, like they had. Gone through season after season and still stood strong.

Unfortunately, it seemed they hadn't done that bit.

Martin gritted his teeth to stave off his emotions. He'd watch every fucker at that barbecue, and the second he twigged which bloke she was shagging, he'd have him.

# Chapter Seven

## SANDRA

In their back garden, Sandra couldn't contain her irritation. It lived inside her most of the time lately, often seeming alive, a real thing with a mind of its own, waiting for a reason to push her into exploding. Some days it remained latent and she felt like the woman she used to be—rare, but it happened, usually when she was completely alone without all of her troubles on her back. How odd, to have a devil inside her who didn't care who she hurt with her sharp words. How useless it would be, to go to the doctor and explain it—but how could she? She'd come across as a mad woman, unstable, and she'd be handed anti-depressant pills to make it all go away, as if she had a mental health issue rather than the truth of suffering from the menopause. She'd put off making an appointment. Dr Gamble had got on her nerves well before her body had turned on her, dismissing any ailments, his thinly veiled words hinting that she was a hypochondriac.

Roman got on her nerves, too, just by breathing, and he did that behind her now, heavily, as though he'd sprinted up a ruddy mountain. She clenched her fists, wanting to launch them at his face, to pummel him until he died. It would solve things, him dying. Everything would be all right, then. She'd get his pension, the life insurance, and wouldn't have to work. She could hole herself up indoors, avoiding people until her hormones had resettled.

She turned to find him staring at his phone—and the breathing was coming out of it. A horrible, horrible thought occurred, and her stomach churned, her blood going cold. No, he wouldn't, would he?

“Are you watching *porn*?” she whispered sharply so the neighbours either side didn’t hear her over the adjoining fences. She opened the parasol so it shaded the food she’d laid out on the table.

Roman quickly shut his phone down and stuffed it in his pocket. “No! Jesus, Sandra, that’s a gross thing to say.”

“What *were* you watching then?”

“Some bloke doing a run. He had head camera on, showing his route.”

“Since when have *you* been interested in running?”

“Since I need to get fitter.” He smirked but quickly swept it away with a nicer smile.

What was that all about?

“Why do you need to get fitter?” She burned with embarrassment about her weight, her body, how she wasn’t exactly fit herself. Was he having a dig at her by making out *he* needed to get fit when it was *her*? Was this his way of telling her what she already knew, that she was an unattractive blimp who resembled a sack of potatoes more often than not?

“Sandra, we’re getting older. We need to take care of ourselves.”

“You mean *I* need to take care of *myself*, don’t you? Look at you, there’s not an ounce of fat on you.”

He grunted. “You’re twisting my words. Just forget it. I’m going to take up running, now let that be the end of it. What you do, or *don’t* do, is your business.”

Well, that had come out as a statement loaded with inference, hadn’t it. He was saying he was going running, and if she wanted to remain a fat cow, which she saw herself as, then she could suffer the consequences.

“I’ll have you know,” she said and rearranged the food so she didn’t have to see his face, “that I can’t help my weight. I’m on a calorie-controlled diet, *not* that you’ve sodding well noticed, and if you bothered to research the symptoms of the

menopause, you'd see my stomach and weight gain are a part of it.”

“All this because I'm going *running*?” He raised his hands then slapped them down on his outer thighs. “Maybe it's time to get that HRT, because your mood swings are doing my head in. You've blown this all out of prop—”

Sandra spun round to see why he'd stopped, hoping he'd got so irate he'd had a heart attack. Unfortunately, he was still alive, staring at the back door, his smile wide.

“Rach!” He walked towards her, hands out to take her food contribution. He relieved her of the burden and jerked his head for her to come outside, then, on his way in, said brightly, “I'll chop this melon up, all right? You go out and have a drink with Sandra.”

Rachel appeared on edge, fiddling with her fingers on the patio. The poor love was going to cry if Sandra was any judge.

“What's happened?” Sandra asked.

Rachel rushed over the grass, her face crumpling. She hugged Sandra and whispered in her ear, “I blurted it out. Basically told him I'm not interested in him anymore.”

“Shit,” Sandra whispered back, clinging on to her. “How did he take it?”

“Not well. It all started because he hadn't noticed my hair.”

Sandra had seen it earlier in a picture Rachel had sent through WhatsApp. “How could he not have noticed? It's shorter and not brown anymore. Bloody hell, Rach...” She pulled back and, keeping her voice low, murmured, “I just accused Roman of watching porn on his phone, so we're both in the doghouse.”

Rachel choked out a laugh. She let Sandra go and wiped her eyes. “God, we should have left them years ago.”

“I know. I mean, he implied I'm overweight, unfit, and need to sort myself out. He's going to start running. Can you imagine it?”

Rachel snorted. “I’m not sure whether Martin will come this evening, just so you know. I scooted out, saying we’ll discuss it later.”

“Cut the tension with a knife, anyone?” Sandra smiled. “Listen, it needed to be said. Maybe not today, and not however you said it, but...you can’t keep living like you have. You’ve stayed with him for the kids, but they’re gone now, so...”

“I know.” Rachel glanced at the fence. “*Shh*, in case he’s come out next door to listen.”

Sandra reached over behind the food and pressed PLAY on the CD machine, one her children took the piss out of because it wasn’t a newfangled thing that hooked up to a streaming app. “Go and tidy your face up in the little loo. Wash those tears away. We’re going to have fun tonight, no matter what those wankers say or do, okay?”

Rachel gave a watery smile and wandered into the house. Sandra lifted one section of the hot tub lid to dip her fingers inside to ensure the temperature was all right.

Her self-consciousness reared its ugly head regarding what she’d look like in a cossie. Now Roman had all but referenced the state of her body, the courage she’d built up from her pep talks about getting into the water in front of the neighbours melted away, leaving her crippled with anxiety again. She’d convinced herself it would be fine, seeing as everyone was around her age, give or take a decade, and understood how bodies didn’t play ball as you got older, but it seemed, if Roman thought she needed to lose weight, that others might think so, too.

Why did she even care? What did it matter, so long as she enjoyed herself? But it *did* matter, especially when she’d be riddled with discomfiture now, worrying what thoughts strutted through people’s minds the moment she came out of the house in her swimsuit.

*Thanks for that, Roman, you utter bastard.*

She clipped the lid back in place and turned, readying herself to go inside and help him with the melon, make sure he was doing it right.

She stopped short. Martin had arrived and stood on the patio. God, much as she agreed with Rachel that they had to call it a day, she couldn't help but feel sorry for the bloke. Crushed wasn't the word. Every layer of pain inside him had transposed onto his face, creating deeper wrinkles, and a haggard appearance that hadn't been there the last time she'd seen him. He must still love Rachel desperately to carry his burdens so openly, no oomph in him to hide them. The slump of his shoulders was awful.

Sandra pretended she didn't know anything. "All right, Mart?"

"No, actually, but it doesn't matter."

"It must do if you've said it doesn't."

He sat on one of the iron chairs around the mosaic-topped table, gazing at the ground, eyes watery. "I think she's going to leave me, Sand."

"Oh fuck." She hadn't meant to say that. It had been more of an answer to her thoughts: *Rachel's bloody told him that?*

He raised his head. Stared at her in shock. "You didn't know?"

"I had no idea," she lied.

She and Rachel had promised not to get the other one in trouble if they announced they were leaving their husbands. Less hassle that way. The men didn't need to know they'd discussed them over the years, moaning about their downfalls and wishing they'd chosen someone else to tie themselves to. The men's jobs had played a part in them feeling alone. Their long hours and climbing the ladder meant Sandra and Rachel had been forgotten, the little wives at home. At times, Sandra had viewed herself and Rachel from the outside in, and she'd concluded that if anyone heard them bitching, they'd be classed as nasty cows. It wasn't like that, though. They both had hearts of gold, it was just life hadn't panned out too well,



and they needed a shoulder to cry on, a safe space in which to talk.

He sighed. “That’s something, then. At least she hasn’t been talking behind my back. I couldn’t handle that.”

“No, she hasn’t said a word. Um, I don’t know what to say...”

“You don’t need to say anything, not now I know you weren’t in on her plans.”

She frowned. “What do you mean?”

“My next question was going to be: who is she seeing?”

Sandra tripped out a metallic-sounding laugh. “Rach? Seeing someone? Not in a month of Sundays.”

“Right. I’m not convinced, but thanks for trying to ease the blow an’ all that.”

Sandra moved closer and sat opposite him. The iron seat burned through her hippy skirt.

*I forgot to put the bloody cushions out. That’s Roman’s fault, what with all that heavy-breathing business. It put me off my to-do list.*

Her irritation flared again, at her husband and finding herself stuck in this uncomfortable conversation with Martin. “If she’s seeing someone, I’d like to think she’d have told me. I’m her best mate.”

“Some best mate. She didn’t even let you know she can’t stand me anymore. I’ve hung around for years, thinking we’d be fine once the grind of mothering the twins went away, but now look. Eighteen years wasted, when I could have been with someone who gave a shit.”

She hadn’t viewed it like that before, too intent on her own troubles and helping Rachel through hers. She felt bad now, thinking of Martin waiting patiently, only for everything to come crashing down. Should she feel bad for Roman, too? “I’m sorry. Maybe you’re better off going down the Orange rather than sitting here with all the guests. Someone’s bound to twig you’re not yourself and ask questions.”

He folded his arms. “Nope. I’m staying. If she’s got her hair done for some other bloke tonight, then it means he’ll be here, he’s one of the *neighbours*. I’m going to suss out who it is and lump him one.”

“Oh God. Please don’t ruin the party.”

Martin sniffed. “I won’t do it in plain view, don’t you worry. And cheers for giving more of a toss about your barbecue than you do me. I thought *we* were mates, too.”

“We are, and I’m sorry again. I didn’t mean...”

“I know you didn’t. Take no notice. I’m just a moody bastard.”

She rose. “I’m going to...to help Roman. The others will be here in a minute.”

He glanced up at her through his Gallagher sunglasses, his bucket hat shading his face. He’d ditched the socks and sandals, though, putting on Hugo Boss sliders instead, the lower half of his legs white where the sun hadn’t been able to catch them. Had Rachel had a rant about the socks and the Jesus creepers? To his *face*?

*Blimey...*

“Where is she anyway?” he asked.

“In the loo.”

He curled his top lip. “Are you sure about that?”

“What?”

“Maybe she nipped out to warn lover boy that I’m on the warpath.”

Sandra swallowed. “Err, I doubt it very much. Anyway, I...”

He waved her off, and she all but ran inside, for once glad of her husband’s company.

# Chapter Eight

## DOWN MEMORY LANE

The smack of a fist on a tearstained face. The thud of her head hitting the alley wall. Her cry of pain and confusion. The slap of his hand going over her mouth. A punch to her stomach. All so quick, so deliberate.

What was she thinking? Why me? What did I do to deserve this? She hadn't done *anything*. A vessel, that's all she was, something to practise on. Easy prey. He'd been watching her comings and goings, needing to know her movements. He found the observation stage the most exciting, where he filed away the patterns. Anticipated whether it would go how he'd imagined. Had a couple of backup plans in case it didn't.

“Don't make a sound, little moth.”

He called them that to remind himself how fragile they were compared to his strength, how easily their bodies could be crushed, their wings ripped off. How, if he chose, he could stick the large equivalent of a pin into their middles and hold them in place on display. A stake of some sort, long and sharp-ended. A fantasy, though, as he'd need a safe place to store such a thing, and carrying it around would get him noticed. No way could he take her to his allotment shed—that had to remain free of evidence.

***“Then you should adopt the same policy with what you've got stashed at home.”***

True, but for now, those things he'd stored could stay where they were.

He wished he could make her out properly, see her expression showing her fear, eyes wide, nostrils flaring to

hoover up air. Too dark in the alley, but wasn't that what he wanted? Anyone passing, glancing down it, wouldn't see a thing.

“We're going to have some fun.”

He couldn't be like Martin anymore, coasting along for all those years with his right hand as a substitute. He'd suffered that humiliation for long enough himself in the shower, and it had grown old. His rapes had turned to murder, and of course the police had added things up regarding that, linking those assaults to what he did now. An inevitable escalation, the papers had called it. The police had brought some kind of profiler in. He was *that* important.

He crouched, shoving her skirt up. Expected her to run. She didn't. She remained with her hands down by her sides, wasn't even clawing at him anymore; no fighting, no resistance, she'd gone limp, maybe numb. From shock? Or did she think, if she let him get on with it, that he'd be quick and let her go?

“One wrong move, and you're dead. You're going to let me do whatever I want, understand?”

She whimpered in response.

He stuck his tongue out and tasted her inner thighs.

Shit, he wasn't going to last if he carried on.

He rose and, condom on, entered her, and she allowed it. No more struggling like she'd done when he'd grabbed her as she'd gone to walk past the alley. No more fuss. This was his wife all over again, no interaction, no actual participation.

“At least *pretend* you're enjoying it,” he said in her ear.

A weird sort of noise in her throat. Was she holding back tears? Revolted by what he'd said? What he was doing to her?

*You'd think, with the rapes and murders being in the news, that she wouldn't have come out alone. The press conference on TV clearly hasn't worked.*

“Put your hands on my arse,” he instructed. “Do it. *Now.*”

A whimper, and she obeyed. He at least felt wanted now.

And that was the crux of it really. To feel like that again.

His wife had put this woman through this. She'd planted thoughts in his head of raping people. Driven him to find an alternative hole. Forced him to imagine killing her, and in order to do that, he had to practise.

"Blame Sandra," he said to his victim. Helen. Helen Bradbury.

It was over too fast and, one hand at her throat, squeezing, he managed to make himself presentable. His jeans zip sliding up sounded like a crack in the night.

"We're going for a walk," he said. "To the Pass."

Although he'd been following her, he hadn't waited until she'd gone into her house like the others, and here they were, in the darkness of an alley. Leaving Louise in her bed hadn't been in his plans either, he'd always intended to dump her at the Pass, but the stabbing had changed that. What was his excuse tonight, grabbing Helen before she'd stepped indoors?

Excitement, plain and simple.

He had to watch himself. Stick to the rules he'd set.

Hand over her mouth once more, gripping the top of her arm tight, he marched her out of the alley, across the road, and onto the Pass path, one of several entrances. Some fight returned to her bones, and she tried to bite his palm, but she wouldn't do any damage. Gloves.

"I wouldn't bother," he said. "The ending's inevitable. There's no going back now."

# Chapter Nine

## DETECTIVE INSPECTOR MONROE

He stood at home, contemplating the case. When the Strangler started up again, Monroe would be too busy to spend much time here. That wasn't a bad thing, he loved his job, and while in the thick of an investigation, he thrived. No time to think about the wrong turns he'd made in life or to dwell on anything much while his mind was occupied with the case at hand. They said a copper's partner had to bear the brunt, and his wife certainly had, blaming his work on the distance that had grown between them. She'd known what she was getting into when she'd married him, though, so complaining about it was a moot point.

His colleagues had mentioned the stretching gap between themselves and their other halves, too, so it was a common theme in their profession. Many had got divorced and set up home with other coppers—at least then they had someone who understood the pressures, sometimes not going home for a day or two at a time when they worked through the night to solve a case. If he thought of it like that, it wasn't fair to the wives and husbands stuck at home. Every so often he had pockets of clarity like this, where he viewed things from the other side. Unfortunately, he knew his own personality well, and he veered towards feeling sorry for himself rather than his missus.

Maybe all men were the same.

For tonight, he'd try to act as if he wanted to be at home, although it might be difficult now the DCI had instructed him to have another poke at Operation Dove. It brought up so many questions, that case, ones he found difficult to ignore,

even when he was off the clock. They swirled through his mind, overtaking other things he might have contemplated. At first, it had been a struggle today, on his day off, to keep his mind active elsewhere, but he'd soon found himself embroiled in thinking about other aspects of his life. His wife, his children, and how he wasn't particularly happy anymore.

The Strangler being caught was obviously the team's main priority, and he had to guide them through the quagmire, although he hadn't told them yet that he suspected they wouldn't catch the killer. For now, he had to remain proactive, not let his thoughts influence them. Morale needed to be high, otherwise the DCI would call him into his office and ask what he was playing at.

He didn't need that, another thing to worry about.

He sighed and went to the fridge to open a beer.

Just one wouldn't hurt if he was called to the station.

# Chapter Ten

## RACHEL

She still hadn't left the toilet. She'd listened to Martin coming into Sandra's house, knew it was him because he'd rattled the handle twice once he'd shut the front door, something he did at home when he locked up for the night. Ever conscious about safety, Martin tended to double-check everything. It drove her mad.

To give him time to go and whisper to Roman about what had happened at home, which he bloody well would, she'd sat on the closed loo seat, staring at herself in the large mirror over the sink opposite. Gave herself a critical once-over, trying to see herself as other people might. The heady rush she'd got from being turned in the salon's chair to check out at her new hairdo had faded, and she reckoned she looked silly now, going for the wispy bob. That was for younger people, although the twins had responded to her picture message with positive reviews. They'd be the first to say if she was mutton dressed as lamb, neither of them the type to hold back on their thoughts, even if it meant causing offence.

Maybe they got that from her, considering she'd just shattered Martin's world by blurting out what she had, something she'd trained herself not to do, even if the words *did* sit on her tongue. He'd mentioned the eighteen years they'd plodded along. Maybe she *should* have left him shortly after the girls had been born, when she'd first got an inkling that she'd made a mistake in being with him. It had been unfair of her, downright bitchy, to stay in the relationship so the kids could see their father more than they would if they lived elsewhere. To begin with, she'd thought she'd had postnatal depression and would come out on the other side as



bubbly as she'd been before her pregnancy, but as the years had worn on, she'd accepted her lot, although dodging sex had always been a heavy burden, her dreading when he'd next approach her and how she could put him off.

His dreams... God, she'd had no idea that all this time he'd been waiting for her to come round, to be the woman he'd first met. What had he imagined? Them going on holiday, just the two of them, having a laugh and whatever? Ibiza and the club scene had been his thing when she'd met him—did he expect, at her age, that she'd rave her head off? She wanted more than that now. Candlelit dinners, maybe going to the cinema and sharing popcorn. She wanted to be treated nicely, not as someone he dumped his veg on so she could clean it. Even nights in watching the telly would have been nice if they'd curled up together, but she'd been too exhausted after finally getting the twins off to bed, then tackling the mountain of ironing and whatever that she hadn't made the time for him when he'd actually been home. Him flouncing off to work in his suit, off to solve other people's problems, meant he'd done a lot of overtime. When he was home, he'd commented that it would be nice to actually see her, and she'd flung back that she'd often thought the same but he was rarely there, so he had a cheek to expect her to drop everything when he was.

She'd lived a lonely life, a wife but not. She couldn't blame it all on him. It had been her fault, too. She'd been awful, using him, not wanting to face the scorn of being a single parent whose kids went away to their dad's house on the weekends he wasn't working. What a stupid, stupid snob she'd been. She deserved everything karma had to throw at her. Maybe she should have taken him up on his suggestion years ago that when he had a weekend free, they pissed off somewhere, so if work called with an emergency, he could say he wasn't in town. They should have been more intent on sharing time together when they could instead of her retreating into herself, resenting him, and him accepting their situation.

She left the toilet, walking into the kitchen. Roman stood by the worktop, covering the slices of melon with clingfilm. He caught her watching him as he turned to put the plate on top of a half-barrel of ice and beers on the dining table to keep

them cool, and she had that uneasy feeling again, like she'd had at home. He *was* looking at her funny, and not in a way she was comfortable with. He eyed her as though he fancied her, and she glanced around for Sandra. Where was she?

"Hubby's out the back, Sandra's nipped upstairs." Roman approached her and stood too close.

His breath smelled of sour whiskey, as if he'd drunk it a while ago and the taste had remained on his tongue along with a recent swig of beer. A nasty image of that tongue going into her mouth repulsed her, and she took a step back.

"Has he...has he said anything to you?" she asked.

"Only that you two had a ding-dong." He cocked his head. "Didn't he give you any compliments about your lovely hair?"

"No."

"Ah, no wonder you had a go at him. That's his fault, then. I noticed it straight away, didn't I?" He inched closer again. "Have you ever thought about us? Roman and Rebecca. Sounds like a match made in Heaven, doesn't it? Shame we didn't meet years ago, before we met Sandra and Martin."

What the hell was *wrong* with him? Had he always been like this and she hadn't noticed? No, she'd have spotted it, especially as it brought on unease. Roman was usually respectful.

*But I know he isn't now. What I saw last week proved that.*

"That's not the sort of thing you should be saying to your wife's friend or *any* woman when you're married," she snipped. "And you're in my personal space, so back off."

He seemed to snap out of whatever mood he'd been in and smiled like the old courteous Roman, walking to the worktop. "Shit, sorry. Sandra's always said my spatial awareness is shite. There was this one time—did she tell you?—when I walked into this pub we were having a meal in, and a bloke—" He stared down the hallway and grinned. "All right, Dave? How's it going, pal?"

Rachel took the opportunity to go out into the garden, no fucks to give about his pub story. Dave and his wife, Georgie, were a nice couple, but Georgie had the uncanny knack of peering into your soul and knowing when something was wrong. The row with Martin, plus yet another weird encounter with Roman—*match made in Heaven, my arse*—had Rachel so on edge, Georgie would spot it in an instant and probe.

Too late, Rachel realised what she'd done. She'd come out and Martin was there. She swallowed, went past him where he sat on the patio, and wandered to the bottom of the garden, the high trees shading the grass. Again, too late to correct it, because he took it as a sign that she wanted to talk away from the house and came to join her. She stared at the slats of the fence, her eyes drawn to a large knothole, the view through it into a back garden in Haven Avenue, a portion of patio doors visible and someone sunbathing on a lounger.

*I want to be that woman.*

Rachel could almost taste the orange cocktail on the low table beside the lady; she longed to put on that sunhat and bask in the heat, no worries, no awful confrontation to face.

“I said later, Martin.”

“I know, but we can't leave it like that. Just tell me if you've been shagging someone else, that's all I want to know.”

Why did she have to be shagging someone? Why couldn't she have just had enough? And who the hell was *he* to bring up extra-marital goings-on after what he got up to? “Chance would be a fine thing. I work, come home and clean the house, cook the dinner, sort the washing. I go to yoga on a Wednesday and art class on a Monday with Sandra. When have I got the *time* to shag anyone?”

“You could be pretending to be with Sandra. She'd cover for you.”

Rachel resisted the urge to turn her head and stare at him. “Are you for real? There's no way Sandra would lie for me like that. She doesn't even know how I feel.”

“That's the impression I got, so I'll let you off on that one.”

Now she *did* stare at him. “Let me off? Oh, piss off, will you? If I was the type to have an affair, I’d have left years ago. I wouldn’t be *hiding* my sexual exploits like *some* people.” She bit her lip. Her true thoughts coming out weren’t fair. It wasn’t his fault she’d kept her mouth shut for years about her feelings, or that she hadn’t brought up what she’d discovered last week. It hit her then, what Roman’s odd behaviour had been about. “And you can tell your mate the game’s up and he can stop being such a creep.”

“What?”

“Don’t pretend you don’t know. What, did you get the feeling I wasn’t happy, so you told Roman to be a bit flirty with me today to see how I reacted? Grow up!”

“Rach, I have no idea what you’re on about...”

She believed him. “Oh. Then forget I said anything.”

“No, what did he do?”

“I said forget it.”

“I don’t want to. If he’s been coming on to you, then I need to tell him to pack it in.”

“Look, he noticed my hair, all right? And made some reference about our names. That’s it.” She couldn’t tell him about Roman wishing they’d met years ago.

“What about your names?”

“That they’re a match. Maybe because they both start with R, I don’t bloody know.”

“Fucking dick. I’ll have it out with him.”

“You do that if it makes you feel better, but not tonight. *Don’t* spoil Sandra’s party. She’s been looking forward to this for ages.”

“Did you... I mean, what did you say to Roman?”

“That he shouldn’t be talking to me like that and was in my personal space. He stinks of booze, so he probably didn’t realise what he was saying.”

“Personal space?”

“He stood too close, that’s all. Now drop it.”

Martin sighed. “What are we going to do? Have I got to move out?”

“No. I’ll get a flat. You stay at the house. You can afford it all on that big pension of yours.” God, how many times had she heard about the size of it? Like he’d wanted to let her know that he still put more money into the bank in his retirement than she did by working. “I haven’t thought that far ahead yet anyway.” *Liar.*

“A flat? It’s got *that* bad? Where?”

“I don’t *know!*” She did, her sister had suggested her second property a while ago, seeing as it stood empty.

As a top-ranking solicitor, Tara had cash coming out of her ears, and her adult son, who used to live in the flat, had moved to Canada, so the place was going begging. Tara had said she’d be renting it out—until a few months ago, when Rachel had mentioned leaving Martin. Just yesterday, Tara had asked when Rachel would be pulling her finger out, because she wasn’t going to let the flat stay empty indefinitely. Well, she could stop worrying, because Rachel would move in there tomorrow. Now she’d voiced her unhappiness, she was better off leaving as soon as possible.

“I’ll ask Tara if I can kip at her spare flat. I’ll go in the morning.”

“I see.” Martin sounded so dejected.

She almost grabbed him for a hug, as a friend, as a human being who wanted to comfort someone, but he’d take it the wrong way. Try to talk her round.

“You must see how broken we are,” she said. “Don’t tell me you think it’s normal, how we’ve been living.”

His face hardened. “What I don’t get is, if you’ve felt this way for years, why didn’t you let me go? Did you need my money, is that it?”

She prayed she didn't blush, then came up with a good response. "I already proved I could manage most of the bills when you were off sick, so don't pull that card."

"So why stay? For the girls?"

Why lie now? He wasn't stupid, he bloody knew.

"Yes," she said.

"Wow." He stuffed his hands in his pockets. "Cheers for using me so you didn't get labelled with the single-mother tag. Fucking great. You're such a snob when it comes to that." His eyes watered. "I'll go up the allotment tomorrow so I'm out of your way, and I'll sleep in one of the girl's rooms tonight. I love you, always will, but... Christ, sod this shit."

He sloped off, and wasn't it weird, that with him seeming to accept it, she wanted to go after him, for him to fight for her to stay, yet she'd checked out years ago. What did it matter how he'd taken it? Why did she want him to tell her she was his world when he wasn't hers? Was it because of what she'd *seen*? Did *she* want to be the star of his thoughts, to erase those other women? Confused by her warring emotions and calling herself a bitch again for even contemplating going after him and giving him false hope, she returned her attention to the knothole.

*You wanted what she's got. Well, now you have it, so get on with it.*

She took her phone from the pocket of her new shorts and brought Tara's name up.

**Rachel:** I'VE TOLD HIM. I'LL MOVE INTO THE FLAT TOMORROW.

**Tara:** OH GOD, HOW DID IT GO?

**Rachel:** HE THINKS I'M SHAGGING SOMEONE ELSE.

**Tara:** TYPICAL BLOKE RESPONSE. ARE YOU OKAY?

**Rachel:** CONFUSED. NO IDEA WHY BECAUSE I'VE KNOWN I WANTED TO LEAVE HIM FOR YEARS.

**Tara:** TALK ABOUT IT TOMORROW? I'LL MEET YOU AT THE FLAT AT NINE AND HELP YOU PUT YOUR THINGS AWAY. DON'T BRING ANY

FURNITURE. NO NEED, IT'S ALREADY THERE FOR YOU.

**Rachel:** I'M ONLY TAKING CLOTHES AND A FEW SENTIMENTAL BITS. CLEAN BREAK AND ALL THAT.

**Tara:** FINE. WHAT ARE YOU DOING NOW? DO YOU NEED ME TO COME AND RESCUE YOU?

**Rachel:** A BARBECUE AT SANDRA'S.

**Tara:** AH, YOU'LL BE ALL RIGHT, THEN.

**Rachel:** HOPEFULLY. SEE YOU TOMORROW. LOVE YOU.

**Tara:** LOVE YOU, TOO. CHIN UP. THINGS WON'T SEEM AS BAD IN THE MORNING. XXX

# Chapter Eleven

## ROMAN

He'd put his foot in it on purpose, going on and on to Sandra about Rachel's hair and how nice it was, how youthful it made her. His wife had stormed upstairs, muttering about needing the loo, but she'd come down minus her grey roots. She'd used some of that brown spray he'd placed on her vanity table three months ago, and he'd smirked. It was all too late, though. He'd already settled on killing her, so no matter what she did to make herself more attractive, he was lost to her now. He'd had a taste of better women and wanted more. Maybe he could do a Martin and bag himself a younger model, one he wouldn't have to beg to shag him.

Martin's revelation couldn't have come at a better time either. Roman had called it a ding-dong to Rachel, but it had been more than that. Martin had said she wasn't happy with him anymore. Hopefully, they'd have a row later, and when she wound up dead, Martin might get the blame—or at least the police investigation would veer into looking at him for a while. The husband or partner was always the first suspect.

The garden rang with the voices of the neighbours and some of Sandra's colleagues from farther afield. Around thirty people had turned up, eating, drinking, music playing in the background. Hours had passed since they'd arrived, the air still hot even now.

Georgie and Dave sat in the hot tub with Rachel and a couple of others, drinks perched in the cup holders Sandra had purchased, which hung on the inflated sides. She'd strung tiny solar bulbs on the underside of the gazebo, and the tub's lights switched from pink to blue to green to orange. Water jostled about, the bubble function on, and the sound reminded him of



the stream, of what he'd wanted to do to Helen there. Tits. He'd just wanted to see her tits.

He adjusted his shorts to hide his burgeoning erection and willed it not to go full-mast, which it almost had when he'd seen Rachel in her black swimming costume, a high-cut effort on the legs, the neckline plunging, showing the inner curves of her breasts.

He sat in a deckchair on the grass beside the depleted food table, his baseball cap pulled low, and watched the goings-on. The fire pit provided enough illumination for him to see everyone, as did the lights going down the sides of the garden and the ones drilled into the fence panels.

Martin, still glued to the chair on the patio unless he got up to get a drink, scowled at everyone in turn, clearly trying to work out who Rachel was seeing. He'd convinced himself that was the case, but Roman could have told him she was doing no such thing. Mind you, he couldn't really, else he'd have to admit he'd been watching her daily movements. That wouldn't go down too well.

Roman's job gave him ample opportunity to wander off course, to put his lateness or absence from his office down to traffic, when in reality, he cruised, so following women wasn't a problem. He'd taken on board what the voice had said about always going for younger women, so he'd scouted for older potential victims he didn't know. None of them had appealed. Apart from Rachel. Had he messed up, though, by letting her know earlier, in a roundabout way, that he fancied her? Probably. Not the best move he'd ever made. She could have told any number of people here—women liked to gossip, didn't they—and when she went missing, they might cast their suspicious gazes at him. She'd avoided being near him since they'd spoken in the kitchen, and when he'd purposely addressed her in front of everyone, she'd answered shortly, gaining a frown from Sandra.

*Got to be careful. If Sandra gets wind of anything, I'm fucked.*

Martin got up and went inside, coming back out with one of the lagers he'd fetched from next door. Instead of going to his chair, he wandered towards Roman and jerked his head. Roman sighed inwardly, got up, and followed him to the fence at the bottom. The air under the leafy branches chilled his skin, but it was welcome as the heat from the fire pit was as bad as the sun earlier.

"She's going to know you're talking to me about it," Roman said.

"What the hell do I care?" Martin slurred. "She's moving out in the morning."

Roman's muscles tensed. "*What?*"

"You heard me. She's going to that flat of Tara's."

"Bloody hell, mate, that escalated." Roman's mind buzzed. He hadn't expected this. He'd planned to nab Rachel in a day or two, but now... "Where's this flat, then?"

"Two bloody streets away, Copse Road, so I risk seeing her. It's going to kill me, bumping into her in the corner shop."

*You haven't got much time to bump into her, so don't worry.* "She must have spoken to her sister about everything if she's moving into her flat."

"Yep. That's what guts me. She obviously talked about it to her but not me. If she'd said something years ago, we could have worked it out or gone our separate ways. As it is, that's eighteen years of me waiting for her to come round down the pan. I'm so angry with her. She used me so she wasn't a single mother. How nasty is that?"

"Hang on. Did she actually say that?"

"She said she'd stayed for the girls. I'm sixty-five. How the hell am I going to find someone else?"

"It's a bit soon to be thinking like that, isn't it? You'll need time to get over it..."

"Whatever, but you can bet I'll be on my own now until I snuff it. I'll have to sell the house to give Rachel her half,

because getting a remortgage at my age to pay her off... Fuck it.” He lifted a hand to swipe at a tear that had fallen.

*You’ll be crying more soon.* “This has shocked me. Sandra’s never said anything about this.”

“Rachel never told her.”

Roman raised his eyebrows. “I’d have thought they gossiped about everything.”

“You know what thought did, don’t you.”

Roman turned to watch the guests. “She looks uncomfortable in that tub.”

Martin remained staring at the fence, his back to everyone. “Probably because she’s sitting stiffly so she doesn’t mess her precious new hair up.”

“They say it’s a sign, don’t they. New hair, new you an’ all that.” Roman stuffed down a chuckle. He shouldn’t enjoy being so cruel, but something inside him wasn’t right. He’d always had a hidden mean streak, and he’d allowed the devil in him to take over.

Martin kicked at the grass. “She could have waited until she’d left me. Talk about rubbing it in.”

Roman glanced down at Martin’s pale lower legs. “Maybe the sandals were the last straw.” Unkind of him, but the words were out now.

“She mentioned those. And the socks. But that’s trendy. Your Adam has his socks pulled up when he wears shorts.”

“Maybe people our age are excluded from fashion.”

“Says the man kitted out in Nike.”

“Then maybe change what you look like. Get that hair cut off for a start, and buy some new clothes. You’re *not* Liam Gallagher, mate. Rachel might fancy you again if you make an effort.”

“Would *you* fancy Sandra if *she* did?”

Roman couldn't tell him he thought Sandra was gross, especially now he'd sampled younger women. He'd have to lie. "I expect so. We've been together for a long time. I admit I've been noticing other women lately, but it's no different to you. Look but don't touch." *Look and rape and kill.*

Martin faced the guests. "Is it you?"

"Eh? Is what me?"

"Is it you she's shagging. Rachel?"

Roman stared at him. "You what? Fuck off!"

"I dunno, she's leaving me, you've been noticing other women..."

"So you added the numbers and thought you'd come up with four, did you? You're way off the mark."

"She said you were weird earlier. She thought I'd sent you to flirt with her."

"Weird? She's taken it the wrong way. I was joking with her."

"You'd better not be lying."

"I'm not!"

Martin seemed to accept that. "So back to what we were talking about. Why have you stayed when you're not happy?"

"The reason I haven't left is my bloody Catholic father. He'd go mad if I went for a divorce without attempting to solve things first. I've been trying to get Sandra to sort herself out for a while with a few hints here and there, to see if she's willing to change. I won't leave until I know there's no other choice. Maybe if she let me fuck her, the old feelings might come back."

"At least you're willing to give it a go. Rachel isn't." Martin opened his can and took a long swig. "You're like her, falling out of love. I feel sorry for Sandra. She's my equivalent."

"But I haven't announced I'm pissing off to a flat, have I? I need to sit and have a chat with Sandra, tell her where I think

it all went wrong, then see if she reckons there's anything left worth salvaging." Roman had sprinkled the seeds with those words. Martin wouldn't suspect him of killing Sandra if he was prepared to save his marriage. "Sandra's got whatever it is she's dealing with when it comes to me, and we need to break through that barrier and talk, like we used to. Yes, I've contemplated leaving, but seeing you like this... I can't put Sandra through that. If we could reconnect, we might be okay. We forget, don't we, that once upon a time we couldn't keep our hands off them and vice versa. We grow stale. Take each other for granted. Be honest, our profession is demanding, and we haven't exactly been at home much over the years." Pleased with his little speech, he shoved his hands in his pockets.

"I wish Rachel felt that way. You know, talking things through."

"Maybe she will when she's lived on her own for a while. When she sees the grass isn't greener an' all that. You've got to have hope."

Martin nodded. "She hasn't been flirting with anyone tonight."

Roman's mind turned dark again, finding something in the depths of his depravity that he could use to his advantage. "She's bound to be hiding it, the same as him, now she's dropped the bombshell on you."

"Great. Cheers for that."

"Look, I've never lied to you." *Much*. "I'm telling you how it is. I won't blow smoke up your arse. Think about it. If you were fucking about with one of the women here, you wouldn't make it obvious, would you?"

"Fair point." Martin let out a growl of frustration. "Keep your eye on her and all the blokes. If you spot anything, tell me."

He stalked off, leaving Roman hiding his smile.

# Chapter Twelve

## THE INTRICACIES OF CHILDHOOD

*Timmy and Gareth had a Raleigh Racer each, much faster than Roman's shitty bike. He struggled to keep up with them across the Pass, and one of his horrible thoughts swanned into his head. They'd just gone by the stream, and he imagined pushing them in and watching them drown. They never let him have a go on their bikes, saying their mum would have a right go at them if they did. But she wouldn't have to know, so what was the problem?*

*"Wait!" he called out, his face hot from all the effort, his leg muscles burning.*

*"Pedal harder, loser!" Gareth shouted.*

*Roman didn't want to pedal faster. He didn't want to be with them anymore either; they kept calling him a loser, and it pissed him off. He stopped, turned towards the stream, and cycled over the grass. He got off and parked his bike against a hedge, then walked down one of the gravel paths that led to the water. He came out near the large stone platform where people usually sunbathed. Kids jumped off it and into the stream. The splashes and their laughter, their squeals, only proved to him that he'd been hanging around with the wrong people. Timmy and Gareth never wanted to paddle here, they only ever laughed at him, not with him, and they said their mum would go mad if they mucked around near here. Seemed she went mad about everything.*

*Roman wandered towards the children, not recognising any of them. They must go to the other school. A girl in a black swimming costume stood and stretched her hands to the sky, and he stared at her tits. That was naughty, him doing that.*

*God would smite him for looking at them, so Dad had said, but Roman kept gawping anyway. They weren't large, the girl must be about thirteen, but they were enough of a sight. He couldn't wait to be old enough to touch boobs. When would that be? Maybe fourteen?*

*She jumped, her brown hair flying out behind her, and disappeared beneath the water. Up she popped and swam to the edge, pushing herself onto the platform. With her costume wet, he made out the curve of her tits better, and something stirred down below.*

*"What are you looking at, pervert?" a bigger kid called over.*

*Roman shrugged. "Nothing."*

*"Piss off, go on."*

*He ran down the path and onto the Pass. Grabbed his bike. He got on and pedalled in the direction Timmy and Gareth had gone, upset they hadn't stopped and come back when they'd noticed he wasn't behind them. Or hadn't they even copped on?*

*He rode on, thinking of that girl's tits and how much he'd wanted to see them. There was only one thing he liked about going to church, and that was the naked statues. No one told him not to stare at them then.*

# Chapter Thirteen

## DOWN MEMORY LANE

Her face etched with the stricken expression of shock, lit by the glow of under-cupboard lighting, she blurted, “Oh my God! What the...? Who are *you*? Please, oh God, please, take whatever you want. My purse is in my bag.”

He stood in her kitchen at her back door, staring at her through the balaclava eyeholes, the safety of a wall of trees and bushes at his rear. “Put that kettle down.”

He’d opened her back door when she’d got up from the breakfast bar to pour boiled water into a cup, facing away from him. She’d sung ‘Don’t Look Back in Anger’, reminding him of Martin, and the fleeting thought had crossed his mind whether the lyrics meant something to her. She must have caught sight of his reflection in the steel kettle and spun round to speak to him, the appliance held aloft, steam billowing from the spout. She could release the lid and throw the contents at him, but he was too far away for it to reach. In her panic, she might not realise that and have a good go at burning him anyway. The only problem would be the water on the floor. He could slip while chasing her, and she might get away, leaving via the front.

*Shit.*

His nerves bunched. He hadn’t entertained a scenario like this. In his head, it had been a clear-cut mission: get in, rape her, take her to the Pass, strangle her, and leave the body. She lived alone, he’d discerned that much, so didn’t expect any visitors to disturb them. His plan had been so simple, but the small problem of potential spilled water concerned him. So many things could go wrong, he *knew* that, so why hadn’t he



factored it in? Had he been he so sure he could carry this out and it'd go without a hitch?

Arrogance always got a killer caught.

“Do as I said and you won't get hurt.”

She lowered the kettle into the worktop. “What...what do you want?”

He must appear scary with his face covered, his clothes black, his gloves dark leather. It was obvious what he wanted. Surely she couldn't be that thick, unable to work it out. The news had been filled with his previous rapes. Women had been warned to be on alert.

He closed the door, locked it by feel alone, and moved closer but still far enough away that if she grabbed that kettle, the water still wouldn't touch him. If she screamed... The house stood in the middle of a line of terraces. Yes, it was the evening, people would have their tellies on, but a noise like that...

“Put that sponge in your mouth.” He flapped the knife he held, gesturing to a little rack on the draining board that held the sponge, a cloth, a washing-up brush, and Fairy liquid.

“W-what?”

“Do it. Put the cloth in there an' all.”

She pressed her back to the worktop to sidle over and do as he'd told her. She eyed the knife while stuffing first the cloth, then the sponge into her mouth, her lips stretching.

“Now move it!” He jerked the knife towards the door that led to a hallway. “Go into your bedroom.”

She ran, as he'd predicted she would, and he lunged after her, but she didn't go for the front door. A quick glance at it showed why: two bolts, a Yale, a mortice, the key in the hole, and a chain. She wouldn't be able to sort them all in time. She gripped the newel post and swung herself round, darting up the stairs. Knife pointed in front of him, he ascended after her, catching her just as she went to close herself in the bathroom.

“A locked door wouldn’t keep me out,” he said, voice full of menace. “I *said*, bedroom.”

He grabbed her upper arm, dragging her along the landing, her sobs muffled by the things in her mouth. He took her to the double bed and unzipped his black bum bag that rested over his stomach. Taking two rolled-up ties out of it, ones he’d bought with cash on a market in Kent while at a work convention, he used his elbow to push her onto the bed. She scrabbled to the other side to get away, the action pinching on his nerves.

He reached over and pressed the blade on her skin to let her know he meant business. The tip went through her white chemise and into her, enough to get her to stop and stare down at the red stain on her stomach area, giving him the opening to get on the bed and straddle her.

The blood reminded him of a time in his teens. He’d promised himself he’d never stab anyone again, and now look.

“You’re pissing me off,” he said.

He put the knife handle in his mouth, gripped her wrists in one hand, and draped a tie over them. She bucked, tried using her tongue to roll the sponge and cloth out, only succeeding in losing the sponge, and while her movement wasn’t helping matters, he quickly let go, snatched the ends of the tie, and knotted them underneath. He looped the tie around again and knotted it even tighter. No chance she was getting out of that. Drawing her hands above her head, he threaded the other tie around the knot and anchored her to the iron headboard. She writhed beneath him, a severe jolt sending him forward, and he banged his forehead on the wall.

“Fucking bitch!” he said around the knife handle.

He sat back and slapped her face, his leather glove ineffectual in creating the sting like a palm would, but it would have hurt her all the same. He snatched the knife out and held it to her throat.

“Listen to me, Louise. You’re getting on my nerves, understand? *Stop* fighting me.”

She went limp, staring up at him, snot coming out of one nostril, her eyes wild, maybe because he'd used her name.

"You're tied to the bed and can't get away, so just let me do what I want."

He shuffled down her body, sitting on her shins to undo his zip. Her eyes widened at the sight of his erection.

"No," she said, the roundness of the word blunted by the cloth. "Noooo."

She shook her head from side to side, and he slapped her again, disregarding her distress. She'd become someone else, someone he'd hated as much as Sandra. He yanked the hem of her chemise up and, condom on, got on with what he'd come here to do. She closed her eyes, tears leaking, and once he'd finished, he moved down to sit on her lower legs again and put the knife beside him. Jeans zipped up, he stared at the smeared blood on her stomach and cringed inwardly. It would be on his jacket. His bum bag.

Anger at this going so wrong pushed him to pick up the knife. He held it pointing downwards, wrenched the hem back down, and stabbed her stomach several times. Oh, the memories. God, this brought it all back. She coughed, the cloth shooting out, blood following it and spraying him. *Fuck!* He dropped the knife and grabbed her throat, squeezing. He couldn't take her to the Pass now, and he couldn't leave her alive to tell the police what he'd done.

It took longer than he'd thought it would, his hands cramping from the continual firm hold, and after what he estimated to be two or three minutes, he reckoned she was dead. He drew the spaghetti straps of the chemise down her arms, leaving the bed to stand at the foot and drag the material off her. Stared at her tits. Tits he'd forgotten to stare at with his very first victim, the one he'd killed as a teenager. He rolled the garment small enough to fit it into his bum bag, then he removed the ties and put them away. Knife in hand again, he staggered from the bedroom, shocked that what he'd envisaged hadn't turned out the right way. Yes, he'd always planned to kill her, but not brutally injure her with the knife.

*There wasn't supposed to be any blood.* He propelled himself down the stairs and out via the back door, blending into the night and arriving home, his wife still out.

Clothes on a short wash in the machine so he could get them into the tumble dryer and hung in the wardrobe before Sandra could question why he'd deigned to do any washing, he rushed into his daughter's old bedroom and, finding the tool he'd hidden behind Kallie's chest of drawers, kicked the fluffy rug away and prised up a floorboard. He placed the chemise, ties, and knife between two joists where he kept his diary, notes in the back about killing. He dropped the latest condom in with the others, the top tied into a knot, replaced the board, and put the rug back over it.

Later, pacing up and down trying to think if he'd left any DNA behind at Louise's, the washing put away, he got out of the shower just in time. Sandra appeared at the bottom of the stairs, taking her coat off as he emerged from the bathroom.

"Did you get your painting finished?" He towelled his hair, asking himself if Sandra and Rachel really went to art class on a Monday when neither of them ever brought their creations home. Something about the pieces being donated to the local hospital to brighten up the wards. Bollocks, he suspected.

"Um, yes. Why?"

"Just making conversation."

He wandered into the bedroom and put bed shorts and a T-shirt on, stashing his balaclava and gloves at the back of his pants drawer.

Downstairs, he found Sandra in the kitchen. She frowned at the worktop, then looked in the sink and opened the utensil drawers, her perusal ending when she checked the dishwasher. Was she having another of those menopausal moments?

"Have you seen the knife that's missing from the block?" she asked. "I'm sure I put it away before I went out."

He swallowed.

"God, I swear I'm going mad sometimes." She gawped at him. "And what the hell's happened to your forehead?"

He reached up to touch his brow. A slight lump.

*Fuck.* “I tripped over and nudded the wall, and no, I haven’t seen the knife, sorry.”

***“You need to be more careful.”***

Roman nodded to himself, earning a weird glance from Sandra.

“What are you nodding at?” she barked.

“Nothing. I’m going to bed.”

“Did you leave me enough hot water for *my* shower?”

“Yeah.” He tromped upstairs.

Christ, she did his head in.

# Chapter Fourteen

## SANDRA

She still hadn't ventured into the hot tub. All the other women looked good in their swimsuits, their stomachs small compared to hers. She had her cossie on under her long wafty skirt and vest top but couldn't bring herself to go inside and strip. Several people had asked why she wasn't getting in the water, and she'd brushed them off by saying she had plenty of time to do that on other days and wanted *them* to enjoy it tonight.

She hated lying, but hadn't she been doing it for years?

She glanced around. It was obvious Rachel had tried to join in the fun all evening, but her stiff movements and pale face told a different story now, more so after Martin and Roman had had their little chat at the bottom of the garden. Since then, the pair of them had been watching the guests, not their usual selves at all, which would normally be telling stories about their time at work together and getting everyone laughing at some of the shit they'd had to deal with.

Sandra wandered over and sat by the hot tub, close to Rachel. "All right, love?"

"I will be come tomorrow."

Rachel had said it quietly, probably hoping the noise of the bubbles would help mask what she'd said, but as usual, Georgie had her earwiggling head on. Sometimes, that was good when it came to gossip they'd share, but tonight, Rachel wouldn't want their friend poking her nose in.

Georgie elbowed Rachel. "What's up? And why will you be okay tomorrow?"

Rachel's face scrunched. She was either thinking of a way to answer or was pissed off she even had to. "I don't want to talk about it."

"Ooh, like that, is it?" Georgie, her platinum hair in a wonky top knot so it didn't get wet, gave Rachel another sharp elbow, the water sloshing. "Are you going back to the hairdresser's, is that it? You're naffed off because it wasn't done right?"

Sandra gave Georgie a filthy look, insulted on her best friend's behalf. "What are you on about? Her hair's lovely."

Georgie went on regardless, alcohol loosening her tongue. "Who did you get it done with? Julie? Did she use a toner? I bet she didn't. It wouldn't be brassy if she had."

"It's not brassy," Sandra snapped—she'd be offended had it been said to her. She'd have felt picked at. Under the microscope. *Laughed* at.

Rachel stood, the water sluicing off her. "You two can argue about it between you. The last thing I give a shit about is my hair. Seriously."

She got out of the tub, grabbed one of the towels Sandra had hung from hooks on the wall, and went into the house.

"Why did you have to be so spiteful?" Sandra said. "She's going through a tough time."

Georgie at least seemed contrite. "She's always told me to be honest with her about things like that. She's given me permission to give it to her straight. *Someone* has to tell her it's yellow, not blonde."

Sandra conceded she had a point about Rachel wanting things straight, but fucking hell... "Maybe not usually, you saying stuff like that, but tonight? She's a bit raw."

"What's occurin'?" Georgie sounded like that Welsh character from *Gavin and Stacey*.

Her husband butted in. "None of your bloody business, Gee. Sodding hell, people are allowed to keep secrets, you know."

Sandra frowned. Why had that seemed ominous, what he'd said?

"Shut your face." Georgie splashed him. "She's my mate, and if she's upset, I want to help." She made to rise.

"Don't," Dave said. "John's gone after, probably to see if she's okay. Debbie just gave him a nudge to go in."

Sandra turned to Debbie, John's wife, who shrugged and pulled a face; she clearly didn't know what the chuff was happening, so Martin must have kept the spat to himself.

"Fine." Georgie lowered into the water. "Well, whatever it is, I hope she gets it sorted, because she's been no fun at all tonight. Come to think of it, she lost her sparkle years ago. Probably because Martin's such a boring bastard." She cackled, her head thrown back. "Don't you ever get like that, Dave, else I'll find a better model."

"Cheeky cow," he said. "There's no one better around here than me."

"I know, puddin'."

Not wishing to remain with those two while they cooed at each other, which would hammer home how much disarray her marriage was in, Sandra stood and went over to Debbie, sitting beside her. No one in their right mind would get on the wrong side of her. A Collins before she'd married John—and it had been a shock that she'd married a copper—Debbie lived her life by the rules her family had set as she'd been growing up, regardless of her husband promising to uphold the law. It had long become apparent that John was bent—he turned a blind eye, especially when it came to his in-laws. If Debbie had clocked what Georgie had said about Rachel's hair, she'd have knocked her block off, hence why Sandra had sat here, so if Debbie *had* heard and brought it up, she could smooth it over.

Martin glanced at Roman, who nodded. Martin got up, his face wreathed in anger, and entered the house.

"What the hell's going on?" Debbie whispered.

Sandra squirmed. "I can't say, sorry."



“Rachel looks upset.”

“She is. Honestly, if I could say, I would, but it’s her story to tell.” Sandra was fed up of being the go-between in life, the one who had to pass messages on to the women neighbours or put things to Roman that their children didn’t want to tell him in case he gave them a lecture. It had become so tiring.

A male shout from inside floated out, distinct now the music had been turned down, and Roman shot up and rushed inside. Sandra followed, going into the living room. She stared at the spots of blood on her cream carpet—*that’ll take me ages to get off*—which also streamed out of John’s nose. Martin had him in a chokehold against the wall beside the fireplace, and Rachel tried to pull his hand down. Roman leant against the curio cabinet containing Sandra’s collection of porcelain frogs, his warped smile giving her chills.

“What the *hell* could be funny about this situation?” she whisper-shouted at him. “Bloody *do* something!”

“Martin’s just having a word, Sand, calm down.” Roman ran a hand over his smirk.

“A word? He’s *strangling* him!” She stormed over to help Rachel, but Martin’s arm was too rigid that even a chop to his inner elbow didn’t do anything.

“When did it start?” Martin asked in John’s face, his teeth clenched. “And when were you going to tell me?”

“I don’t know what you’re on about, pal,” John managed, his voice raspy. “Leave off, will you? I can’t...fucking...breathe.”

“You had your hands all over her when I came in,” Martin snarled. “She’s in a swimming cossie and a *towel*. Half-naked! *She’s* not a sex object you can ogle.”

“He was cuddling me because I was *crying*.” Rachel smacked at Martin’s wrist. “Get *off* him, for God’s sake. He hasn’t done anything wrong.”

“Giving you a porking is wrong,” Martin said. “Fucking my *wife* is wrong.”

“We’re not fucking!” Rachel screamed at him.

“I should bloody *hope* not.” Debbie appeared. She marched over and, stooping, her fist behind her, brought it forward, the thump landing between Martin’s parted legs.

He bent on instinct, his grip loosening, and growled out his pain. John panted and pushed past him, stalking out and yanking the front door open, calling back that Martin was a nutter and needed to sort himself out. He left, slamming the door.

A beat of shocked silence, then Debbie grabbed Martin’s hair and yanked his face up towards her.

“I don’t know what the hell’s going on with you, but if you dare hit my old man again, I’ll cut your bollocks off.” Debbie had no qualms about using violence to solve matters, and she shoved Martin so hard he fell on the floor. “Not only did you accuse my John of cheating, you’ve failed to see your wife’s in a state. *I* sent John in here to see if she was okay because *you* sat on your arse and left her to it. Prick.” She let go of his hair and smiled at Sandra. “Sorry about that, love, didn’t mean to ruin your bash. My temper got the better of me. I’m going to see if John’s all right, which is what a partner’s *meant* to do, unlike that Oasis-wannabe cunt there.”

Debbie walked out.

“Fuck me,” Roman muttered on a laugh. “Wouldn’t want to be with *her* in a dark alley.”

Sandra took Rachel’s hand. “Do you want to stay here tonight?” She glanced at Roman. She didn’t care if he agreed or not, she was warning him not to stick his oar in.

Rachel shook her head. “No, but thanks anyway. I’m...I’m going for a walk.”

Martin stumbled to his feet, his cheeks wet from where his eyes had watered. “Going after John, are you? To get your stories straight?”

“Pack it in now,” Sandra said.

Martin ignored her. "I'll come with you, Rach. I don't want you being out there by yourself with that Strangler around."

Rachel glared at him. "You've got no right to offer me help now. That chance went out of the window after what you've done. Just keep away from me. I'll stay at Tara's flat, get the keys off her later. I'm going to get dressed."

She left, casting a look at Sandra that said: *I'll be okay.*

Roman chuckled. "Sore nuts, mate?"

"Knob off," Martin said. "When she's gone, follow her for me, all right? If she isn't shagging John or anyone else here, she's probably going to go off now to her new bloke's place."

Sandra stopped short of stamping her foot. "She hasn't *got* a new bloke!" She switched her attention to Roman. "But he's right. Go after her. With that nutter about, she might get hurt."

Roman nodded. "Fine by me, but what do I say if she catches me following?"

"Talk to her," Sandra said. "Just give her a listening ear."

"Whatever." Roman circled his shoulders. "But if she has a go at me and tells me to sod off, don't start on me when I come home."

# Chapter Fifteen

## RACHEL

By the time she'd reached the end of her street—*not my street anymore*—the thud of footsteps gave it away that someone had come after her. God, she'd bet it was Martin, the last person she wanted to see at the moment. He'd try and get her to return to their house so they could talk into the early hours. 'Hash it out' as he'd say, come up with a resolution that suited both of them so things weren't acrimonious. He'd been good at that part of his job, being a mediator, smoothing any ruffles. Laid-back for ninety-nine percent of the time in her presence, he had a way of calming situations down. Could *this* one be calmed, though?

His accusation that she was having sex with John had hurt her when *he'd* clearly been dabbling where he shouldn't. And even if she *had* fancied John, which she didn't, Debbie would beat the shit out of her if she caught them. Getting into trouble with a Collins wasn't sensible. If you upset one, the whole lot came after you. Would Debbie keep the altercation quiet, or would her extended family turn up on the doorstep and give Martin what for? He'd punched John in the face, *a copper*, such a stupid move. Had he broken his nose?

"Wait!"

She cringed. Roman. Relieved it wasn't Martin but irritated because his best friend had chosen to take his place, especially after his weirdness earlier, Rachel sighed in frustration. Why couldn't they all just leave her alone? If she'd been quicker, getting around the corner in time, Roman wouldn't have seen her. She was eager to get to the flat a couple of streets away, but she hadn't got hold of Tara yet to ask her to meet her there to drop off the keys—and have a chat to get all of this off her

chest. She'd yet to confess to her what she'd discovered last week. How sickened she was by it. And what had she been thinking anyway? She couldn't expect Tara to come to her. Instead, she'd walk the long way round to her sister's house so she avoided the Pass, as Tara lived on the other estate.

Despite being annoyed and perturbed in case Roman came on to her again, Rachel stopped and turned.

He approached, holding his hands up beneath the streetlight as if to tell her he wasn't there to cause hassle. He appeared brighter here than he would under one of the others. This one had a white bulb, the others more orange. "Look, don't have a go, all right? Martin wanted to make sure you were safe, and Sandra's worried. If you don't want company, fine, but if you need to walk off your anger, I'm going to follow you. It's not safe around here."

She understood what he was getting at. "No one's been killed for months."

"So? He might be having a break, assimilating his feelings over what he's done, reassessing his next move. He could start again at any time. You, out on your own? Stupid. What if tonight's the night he decides to do it again? You'll be easy pickings. Don't tell me you're angry enough to disregard the danger. Martin was a dickhead, yes, but he's had a shock, and that makes people act out of character. He's already stepped off his soapbox a bit."

"I bet he still thinks I'm seeing someone else, though."

"Unfortunately, yes, but I'd be the same in his shoes. Some of us men can't face the fact that we've done something wrong in order for our other halves to want to leave, so we blame it on another man. I mean, it *can't* be us, right?" He laughed, likely to show her how silly he thought men could be.

She didn't feel like laughing. "It's pathetic. There's no other man." *But Martin's obsessed with other women.*

"I don't suppose there is. Where are you going? What was your plan? Or did you storm out with no direction in mind?"

"I'm going to Tara's."

“Want me to walk you through the Pass? I assume you weren’t going to cut through on your own...”

“Of course I wasn’t, otherwise I’d be down the alley back there by now.”

“Come on.” He stabbed a thumb over his shoulder. “We’ll be all right together, and I’ll be fine on the way back. The Strangler’s not into men.” He smiled. “Or you could get an Uber. I wouldn’t advise a normal taxi—who knows if the Strangler does that for a living. At least Uber drivers are safer.”

A chill went through her, despite the warm night, and a boil of rage burst inside her at what he’d said. “Thanks for scaring me. *Just* what a woman needs when a nutjob’s out there killing people.”

“Sorry.”

She sighed, and he linked his arm with hers as they walked back down the street to the alley that connected to Haven Avenue. She shuddered at the touch but didn’t call him out on it. She’d look stupid, because he’d say he was just being a mate, guiding her along.

“Listen to me,” she said, “I don’t want you being odd again.”

“Odd?”

“You know, earlier.”

“Ah, me saying about a match made in Heaven and all that. Sorry.”

They went down the alley.

“I’m going to sound like Martin now,” he said, “but is Sandra seeing someone else?”

“No!” *But you want to. Hypocrite.*

Out in Haven Avenue, they crossed the road to go onto the Pass. She tensed at the darkness ahead, how the tops of trees appeared black against the summer night sky, the ground

black, too, to the far left and right. Anyone could be lurking there and she wouldn't spot them.

She hadn't been listening to what he'd been saying. "Um, sorry, I drifted off for a second there. What did you say?"

"I said sorry for acting a dick. Wait up, I'll put my torch app on."

He lit the way, and Rachel walked faster, tugging him along.

"Scared?" he asked. "Even with me here?"

"I've never been able to get the image of that woman in the stream out of my head, so this is shitting me up, and walking here in the dark is ridiculous. We should go back."

He upped his speed more than hers and, trotting to catch up, she sank inside her thoughts, Martin filling them. He wouldn't see he'd done anything wrong apart from when he'd worked long hours and hadn't really been there to help her bring the twins up. But what he'd been doing behind her back was another matter. Why hadn't she brought it up with him? Thrown it in his face that she *knew*?

"It'll be fine," Roman said.

"I don't think I was ever in love with him," she blurted, completely off topic.

"Hmm. There's love, then there's in love. I know what you're saying. I've never been in love either."

"Must be nice to be giddy with it even after all these years."

"Only a few lucky people get that. When the stomach still rolls over in excitement at seeing them or thinking about them. I can't say it's ever happened to me."

"So you never loved Sandra like that?"

"Let's just say I felt I had to get married and picked the woman my parents would like."

"So you've never been happy all these years?"

“I’ve had happy times, can’t deny it, but...were they real or manufactured? I shouldn’t even be telling you this. You’re her friend.”

“But I’ve felt similar. I married Martin, although it was against my parents’ wishes, as you know, and I got stuck on the treadmill.”

“Same. We’re all older now, we see things differently, and we pick our lives apart because, if we don’t, we might go through the rest of our days in ‘accepting our lot’ mode. We ask ourselves if we want more, if we *deserve* more, or if we don’t want what we have. We come to a crossroads where it’s either stay stuck in a rut or get out of it. I stayed because divorce isn’t an option, although why I care so much about my dad’s opinion nowadays is beyond me. Actually, that’s a lie. A kid never stops wanting their parents’ approval. You had your girls to bring up, mainly on your own, and when Martin did get time off, he liked the pub a bit too much. Just my opinion, and I did tell him he spent too many hours with his elbow on the bar. He said it helped him cope with his demons.”

“He’s switched work for the allotment. It’s like he can’t bear to be at home.”

“Retiring can’t be easy. He had a full working life, and now it’s gone. How’s his PTSD flashbacks now, by the way? He won’t talk about them with me.”

The trickle of the stream told her where they’d got to. She walked faster, imagining the Strangler standing beside the water, a body at his feet. “He doesn’t talk to me either. Says if he did, it’d bring it all back. The therapist helped, though. He had less nightmares after he went to see him, but he still has them.”

“It was a bad time. I remember it well.”

She had to change the subject. Anything to do with Martin’s old job pissed her off. His marriage to it had always been a bugbear. “So, you and Sandra...”

“Seeing you and Martin tonight has brought me up short, to be honest. I’m going to go home and talk to her about it when



everyone's gone. See if we can sort our shit out."

"Good." It was a standard answer to deflect from saying the truth, that Sandra would hate having to talk about it, and when they did, would she take courage from what Rachel had done tonight and tell Roman she didn't love him anymore, couldn't even bear the sight of him?

"Will she be receptive?" he asked.

She sensed he was feeling her out, checking if Sandra had spoken about her emotions. She'd stick to her promise of not dropping her in it. "I don't know because she's never said anything about having a problem in your marriage."

"Don't get me wrong, but I find that unbelievable. Martin said something similar about you earlier, that you hadn't spoken to Sandra. Why's that? Don't you trust her or something?"

"Do *you* talk to Martin about *your* love life? Do *you* trust *him*?"

"No, and yes. I don't get into my feelings with him, not the deep ones. And you know I trust him. He's had my back more than I've had hot dinners."

"Unfortunately, we're at the end of the road, me and Martin."

"It happens. He'll be all right eventually, although I will give you a heads-up. It might take a while for him to accept you're not seeing anyone, so expect him to bang on about it a bit more. When I worked with him, he never let things go. Like a dog with a bloody bone."

"Strange, because he isn't like that at home. He's more likely to roll over and ask for a tummy rub."

They laughed, although she didn't find it amusing, more that Martin had been so apathetic until tonight that she'd convinced herself that he wouldn't give a shit if she left him anyway.

"We all have different sides to us that no one else sees," Roman said.

*I saw it. I know what you do.*

“I suppose.” She’d answered calmly, but his words bothered her. Did he want to talk about the side of himself he kept hidden? Would him explaining it help her to understand what Martin got up to?

“Feelings, dreams, thoughts,” he went on. “If we told people half of what went through our heads, we’d be seen differently.”

“True.”

Many a time she’d imagined suffocating Martin with her pillow. If she blurted that out, she might get herself arrested. Did Roman feel bad about what he did? Was he desperate to explain so she understood? She didn’t want to go into it, though. It was too disgusting. Depraved. Or was it just what men did when they didn’t think anyone was watching? Could it be classed as lads being lads?

She had to talk about something else or she’d blab that she’d discovered their dirty secret, and she couldn’t deal with it, no tonight. “I’ve got to tell the girls about this at some point, unless he’s got to them already. They think I don’t know they’ve got a secret message group between them.” She’d said the latter on purpose to see what he’d say.

“Doesn’t everyone have a secret group, though?”

*Only perverts like you.*

She raised her eyebrows. “I don’t.” She relaxed a little more—the lights of the other estate peeped above the trees.

“People *are* entitled to their privacy, you know. Being married doesn’t mean showing your other half everything about you.”

“No, but there are some things I wish I’d known a long time ago. It would have changed everything. I wouldn’t have felt bad about wanting to leave. I’d have had a valid excuse.”

“What do you mean?”

“It doesn’t matter. You’ll only go and tell Martin anyway, and what I know should come from me, no one else. I haven’t

made up my mind whether to say anything yet.”

“Sounds worrying.”

“Maybe.”

“It’s clear you don’t want to discuss it, so... Will you be okay? Financially?”

“I should imagine so.”

“What about emotionally? If you’re holding on to some grudge...”

“I’ll plod on. I wasted years of his life by staying with him. Wasted my own. I stayed with him to make a point. How sick am I?” *How sick is he?*

“There are sicker people about. Don’t beat yourself up.”

They reached Tara’s estate, and while Rachel could walk on alone now that lights lit the streets, having passed that stream, she didn’t fancy it.

“Where does Tara live?” he asked.

“The next street over. In Farm Acre.”

“Right.”

He led the way, their arms still linked, and once they’d arrived, he waited until Tara had opened the front door.

“Take care of yourself,” he said.

“Thanks, for...the walk and the chat.”

“Not a problem. Night.” He strode off.

She turned to her sister, tears welling. “I need to stay at the flat tonight.”

“Piss off! Going by the state of you, you can stay here, and we’ll go over in the morning. What you need is a glass of wine. A large one. Maybe a hankie or two.”

Rachel went inside, wiping her cheeks, a horrible knot in her throat. The end of something was usually either a relief or sad, and she was confused to find she experienced both emotions, even though she’d wanted this to happen. She still

cared for Martin, but she had to remind herself that using him for any longer wasn't nice.

She'd been a cow, and it had to stop.

And him being a pervert...no, she couldn't go back.

# Chapter Sixteen

## ROMAN

He could have raped her, killed her, he'd put a condom and a pair of gloves in his shorts pocket with the intent, but once they'd got to the Pass, the voice had warned him not to. He might have been seen in their street, talking to her beneath the lamppost. Not all the neighbours had been invited to the barbecue, and Debbie and John had gone home, easily able to glance out of a front window. Best to get Rachel to Tara's so he could report back that she'd got there safe, so when she *was* killed, they wouldn't suspect it was him. Now he knew the street of the flat and her sister's address, he had more to go on. He could waylay her on Monday night, giving Martin something to really cry about and himself a much-needed release. Seeing Rachel in that swimsuit had wreaked havoc with his dick.

Parts of the recent conversation bothered him. Rachel had hinted she'd discovered something. Was it the secret Session group? If so, why hadn't she confronted Martin? Why hadn't she told Sandra, Georgie, and Debbie? Why hadn't she sounded Roman out? He had to admit, the shit that was posted, the stuff they said, would look bad to anyone else. It would shock a wife to find out her husband talked about women in that manner.

Should he warn the group or keep out of it?

He walked back through the Pass, thinking about his time away from raping and killing. Seven months had been a long time, and he'd missed his extra-curricular activities. Once he'd started on this mission, he'd asked himself whether he'd be able to stop, and the fact the police and the newspapers thought he'd escalate to the point he'd get caught, well, he'd

wanted to prove to them that people like him *could* control themselves if they wanted to. And also so his lack of activity might be put down to an out-of-towner being the Strangler, sending the case in another direction, far away from him.

He sensed the urges coming back. It was the darkness that did it, *and* guiding Rachel through here earlier, her perfume tantalising his nostrils, reminding him of the thrill and the black cloak of night that prevented anyone from seeing him strangling someone here.

He'd made up his mind that she was his next woman, so to stop his thoughts from wandering where they shouldn't, he switched his torch app on again and veered off the path and onto the grass. But the need to kill wouldn't go away, and as if they had a mind of their own, his feet took him farther towards the stream. He could stand there, soak in the sound of the water.

Remember.

He arrived, dipping down the little gravel path, excitement coasting through him, pushing him on. He went directly to where he'd left Helen and stood in the spot her torso had lain. Imagined her soul lived in the earth and rose to infiltrate his legs, to infuse him with who she'd been—her hopes, dreams, her thoughts—but only his own waited inside him, repeating the end goal: no more Sandra.

He wandered along farther, his torchlight bobbing with each step. He didn't have to worry about anyone seeing the light during summer, the trees either side of the stream too thick, too high, the trunks close together, as if standing in a line to aid him in hiding the beam. In the winter, it would have been a different situation. Most of the trees hadn't had leaves, autumn snatching them away.

He stared ahead at the bathing area. People came to paddle here, to fish, or to picnic on a large, natural stone platform. He frowned. Either someone lay on the platform or they'd left a pile of clothing behind. He ventured closer, his heart picking up speed. What if someone out there had taken up his mantle? Pretended to be him? A copycat? Because that *was* a body.

Sunburnt skin on the arms which lay on top of a blanket covering her. A pillow rested beneath her head, the blow-up kind used in baths, and, momentarily taken aback at the kindness of whoever had laid her out like this, Roman went nearer. Crouched.

He should really phone the police, but other than walking Rachel home, what excuse would he have for being at the stream? It was a diversion no one would take unless they had a specific reason to be near the water.

He panned the light around her. A handbag. Half a litre of vodka, a quarter gone. A can of bitter lemon, open. A packet of sausage rolls from the Co-op, three out of five missing. And a prescription bottle of temazepam, 20mg, some tablets still in it. So she hadn't come here to kill herself, then, else she'd have swallowed them all. The label had her name on it.

Shit, he knew her.

Had someone brought the booze here to make it look like she'd ended her own life when *they'd* really done it? Or was this a picnic that had gone on longer than she'd expected and she'd fallen asleep? Her bag was certainly big enough to carry everything. Had she been here all day, sunbathing, got pissed up?

Her family. Would anyone notice she wasn't at home?

***“Don't... Not her.”***

Leaning closer, he listened for breathing. Ah, there it was, steady and strong. Vodka, mixed with tablets prescribed to help with sleep, meant she was probably deep in dreamland.

He had to make a decision. Too many choices, though.

Leave her there.

Wake her and get her home.

Phone the police and let them know a woman was alone by the stream, out of it.

Or kill her.

His erection, painful owing to his crouch, gave him the answer.

***“I said, don’t.”***

But she was just here, a gift, one he hadn’t had to follow or watch.

***“Rachel’s the next one, remember.”***

But...

“Fuck it,” he said, a little too loudly.

Her eyes snapped open, and she let out a sleep-addled screech, staring up at him, seemingly unperturbed to find him there. “What the chuff? Where am I?” She glanced around. “Oh, bloody Nora, I did it again, didn’t I.” She sat up, the blanket falling to her waist to reveal a red sequinned boob tube. “What are *you* doing here?”

“I could ask you the same thing. I was just walking Rachel to her sister’s and saw you. Are you all right?” He couldn’t think straight, his thoughts clouded by what he wanted to do, knowing he shouldn’t. The beer he’d had on top of the whiskey at the allotment hadn’t helped matters either.

“Then you can walk your other neighbour home an’ all,” she said. “I need to see the doctor again. Sleepwalking isn’t funny, you know, not the kind I have. I mean, what if I’d gone into the stream? What if that Strangler found me?”

He choked on laughter. “You shouldn’t be out at night on your own.”

“I know, but it’s not like I can stop myself when I’m asleep, is it. I’ve had this happening since I was a kid. Blimey, I even brought the stuff with me that I had here earlier. I must have grabbed my bag. I didn’t bother unpacking it or getting changed before I went to bed. Too knackered. That sun wore me out.”

Her excess of information got on his nerves.

She pushed the blanket off then stood, bent to pick it up, and folded it. She put it to one side and popped her things in



her bag, then stuffed the blanket on top. She turned to face him.

She'd changed since the last time he'd seen her. She was Clive and Sally King's daughter, ten doors down from his house. Her parents hadn't been at the barbecue, they'd said they were already going out for a meal elsewhere. If she'd sleepwalked, they wouldn't have been home to stop her.

He studied her. Blonde. Young.

She'd do.

He put his phone away, leaving the torch on, his shorts pocket lighting up. He took the gloves from his other pocket and put them on while his eyes adjusted to the darkness.

“What are you doing?” she asked, her voice disembodied. “What's that snapping noise?”

He squinted to judge where she was—still where she'd been before. He punched her in the face. She fell back, her head cracking on something. A muffled cry, then a whimper. Quickly, he took his phone out again, aiming the torchlight at her. She'd landed on the platform on her back. Blood seeped from her head onto the pale stone, and it dripped from her nose, dribbling to one side down a cheek. She made a move to rise then flumped back down.

“What the...?” she muttered. “My dad's going to go mental at you for doing that.”

Roman stepped forward and straddled her. Placed his phone in his pocket again and at the same time gripped her throat. His erection strained, but he ignored it, too desperate to snuff her life out. She raised her arms to grab at him, but with his free hand he batted them away. Shuffled up her body in increments, then lifted one knee to trap her left hand, then the other. He pressed down on them, hard, and squeezed even harder, using his other palm to push onto the back of the one on her neck. Her gurgles joined those of the stream.

He was going to make a mess in his shorts, he was too excited, and the stone scuffed at his knees, grit digging into his skin. How the hell would he explain that when he got home?

Anger at himself, for not listening to the voice, spurred him on. He couldn't back out now. He put pressure on her neck, straightening his arms to quicken the death. He let her go. Retrieved his phone and aimed it at her.

Eyes closed. Red marks around her throat. Frothy blood at her mouth.

He listened for breathing.

Nothing.

She'd died too quickly. Strangulation usually took longer. Had she had a heart attack from the shock?

Phone on the stone beside her, he fished his wallet out. Removed a condom.

Smiled.

He'd never done a dead one before.

# Chapter Seventeen

## THE INTRICACIES OF CHILDHOOD

*The first time Roman had seen a dead body was at thirteen when Mrs Willington from down the road died. He stood in her living room with Mum and felt nothing but fascination. The old lady was grey, her lips a weird purple, and spit had dried on her chin, securing a biscuit crumb in place. A chocolate digestive lay on her lap, one bite taken out of it. She sat in her armchair by an electric fire, the room so hot where it must have been on for a while with the door shut.*

*Mum fanned her face. "Oh, dear God. The poor woman!"*

*It annoyed Roman, what she'd said. She wasn't a poor woman at all, she was spiteful and chased him once when he'd nicked an apple from the tree in her front garden. She'd told Dad, and Roman had cried at the slipper cracking against his arse. Maybe that's why he felt nothing. This woman had never been kind to him, so her being dead made no odds.*

*Mum rushed to the phone beside Mrs Willington's chair and picked up the handset. She dialled, and Roman continued his study of the body. Her eyes, wide open, had a milky glaze, as if her irises had filled with snow. Their colour matched her hair, still in rollers, her dressing gown buttons done up right to her neck. A cup of tea, long cold now, a skin on top, sat on the table beside her next to a knitting magazine. Another biscuit crumb balanced on the lip of the cup, so she must have been dunking.*

*How had she died? Had she choked? Heart attack? It would bug him if he never found out.*

*Mum put the phone down. “We have to wait out the front. The police and an ambulance will be here in a minute. Come on.”*

*She took his elbow and steered him out into the hallway. He shrugged her off, annoyed she hadn't asked him how he was. All she'd cared about was the 'poor woman', not her son who could be shitting bricks at seeing a dead body. He wasn't, but that was beside the point.*

*Outside in the chilly winter breeze, he thought about why they'd even gone to see Mrs Willington anyway. Mum had taken him with her for one of his 'charitable duties', to help the old bag tidy up or whatever she needed doing, so he could tell Father Brown what he'd done for the community this week. Roman never wanted to go round being a do-gooder; it took time away from mucking about with his mates, plus they ripped the piss out of him for it. None of them did anything like that, and he was the odd one out. Dad said it would shape him into a decent man, knock the Devil out of him, and Roman had learned to smile and nod and pretend nothing dark lived inside him.*

*But it did.*

*He wished he'd been there to watch Mrs Willington die.*

**“You're not right in the head.”**

*He ignored that, God could fuck right off, and stared down the street at the approaching police car. It sailed up to the kerb, and two officers got out, both in uniform. He reckoned they got to see some right sights, all those dead people and whatnot.*

*He was curious to know whether he'd feel sorry for them if he saw one again.*

*Because Roman never felt sorry for anyone, never had.*

*He reckoned he was broken.*

# Chapter Eighteen

## MARTIN

He couldn't get the idea of Rachel seeing someone else out of his head. It swirled, punched against the inside of his skull in the form of a headache that might turn violent soon. A migraine. Just what he needed, for fuck's sake.

It was the lack of her wanting sex that had pushed him towards that way of thinking, not to mention the conversation he'd had with Roman at the allotment regarding affairs. Martin shook his head at himself. He'd said anyone was capable of cheating, had joked about Eric being her fancy man, but he hadn't *really* thought it would be the case with Rachel. Now, though? Bloody hell, it was a distinct possibility. She could deny having another bloke all she liked, but something niggled inside him, something he couldn't get rid of.

Or was he guilty of grabbing at something else being the problem to divert the blame elsewhere?

Away from him?

As she'd avoided him in the bedroom since the twins had been born, did that mean she'd been seeing someone for eighteen years? Had he been that embroiled with work he'd failed to really *think* about her playing away? Had he been so sure of himself that he'd thought she wouldn't dare cheat on him?

It was likely, but something he didn't want to face at the minute. It would mean opening himself up and inspecting the contents. Spotting all the rancid parts of him that existed in his cells and blood and bones. How he'd turned to filthy videos in order to fill the void. How he'd bought DVDs from a dodgy place, knowing they were illegal but doing it anyway, the risk

becoming a necessity for the thrill. Watching porn in a shed, reduced to the equivalent of some filthy, perverted older man whose wife had denied him as much as she could get away with.

His mind drifted over the years they'd been together. Many an evening she'd been alone, him doing overtime. She could have put the twins to bed and shagged whoever she wanted and no one would be any the wiser, letting the bloke out in the dark, telling him to be quiet so the neighbours didn't come to their windows for a nose. Giggling. Making plans for when he could come round again. Her, desperate to see him between visits, pining for him like she had when Martin had first come on the scene.

*Stop tormenting yourself.*

His headache pounded harder.

When he'd watched her flirting with Eric, it had hurt for all the usual reasons, but the biggest one was that she wouldn't, or couldn't, do that with him. Martin wasn't someone she fancied anymore, yet he'd let the years drift by, pretending the spark would come back.

It wasn't Eric. And it wasn't John, he'd known that even when he'd punched him in the face, but his anger and bewilderment at his situation, the abject fear of losing her, had dictated his actions, his words. *Someone* had to cop it, and John had been the perfect candidate. Although perfect wasn't the word now Martin came to think of it. John was married to a Collins.

*Shit.*

Debbie thumping Martin in the nuts had had the desired effect. It had sobered him up, and remorse had filled him immediately, but John had buggered off before Martin had the chance to apologise. He ought to go round there, say sorry, if only to appease Debbie, who might take it upon herself to tell her family what he'd done. That was the last thing he needed, a load of Collinses standing on his doorstep.

He stared at Roman's living room wall, emotionally exhausted but wired. He'd stayed in the living room out of the way. Ten minutes ago, Sandra had come in to say she'd told everyone she was calling it a day. People had filed out past the doorway, most of them glancing in at him sitting on the sofa, widening their eyes at the blood spatter on the cream carpet. Sandra's Vax SpotWash, no matter how much she extolled its greatness, likely wouldn't get the stains out.

Georgie staggered past, then backtracked and popped her head around the jamb. "What's happened in here, then?"

Dave appeared next to her. "Leave it, Gee, for God's sake." He eyed Martin: *Are you okay?*

Martin didn't bother nodding. How *could* he be okay? "I may as well tell you. Me and Rachel. We're splitting up. She's moving out."

"Fuck me," Dave said. "What a shocker. Sorry to hear that, pal."

"Yeah, well, it seems I wasn't paying attention to what was going on under my nose."

Georgie pointed at him. "If you're suggesting she's been having an affair, then you're wrong. She's bored, that's all. Feels a drudge. Feels...I don't know, like she's unattractive and wants a bit of fun in her life. You *are* boring, Martin, even you can admit that."

At last, an insight—and it stung like a bitch, as did Georgie's giggle. He was boring. Great. "She's said that, has she?"

Georgie rolled her eyes. "Well, yeah, otherwise I wouldn't have told you. I don't say stuff for the sake of it, nor do I make crap up. You need to spice things up in the bedroom, doesn't he, Dave?" She turned to her husband. "You'll give him some pointers, won't you?"

Dave cleared his throat. "Err, not appropriate, love."

"Porn," Georgie said and winked. "Works wonders."

Christ, the last thing they needed was for her to blurt that she knew about the Session group when someone could come along any minute and hear her. She'd agreed to keep it a secret.

Dave shook his head at her. "Now you *know* Martin's not into porn, Gee, and I doubt Rachel is either." He nudged her to get his point across: *keep your mouth shut*.

He'd done it just in time.

"Porn?" Sandra brushed past them and flopped into an armchair. "Are there code words for when you men view that?"

"Eh?" Dave frowned.

"Like, would you say you were watching someone going for a run if your wife caught you on your phone, all that heavy breathing and whatever coming out of the speaker?" Sandra's face flushed.

"No, he wouldn't," Georgie said, "because I watch it with him. Don't look so shocked, Sand!" She paused, calculating. "Oh my God, did Roman say he'd been watching someone *running*? What a *scream*!"

"No," Sandra said quickly. "A friend of mine at work told me the story."

*She's lying.*

Martin expected a flurry of messages later on the Session group. Dave would try to make this better by finding hookups online and sending links so Martin could get his end away. Much as he'd wanted sex during his marriage, suddenly, it didn't seem important anymore. Having Rachel's company did. All those years he'd had her there, and he'd bemoaned no bedroom antics instead of seeing what was really important: how she'd been feeling, how he'd treated her, how he'd trundled along thinking it would be fine. God, it had all gone so wrong. Being on the Session group seemed gross and perverted now.

"Come on, you pisshead," Dave said to his swaying wife. "Let's get you home."



They left, Georgie laughing uproariously at something she'd muttered.

At the sound of the door snicking shut, Sandra moved from the chair to sit next to Martin. "That's the last of them gone. And Georgie doesn't mean any harm."

"I know. She's got foot-and-mouth issues."

"Ah, she does that, puts her size fives in her gob a lot."

To take his mind off his own shit, he asked, "*Was* the story about a work colleague?"

"No." She gripped the chair arms, fingers bending at the knuckles, chubby spider's legs.

"Didn't think so."

Since he'd had the wind knocked out of him, it was as if a veil had been removed. Seeing Sandra, how she was clearly upset by her husband's behaviour, well, it brought home how he'd missed all these signs with Rachel. The upset in the eyes. The pinched mouth. The air of confusion and hurt.

"I'd say you were always good at spotting a liar," she said. "But..."

"Yeah, I know, I missed all Rachel's lies." He let out a shuddering breath. "When did it happen? The phone thing?"

"Earlier, before everyone arrived. I felt sick hearing that breathing. Has he told you anything about...?"

"I don't know what he gets up to," he fibbed. "Insensitive of him to watch it while you were there, though." At least Martin did it in his shed, well away from home.

"Hmm. To cover for it, he said he's going to take up running."

"Maybe I should join him. Get fit so I can find someone else."

"So you've accepted it, then. That she's leaving." Sandra sighed.

“I’ll never accept it, nor her using me, but I’ll put it behind me eventually, yeah.”

“But—”

The squeak of the front door opening had them both staring expectantly into the hallway.

“That you, Roman?” Sandra asked, the spider legs curling underneath to form fists.

“Yep, need a quick wee. Hang on.”

“Did you—?”

The sound of the loo door shutting cut her off. Martin tensed. Had Roman caught up with Rachel, and if he had, what had she said? Roman was good at wheedling information out of people, and maybe he’d gained an insight into the workings of Rachel’s mind. That she’d used him wasn’t like her at all. She was a lovely woman, and he’d never have guessed she had it in her. Mind you, *she* wouldn’t guess he belonged to a secret porn group, so there was that.

Everyone hid things from each other.

The noisy opening of the loo door then Roman’s heavy footfall on the stairs prompted Sandra to huff, get up, and stand by the newel post. She clutched the ball on top, her anger evident.

“What are you *doing*?” she called up to him.

“Two secs.”

Sandra came back in and stood by the curio cabinet. “Bloody hell, I mean, it isn’t like we’re desperate for news or anything.”

Martin shrugged off her sarcasm, used to Roman’s ways. “It means everything’s all right if he doesn’t see any urgency.”

“Yes, because *he* knows what’s going on, but we don’t. Selfish bastard.”

Martin raised his eyebrows. He’d never heard her call Roman names before. “If it was bad, you’d see a different side to him. He wouldn’t casually go upstairs.”

They sat quietly for a couple of minutes, then the man himself came down in pyjamas and plonked himself on the sofa beside Martin. He smelled of soap and deodorant.

“Well? Oh, and nice of you to casually have a shower while I’m waiting for answers, by the way,” Martin said.

Roman lounged back. Ran a hand through his damp hair. “I caught up with her at the end of the street. Walked her through the Pass to Tara’s.”

Martin’s stomach lurched. What if Roman hadn’t stayed until she’d got inside? “Did you watch her go in?”

“Of course I did. Text her and check if you like, although given the circumstances, she might not answer.”

What did that mean? Had she told Roman she wouldn’t be taking Martin’s calls or messages? That explained things. She hadn’t responded to his last few texts, although the status said she’d read them. Maybe she didn’t want to hear how sorry he was. How he wished he could turn the clock back.

He took his phone out, hand shaking.

**Martin:** PLEASE TELL ME YOU’RE AT TARA’S. I WON’T BOTHER YOU AFTER YOU’VE REPLIED, I JUST NEED TO KNOW YOU’RE SAFE.

**Rachel:** I’M OKAY.

“She’s fine,” he said, relief floating through him. “Cheers, mate, for...you know, getting her there.”

“No problem.”

“You were gone a while,” Sandra said, her accusing glare aimed at Roman. “Longer than it takes to walk through the Pass and back.”

She’d sounded suspicious, and it brought to mind what Martin had asked Roman earlier, whether it was *him* Rachel was seeing. What if it was? What if they’d had a shag against a tree and laughed at how pathetic he was? Was that why he’d had a shower? What if they’d made plans that she’d stay at the flat for a bit, then he’d leave Sandra and they could be together?

This was doing his head in.

Roman sighed. “We walked slowly and talked for a while, all right? I tried to get things out of her. That’s what you wanted, wasn’t it?”

“Well, yes, but for *that* long?” Sandra folded her bottom lip between her teeth.

“She had a lot to offload, as you might imagine, and I had to play it carefully so she didn’t suspect I was fishing. Don’t you want to know what she said? How she is?” Roman gave her a filthy look. “Considering she’s your best friend and you’re meant to care about her.”

“That was below the belt,” she snapped. “Of *course* I want to know what’s what.”

Roman turned to Martin. “She’s gutted about using you. I wanted you to know that first and foremost. We all do things we shouldn’t, and she knows she was bad in stringing you along.”

He paused, stared, and Martin didn’t need to know why. *We all do things we shouldn’t*. The Session group. Some of the shit on there was illegal, and if they got caught...

“Listen,” Roman said, “we’re all brought up with certain standards to uphold, they’re ingrained in us whether we like it or not. Her family predicted your marriage wouldn’t last because of the age gap and that she’d end up a single mother. Think about the pressure of that, how she’d have felt a failure had she cut ties earlier. She’d have to face all that ridicule and ‘I told you so’ from several angles. Regardless of whether remaining in your marriage meant she’d be unhappy, the fallout was too daunting for her to leave. She’d have stayed to make it work because she didn’t want egg on her face.”

Martin huffed. “So you’re saying it’s okay for her to use me because she has issues and pressure, is that it?”

“No, but... Another example. I have a Catholic family, they’d go mental if I asked for a divorce, so I know—”

“Were you *planning* to?” Sandra butted in. “Because this is the first I’m hearing about it if you are.”

Roman sighed again. He had his ‘will you shut the fuck up?’ face on. “No, I’m trying to make a point, that what we’re brought up learning has an effect on us.”

Martin nodded. He understood that. He’d stuck it out with minimal sex because the same had happened between his parents, the pair of them career-orientated, driven to succeed, but once Martin had left home, they’d gone back to being honeymooners. They’d got through the sticky patch and came out on the other side, which was what he’d thought would happen with him and Rachel. Besides, his mother had told him to stand by his wife no matter what, and he had, so *he* was guilty of hanging on when he shouldn’t have, too.

“Still doesn’t excuse what she did, though,” he muttered. “She strung me along.”

“She did, but she’s sorry.” Roman linked his fingers over his flat stomach. “Let’s face it, mate, neither of us have helped our situations. Work...” He glanced at Sandra. “It takes over, and we forget we’ve got families. It happens. Maybe you could talk to Rachel about everything once she’s calmed down.”

“Are *we* going to talk?” Sandra asked.

“Yes, I think it’s time, don’t you?”

“Not with Martin here, it isn’t.” She folded her arms.

Martin stood. “I’m going anyway. I need to be on my own for a bit. To think.”

Sandra reached out and touched his arm as he passed. “I’m so sorry.”

“Aren’t we all. I’ll arrange for someone to clean the carpet.”

“No, it’s fine. I’ll sort it.”

He walked out, leaving them to it.

# Chapter Nineteen

## ROMAN

The shit he'd said in front of Martin about childhood stuff being ingrained had been for show—although in Roman's case, it was very true—and the shit he'd say to Sandra now was so she wouldn't know how much he despised her until the time came for him to wrap his hands around her fat throat. She moved from the curio cabinet that contained those god-awful, creepy-eyed frogs and sat on the armchair opposite, staring at John's blood on the carpet in disgust, wringing her hands as if she couldn't wait to get a scrubbing brush on it instead of spending time with him.

He studied her features, how hard they'd become—hard with vindictiveness, bitterness, and self-importance. Her eyes, they weren't soft anymore, instead seeming to glitter with malice. He'd seen plenty of faces like hers in his time, where going on the defensive gave them a spiteful appearance.

Was she worried?

He doubted it. He knew when someone had come to the end of their rope, and Sandra had, months ago. He was about to ask her if she was seeing someone, maybe from art class, and whether Rachel had hooked up with a bloke there, but it would only send her into a tailspin and put him in a bad light. He *had* to remain calm.

“The Catholic thing, mentioning divorce,” he said. “In my defence, I was trying to fight Rachel's corner, show Martin how her upbringing affected her life choices.”

“I realise that now, but at the time... What are we going to do?” She wouldn't look at him, instead transfixed by the blood.

“About what?” He’d let her choose the subject.

“Us.”

So she was taking her friend’s lead, was she? Bringing her feelings out into the open? Depending on how far her hatred went for him—he wasn’t stupid, he knew she only tolerated him—would determine how this conversation ended. If he could be persuasive, get her to think about wiping the slate clean and starting again, then the way they acted in front of people in future would show the world they loved one another. It would keep him safe from suspicion when she died. After all, how could an adoring husband kill his wife?

“That isn’t something I can answer until I know how you feel,” he said.

“Do you want the truth, or should I sugar-coat it?” She seemed to have grown a metal spine, the way she sat straighter, determination replacing the bitchy slant of her face.

“I always strive for the truth, you know that.”

“Of course you do.” She tutted. “Well, the long and short of it is, I don’t much like you anymore. You’ve become someone I wouldn’t want to be friends with, let alone be married to.”

He held back a trumpet of laughter. *The feeling’s mutual, you stupid cow.* “Oh. Right.” Acting suitably downcast, he fiddled with his fingers. “Is this where you do a Rachel and tell me you’re moving into a flat?”

“No, it’s where I tell you *you’re* moving into a flat.”

“What?” Had he sounded shocked enough? “Oh, come on, Sand, it doesn’t have to be like this, does it? I meant what I said to Martin, about work. We *do* forget we’ve got families. I’ve realised, obviously too late, that I took you for granted. Speaking to Rachel has really opened my eyes, and I’m sorry for how I’ve treated you.”

“Like an afterthought? A maid? Someone to cook your dinners?” The malice was back in her features, cruel and damning him to Hell.

“And the rest,” he said. “Is there any way back? Can I make it up to you?”

“No. I think it’s gone past that. I can’t even look at you half the time. The resentment is unreal.”

*I can’t stand to look at you either, you blobby bitch.*

“Do you want the truth, too?” He hadn’t meant to say that.

She sighed. “Oh, I suspect it’ll be cutting, designed to hurt me, but go on, it can’t be any worse than the shit you’ve been saying and doing lately.”

“What shit?”

“The root spray, the sachets of diet milkshakes in the cupboard, the veg you’ve taken to growing and keep telling me it’s *good* for me and can help with weight loss. How you don’t give one single *shit* about what I’m going through. My hormones are all over the place, and all you’re bothered about is what I *look* like? Where’s the compassion? I get more sympathy off Debbie’s fucking spaniel.”

“I didn’t mean to make you feel this way.” *I did.* “I just thought a healthier diet would help your symptoms. Eating all that processed food can’t be good for *anyone*. Do you *know* the crap they put in half the stuff in the supermarkets these days? My veg isn’t modified, it’s better for you.”

“I *have* been on a diet, though, I don’t have the same meals as you, but you’re not here to see what I’m cooking for myself half the time.”

He eyed her. If she’d been on a diet, he’d eat his hat. Why was she still fat?

“If you’re feeling like Rachel, undervalued and ugly”—*which you are*—“then take yourself off and have your hair done like she did. Get some new clothes. A nice bottle of perfume. Go to a spa and pamper yourself. You deserve it after bringing Adam and Kallie up. Jesus, I’ve been such a bastard.” He covered his face with both hands and peeped at her through the gaps between his fingers.

She still wouldn’t look at him.



“Yes, you have been a bastard, and spas and whatever won’t fix me. This. It won’t stitch my feelings back together. I don’t *love* you anymore, *okay?* I want out.”

This wasn’t going how he’d planned. He’d left this way too late. His hands itched to slap her, to beat the ever-loving shit out of her, to carry her to the Pass and dump her with Zoe.

He forced tears to his eyes. “Please, Sand, don’t do this. We loved each other so much once, didn’t we?”

“Did we?”

He frowned. *Does she know I’ve never loved her? Did Rachel message her and tell her?* “What do you mean?”

“We were young. How the hell did we know what love was? If love is feeling like you don’t matter, then I don’t want any part of it.”

“I didn’t mean to make you feel you didn’t matter, I swear.”

“All those years, me being like Martin, hoping our future would be better. It was always ‘when’ something happened an’ all. When the kids stopped waking me up at night so I wasn’t as tired. When you stopped doing that bloody overtime. When they grew up and weren’t so reliant on me. When they left home. When, when, when, there’s always going to be one, and if Martin’s any indication, you’ll go the same way as him, swapping work for that bloody allotment, and there’s me, still at home by myself, hating who I am, who we’ve become... Oh God...”

He didn’t want to comfort her now she was crying, but if he didn’t, she’d have more ammunition to throw at him. He got up and knelt by her feet, in fake supplication, showing her he’d stay on his knees forever if she’d change her mind. Not. “Please, Sand... Please. I bloody love you! Don’t do this to me.”

Something softened in her. Her shoulders slumped, and she cupped his face. “I don’t know if I can turn this around.”

“Try, please. Just this one time. Remember how we used to be, how you used to feel. If it doesn’t work, we’ll walk away.

But we won't know what we'd miss out on if we don't give it a go." He stood. Held his hand out to her. "Let's go to bed."

The thought churned his stomach, of touching her, putting himself inside her, but he could pretend she was someone else. He'd picked the ideal time to persuade her. She'd sunk a fair few glasses of wine tonight.

She rose to her feet. "I don't know if I can. It's been too long..."

He kissed her and prayed his magic worked.

# Chapter Twenty

## DOWN MEMORY LANE

He'd do better this time. He'd learned from the other one that mistakes could happen despite him smugly thinking he had it all covered. It brought it home, abruptly, that he *didn't* know everything there was to know. At first with Louise Foll, he'd told himself he'd never get caught, but later, when he'd gone home and contemplated that blood had spilled, the voice had warned him that even knowledgeable people felt the coldness of cuffs in the end. Despite getting away with his first murder as a teen, he shouldn't let his guard down. So he'd prepared himself for this attempt at killing, going through various scenarios from well-known cases to get an idea of what could go wrong.

Being this new side of himself was alien yet welcome. And also confusing. He'd never broken the law in his life until he'd been sixteen—oh, he'd thought about it, of course he had—yet he planned to do it again and again now. Where had the stable Roman gone, the man he'd forced himself to be? Why had Sandra becoming a changed woman changed *him* to this degree? Most men didn't run headlong into murder when their wife looked a slob and their marriage was over, so why had he?

Was there another underlying issue? Maybe it was his indignance that Sandra could dare to *not* love him. He'd always had an arrogance about him—tales from family as he'd grown up had proved that—but *really*? He'd stooped to this level because of a little *hurt*? A bruised ego? Because someone had the audacity to *think* for themselves, *feel* for themselves? Was he annoyed because she'd dared to take control from him when he'd vowed no one ever would? She'd

promised to love him till death did they part, and he'd promised the same—his proclamation had been for show, to please Dad, but no one needed to know that. So wasn't *he* also to blame, for never being in love with her? For choosing her so it got Dad off his back? What gave him the right to be affronted about that when he had the same feelings as her?

God, the urge to smother Sandra in her sleep had been massive once he'd seen she'd given up on herself. On them. Did she have the same urges? To kill him?

***“If you keep going inside your head, you're going to mess up again. Concentrate!”***

He nodded, acknowledging the sound advice.

From his position behind a tall bush, he stared at the woman's house. Natasha Jones, fourteen Haven Avenue. Twenty-three. Single and loving it, according to the tacky mirrored picture she had on her living room wall directly ahead. He'd bet she had Live, Laugh, Love on another one somewhere in the same swirly font, blindly following the trends so it made her seem cool instead of welcoming her own identity, being who she was deep inside. Something Roman wished he'd done. He should have shunned Dad's ideals and chosen his own. Natasha owned Luscious Locks, a naff name for a hairdresser's if ever there was one. Minimal friends. Parents living in the next town over. No siblings. No boyfriend.

Perfect.

He glanced at his watch. Eight p.m. Two hours or so before Sandra got home from yoga. The summer sky hadn't darkened enough for him to be fully comfortable, despite the balaclava, but that only added to the thrill, the danger of it all, although the voice would likely have something negative to say about that. Something like, ***“Getting caught isn't a thrill, it's a worry.”***

He should get a move on.

He crept down the edge of the back garden farthest from her, then along the house to the open patio doors. She lounged

on the sofa, her gaze on the telly, eyes wide. The sound effects of someone being hit echoed.

“Don’t you ever come round here again,” a lady on the TV said. “Because you’ll get another slap, you nasty cow! Cheating with my Dan... How *could* you! I’ll never forgive you.”

All rather dramatic. A soap. *Emmerdale* or *EastEnders*.

He stood to the side of the patio doors and leaned a shoulder on the outer wall. She was that engrossed in her programme he doubted she could even see him out of the corner of her eye, the long curtain shielding him. With Louise so recently murdered and all those other women raped, the Strangler prominent in the news, you’d think she’d be a bit more careful, wouldn’t you. More security conscious, yet the doors stood open, and he was *right there*, spying.

He took a moment to work out how quickly he could get to her before she screamed. Six footsteps. Three seconds. Would the shock of seeing him render her mute for long enough? Or would she screech straight away? He’d brought one of Sandra’s new microfibre cloths with him to stuff into Natasha’s mouth, a lurid bright yellow.

Knife held low beside him, one he had no intention of using—he’d put it back in the block when he got home—he lunged into the house and across the room. She caught sight of him after two steps and opened her mouth wide.

“Don’t you *dare* scream. Off the sofa. Down on your knees.” He brandished the blade and waved it at her, taking a cable tie from his pocket for her wrists. “Do it. Do it *now*.”

He’d successfully taken what he wanted with minimal noise. Her bottom sheet, rumped, and the spot of blood that had fallen onto it after he’d punched her in the mouth, would show the police what had happened here. They’d realise there was a body to find. How long would it take for someone to notice

she'd gone? Perhaps by tomorrow, mid-morning, when she hadn't turned up for work, her boss would spring into action.

"We're going to walk to the Pass, nice and calm, understand?"

She stood beside him, her wrists bound behind her back, her nod frantic, mouth still stuffed with the cloth. Tears streaked her red face. Her pink camisole top, one spaghetti strap ripped off and dangling so he could paw her tit, had a crinkled appearance where he'd lain on top of her. He'd pushed the crotch of the matching bed shorts aside to violate her, but the outfit wouldn't appear strange to anyone watching from their rear windows when he took her out of the house. A lot of young women chose what he considered lingerie for everyday wear.

Slutty clothing for slutty people.

***"But they might notice that yellow cloth..."***

He half dragged her down the stairs. At the bottom, he ordered, "Put those flip-flops on."

She slid her feet into them. Glanced at him, fear brimming in her eyes. More tears following.

"No good crying," he said. "It won't make me change my mind."

Her nostrils flared, and a muted sob caught at the back of her throat. A sound, a distorted word tagged on the end of it. Perhaps: *Why?* Then: *Why me?*

"Because you were an easy target. Now get going."

He pulled her through the house and out via the patio doors. A garden gate to the right led to an alley between houses, and he guided her down it into another alley behind the row of homes. Hidden from the lower windows by the high wooden fences, as he propelled her along, Natasha struggling to free herself from his tight grip on her upper arm, he checked the top windows.

No one there.

The alley met with a path, one that went directly to the Pass. This was where things could get hairy. Where they could be seen. At the end, he nudged her to the left, into the trees surrounding the Pass, and marched her along, keeping an eye to the right. Some people still sat on the grass, chatting, and a few of the Collins lot crowded around their foil barbecue, vultures eager to eat. Didn't they have a back garden? A trail of dark-grey smoke rose from the middle of the animated family huddle, and he smiled at their noise. Enough to hide any Natasha might make.

They reached the right turn in the woodland that would take them to the stream. She stumbled and staggered, still trying to wrench her arm free, but he dug his fingers in.

“There's no point fighting this, you stupid little cow.”

A minute or so later, the dam at the end of the stream came into view, and the trees thinned to one long line that shielded the rest of the water from the main Pass. A path stretched ahead, and he could only hope no one came along it. He put one foot out into the open and—

***“Don't. Man and woman coming.”***

He'd seen them and had been prepared to forge on regardless. How stupid was that? *This* was how people got caught. A simple, arrogant slip-up. Killers too eager to complete their mission, their needs clouding their judgement. No inner voice to throw out a warning—thank God he had one. He reversed to a tree and shoved her behind a trunk, her back to it. Leaned on her so she couldn't run away.

“Not one sound.”

She breathed through her nostrils, snot flying out. He peered to the side of the tree. The couple stood near the water, hand in hand, talking, what they said indistinct. They lowered to the grass in front of the border of bushes and kissed. He watched, jealous. He'd had that once with Sandra, the dating, the getting-to-know-you phase. Now all he had was distaste and loathing for her, for himself—if he hadn't done what Dad wanted, he'd never have married her. He wouldn't be in this situation now.

He stared while they had sex, his erection digging into Natasha, her nostril exhales hot on his neck. He could almost imagine she enjoyed the sight, that she got off on it, but reminded himself she couldn't see it.

"They're fucking," he whispered to up her torment. "They're fucking while you're standing here with your killer."

Natasha's loud groan joined the woman's. He doubted the couple would have heard it, but he jerked his face out of sight in case they glanced his way.

"I'd do you again, but there's still too many people about." He shoved his groin into her some more. "Feel that? Does it turn you on, little moth?"

Natasha's eyes bulged, and he positioned the side of his gloved hand across the front of her neck. He reared his head and torso back to give himself some room, then karate-chopped her throat, hard. Her eyes watered, she grunted, and he dug his thumb into the spot. Kept digging. Wanted to break that little bone in there. Nothing gave, so he wrapped both hands around her neck and pressed his thumbs into it instead.

He poked his head out slowly. Viewed the couple coming to the end of their tryst, the man's movements frantic. Natasha sagged, and the visual by the stream and the life leaving her proved too much. His excitement filled his boxer shorts, and he gritted his teeth to keep any noises inside, his breathing heavy.

***"What if they don't get up and walk away? What will you do then?"***

This hadn't featured in any of his scenarios, someone hanging around for long enough to make him late home. What excuse could he give Sandra for being out? She might get back from art class before him.

*I'll just leave her here. She doesn't have to be left by the stream.*

He continued squeezing, his anger at himself tightening his grip. How *thick* was he to commit murder in summer when the sky wasn't dark enough to shield him? Why did he insist on



trying to prove a point to the police, that someone *could* do everything he'd done and still remain elusive? Why did he always have to be so smug?

The couple stood, sorted out their clothing, then the woman giggled, and they wandered back down the path towards the stone platform in the distance. They parked their arses and settled in for the duration.

“Jesus Christ,” he muttered and drew his head back in.

One more nasty press of this thumbs, and Natasha's body went limper. Rage at things not going his way took hold of him, and he held her up using his knee in her stomach, shaking her head back and forth, slamming it onto the bark. The dull thuds brought him out of his fury—he couldn't afford for anyone to hear, there was no place for smugness now. Gripping her around her torso beneath the armpits, he reversed to the thicker woodland he'd first come down. Placed her in a dense section, propping her so she sat against a birch trunk. Her head flopped down, the momentum pulling her top half forward. He'd love to pose her like a moth, but the risk of the people on the Pass seeing the flickers of movement between the trees and the fact that time was running out stopped him. Fuck her, she could be found however she eventually landed.

He walked away, annoyed that yet another scenario had presented itself to bodge up his original plans. He clamped his teeth. Christ, he still had a lot to learn.

Yellow cloth and the condom in with the other items between the joists, he took a shower and got ready for bed. Downstairs, he stuck the telly on, a full wash jostling around in the machine. He'd added other bits of laundry to his messy boxers and the clothes he'd had on this evening. Making out he was helping Sandra—for once—might get her suspicious, but he couldn't allow her to discover his soiled underwear. He'd give her some guff if she questioned it.

Balaclava and gloves hidden, the knife washed and back in the block, he sat on the sofa and went through the evening's events. No one had been at any of the rear windows in his street when he'd made his way down the alley behind the houses and into the back garden. Although there *had* been signs of life. Martin, Alice, and Emma had been finishing off their barbecue, Martin's voice floating over the dividing fence. He'd said he'd save some burgers for Rachel so she could eat when she got home. They'd had music on, which had disguised the click of the gate handle latching.

An hour later, the washing in the tumble dryer, he jumped at the sound of Sandra's key going in the lock. He'd expected her, she was ever the good timekeeper, but he'd been drowning in thoughts of Natasha and had lost track of time.

***“You need to be more alert afterwards.”***

*I know, piss off.*

“I'm back!” Sandra shouted from the hall.

“Have a nice time?”

She appeared at the living room doorway and frowned. “Is that the tumble dryer I can hear?”

“Yep. It's about time I helped out around here when I can.”

“You've changed your tune. And it's summer, so the tumble is a waste of electric when you could have hung it outside in the morning.”

He smiled to hide his ire. She could at least be grateful. “I'm turning over a new leaf. If I'm not working overtime, when you're out in the evenings, I'll do a bit of housework for you.”

“*For me?* Like you're doing me a favour by doing my ‘job’?”

*Fucking woman...* “I didn't mean it like that.”

“Bloody hell. Wonders will never cease.” She walked off.

He relaxed. Until:

“For God's sake! Did you do any cleaning?”

He sat straighter. “No, why?”

“One of my cloths is missing.”

His heart pounded. “Cloths?”

“Yes, cloths. I was keeping the yellow one to use as a duster. There’s only pink and blue ones left.”

“I don’t even know where the cloths *are*,” he said.

Her loud tut hammered home that she clearly had eyes like a hawk.

“First the knife, now the cloth,” she said. “Are you sure you’re not hiding them to fuck with me?”

He smirked. “Why would I do that?”

“To gaslight me.”

He got up and joined her in the kitchen. “And why would I want to gaslight you?” He frowned. “Are you all right? Is it the menopause making you think you had a yellow cloth?”  
*Now that’s me gaslighting, you stupid bitch.*

She sighed. “I suppose I could have brain fog...” She bit her lip. “I can’t for the life of me remember where I put it.” She rubbed her forehead. “I could swear I left them all under the sink, though...”

***“Like she said, first the knife, then the cloth. Make sure you don’t get caught because of stupid mistakes. By your wife, of all people.”***

Sandra’s eyes filled with tears. “I hate this. Being forgetful. It’s like there’s a black hole in my memory.”

“Go and see the doctor, then.” Unsympathetic, but what else did she expect him to say? “You don’t ride round on a bike with a popped tyre, do you? No, you fix it.”

“Hmm.”

But he’d long suspected she *liked* riding the menopause bike without medical intervention. It got her attention. Sympathy from friends. Why fix something when the broken version gave her so many benefits? Personally, he found her

vile for manipulating him, their children, and their acquaintances this way.

It only had him hating her even more.

# Chapter Twenty-One

## DETECTIVE INSPECTOR MONROE

Seven a.m. at the stream, he stared at the body beneath the large tent erected on the stone platform. Wayne, one of the regular photographers, had just finished snapping images, and a milk-bottle SOCO used a pole to part some grass sprouting from a crack in the stone. The redheaded pathologist, Gruffydd Kendrick, originating from Wales, filled in his form, glancing down every so often to observe the body. Kershaw stood beside Monroe, his eyes closed above his face mask, as if he couldn't bear to witness the proof of a murder any longer.

This should be Monroe's priority, the body, the loss of life, but instead, he internally complained about being too warm in the protective clothing over his suit trousers and shirt, the hood down—he'd take the bollocking that would come from the scene manager for not having it up; he'd obey the rules when that time came, but God, it was hot today, so he'd take the relief while he could. The air in the tent was stifling.

On top of that, he hadn't slept well, tossing and turning, the bedroom fan doing sod all to cool him. A lukewarm shower this morning had helped momentarily, but the moment he'd stepped out of the cubicle and dried himself, his skin had gone clammy again, sweat beading on his brow. Halfway through a breakfast of cornflakes, his wife still in bed, he'd received the call, as had his team. A dog walker had found the body.

"Reckon it's him?" Kershaw asked.

"Could be." Monroe scratched his head.

A shout came from outside the tent, strident. "Scene contamination! What the *fuck* are you doing, scratching your head, man?"

He'd been caught by none other than the forensic scene manager, Ingrid Clemmons. He should have known he wouldn't get away with it for much longer. She had eyes in the back of her head.

Monroe spun round, putting his hood up. "Sorry. Didn't think."

"You know better than to not think," she snapped, pointing towards him, her finger wagging and accusatory. "Bloody hell! I should write you up." She turned back to searching in the greenery beside the water, her movements sharp, her lips moving, likely with muttered curses.

"Naughty, naughty," Kershaw said quietly. "I did warn you before we came into the tent."

"So did I," Gruff waded in.

Monroe smiled. "I know. That's me told, so sod off."

"So, as I was saying..." Kershaw puffed air out. "It's got to be him, hasn't it? Those marks around her neck, the location, her age. I know she's blonde but..."

"It could be anyone to be fair." Monroe pondered that. It *could* be anyone. To the outsider looking in, and with a peek at statistics, it wasn't unheard of that two people could commit a similar crime with the same MO. "But seeing as we've had the Strangler on our desks for a fair while now, we'll poke into it as if it's linked. Can't do any harm."

"I honestly thought he'd fucked off," Kershaw said.

"Hmm."

"She's been hit in the face."

Monroe studied the nose. It skewed to one side, dried blood a nasty brown colour. "When he attacked her, she fell backwards and banged her skull." Blood had seeped onto the stone, too, baked dark by the morning sun.

Gruff knelt and carefully lifted her head. "Ouch. She landed on a bit of rock sticking up." He raised his face to Wayne. "I want close-ups of that once she's been moved, please."

“Right you are.” Wayne shook his head. “That must have really sodding hurt.”

“D’you think?” Gruff asked sarcastically.

“Could that have been what killed her, Gruff?” Monroe felt he should ask—when he’d voiced his opinion before on how someone had died, the pathologist had a pop at him for assuming, even though it was highly obvious to Monroe what the cause of death was.

Gruff placed the head down. “The rock isn’t high enough; it cracked the skull but didn’t penetrate into the brain as far as I can see, but there’s a fair bit of clotted blood, so the post-mortem might prove me wrong. Strangulation is most likely the culprit.”

“Well, the *killer* is,” Monroe said.

“If you want to split hairs, then yes.” Gruff rose and sighed. “Poor woman.”

“Has her bag been checked?” Kershaw asked.

Gruff swatted a fly away. “I can do it now the photos have been taken. You know I’m a stickler for not moving things until a visual of the scene is documented.” He sidled round to the large handbag by the body and removed a folded blanket. “Evidence bag, please, and we’ll need photos of what’s left in the handbag before I touch anything else. Actually, I’ll use my tongs to remove stuff as my gloves have come into contact with that blanket.”

Wayne stepped forward and got on with it. The nearby SOCO, Olivia, brought an evidence bag over, and Gruff placed the blanket inside. Wayne finished photographing the inside of the handbag and stepped out of the way.

Gruff peered into it. “At a guess, she’d been here for a picnic. Sausage rolls, vodka, a can of something...” He bent closer. “Ah, a purse beside a prescription bottle of temazepam. Interesting.” He picked up his tongs, removed the purse, and flipped it hard so the popper released and displayed the credit card flap section.

Monroe moved nearer. Behind a plastic window, the victim's face on a driver's licence. "Zoe King. I'll get uniforms to go round and see if anyone's at that address. We'll need the NOK to do a formal ID later." He left the tent to make the call.

"We're not doing it?" Kershaw asked, coming out behind him.

"I'd rather crack on with finding out who did this, wouldn't you?"

"Well, yes, but I want to break it to the parents."

"Be my guest. Take a plod with you. I'll go back to the station and get the team on CCTV and whatnot."

Kershaw nodded and walked towards the designated area for removing protective clothing.

Monroe poked his head back in the tent. "Anything else in that handbag I need to be aware of?"

Gruff sighed. "The sausage rolls are from the Co-op, if that's any good to you. Temazepam is 20mg. The can's bitter lemon. Otherwise, we're talking the usual. Makeup, tampons, a couple of receipts..."

"Can you check the receipts for me, see if they're for recent purchases?"

Gruff pulled two out and inspected them. "Yesterday, the Co-op branch in town, ten-sixteen. She bought the sausage rolls, vodka, and bitter lemon. The other is for Trends. Going by the listed items, it looks to me like she purchased the clothes she has on. Ten forty-five, so she perhaps went to other shops in between Co-op and Trends."

"Thanks, those times narrow down where we need to look on CCTV."

Monroe faced the outside scene. SOCOs on hands and knees, searching in bushes beside Ingrid. An officer in the water, fishing for discarded evidence. A PC at the cordon, a crowd of rubberneckers beyond, another PC keeping them back.



He cringed. There had already been a lot of sunbathers on the Pass when he'd arrived, several officers questioning them. It was likely to get busier as the day progressed, everyone coming out to enjoy the Sunday weather. Plus, news would spread on social media, and the ghouls would appear in droves.

He approached Ingrid. "I think we should close off the whole Pass."

"I agree. I'll get it sorted."

He removed his protectives, signed out of the log, put on fresh booties, and walked over a little gravel path onto the main Pass. About one hundred people sat dotted about, some children haring around with a football. He retraced his steps and dipped beneath the cordon, going up to the crowd farther along the stream. They must have come this way down one of the other paths.

"Give your names, addresses, and phone numbers to the officer here then leave," he said. "We're shutting the Pass."

"What's happened?" someone asked.

"There's been an incident, that's all I'm prepared to say at this time. If you were here yesterday, let the officer know, and we'll get back to you."

"What, in case we saw something?"

"Yes, but also whether you saw a specific person, maybe having a picnic."

Bugged if he'd give them Zoe's name, he strode away down the path, thinking about all the people who must have been here yesterday. It would be a big task, speaking to everyone, and it was one of those times he was pleased he wasn't a uniform.

The dog walker, Sybil Platt, stood with a PC and her bouncy golden retriever to the left of the gravel path on the main Pass. She belonged in the blue-rinse brigade, all flowery dress and

stout walking shoes any rambler would be proud of. She gripped a pole with a ball on the end. Her pet kept trying to take the ball off, but Monroe supposed it was held on somehow until she pressed a button to release it.

When he'd first arrived prior to seeing the body, walking across the grass towards this spot, Sybil had flapped a hand at him, eager to give her side of events. He'd said she should go home and someone would take a statement later, but it seemed she wasn't having any of that, determined to stay until he could deal with her. The PC with her now had been with her then, and Monroe smirked at the thought of the poor bastard having to listen to tales about Sybil's youth in the sixties—or whatever the older generation talked about these days when reminiscing. She looked mid-seventies or thereabouts—sprightlier, mind, than any other woman her age he'd been in contact with recently.

*Maybe it's all that walking and fresh air giving her energy.*

Even though he wanted to crack on at the station, he had better speak to her. Sybil may have seen something he'd need to know about now rather than an hour or two down the line.

“Detective Monroe.” He held a hand out for her to shake.

She took it, her fingers strong and firm around his. “Finally got to me, did you?”

He let her jibe slide. Reprimanding a granny wasn't on his to-do list. Besides, *she'd* chosen to stay, so he had nothing to feel guilty about there. “Sorry to keep you waiting. You didn't have to be here—you *were* told you could leave.”

She glared at him, clearly not used to people taking her to task. “I don't want it hanging over my head. I'd rather do it now.”

*Or you want to be in the thick of it.* Monroe glanced at the PC. He didn't know who half of them were these days. “Can you take Ms Platt home or to the station for the statement?”

“Yes, sir.”

Monroe smiled at Sybil.

She narrowed her eyes. “I bloody well stayed here to speak to *you* because you told me you were the detective in charge. I don’t like speaking to the monkeys, I prefer the organ grinder. Things get done quicker that way.” She glowered. “Or so I thought...”

He wasn’t going to repeat to her that seeing the body had been his priority. “It’s okay, you can tell me what happened as well. PC...” He raised his eyebrows at the officer for him to provide a name.

“Jenkins.”

“PC Jenkins will jot it down in brief, then you can expand on it again later, all right?”

Sybil sighed. “Fine.” She glanced at her dog. “Bobby, if you don’t stop tugging on that blasted ball...”

Bobby let it go and slumped to the grass on his side, groaning in the shade from the overhanging trees and giving Monroe a baleful stare.

*I know, mate, it must be hard living with her.*

“What time did you come out today?” Monroe asked.

“I left the house at seven-thirty. I like to get the first walk out of the way when no one else is about so Bobby can have a run off the lead. Well, I say no one being about: apart from people going into work early or other dog walkers.”

“And where do you live?”

She pointed to the Ring estate. “Two Haven Avenue.”

*That explains the rod up her arse.* “Right. Did you see anyone going to work on your way here?”

“Not today, no, probably because it’s Sunday. The Pass was empty, too, just me and Bobby. I walked from the Haven entrance and kept going for a while along the path, throwing the ball, Bobby bringing it back. We ended up by the trees bordering the stream, along here, look, and I threw the ball a bit too hard that time. It went into the trees, and Bobby chased after it. When he didn’t come back, I called him. He ignored

me, so I went down that gravel path there, and that's when I saw her."

So many discoveries played out that way. Textbook.

"The body," Monroe confirmed.

"Yes. I don't have a mobile, so in a panic, I rushed home to phone the police. Mr Allworth was getting in his car next door to mine, and so I told him what had happened. He came and stood with me until the police arrived, and quite a few people had come out to enjoy the sun by half eight."

Monroe gauged the time. It must be about ten by now, so she'd been out for a while. How stubborn *was* she to remain here instead of going home? "Thank you for calling it in. Did you notice anything unusual while you were near the body?"

"Like what?"

"As in...did you get the sense someone lurked around?"

"I did, actually. As soon as I realised she was dead, this terrible feeling came over me that I was being watched. At first I thought it was her ghost—stupid, I know—but then I thought it was her killer, which is why I got Mr Allworth to come back with me. I didn't want to leave her there by herself, but at the same time I didn't want to be there alone. Bobby wouldn't bite anyone to protect me, he's soft as muck. We stayed on this side so we didn't mess anything up, and Mr Allworth has already given his statement. He's gone to work now, you see. I have to say, and I did tell another officer this, but Bobby got up onto the platform and sat by her bag."

"It's fine. Someone will remove some of his fur for comparison purposes."

"To compare it to what?" Sybil asked, frowning.

"Other hairs and fibres at the scene."

"I see." She bit her lip. "This is all very disturbing. That poor girl..."

Monroe had heard a lot of "that poor girl" since this Strangler business had started. "Is there anything else you'd like to add?"

“No, I don’t think so.”

“What time did you go to bed last night?”

“Ten o’clock, the same as always.”

“Did you sleep well?”

“What do you need to know *that* for?”

He winced at her acerbic tone. “I’m trying to ascertain, as will other officers who will do door-to-door enquiries, whether you were up during the night and possibly saw someone leaving the Pass—someone who could have killed the young lady.”

“Oh God, no, I was out for the count until six when I got up.”

“Did you recognise the deceased?”

“I’m afraid not.”

“Are you sure? She only lives in the street next to yours.”

“Of course I’m sure! I may be old, but my eyesight hasn’t gone yet.”

Monroe turned to Jenkins. “If you could take Ms Platt home now, or if you choose the station, please take some of Bobby’s hair. And make sure there’s a cup of tea and cake on hand.”

Sybil raised her eyebrows. “I really want a tinkle.” She gave Jenkins a scowl. “So we’d better go before I disgrace myself.”

Jenkins smiled. “We don’t have to go to the station. We can nip to yours if you prefer, seeing as it’s closer.”

Sybil shook her head. “With free cake on offer? Not likely.”

*So that’s how the rich stay rich...*

# Chapter Twenty-Two

## DETECTIVE SERGEANT KERSHAW

With PC Afra Hameed beside him on the doorstep, Kershaw took a deep inhale and rang the bell. He felt he owed a more personal visit to the family rather than leave it solely to uniforms, seeing as he strongly suspected it was the Strangler's work. Although...Zoe was blonde, the other victims brunette, so *could* this be someone else? Had it been a chance encounter, a man on his way home from the pub?

He could understand Monroe not wanting to come here—a death knock wasn't the nicest part of their job—and his excuse for not doing so was understandable. The DI *would* be better suited in the incident room, rallying the troops. It was what he did best. Kershaw, on the other hand, preferred working out in the field, in the thick of things. Being chained to a desk bored him. Besides, he would glean a lot of information here on what Zoe King had been like, which would perhaps give them something to go on.

“They could still be in bed,” Afra whispered. “It's Sunday, so...”

“Hmm. Or they might have gone out.” A quick look at the windows set him straight on that notion, unless the curtains remained closed to keep the harsh sun out. It was a bloody bright one today, too warm to be in a suit jacket, but he liked to be respectful when visiting people he was about to send off at the deep end.

He rang the bell again and knocked for good measure.

“Hang on, hang on, Zoe,” a man said on the other side. “If you ever remembered to take your bloody keys...” The door swung open, and a bleary-eyed, sunburned, middle-aged bald

man in orange shorts and nothing else peered at them. “Oh, I thought you were Zoe.”

Kershaw held up his ID. “Detective Sergeant Kershaw, and this is my colleague, Afra Hameed.” He pulled the man’s name from memory where he’d stored it on the way here after a check into the family with Claire at the station. “Are you Clive King?”

“Yes...”

“Could we come in?”

“What for?”

“It’s about your daughter, Zoe.”

“Bloody hell, what’s she done?”

“Um...” Kershaw gestured to let him know they really needed to chat indoors.

“Right then. Err, right.” Clive stepped farther inside. “Go through to the kitchen at the back there. Should I get the missus up?”

“That would be best, thanks.”

Kershaw and Afra found the kitchen while Clive disappeared upstairs. Afra sat at the table to appear less intimidating to law-abiding people, a tactic Monroe preferred for two-person teams, but Kershaw remained standing by the fridge for now.

The creak of floorboards above had his stomach rolling over, and he mouthed to Afra: “You all right?”

She nodded, used to doing this as she’d been an officer for ten years. Still, it did no harm to check on her welfare, did it. He waited, patient on the outside, nervous on the inside. You never could tell which reaction you’d get to such devastating news.

The thud of footsteps on the stairs further ramped up his anxiety, and he turned to face the hallway. A brown-haired woman, her face streaked with panic, eyes wild, her red dressing gown fronts flapping, came rushing towards him.

“What’s happened?” She snagged his arm, her nails digging in.

“Let’s take a seat.” He guided her to the table.

“I don’t *want* a seat. I want to know why you’re here.” She glanced at Afra and paled. “Oh God, what’s going on? What’s this about Zoe?”

Kershaw gently pressed her down onto the chair opposite Afra. “Would you like a drink? Sally, isn’t it?”

“No, I don’t want a sodding drink! I want *answers!*”

“*Sally!*” Clive admonished, a T-shirt now covering his top half. “Come on, love, he’ll get to it in a minute, I’m sure.”

Kershaw glanced at the husband. “Would you like to take a seat, sir?”

“Yep, will do.” Clive walked over to drag a chair next to his wife and sat by her. He gripped her hands on the table, their combined hold shaking.

Kershaw sat, too. Standing there looking down on them wasn’t his bag when it came to this sort of thing. He preferred to be at eye level when he delivered bad news. “I can’t say this in a good way, so I apologise if I come across as blunt. A body was found near the stream at the Pass this morning by a woman walking her dog.”

Clive and Sally blinked. Blinked again.

“A handbag was with the body and among other things contained a purse. Inside, we found a driver’s licence with this address and your daughter’s name on it.”

More blinking.

Kershaw waited for it to sink in.

A tense twenty minutes later, the couple had calmed down enough to continue talking, but if Kershaw had his way, he’d



leave them to their grief, give them some privacy. Unfortunately, he couldn't.

"Sorry to have to push you like this, but I need to talk about Zoe."

"What about her?" Clive asked, his eyes red-rimmed.

"Her life, her day-to-day movements, where she worked et cetera, so we can get an idea of where she might have gone last night—unless you already know."

Clive shook his head. "I have no idea. We were having a meal at the Orange Tree. I haven't seen or spoken to her since yesterday morning."

"What time did you go to the pub?"

"We arrived about half six, quarter to seven, and left...oh, I dunno. I didn't think to look at the clock, did you, love?" Clive glanced at Sally.

"I can't remember, but you could ask the landlord. I know it was dark by the time we rolled up here. Zoe texted me about nine to say she'd come back from sunbathing at the Pass and was going straight to bed, and we were still at the pub then." Sally produced her phone from her dressing gown pocket and accessed the message. She turned it around so Kershaw could read it.

"Can I take a photo of that? Only, forensics will be going through her phone, so the team I work with won't be able to see what they've found yet, and it would be handy for me to have the time she sent that message so I can show my boss."

Sally nodded, and Kershaw snapped an image. He noted Sally's response: ALL RIGHT, LOVE. SEE YOU TOMORROW. WE CAN GO OUT FOR A LATE BREAKFAST IF YOU LIKE, ABOUT ELEVEN?

Zoe had replied with a love heart.

How sad that they wouldn't be going for that meal now.

"Thank you." He sent the picture to Monroe. "So we can safely assume she came home." *Unless she was forced to send that message by her killer.* Not the sort of thing he'd say to these two, though. "Do you know if her bed's been slept in?"

“I’ll go and check,” Clive said.

“Afra will go with you.” *I don’t want him touching anything.*

The PC went off with Clive, and Kershaw gave Sally what he hoped was a sympathetic smile.

“I can’t believe this is happening,” she said and shook her head. “It doesn’t seem real.”

“No, it won’t. It’s a terrible shock.”

“It’s like I’m viewing it all from outside myself. I can’t explain it.”

Kershaw opted to take her mind off her discombobulation and give her something else to focus on. “Did Zoe have a boyfriend?”

“Not that she’s said. She doesn’t always let us in on what she’s up to, though. You must know what kids are like these days. The last one I was aware of was a chap at work—she’s a secretary at Lime Lighting down Hawthorn Road. Harry Gould his name is. Nice lad. They were seeing each other for a couple of months.”

“Any address or phone number for him?”

“No, but I know the street where he lives because she asked me to drop her down there once. It was halfway along Albert Road. Blue door.”

“That helps, thank you.”

Her red eyes widened. “You don’t think *he* had anything to do with...with this, do you?”

“We’ll have to speak to everyone, to rule them out.”

“I see.” She bit her lip. “I’ve been thinking... Zoe sleepwalks. Do you think... I mean, she’s wandered out during the night before. She’s on tablets, temazepam, to help her get to sleep and hopefully stay asleep, but on the odd occasion if she forgets her tablets, she gets up and doesn’t know what she’s doing. We rarely go out, me and Clive, in case she sods off like that, but lately the medication’s been working, so we

thought it would be okay. I wish we hadn't gone now. If we'd been home..."

Kershaw opened his mouth to respond, but Clive and Afra returned, both taking their seats.

"Looks like she went to bed," Clive said. "She always makes it when she gets up in the morning, so there's no way she'd have left it in a mess yesterday. She's very picky when it comes to being tidy."

"It was definitely made yesterday," Sally said. "I took a pile of washing in there about three in the afternoon."

Clive sighed sadly. "She must have put it away because it's not there now."

Kershaw pressed on. "Where did she go yesterday, during the day? Do you know?"

"To town, left the house about nine." Sally wiped her ruddy cheek. "She wanted to buy a new outfit to wear at the Pass, mainly a top without straps so she wouldn't get any tan lines. She nipped home, got changed, then went back out. We didn't see her after that. Clive did some gardening, and I read my magazines out there, did a bit of washing, then we went for dinner at the pub."

"Did she regularly visit the Pass?"

"Only on hot days, the weekends, you know, when she isn't at work. She takes a picnic, her book."

Kershaw didn't recall a book or Kindle being in the handbag.

"The book's on her bedside table." Clive rubbed his forehead. "I know it's the one she's reading because I'm reading it as well. We have what we call our little book club where we chat about the stories afterwards."

*So she must have come home for that book to be there.* "Would anyone have gone with her?"

Sally circled a thumb over the opposing cerise nail. "I doubt it, she likes being by herself, but she could have bumped into someone there, I suppose. Oh God, if we hadn't gone to

that bloody pub, we'd have heard her getting up and going out. We'd have checked what she was doing, wouldn't we, Clive, because of the sleepwalking."

Clive nodded. "Bloody hell, that's what could have happened. She went out and someone...someone did *that* to her."

Afra looked at Kershaw, frowning, so he filled her in on the sleepwalking. She made a note, perhaps reminding herself to pass on the information to the other uniforms when they were brought in to do house-to-house enquiries, which should really be going on now they'd established Zoe could have been seen in this street prior to her death.

"Could you excuse me for a moment?" Kershaw asked. "I have to make a phone call to action something. We need to get the ball rolling on who might have spotted her."

Clive nodded.

Kershaw left the room and closed the door. In the hallway, he phoned Monroe.

"Looks like she was in bed then went out," he said. "She sleepwalks, so maybe she wandered to the Pass in the dark and the Strangler got hold of her. The parents were at the Orange, having dinner. They can't recall what time they came home, but like they said, the landlord might know."

"Right."

"She sent a text to her mother, letting her know she was home. She last made contact with a heart emoji at twenty-one minutes past nine, so we can assume she left home after that. Between the text and exiting the house, though, she'd got into bed." He explained about the sheets being messed up. "Or the Strangler broke in, raped her, then took her to the Pass."

"Zoe's blonde, though."

"I've already thought of that. Maybe he's changed tactics."

"I'll send SOCO round. The parents will have to go and stay elsewhere for a while."

“I’ll let them know. Can you action uniforms being sent to her street, please? The neighbours will need to be spoken to.”

“Yep, will get on that now we know she was at home prior to being at the Pass last night.”

“Another couple of actions. An ex-boyfriend and her colleagues at Lime Lighting.”

“What’s the ex’s name?”

“Harry Gould, Albert Road, although I don’t have the house number.”

“Two secs.” Tapping came down the line. “Seventeen. You and the PC go and see him, I’ll sort out who visits the other colleagues.”

“Cheers.”

“How did the parents take it? What I mean is, would they benefit from family liaison?”

“Might be a good idea, although I don’t think they need watching in the sense that they’re suspects.”

“I’ll get Lil to come round. Stay with them until she arrives, then she can oversee them going to stay somewhere else.”

“Got it.”

Kershaw ended the call and went back into the living room. He gleaned more information about the type of person Zoe was, enough to tell him she was a little naïve, possibly too trusting, and she wouldn’t hurt a fly. He gently let her parents know that forensics would need to sweep through their home. He *didn’t* tell them it was because the Strangler could have done his usual, despite Zoe being blonde. Kershaw had purposely left out the fact she’d been strangled, too, not wanting them to put two and two together and torment themselves further. Better that they processed the news that their daughter had been killed first.

The nasty details could come later.

Harry Gould, dark-haired and broad-shouldered, was indeed a 'nice lad', an unassuming sort who'd been shocked to hear about Zoe's death. There was something to be said about gentle giants, the way they carried themselves and spoke. More people should adopt their way of going about. The world would be a much nicer place.

The giant in this instance sat in his lounge, a narrow new-build designed for one person or a couple, not much room to swing a cat. It was tidy, a place for everything and everything in its place. Lots of white and black, no feminine touches, no bursts of colour.

Kershaw sat opposite on an IKEA armchair, the same one he had at his place. Afra perched beside Harry on the matching sofa.

"Is it that Strangler?" Harry asked. "I mean, he went quiet, but he could have come back, couldn't he?"

"It's too early to tell at this stage," Kershaw lied. "Sorry to have to ask this when you're clearly distressed, and it's just a formality but—"

"I know, I know: Where were you last night? I get it. At the Cabaret Club. I got there around nine, left at half two. They had Drag Queen Karaoke on, and I sang a few times."

Kershaw enjoyed those karaoke nights, they were always packed, so plenty of people would have seen Harry, not to mention he'd have been captured by the internal CCTV.

"Did you come straight home afterwards?"

"I got a taxi."

"Can you give me the names and addresses of who you went with, plus the taxi firm?"

"Only Cassie Moss, she's my girlfriend. The taxi driver was from ABC. He dropped her off first, then me. When I got home, the pisshead next door was out the front, arguing with a lamppost. Hopefully he'll remember me putting him to bed. As for Cassie, she lives at number six Wingdale Gardens.

She'll likely still be in bed, so you could nip round there and ask her."

Afra left the room to make the calls. Better that she got another officer to go there now so Harry didn't have time to nip to the loo and phone Cassie, warn her of what to say—not that Kershaw thought he had anything to do with it, but still.

"Did your relationship with Zoe end amicably?" he asked.

Harry nodded. "We were only fucking about, you know, nothing serious or anything. Friends with benefits until someone more serious came along. Neither of us thought it was going anywhere, so we ended it. We're still mates, which is handy because we work with each other."

Present tense. Normal when people had been given such news. Their brains couldn't compute that the person in question was actually dead.

Harry shuddered. "The thought of her possibly being out all night on her own, dead..."

"Don't think about it."

Afra came back and retook her seat.

Kershaw had a mind to pick Harry's brains, which would be a help to the officers going to Lime Lighting if he said anything nefarious. "Did Zoe get on well with everyone at work?"

Harry smiled. "Never a cross word. She's really funny. Always up for a laugh."

Even sadder then, that she'd died, her life snuffed out by a sick bastard. Why did all the good people get murdered?

"So no one at work could have done this to her, in your opinion?" Kershaw clarified.

"God, no. There's no reason for anyone to kill her. She's too nice." Harry shook his head. "I can't get over this. It's like I'm in a film or something."

"Trauma response," Kershaw said. "It happens."

They chatted for a while longer and, satisfied with Harry's behaviour and answers, and having received the nod from Afra that Cassie Moss and the driver from ABC had been spoken to, her phone alert going off to inform her, they left the property.

Kershaw drove Afra to Zoe's street so she could help with door-to-door enquiries, and he went back to the Pass, wanting to gather more intel. He was eager to catch the Strangler this time. That wanker couldn't be allowed to continue picking off women, and if Kershaw had anything to do with it, this would be the last senseless death.



## Chapter Twenty-Three

### SANDRA

In the middle of cleaning up after the party and berating herself for sleeping with Roman, Sandra seethed, the hot water splashing into the kitchen sink. She used a Brillo pad to scour the cold fat Roman had left where he must have poured the contents of the barbecue drip tray down the side of the washing-up bowl last night. The amount of bloody times she'd told him you couldn't do that else it would clog up the waste pipe...

Her mind turned to when Martin had gone home and how Roman had talked her round to trying again. Damn him and his persuasiveness. In an attempt to know once and for all whether their marriage was dead, she'd fallen for his words, that small piece of her that was still desperate for his attention lapping it up. As soon as she'd woken up in the shaming light of day, she'd known it had been a mistake. Her skin crawled at the memory of him touching her.

Why had she let him do that when she'd been so adamant she detested him? And was it her imagination, or had he been different? She couldn't put her finger on it, but their lovemaking of old hadn't been anything like that. Last night had been urgent, fast, as if he couldn't hold back. Maybe the lack of sex had been the reason, but something else niggled her about it. Even his kiss in the living room wasn't the same, and upstairs, she'd turned her head away to avoid having to engage in another one. She'd got into the swing of sex eventually, though, the vulnerable part of her convincing her it would fix them, and maybe, if she could bear to admit it to herself, she'd wanted to be loved. Needed. But no. *No*. Today, she was back to hating him. Cringing at the memory. It had

been the wine talking, charming her into thinking everything could go back to normal.

She'd continue to wear her nice lingerie from Ann Summers no matter what happened. That was something Roman couldn't take away from her. She didn't feel sexy in it, though. How could she with her bloated figure?

*So why bother wearing it?*

The peal of the bell drew her away from her self-recrimination, and she wandered down the hallway, her Brillo covered in Fairy suds, her fingers greasy from the burger fat. Not giving a toss what she looked like as it would only be one of the neighbours, plus she was too tired and grumpy to care, she opened the door and frowned.

Had the police come to tell her Roman had died on the way to work? Or maybe *at* work? That would be *so* handy. She let hope bloom in her chest and for a brief moment imagined him lying on the ground with a gunshot wound in his forehead. She liked the imagery a bit too much.

“Um, yes?” she asked.

“PC Bedford. Just a couple of questions,” the male officer said, his face red from the sun, sweat above his full top lip. “A serious incident has occurred, and we've been talking to a few of the neighbours. I'd like to confirm that they were at a barbecue here last night.”

Sandra peered past him into the street. Other uniforms stood at front doors. A police car, parked outside Clive and Sally's, piqued her interest. What was going on there, then?

“Oh right.” She dragged her attention back to Bedford. “Do you want the names of who came? I've got my invite list still on the fridge.” She liked to be organised. Not only did it have their names on it but the food and drink they'd brought with them.

Bedford nodded. “That would be great, thank you.”

“Do you want to come in? It's bloody warm out again, and you look like you could do with a cold can of Coke. We've still got a few left.”

“Very nice of you.”

Bedford stepped inside and paused, frowning into the living room. Sandra had scrubbed at John’s blood earlier then used her Vax on it, getting rid of enough that it was only freckled beige stains now, but it was obvious it had been cleaned, the pile still damp and going in another direction to the rest. She’d have to buy a rug to hide it, which she planned to do this afternoon. A trip in the car to Home Bargains would sort it out.

“Someone spilled red wine,” she said and closed the front door. “Too pissed to stand up straight. Come through.”

In the kitchen, she threw the Brillo in the sink and washed her hands, annoyed with herself for leaving the tap on and wasting hot water when she’d opened the door. The boiler in one of the wall cupboards clanked and groaned to heat up more in the tank. She switched the tap off, then handed him a cold Coke from the fridge. He drank gratefully. She took the list from beneath a magnet she’d bought in Spain years ago on a rare family holiday and gave it to him.

“The only ones on there who didn’t come are Clive and Sally. They were going out for a meal instead and I forgot to scrub their names off. I’m sure they said the Orange Tree. Any other neighbours who said they were here are lying. There are friends on there, too, from my work.”

Bedford studied the list. “That’s a great help. Where do you work?”

“Stafford Solicitors. Fountain Road at the back of town.”

“What time did they all leave?”

She eyed the ceiling to recall. “Debbie and John left first.” She lowered her head to gaze out of the window. “Let me think... That was about eleven. Then Rachel left shortly after. My husband, Roman, walked her to her sister’s on the other side of the Pass.”

Bedford’s eyebrows rose. “Roman? A name that stands out. Not many people called that around here.”

“No. Anyway, I asked everyone else to get a shift on at about twenty to twelve, something like that. Dave and Georgie were the last to leave. Roman came back about ten to, and we had a chat with Martin from next door—he was still here. Martin left around five past.”

“Right. Where’s your husband now?”

“At work. What’s this about? I mean, there’s a police car outside Sally’s so...”

“Did you see Zoe King at all yesterday?”

Sandra’s heart skipped a beat. “Oh God, is this about her? Is she all right?”

Bedford finished his Coke in three long swallows and placed the can on the worktop. “*Did* you see her?”

She knew a deflection when she heard it. Roman did it enough for her to be au fait with it. “I haven’t seen her for a good while. Months. You might want to check with Kallie, that’s my daughter, because she’s friends with Zoe. Whatever it is that’s happened, Kallie might be able to shed some light on what’s going on in Zoe’s life. Kallie lives in Dorset but still messages her.” She took a piece of paper and pen from a drawer and wrote Kallie’s address and phone number on it. “Here you go. As for me, I don’t tend to stand at my window nosing so wouldn’t have spotted Zoe around, sorry.”

“Thanks for your time. I’ll see myself out.”

She waited for the front door to close then rushed into the living room. No, she *didn’t* usually nose, but today was another kettle of fish. Opposite, a male officer walked down Dave and Georgie’s path and wandered to the next house along.

A second later, a text message pinged. Sandra accessed it.

**Georgie:** NEWSFLASH! DAVE’S GOOD MATES WITH THE COPPER WHO’S JUST BEEN HERE, AND GUESS WHAT? THEY THINK ZOE’S BEEN KILLED BY THE STRANGLER! WE’RE NOT MEANT TO PASS THAT ON, BY THE WAY. POOR SALLY AND CLIVE.

Sandra stared at the text. Zoe, killed? *What?*

**Sandra:** WHEN DID THIS HAPPEN, AND WHERE?

**Georgie:** DUH, WE'RE TALKING THE STRANGLER HERE. LAST NIGHT AT THE PASS.

Sandra's skin turned cold. Roman had been at the Pass. She'd said to him he'd been gone a bit too long. Every time a woman had been raped or killed, it had been a Wednesday when she was at yoga or a Monday while she went to art class. They'd joked about those nights, saying he could be a suspect.

**Sandra:** WHAT TIME DID SHE DIE?

**Georgie:** NO IDEA UNTIL THE POST-MORTEM'S BEEN DONE. WEIRD THING, THOUGH. ZOE'S BLONDE. WHAT IF IT WASN'T THE STRANGLER?

*No, please don't say that, because then it might mean...*

She cut off that train of thought. No, it couldn't be Roman. Absolutely not. Such a ridiculous scenario. He was too honourable to do any such thing.

**Sandra:** GOD, THIS IS AWFUL. SHE WAS ONLY YOUNG.

**Georgie:** BUT ALL OF THEM HAVE BEEN. MAYBE HE COULDN'T SEE SHE WAS BLONDE IN THE DARK.

But the police thought the Strangler had watched the women beforehand, so he'd have *known* what her hair was like. Maybe he'd changed his tastes.

**Georgie:** OMG. LOOK OUT OF THE WINDOW. A BLOODY FORENSIC VAN JUST TURNED UP.

Sandra craned her neck. She felt rotten, spying like this when her neighbours must be going through hell. This wasn't light entertainment like Georgie seemed to think. People were *hurting*. The thought of losing Adam or Kallie was enough to bring Sandra out in goosebumps, so God knew what Clive and Sally were experiencing. Had the Strangler been watching her and taken his chance when Clive and Sally had gone to the Orange?

**Sandra:** BLOODY HELL. THIS IS SO HORRIBLE.

**Georgie:** ESPECIALLY AS WE WERE ALL HAVING A LAUGH ROUND YOURS WHILE SHE WAS BEING TOPPED.

**Sandra:** DO YOU HAVE TO BE SO BLUNT ABOUT THINGS?

**Georgie:** ALWAYS AM, YOU KNOW THAT. DEAL WITH IT. OH, CHUFF ME, THE K9 VAN'S TURNED UP. DAVE'S JUST SAID IT'LL BE CADAVER DOGS TO SEE IF SHE DIED IN THE HOUSE. WANT TO COME TO MINE FOR A CUPPA? YOU CAN SEE BETTER FROM OVER HERE.

**Sandra:** NO. I'M TIDYING UP. STILL GOT THE GARDEN TO DO.

She waited for Georgie to say she'd come and help, but of course, she wouldn't. Georgie had a cleaner and didn't get her hands dirty. God forbid she ruined her acrylic nails.

**Georgie:** HAVE FUN! WILL KEEP YOU POSTED.

Sandra sighed at an Alsatian being taken from the back of a small van.

Had Roman had enough time to rape and kill her?

Yes, he had, if he'd rushed. *And* he'd come home and had a quick shower.

*Stop it. It can't be him.*

Should she ring Kallie and warn her the police might phone her? No, she shouldn't interfere. Kallie wouldn't appreciate it anyway, she was funny about things like that. Helicopter parenting, she called it.

Sandra turned from the window and caught sight of the ceiling. Somehow, some blood had made its way up there. Then the light fixture gained her attention, the dust on the opaque glass shades back again, even though she'd only done them last week. Annoyed she'd have to get the stepladder out of the shed and clean the blood and dust, she stomped into the kitchen to finish scrubbing the sink, talking herself into having some new spotlights put in, maybe those lovely ones she'd seen in that magazine the other day.

Reminding herself to contact an electrician when she'd finished her chores, she got on, her mind full of mood lighting rather than Zoe King being dead. Or pondering the goings-on in bed with Roman last night, her stupid reasons for doing it.

She didn't want to take *that* route again, it had soured her enough today as it was.

But the niggle about the sex had finally caught up with her. Now she knew what was so different about Roman.

He'd shaved off his body hair.

# Chapter Twenty-Four

## MARTIN

Having a copper on the doorstep churned Martin's stomach. The last thing he needed was to get in trouble for lamping John. He shouldn't have hit a policeman, that much was obvious, but John was a good mate and neighbour, and they were bound to have spats. And anyway, Martin hadn't been seeing straight. His head throbbed from a hangover, not to mention a nightmare, the recurring one he always had. His mouth, dry where he'd leapt out of bed to open the door, thinking it was Rachel, clacked when he moved his tongue. He needed a coffee, maybe a fry-up at the Orange, then he'd go up the allotment so he was out of the way when his wife turned up. He'd promised he wouldn't be here, although he hadn't checked his phone to see if she'd messaged the time she'd be round.

The PC clearing his throat brought him back to the present. *Had* Debbie and John dobbed him in for last night? He hadn't really thought they would, the Collins lot liked to sort things out on their own, the menacing bastards, but maybe John had persuaded Debbie to keep her family out of it for once and they'd gone down the official route. Unusual if they had. John was a bent copper when it suited him, but grassing Martin up wasn't his style.

"Can I help you?" Martin clocked other officers in the street, not to mention vans outside Clive's, so he felt better that the copper wasn't here for him. But what the hell was going on? For this amount of manpower to be here, it had to be something serious. Martin knew a lot of coppers, he drank with them at the Orange, but this fella here, no, he didn't recognise him. "What's your name?"



“PC Bedford, sir. Mr Forest, isn’t it?”

“Yes, but call me Martin. What do you want?”

“We’re making enquiries because of an incident that occurred last night. What time did you leave the barbecue next door?”

“I didn’t look at the time, I had other things on my mind, but it was likely gone twelve.”

“Did you go straight home?”

“Yes. I sat up and got even more pissed than I already was, then went to bed.”

“Can anyone corroborate that?”

Martin glared at him. “You *are* having a laugh, aren’t you?”

“Sorry, sir, but I have to ask.”

Martin wouldn’t press it. The man was only doing his job. “No, there’s no one to back me up. My wife, Rachel, wasn’t here. Our twins are at uni. Rachel stayed at her sister’s last night. My mate, Roman, took her there.”

“So your neighbour said. Where does the sister live?”

“Tara? Thirty-two Farm Acre. Look, what’s happened?”

“I can’t discuss it, I’m afraid.”

Martin loved a jobsworth, they made life so much easier by sticking to the rules, but there was a time and place, and this wasn’t it. “Seriously? Something’s going on in my street and you won’t say what it is? Do I need to up my security?”

“All I can ask is whether you saw Zoe King yesterday.”

Martin’s veins turned to ice. Anyone would understand that the officer, without actually saying what had happened, had implied Zoe was involved. “Oh shit. No, you’re kidding me.”

Bedford sniffed. “I wish I was.”

Martin sighed. “Jesus wept. No, I didn’t see her. Haven’t for a while. Actually, tell a lie, last week in the corner shop briefly, the one at the end of Copse Road. She was buying vodka, and I joked about her not being old enough to be going

on a bender. A laugh, you know, because I've watched her grow up and one minute they're kids, the next they're adults."

Bedford smiled. "Thanks for your time."

"What, that's it? You're not going to say why you're asking about her?"

The officer glanced over his shoulder, then back at Martin. "The incident took place at the Pass. By the stream."

That was all Martin needed to hear. "Shit. *Shit!*"

"Hmm. I'd best get going..."

Bedford walked away, and Martin remained on the doorstep. A SOCO came out of Clive's house with an evidence box, and Martin cringed. It was obvious from the mention of the Pass what had occurred. The police were at Clive's to determine if Zoe had been killed there or at the stream. He read the news so knew a fair bit. Was there enough evidence in Zoe's bedroom to warrant them linking it to Louise Foll? She'd been murdered in her bed, the only other Strangler victim to have died at home. Or did they think there were two separate killers now, one for Louise and Zoe, one for all the others?

He itched to find out more, but Rachel walked down the street, her eyebrows knitted, probably because he hadn't gone out like he'd said he would. His mind taken away from Zoe and plonked firmly on his wife, he smiled as best he could, given the frosty stare she levelled his way, and moved back to let her in.

"Didn't you get my message?" she asked.

"No, only just got up. I'll be out of your hair after a quick shower."

"Good. And don't come back until I tell you to. I've got a taxi booked for two hours' time."

"Why are you being so snippy? It should be *me* who's arsey, not you. *You're* the one ending it, fucking off and whatever."

“We’re not going there, not today.” She gestured to the street. “What’s going on?”

“I’ll tell you inside.”

“Hold up!” Bedford came back and strode to the door. “Can I have a quick word? Rachel, is it?”

She stepped outside onto the path. “Yes, that’s me.”

“You went to your sister’s last night, correct?”

“I did.”

“What time?”

“Just after eleven.”

“Which way did you go?”

“Through the Pass. Don’t look at me like that! I wasn’t alone, Roman from next door was with me. Why?”

“Did you see anything untoward going on?” Bedford asked.

“No, and if I had, I would have said so at the time. We walked through pretty quickly because of what’s been going on there. Roman put his torch on, and I didn’t spot anything, although it was creepy being there, what with recent events.”

Martin frowned and couldn’t help butting in. “Quickly? But Roman was gone for a while.”

She turned to glare at him. “We were talking under the lamppost at the end there for a bit.” She jerked a thumb down the street then faced Bedford. “I’m sorry, I can’t help you.”

“Not to worry.” Bedford smiled, thanked her, and crossed the road to speak to a colleague.

Rachel entered the house and closed the door. “So what’s happened?”

“From what I could glean, Zoe King’s copped it from the Strangler.”

Rachel staggered to the side and bumped into the wall. She propped her shoulder against it. “Oh no. Oh God... I had a

horrible feeling at the Pass, like someone was watching in the dark.” She slapped a hand to her chest. “I feel sick.”

“Did you hear anything? Someone walking on the grass? Any other noises? She was found by the stream.”

Rachel closed her eyes tight. “I saw her earlier in the day, at work, then on my way back home. I need to go and tell that policeman.”

She rushed outside, and Martin stood on the doorstep, watching. Any sight of her was better than none, even if she *was* crying and in distress. Bedford pointed to the house, and the pair of them walked over.

Bedford smiled at Martin. “Best to take your wife’s statement inside, sir.”

Martin nodded. He didn’t mind. It meant he could be in her company for longer.

# Chapter Twenty-Five

## ROMAN

Pissed off at having to work on a Sunday, Roman battled with his emotions. At the knock on his office door, he looked up, frustrated. His mind was too packed to be dealing with anything unless it was important, and he'd told the staff he didn't want to be disturbed unless it was. He got up to open it and raised his eyebrows at a policeman in uniform. He told himself to calm down, but a part of him wondered, was this it? Had he been caught? He'd be marched out of here in front of everyone, and they'd know he was a bastard. A lying, hateful, murdering bastard.

“Yes?” he asked, unable to keep the testiness from his voice. And who the hell was this copper anyway? He should have introduced himself straight off the bat. Roman didn't like his lack of manners. “Do you have a name?”

“PC Bedford. I need a word, sir.”

“Fine, come in.” Roman shut the door and went back behind his desk. If he was being arrested, surely they'd have sent at least two plods. He leant back, acting casual, although his temper simmered. If he'd fucked up, had put himself in the frame, he'd go mental. “What's this about?”

“We've spoken to your neighbours and your wife. You had a barbecue last night at your house.”

“And?”

“You walked a Rachel Forest to her sister's.”

“And?”

“You went through the Pass.”

“Oh, I see what you’re doing. It’s been in the news this morning about another murder, so because the police will be under fire, the public baying for the case to be solved quickly, you’re going to do your job so well, dotting the i’s, that you’re going to ask me if I’m the Strangler. Did you ask all my neighbours that question as well?”

“Err, no. I just wanted to know which way you came back after you left Rachel and whether you saw or heard anything as a potential witness.”

“Good, because I don’t appreciate being accused of something I haven’t done.”

“I wasn’t accusing—”

Roman held a hand up. “Sorry, ignore me. I’m tired from a late night and taking it out on you. Unforgiveable. Let me see... I left home around eleven and spoke to Rachel at the end of the street for a while, no idea how long. Do I need to go into the details of that conversation?”

“Not unless it’s pertinent.”

“It isn’t, I assure you. We talked, then I walked her through the Pass, and no, I didn’t see or hear anything. Don’t you think I’d have phoned it in if I had?”

“I’d like to think so.”

Roman sighed. “You’d like to think so. Great vote of confidence there. Listen, I can see how it would look, but I’ve got nothing to do with this. I appreciate you have to ask, though. So, I went home through the Pass, and nothing was out of the ordinary, that’s the long and short of it.”

“What time did you arrive home?”

Temper now sizzling, Roman blurted, “Christ, are you fucking me about?” He glared at him. “Again, my apologies. I’m under a lot of stress. Ten to midnight, and I know that because I saw the clock on the bedside cabinet before I got in the shower. Do you want to know what soap I used? Imperial Leather gel, the white one, all right?”

“Sorry to have upset you, sir, that wasn’t my intention.”

“Is that all?”

Bedford nodded and left.

Roman gritted his teeth at his door being left slightly ajar and got up to poke his head out and see what the staff had made of the visit. Nobody took any notice, which was something, but he didn't like being quizzed. It reminded him of when he'd been a teenager and the police had thrown question after question at him. He slammed the door and returned to his desk, going through last night's events in his mind. No one had been around other than him and Rachel, and of course Tara when she'd opened the front door. When he'd emerged from the Pass, Haven Avenue had been silent, most of the lights off in the houses, the same as his own street. Even if he *had* been seen, he could get away with it because he'd only been walking Rachel to Tara's. Nothing to see here.

Still, it had been a close call, PC Bedford coming here.

*A bloody good job I didn't kill Rachel instead then, isn't it.*

Distracted from his work, he leant back and pondered what had happened after Martin had gone. Sandra had melted like he'd hoped she would, and he'd thought about Zoe while he'd fucked his wife in order to get through it. It had been quick; the excitement of taking Zoe then doing Sandra not long after had been too much. He'd try it on with Sandra again later, make her think he couldn't keep his hands off her, that he was willing to keep their marriage intact and he still fancied her, despite her blobby body.

How long could he keep the charade up for, though? The disgust he experienced when near her was pretty high. Would a month of them playing the happy couple be enough to convince people he wouldn't have killed her? Saying that, they hadn't exactly aired their dirty laundry in public, so no one knew they were going through a sticky patch anyway. As an upstanding member of society, he doubted very much he'd be suspected, but the police would have a job to do, and ruling him in or out would be their first priority. Maybe he could use Martin on the night he killed Sandra. Get him rat-arsed so much he fell asleep, then he could nip out and nab her after art

class or yoga, then go back to Martin's, drink a shitload himself, and nap on the sofa so he could make out he'd been there all along.

An iron-clad alibi.

He had Rachel to kill first, though. He desperately needed to do an older woman so Sandra's death wasn't questioned or seen as being someone else who'd done it. The fact Rachel was now blonde, like Zoe, would solve the problem of him not choosing brunettes those two times. Maybe he should persuade Sandra to get streaks put in so she was like them.

His mind returned to sex, how he'd shagged a dead woman last night. Not many men could lay claim to *that* one. He wasn't worried about any hairs of his being left behind. The only ones that remained had been tucked beneath the balaclava, he even had his armpits waxed, so he hadn't needed to put her in the stream. The reason he'd submerged Helen Bradbury's lower half was because he'd licked her inner thighs. He'd bet she'd hated that, his hot tongue down there, but it wasn't like she could have done anything about it, was it. Besides, she'd been a limp noodle. He hadn't done that again, the licking. Stupid of him to have done it in the first place. He'd had to remind himself that DNA evidence could get him right in the shit.

What he knew, though, was that he had a new kink to add when he killed Rachel. He'd shag her while he strangled her, fucking an alive woman then a dead one within seconds. How many men could boast they'd done *that*?

He rubbed himself beneath the desk, desperate to relieve himself.

Not here, though. Not a work.

Maybe tomorrow. He could wait at Rachel's new flat and rape her there once she'd come back from art class, although he wouldn't be able to take her to the Pass, not with the police all over it.

Perhaps he could carry her to the other side of it where the coppers weren't around.



Risky? Yes.

But would he do it anyway?

Probably.

# Chapter Twenty-Six

## THE INTRICACIES OF CHILDHOOD

*Roman had taken a liking to risks. They gave him a thrill, something he hadn't had much of while growing up. At fifteen, he was aware he hadn't had the usual upbringing, his parents stoic and rigid, everything they did for God's benefit. He was their vessel, they said, something the angels had seen fit to give to them, a boy to help them spread the good word. Not once had they said they were proud of him. The most he'd got out of them by way of showing their appreciation for his existence was a condescending pat on the head. He wanted to be himself but couldn't. How could he show that the Devil did, in fact, live inside him? How could he let Mum and Dad down, bring shame on them by revealing who he really was? He was ready for girls, for tits and everything else they had to offer, but he wasn't allowed.*

*He stared across the church grounds at the girl who'd been in the swimming costume at the stream a few years ago. She had bigger boobs now and had only been coming to St Mary Magdalene for a month with some bloke who must be her boyfriend.*

*Dad caught him staring.*

*"God will send the woman for you when the time is right," he said. "And with you being fifteen, she isn't right. He will guide you to the one who is destined for you."*

*Roman thought it was a load of old bollocks but didn't bother saying so.*

*"Until then, you will do the Lord's work until He shows you which path you must take. And remember, you must choose a*

*career in which you'll do good. Where you'll be an asset to the community. Always, always put your best foot forward. Always be prepared to help."*

Best foot forward? Is smacking your son your best foot, then, Dad? Fuck me...

*Father Brown ambled over, clearly having heard the conversation. "Your father is right, Roman. The Lord will hold your hand throughout life."*

I fucking hope not.

*Roman held his laughter in. Annoying Father Brown would annoy Mum and Dad, and he didn't fancy getting the slipper today. Or shouted at in front of Tit Girl.*

*"What do you think you'd like to do in life?" Father Brown asked.*

*"Be a social worker or summat like that," Roman said. It was what they'd expect, him working with the community.*

*Mum tutted. "Something, Roman! Summat is so vulgar."*

*When he left home, he'd say and do what he liked. He'd swear, he'd leave the toilet seat up, and he wouldn't lift a finger around the house. Mum had him cleaning every Saturday morning, and he was sick of it. He couldn't wait to get away from them.*

*"A very wise choice," Father Brown said. "What better way to give back to others."*

*Roman smiled. They had no fucking clue who he was, did they.*

# Chapter Twenty-Seven

## DETECTIVE INSPECTOR MONROE

Monroe perched on the corner of Claire's desk. Each member of the team, previously busy searching for leads, looked his way. Expectant again. As if he had all the answers. As if he could solve this all by himself so none of them had to endure a bollocking from the DCI for not wrapping up the case by now.

The weight on Monroe's shoulders sat heavily. He wished the old DCI was here. They'd worked well together, hashing things out, coming up with information, smashing cases quickly. The DCI who'd taken up the reins liked to throw his status around a little too much for Monroe's liking. Chasing him and the team for data, bawling them out if they didn't have anything, playing the blame game so he didn't take any flak from his seniors. Monroe had no desire to climb the ladder further. The bureaucracy side of things would do his head in.

DCI Dorchester, skinny and tall with a protruding stomach, his thinning black hair in a hideous comb-over, stood in front of the whiteboard, spindly arms folded, grey suit crumpled as if he'd slept in it. "Another one. *Another* one! Just as I asked you all to look into the case again, he strikes. This muddies the waters. I wanted a clear run this time, no distractions, to go over everything without any pressure, everyone clear-headed, but now we're all going to be up to our armpits in Zoe King. We don't have enough resources to run the other murder cases in the background as well as this one. *Shit.*"

Monroe understood the man's frustration, but he'd said it as though it was the team's fault. A reminder was necessary: "We'll do our best, as always."

“You’d better.” Dorchester scowled. His haywire eyebrows needed trimming, and if he wasn’t careful, going by the red flush creeping up his neck, he was on the verge of his blood pressure rising too high.

“It might not be him this time,” Kershaw supplied, having driven here from the Pass once Monroe had warned him Dorchester wanted a meeting.

“How so?” Dorchester asked.

“Zoe’s blonde.”

“But everything else is the *same*.” Dorchester paced. “Unless this is a copycat.”

“It could well be,” Monroe said. “But until we get some idea of why the Strangler stopped for all these months, whether we can find out that he’s moved away, is in hospital, or even dead, then we’re safer assuming it could be him starting up again. Obviously, we’ll also look into it as if it’s a copycat, too.”

“More overtime,” Dorchester grumbled. “Budget cuts fucking us over. Those on high getting on my back. Christ, I can’t even breathe without them questioning it. We’re going to have to work harder in the time we have. Squeeze more into the hours available in our usual working day. Overtime for the first week of this investigation, then we scale back if we find nothing.”

“That’s a bit rotten,” Claire said.

“Yeah, like Zoe isn’t as important as the others,” Neil added, probably to wind Dorchester up. For some reason, he enjoyed seeing the boss self-combust.

“Of *course* she sodding well is,” Dorchester barked, “but I’m under orders here. I’d have us all out there twenty-four-bloody-seven, but I get whinged at, reminded about the costs, the manpower. Please, just do your best by going at it harder, all right? I know I’m asking a lot, and I’m happy to pitch in, but...”

Monroe nodded. “Instead of lamenting the pitfalls, which isn’t moving us forward, let’s get on with it, shall we? Where

are we so far?"

Claire stood and moved to the whiteboard. She used her pen to point out what she'd written so far. "Zoe King, twenty-one. Place of work, Lime Lighting." She paused and stared at Monroe.

"I'm going there after this meeting," he said. "I've checked, and they're open seven days a week."

Claire continued. "Minimal friends outside of work, apart from Kallie." She tapped the full name on the board using her pen. "She's been spoken to, and since she's moved into her own place in Dorset, she hasn't seen Zoe much. She has, however, taken a screenshot of the latest WhatsApp conversation they had and forwarded it to us. I'll print it out so you can all read it. Sadly, it's nothing of import, just Zoe asking when Kallie will be back in Simwell. So, she was a chirpy sort, happy-go-lucky, wouldn't hurt a fly. She preferred being alone, hence going to the Pass to sunbathe by herself and read a book yesterday. Not many people in her outer circle are aware, but she was high-functioning autistic, able to mask her condition well enough, as most autistic women do. Super clever, intelligent, but struggled with reading expressions and interpreting tones of voice or emotions in text form. Lil, the FLO, has phoned in with all of this information after speaking to Sally, Zoe's mother. They've gone to Sally's sister's across town, by the way, while SOCO are in their house." She rapped on the board to indicate the address.

"Sally and Clive didn't mention the autism to me when I spoke to them," Kershaw said.

"Maybe they were in shock," Monroe suggested.

"Go on, Claire," Dorchester chivvied.

"Sally said Zoe took people literally, didn't understand sarcasm et cetera. She was too trusting, so if he'd lured her to the Pass with some bullshit story, she might well have believed him. By the time he struck, it would have been too late."

Monroe closed his eyes for a moment. Zoe was *autistic*? That changed things. Not that it lessened the severity of the

other women's deaths and rapes, but it somehow made it worse because she'd been more vulnerable. He felt a bit sick at the thought of violating someone in her circumstances. "He may not have known of her diagnosis, and if he did, do we think he'd have gone after her anyway? We suspect he follows them—he has to, to know they're alone in their homes—but are we dealing with a man who would deliberately target a more vulnerable person?" He was curious to hear their thoughts on the killer.

"He doesn't give a shit *who* they are," Kershaw said.

"I agree." Claire sighed. "He's a monster."

Interesting that she saw the Strangler that way; she'd stayed in the black and hadn't explored the grey areas, asking herself if the Strangler could actually be an okay bloke who'd just gone down the wrong path. As usual, Monroe wanted to expand their minds. To encourage them to think outside the box. To steer them in different directions so they didn't get immersed in just one—that way lay danger. Focusing on one avenue when they didn't have all the facts to hand could derail a case. "But what if he *isn't* a monster? What if he's your everyday man who just so happens to take sex that isn't on offer, then gets worried about being caught and kills them afterwards? The rape-only cases, for example—women came forward, so he may have got antsy about them revealing something about him. The only way for him to continue was to shut future women up."

"Are you taking the piss?" Kershaw asked. "It sounds like you're sticking up for him."

Monroe shrugged. "Just seeing things from different angles. It helps to talk through the scenarios. Not every killer has black-and-white motives, we all know that. I'll even throw another spanner in the works. What if he's biding his time and will go after the rape victims again now the heat's died down on them, only this time, murdering them?"

Dorchester spluttered, "Are you suggesting they need protection? Because that's something we can't afford and—"

PC Bedford walked in and stopped short at the sight of a meeting taking place. “Err, sorry, sorry, didn’t mean to interrupt. I’ll come back.”

“No, what is it?” Dorchester demanded.

“I’ve got some information. Someone who wasn’t at the barbecue saw a dark figure coming from the Pass path in Haven Avenue when they were on their way back from the Orange. His name’s Jason Brent, the bloke who called it in.”

Monroe’s stomach flipped. A lead? “Any height, weight, distinguishing features?”

“Not really, just that they were taller than him—he’s five eight—and they were white. The face was lighter in the darkness, although he only caught a partial profile.”

“What was this Jason doing?” Monroe asked.

“Standing in someone’s front garden having a piss behind a hedge.” Bedford blushed. “Sorry, taking a leak. The figure walked past him with his head bent. He—or it could have been a woman, Jason wasn’t sure—had a baseball cap on.”

Dorchester’s face brightened. “What time was this?”

“He doesn’t know. He left the Orange after last orders, got a kebab from the van out the front, and ate it on the way through the Pass. He reckons the person had shorts on; the whiteness of the legs also stood out.”

“Hardly the outfit of a killer,” Claire scoffed. “It could have been someone else on their way back from the Orange. Loads of people cut through the Pass to get to the Ring estate.”

“True,” Monroe said. “I suspect, now the new murder has been on the news, a few people will come forward to say they’ve seen someone. How do we know the bloke having a slash isn’t covering his tracks? *He* went through the Pass.”

Bedford scratched his head. “I chased up his alibi. He was in the Orange from six-thirty. Landlord says he’s a regular.”

“But we don’t know the time of Zoe’s death yet,” Monroe said, “so it *could* have been him, killing her after he’d had a jimmy riddle.”



“Why come forward with the info, though?” Neil asked.

Dorchester tutted. “*Think*. He’s worried someone spotted him so he’s had to say something. Maybe his missus has questioned him about coming home late. Poke into him, Claire.”

Monroe suspected the DCI was latching on to this witness so he could string him up, contact the CPS with a load of trumped-up reasons to charge him, and close the case so no more money was spent. “But we’ll keep an open mind as well as looking at him. Several people could have been out last night. It was Saturday, a lot of drinkers in the pubs. For all we know, a few men might have walked through the Pass and they’re all innocent. The stream is away from the winding path that goes through the middle, don’t forget. Yes, it’s quiet at night and sounds carry, but if they were drunk, they might not necessarily have put any noises down to an attack, rape, or murder. Paralytic people may not even remember how they got home, therefore, they might not phone in to eliminate themselves—that’s if they even watch or read the news.”

“Press conference?” Kershaw suggested.

“God no,” Dorchester barked. “Money, time, all that business. We’ll do one if we hit a brick wall, but until then, not a chance. Too many people will be pulled away to answer the phones, and ninety-nine percent of those will be cranks.”

Monroe shook his head. “Maybe just a quick phone interview with the leading journalist instead? Get the word out that we want to speak to anyone who was out so we can scratch them off the list?”

“Fine,” Dorchester grumbled, “but if it nicks our resources with too many time-wasting calls, I’ll go spare.” He stared at Bedford. “Give Claire the details of that bloke so she can write it on the board.”

While that went on, Monroe contemplated what Dorchester had said. It didn’t make sense. The DCI wanted the case wrapped up quickly, and the best way to get information was a press conference, so why was he holding off on that? Crank calls and a waste of money couldn’t be the only reasons, could

it? Instead of going into it with him, as he wouldn't get anywhere, Monroe looked at all the names on the board of people who'd attended the barbecue. All of them had strikes through them. Officers had been to speak to the ones working at Stafford Solicitors. Many of those had called Ubers and shared the rides home. Harry Gould also wasn't a suspect, his alibi holding water—although it could be argued that after he'd helped his neighbour to bed, he'd gone off and killed Zoe.

Claire finished writing the info on the board. "Okay, the names with strikethroughs aren't of concern to us. What we need to do now is find anyone else who was out during the night. Of course, when it gets in the papers that we want to speak to them, they might shit themselves thinking they'll be arrested so therefore won't come forward—a risk we always have to take. So it's the employees at Lime Lighting, then we'll have spoken to everyone."

"What about family members other than Zoe's parents?" Monroe asked, not seeing that information.

"Uniforms have done that. I forgot to write it up, sorry. Only two aunts and uncles and a cousin at university in Scotland." Claire got her notebook out and scribbled the data on the board.

"Sod all," Dorchester raged. "We've got sod fucking all. No further forward than we were before Zoe copped it."

"Harsh," Neil muttered.

"There's still hope. There could be DNA this time," Kershaw said. "Something might come up in the post-mortem."

Dorchester slumped against the wall, arms folded. "Doubtful, considering the past cases, but let's hope that's on the cards."

"Something else to consider," Monroe said. "I spoke to the dog walker earlier, the one who found Zoe. Sybil Platt. She said she felt like she was being watched when she discovered the body. Did the Strangler change his MO and stick around to

watch Zoe being found? That means, as it was light at the time, he might have been seen by someone. While I was merrily eating my cornflakes, he could have been observing Ms Platt.”

“Creepy,” Claire said.

Kershaw nodded to himself. “Shall I get hold of the scene sergeant in Zoe’s street so he can send people back round to Haven Avenue to check again whether anyone was seen leaving the Pass after Ms Platt went home to phone the police? Then there’s the street on the far side near the other estate, officers will need to go back there.”

Dorchester looked like he was about to lose his shit. “The residents have already been asked whether they saw anyone or anything suspicious, that’s the whole point of house-to-house enquiries! Bloody hell, Kershaw, are you dense?”

“I said *again*, sir, for them to ask again.”

“A waste of time—and manpower—if they’ve already said they’ve seen fuck all. I’m going for a coffee before I shitting explode.” The DCI strutted out, his walk that of a gangly stork.

Monroe raised his eyebrows. Sighed. “Okay, let’s crack on. I’ll ring Pete at the *Simwell Star* and give him a snippet. After that, Kershaw, you’re with me.”

Lime Lighting’s building stood as if proud of the Gothic monstrosity it was, the windows glittering eyes that glowed with the reflection of the sun, the large double doors a black, closed mouth. Gargoyles presided over the area from their lofty columned perches, their mouths skewed, noses squashed, and the stonework reminded Monroe of a vampire’s castle. Quite the building for a lighting company, where he imagined rows of bulbs in boxes on shelves and lamps positioned on side tables to entice the buyer. A DFS without the sofas.

Inside, his imaginings dashed by nothing of the sort, the relief of air-conditioning drying his clammy skin, he

approached a high black reception desk in the chilly foyer, the brickwork on show, a juxtaposition to the outer façade as the interior presented as urban—exposed metal beams, the fake front grille of an American car hanging on the wall beside retro images of scenes from what he supposed was downtown New York. Jarred by the contrast, he smiled at the receptionist, a middle-aged woman of about forty, her brown hair pinned back in a bun.

“DI Monroe and DS Kershaw.” He showed her his ID. “Could we speak to the manager, please?”

“Oh, is something wrong?” She reached for a desk phone.

Monroe didn’t bother replying, moving away and indicating that Kershaw should follow. He didn’t need twenty questions from the woman so turned to the side to avoid her gaze.

The manager appeared a minute or so later through a steel door decorated with studs. Rather than the trousers and jacket Monroe had expected, the grey-haired man in his sixties had a blue boilersuit on and clunky boots, as though he was more of a workface boss than one who presided over everyone in his office. Someone who’d climbed his way up from ground level?

“Boris Lime. How can I help you?” He stopped in front of them and held out a hand.

Monroe shook it and introduced them. “Is there somewhere we can speak in private?”

“Yep, in my office.”

Boris led the way through the studded door and down a corridor, people working in offices behind glass walls. He came to an open door, stepped over the threshold, and invited them to sit on the sofa adjacent to his desk. This office was as open as the others, so any of the employees could watch them.

Boris must have noted Monroe’s expression. “I prefer that everyone can see me like I can see them. I want them to know I work just as hard as they do. Makes for a better environment. Boosts morale.” He gestured to his outfit. “I’ve been

downstairs helping to fix one of the machines, hence the oil all over me.”

“You work on Sundays?” Monroe sat beside Kershaw.

“Lots of orders to fulfil.”

“What exactly do you do?”

“Chandeliers mainly. Some are real crystals, some real diamonds, some plastic. The workshop is belowground, beefed-up security, as you can imagine. We have a large safe for the jewels. We cater to high-end customers, many of them abroad. Lots of hotels use us, too.”

“I had no idea...”

“You thought we dealt in bulbs and lamps, didn’t you?” Boris chuckled and sat behind his desk. “Granted, that’s how I started, but I branched out. Okay, how can I help?”

“Zoe King.”

“Ah, my lovely secretary. I can’t imagine she’s done anything wrong... So why are you here?”

“Have you seen or read the news this morning?” Kershaw asked.

“Err, no, we have a shipment to the Middle East going out later today, so we’re rather bogged down with ensuring all the diamonds on a ten-foot chandelier are flawless. The customer is, shall we say, a perfectionist. I should think he’s entitled to be, considering he paid a million for it.”

*A million for a chandelier? I’m in the wrong business...*  
“Right. No, she hasn’t done anything wrong.” Now Monroe had seen the amount of employees in the offices, let alone whoever worked in the basement, they’d need assistance talking to them all. Dorchester would go mad at him pulling officers in, but it couldn’t be helped. He’d send a message for more troops in a few. “I’m afraid we’ll need to speak to all your staff—uniforms will arrive shortly—so we might put you behind schedule.”

“As long as you leave the diamond-checkers until last—they only need another hour—then that’s fine by me. Why do

you need to speak to everyone, though? Is Zoe all right?”

“I’m afraid Zoe lost her life.” Monroe may as well add a little detail, seeing as it was all over social media now. “She was murdered and left at the Pass.”

Boris paled. “Oh no. Not Zoe... Oh God, no. That’s awful.”

“Obviously, we need to eliminate everyone she knew.”

“You can’t think the Strangler works *here*, surely. That’s what you meant, wasn’t it, when you mentioned the Pass?”

“Generally, killers don’t look or act like killers,” Monroe said. “They walk among us, appearing like normal people. They go to work, eat, sleep, and laugh like everyone else. They don’t show the darkness inside until...well, I don’t need to spell it out.”

“Good grief. Of course you must speak to everyone. I have to say, though, and this isn’t just me being biased, I can’t think of a single person here who’d want to harm her. Zoe’s such a bubbly, nice person. She’ll do anything for anyone. She loves to please and to be accepted. Are you aware she’s on the spectrum?”

“Yes.”

“If you didn’t know, you’d never guess. She’s very good at emulating someone who isn’t autistic.” Boris sighed. “She told me she has to in order to fit in better.”

“So the killer wouldn’t have been able to tell she was classed as vulnerable?”

“God, no. Well, apart from moments where she doesn’t make eye contact, although it looks like she does. Her little secret is to stare at someone’s forehead instead. We’ve had many a chat about it. I wouldn’t be a good employer if I didn’t help tend to all of her needs. She knows she can come to me if she’s struggling. Dear God, I can’t believe she’s gone. Her attention to detail is second to none—I’ll miss her, will never get another secretary like her. She thinks differently, sees things from a viewpoint the likes of us would never consider. She’s actually saved me hundreds of thousands in the past by

suggesting different ways of doing things.” He stopped, perhaps aware he’d babbled. “Sorry for going on.”

“No, no, it helps us to get to know her. The more we’re aware of, the more we can try to understand why she was... chosen.”

“That bloody Strangler! He needs stringing up. You’re going to get a lot of tears from my lot today. Zoe’s the kind who walks into every office to ask if people want tea or coffee, and she can recall everyone’s favourite biscuit.” Boris released a long, ragged breath. “What a bloody shame.”

It *was* a shame. The Strangler, it seemed, had taken someone he should have allowed to live. Monroe suspected a light had gone out for a good many people because of Zoe’s death.

*Shit.*

“It had to be done, interviewing that lot,” Kershaw said, “but we’re no further forward. I doubt anyone there killed her.”

Monroe stared up at one of the glaring gargoyles after they’d swapped notes on the interviews. PCs had come, Bedford one of them, and the gathering of six, getting sweatier by the minute now they were out of the air-conditioned building, were all frustrated.

“So it’s official,” Monroe said. “A lovely young lady.”

Kershaw shook his head in sorrow. “This Strangler fucker, we need to catch him.”

Monroe sighed. “Let’s get back to work.” He smiled at the uniforms. “Thanks for your help.”

He drove back to the station, Kershaw unusually quiet in the passenger seat. The immediate grief from the employees had astounded Monroe. Not once had he come across a contingent where they *all* loved a certain person. Zoe King’s death had a ripple effect bigger than any he’d seen so far.

*Oh, to be adored like that.*



# Chapter Twenty-Eight

## DOWN MEMORY LANE

Fran Morton had a habit of sticking to a rigid routine, rarely deviating. He supposed that was down to her job, where she had certain rules to follow in a specific order. He wanted to prove that even with the added impetus to find her killer because she was a copper, it still wouldn't be enough for the police to locate him. He was sailing close to the wind by choosing her but had been unable to resist. She bleated on in the Orange now, letting everyone know how cool she thought she was. How clever.

Sigmund Freud would have had a field day analysing him, pointing out that Roman struggled with fully admitting he was an egotistical prick, so therefore, he wanted to erase Fran because she basically held a mirror up to him—and he didn't like it. He had been observing her for some time. She was him in some of her mannerisms and the way he thought and felt. Seeing her in action drilled it into him that people might see *him* in the same light. Too sure of himself. Too smug. Too everything, so he'd reined in some of his natural responses lately, trying not to be like her.

Along the bar, she talked to her colleagues about the last two murders, bragging that she'd be the one to find the clue that caught the Strangler. He listened intently, all the while picking up on the way she carried herself, as if she'd been brought up with parents who called her Princess all the time, giving her the impression she was actually that important. Royalty. Better than everyone else. She believed it, and it showed.

*Who does she think she is?*

***“Who do you think you are?”***

*Get lost.*

He sipped his pint, stuffing his anger down and forcing his face into an expression that didn't give his feelings away. Anyone could be watching him—and it paid dividends to be careful when a load of coppers hung around.

Martin stood next to him at the bar, glancing across at those with the blue blood of the law running through their veins. “She’s talking too loudly. Anyone could hear what she’s saying.”

Roman glanced around. “No one gives a shit, and I thought she was talking quietly to be honest.”

“How do you *know* no one gives a shit, though? They could be pretending not to listen in, then go to the press with all the information. And the police wonder why they have leaks...”

Roman shrugged. “It’s none of your business, so keep your nose out.”

Martin stared ahead at the optics. “I suppose, but still...”

Roman had to change the subject. Martin with a bee in his bonnet wasn't an enjoyable experience. “Are you seeing any difference in Rachel’s body with the yoga?”

“Not really.”

“Sandra looks the same, too. Do you think they’re even going?”

Martin faced him. “Where else *would* they go?”

“A pub?”

“No money comes out of the joint account for any pub by using her card, and she only withdraws twenty quid once a week to pay for yoga and art class.”

*The same happens with Sandra.* “She must have a bank account of her own, surely. And a tenner’s enough for a couple of glasses of wine.”

“Nah, she doesn’t smell of booze when she gets back.”

“How do *you* know? You said she doesn’t let you anywhere near her.”

Martin frowned. “Blimey. Why would they lie about where they’re going, though?”

“Who knows. Maybe they’re plotting to leave us.”

Martin’s eyebrows rose. “I hope you’re joking, because that isn’t funny. Come on, let’s go and check.”

“Check what?” Roman finished the rest of his lager.

“To see if they’re at the sport’s centre doing the downward dog.”

Annoyed with himself for playing with Martin’s feelings so the conversation had come to this point, Roman shook his head. “What if they see us?”

“We can say we were bored and came to meet them. To take them for a meal after or something.”

“Are you that paranoid?”

Martin’s cheeks reddened. “About what?”

“No sex, Rachel off out on a Monday and Wednesday, so you think they’re at the boozier meeting men...”

“Men? I didn’t mention any men. It’s *you* who puts this shit in my head.”

Roman hid a smile. “I’m not risking getting caught. Sandra can be a right cow for weeks if I piss her off. Let’s have another pint.”

He’d been unable to get out of going to the Orange tonight. He was supposed to be hiding outside Fran’s house, waiting for her to come home, yet here he was, coppers to his right, Martin to his left, stuck where he didn’t want to be.

He ordered two lagers and steered the chat away from their wives to a safer topic—growing veg. Martin became animated, saying he’d found a great tip for lettuce, and Roman zoned out while he droned on. He watched Fran in the mirror behind the bar, how she expressed herself by using her hands. He’d bet she’d be feisty when he got hold of her. Would know how to

fight him off, all that police training she'd had. He'd gone over and over it in his head, convincing himself he could get the better of her.

***“You’ve convinced yourself of other things before as well, though...”***

“...so I thought of doing a romantic meal,” Martin was saying, “you know, candles, music, all that sort of thing. What do you think?”

Roman sifted through his brain for a suitable response. “So you’re going to try and date your wife all over again, is that what you’re saying?”

“Yeah. Get the spark back. I’ve got to do *something*.”

“After all this time? Haven’t you left it a bit late?”

Martin’s face dropped. “But I can’t stand the way we’re just drifting along. This isn’t how I thought it would be once the girls got older. We’re *stagnant*, mate.”

“I suppose you could give it a go. At least you’ve tried, then.”

“That’s what I thought.”

The officers had drunk one for the road and prepared to leave. Roman accepted he wouldn’t be able to do what he wanted now. He’d have to go to Fran’s another night. Martin had just launched into a diatribe about what meal he would cook, something about chicken in a white wine sauce, so Roman would be stuck here for a while yet. Fucking hell. He’d geared himself up for sex and a kill, and now he’d have to calm his raging libido by himself when he got home.

On the way out, Fran threw her head back and laughed, as if she knew she’d thwarted his plans, and the bile of anger gave him heartburn.

*Bitch.*

As luck would have it, Sandra messaged to say she'd be dropping Rachel off then going to her mother's after yoga and didn't expect to be back until the morning. Her mum, Kath, had taken a funny turn, and Sandra would stay the night. He walked towards home with Martin, pleased he'd be able to do what he wanted after all, and explained what was going on with Kath.

"Want to come to mine for a nightcap?" Roman asked. He could get Martin sloshed so he didn't recall him going out later.

"Rachel might not like that. It's coming up to ten o'clock. I need to get to bed anyway. Early start in the morning. Seedling planting to catch up on."

"Fair enough."

Roman said goodbye at Martin's gate then went home. He messaged Sandra to check the state of play and to ensure she really *was* staying away all night. He didn't need her coming back and finding him gone.

**Roman:** HOW'S YOUR MUM?

**Sandra:** IT'S BEST SHE GOES INTO HOSPITAL. I THINK SHE'S HAD A STROKE. HER FACE IS DROOPING.

**Roman:** DO YOU NEED ME TO COME WITH YOU?

**Sandra:** NO, I'D RATHER DO THIS BY MYSELF.

**Roman:** WILL YOU BE BACK?

**Sandra:** I CAN'T JUST LEAVE HER THERE ON HER OWN!

**Roman:** OKAY. SEE YOU WHEN I SEE YOU.

He smiled. Paced and planned until one in the morning. Did the usual visual checks on the street before he went outside and headed for Fran's. She lived three streets away in Peyton Grove, a small detached house. Longer to walk to the Pass from there, but with the cover of darkness and a couple of pairs of her knickers stuffed in her mouth, it would likely be okay.

Balaclava, gloves, and a lock pick in his pocket, he walked quietly, head down, reminding himself she didn't have a house alarm—he hadn't seen a box for one.

***“What if an alarm goes off anyway?”***

*I don't know what to do about that yet.*

***“Then go home. Why take the risk?”***

*Because I like it.*

***“More fool you if it goes wrong, then.”***

She hadn't fought enough. He'd overpowered her, did what he'd gone to her house to do. He'd put her on the ground at the Pass, the surrounding trees seeming to peer down at him, their rustling leaves expressing their disdain. Roman ignored it—it was only his conscience anyway, what little decency he had left screaming at him that this was wrong. It was, no question, but now he'd embarked on this mission, he couldn't turn back. Didn't *want* to.

Considering the time, he could do her again, or at the very least expose her tits so he could look at them. They'd be greyed humps in the darkness, but he'd get the gist. Or he could use his torch app, see them in all their lit-up glory...

No. Instead, he went over to a prickly bush and found a thorn of about three inches long. He'd imagined using a stake, pinning her to the ground like a dead moth in its case, but this would give the same effect, at least in his mind when he brought the memory out for another inspection. He broke the thorn off and stuck the sharp end into her dressing gown, right where it would be on a moth's body had he wanted to mount it for display. Would anyone understand why he'd done it?

The snap of a twig had him freezing, his heart thudding too hard, his pulse competing with the rasp of his harsh breathing. He cocked his head, determining the sound came from behind him, and slowly, he turned.

No shape of a person. No other noises. Then a scuffle, loose undergrowth shifting, and the quick movement of something darting into the density of the trees to his right. A fox? Badger? Whatever it had been, it had spooked him, and he'd likely spooked *it*. An omen to return home, then. It could be an animal now and a person later. He shouldn't push his luck.

He wandered between the tree trunks and paused at the alley leading to Haven Avenue. To collect himself. To take a moment to *breathe*. Composed, still with his balaclava and gloves on, he moved down the avenue and into his street. Nothing out of the ordinary here, only one light on down the way, a bedroom, the blind drawn. He nipped between two houses to the alley behind his row and entered his back garden, glancing at Martin's top window. Safe from prying eyes, Roman went indoors, quietly twisting the key in the lock. He crept through the house, up the stairs, and checked their room in case Sandra had returned. The bed stood empty, and he nipped to the window to stare through a chink in the curtains.

Her car wasn't outside.

He'd switched his phone off while with Fran so turned it on again.

Three messages from his wife.

**Sandra:** MUM'S BEEN ADMITTED. DEFINITELY A STROKE.

**Sandra:** ARE YOU AWAKE? I'LL BE BACK IN THE MORNING BUT NOT UNTIL YOU'VE LEFT FOR WORK, SO YOU'LL HAVE TO MAKE YOUR OWN SANDWICHES.

**Sandra:** SHE'S JUST HAD ANOTHER MINI STROKE. IT ISN'T LOOKING GOOD. IS YOUR PHONE OFF? YOU NEVER LEAVE IT OFF! I KEEP GETTING SENT TO VOICEMAIL. BLOODY ANSWER ME, WILL YOU?

Four missed calls after that and one voicemail message: "*I need you to phone me. Oh God, please pick up...*"

He sighed. Switched his phone back off. Her mother had either died or had got much worse, and he couldn't be doing with it. He had to put Fran's knickers under the floorboard, the

ones he'd stuffed in her mouth, plus the condom. He had his clothes to wash. He needed a shower.

Kath, and whatever had happened to her, could wait until the morning.

He'd never liked his mother-in-law anyway.



# Chapter Twenty-Nine

## RACHEL

Unsettled after her interview with PC Bedford, Rachel had quickly collected her things, packed them into humiliating black rubbish bags (leaving the suitcases for Martin in case he had an impromptu holiday to get over the split), and left in a taxi. She still had to tell the twins she lived elsewhere now and expected tears, maybe recriminations. They adored their father and wouldn't want to accept he'd done anything wrong. To pay penance for the guilt she experienced about using him, Rachel had already decided not to lay any blame at his door and would cite the age-old excuse that they'd drifted apart. What Martin chose to tell them was his business, and she'd weather any storms he created. If he chose to be bitter and told them what she'd done all these years, she'd find a way to explain it to the girls, and if they hated her for it, there wasn't much she could do. Bearing their scorn would hurt more than anything she'd ever been through, but they were entitled to their opinions. She wouldn't govern or manipulate their emotions, something she'd done with Martin and herself for eighteen long years. Something her parents had done to her.

She had to change. To be a better person from now on.

*He* had to change and be better, too. Maybe she *should* tell him what she knew about him. Ram it home that he was a misogynistic prick as well as a pervert. Help him to see that viewing women as sex objects was disgusting—and remind him he had daughters. How would he feel if blokes lusted after *them*?

She'd unpacked all of her clothes and hung them in the large, wall-wide mirrored wardrobe in the biggest bedroom, her underwear and folded items in the posh chest of drawers

opposite the end of the bed. Choosing one of the matching nightstands, she placed her Kindle and earplugs on top—Martin snored, and using those had been the only way she could get uninterrupted rest. She doubted she'd be able to drift off without them now, her mind attuned to the signal that when she put them in, it was time to sleep.

A quick check of her watch—one p.m.—sent her downstairs to the hallway to put her shoes on and collect her handbag. She'd nip to the corner shop on Copse Road and get some bits and bobs in. Bread, butter, teabags and the like. Tomorrow, she'd do a full shop in Tesco, one that would last a month. As she didn't work on Mondays, she'd do some batch cooking and freeze dinners, which reminded her to buy some plastic containers with lids.

She left the ground-floor flat smiling, despite the mess she'd created in Martin's life, happy to be by herself for the first time in years. Shoving away all thoughts of how he must be feeling, she strolled down the street, mentally calculating how much she should spend. When she got back, she'd go through her notebook where she'd written out her single-person finance plan ages ago on one of the lonely Sundays when Martin had been at the allotment and she'd dreamed of living on her own.

How surreal that it was a reality now, that she'd finally done it. Got away.

It was about time, because her antipathy towards him had only grown once she'd discovered that Session group on his phone. Last week, when she'd got back from art class, Martin had been messaging someone and had become a bit red-faced. He'd shot up, walking oddly, his back half presented to her, and exited the room to go upstairs.

*He'd left his phone on the sofa arm, the screen still alight from where he'd used it. Knowing she shouldn't, but too curious to stop herself, she reached across to pick it up before the lock screen came on and denied her access. A list of his chats filled*

the screen—Roman one of his many contacts—but the bar at the top, entitled *THE GANG*, caught her interest. Hating herself for it, shrugging off the stirrings of guilt, she opened it. And wished she hadn't. Image after image of women in sexually explicit positions. Young women, similar ages to their twins. Links that left nothing to the imagination, going by some of the wording in them: *women love cock; suck it bitch; fill my hole*, all preceded by website addresses and followed by places in Simwell she recognised. The newsagent's down Blackwell Street. The Conservative Club in town behind B&M. The bookies down Hemming Road. What did those locations have to do with the links?

Sickened by what she'd seen, she continued to scroll, the group participants adding commentary to the pictures. People she knew. Who she'd thought were good and decent.

**Roman:** *LOOK AT THE TITS ON THAT!*

**Dave:** *GEORGIE'S JEALOUS. SHE WANTS A PAIR OF FAKES NOW. YET ANOTHER EXPENSE.*

**Martin:** *I CAN'T BELIEVE YOU SHOW HER THIS STUFF. RACHEL WOULD GO MAD AT ME IF SHE KNEW.*

**John:** *YOU DON'T EVEN WANT TO KNOW WHAT DEBBIE WOULD DO. LET'S JUST SAY I'D BE WITHOUT BOLLOCKS.*

Laughing emojis. More comebacks. Jokes. Vile scenarios and fantasies written by men who presented themselves to the world as normal citizens, when behind closed doors, they gawped at women and chatted about them as if they deserved the filthy derision.

The creak of the floorboards above had her closing the chat and all but throwing the phone back on the sofa arm, hoping the screen light went off quickly. She stared at the telly, her eyes blurring, anger and...what was it? Revulsion. Yes, revulsion whipped through her. That any of those men were involved in such a chat group...she wouldn't have believed it if she hadn't seen it.

Should she tell Sandra and Debbie what they were up to?

*Even more of a shocker, Georgie knew about it. She condoned it.*

*What the fuck was wrong with her?*

Rachel's cheeks blazed at the memory, of how naïve she'd been. She'd known there were perverts about, that this sort of thing went on, but she'd thought it was in seedy places on the web, forums hidden from the general public. She couldn't wrap her head around those four men throwing banter about and lusting after people who were young enough to be their children. What was worse, she swore one of them must only be about fifteen. That was unacceptable and *beyond* perverted. That alone should send her running to the police. Underage girls with their legs in such a position with their clothes off should never see the light of day. But would she be believed? No decent copper would think their colleague ogled minors, and she'd be laughed out of the station.

She thought of John, how he'd been so kind to her last night. The personality he'd shown her for years didn't match the stuff he'd typed. What was it Roman had said? That everyone had dark sides to themselves or something like that? Was that why Martin had accused John of shagging her—had there been a gross conversation about wife-swapping and John had expressed an interest?

*God, would you listen to me. I'm being ridiculous. Like john would even fancy me.*

The section of chat she'd read had cemented her need to leave. What else would she have spotted if she'd scrolled farther? How long had the group been active? Who'd brought up the subject of creating it? How did you even have the conversation that you had fantasies you wanted to share with your mates? And what were those mates like if they'd agreed to it?

She didn't know them at all, and although she should have opened her mouth and raged, she still hadn't been able to

broach the subject with Martin. Taking that route would only bring up her deficiencies as a wife, and she couldn't bear to have a looking glass held up in front of her.

In the end, her haircut had been the catalyst—she'd had it lopped it off so it wasn't the same length as the women in the images. She didn't want to resemble them in any way. Martin didn't know that in the moment he hadn't noticed it, she'd seethed at the fact he'd *certainly* noticed the women in the chat images. Maybe he'd turned to those because she hadn't been putting out. She'd understand it if he did that in private, but with his *mates*? Was that group more sinister than she thought? Was the allotment just a cover for where Roman and Martin *really* went? Did they meet up with Dave and John and —

No, she didn't want to probe into that.

The mind was a terrible thing. It conjured roads you didn't want to walk down. It encouraged you to explore the dark forests and peep into the deepest shadows.

It forced you to see your world, and the people in it, in a way you'd rather not.

*Martin came back into the living room, walking normally this time. The realisation of why he'd been side-on earlier hit her. He'd hidden an erection, hadn't he. He'd been turned on by those women. Her face heated so much the skin prickled, and, blinded by more tears, she asked herself what she should do. A huge part of her wanted to admit to him she'd snooped on his phone, that she'd seen enough to know he wasn't the man she'd thought he was, but another part... The shame of talking about it, of having to discuss his perverted antics, him throwing it in her face that if she had sex with him more, he wouldn't have to resort to that kind of thing, would cripple her. He might twist it so it became her fault; denial was most people's go-to, wasn't it? Lie until you were blue in the face. Until the other person believed your bullshit.*

*She should know, she'd done it for eighteen years. Didn't this serve her right, then? Wasn't she being paid back for all of her lies? Karma had decided to teach her a lesson, and maybe she should sit up and take notice. Learn from it. Change from it.*

*He sat beside her and picked his phone up. Her stomach rolled over. Was he going back to the chat? Would the others have dropped more photos and links by now? From the corner of her eye, she watched what he accessed. He closed the app and brought a game up, mindlessly zapping rows of fruit. What had he been doing upstairs, having a wank?*

*She almost heaved. Yes, she'd accepted that he must have sorted himself out from time to time, but she'd thought it would be a quick go in the shower, not that he'd have vile images in his mind while he did it. Her revulsion for him grew, and she tried to blank her mind of the scene it insisted on showing her: Martin in bed, his phone in one hand, his dick in the other. Why was her brain doing this? She didn't need to see it, to be tormented.*

*Angry, bewildered, and hurt, she got up and went into the kitchen to make a cup of tea, the act of flicking on the kettle so at odds with her discovery, so normal. Panic surged, seeming to fill her whole body with a red-hot rage. Now her mind raced with the desire to leave, right this second, just walking out and not looking back, to get as far away from her husband as possible. Fuck taking a bag with her. Fuck everything. The need to escape was so strong she had to go out into the back garden and sit on the bench to calm herself.*

*She breathed deeply, the evening summer air clingy and oppressive. Like her life had become. Suffocating. Why was she sitting here really? Why wasn't she confronting her husband? Why did she feel she had to hide the men's secret?*

*She knew why. Because Martin's behaviour would shine a light on her part in it.*

*She couldn't stand this. She had to make a decision.*

*One, go to Tara's flat and pretend she hadn't seen the chat.*

*Two, walk next door and tell Sandra what she'd seen, letting the chips fall where they may.*

*Three, confront Martin and risk being blamed for his actions.*

*Or four, keep quiet, wait for the best time to say their marriage was over, then leave.*

*A coward, she opted for the latter. With a game plan in mind, she felt a little better, although having to tell him they were over because they'd grown apart was now a joke. But she wanted a gentle split, one where she could pretend to anyone watching that she harboured no ill-will towards him—another requirement of her parents, to never show the world that you had troubles. To keep secrets to yourself so you weren't viewed in a bad light.*

*Despite their 'I told you so' which was sure to come, she would leave. She'd spent too many years abiding their rules, and it was about time she took control of her own life instead of living by their ideals.*

Rachel entered the little shop, the list of items in mind crowding out her resentment towards her parents, Martin, and society in general. It was *her* choice how she lived, not theirs. She popped what she needed in her basket and added a chilli microwave meal. In the small freezer section, she picked up garlic bread slices to go with it and moved along the aisle to the wine. A crisp sweet white to celebrate her freedom—she didn't like champagne and didn't want to splurge on it anyway—although with her guilt and the men's secret bearing down on her, she didn't feel as free as she'd imagined she would.

She paid and left the shop, frowning at the car parked on the other side of the road. Roman sat in the driver's seat, a look of shock appearing which he quickly switched to a beaming smile. Why was he shocked to see her?

His window sailed down, and he widened his grin. "Want a lift?"

“I only live two minutes away now...”

“Right. Everything okay? All settled in?”

“Mostly.” She didn’t want to have a conversation where she shouted across the road, nor did she want to speak to him. Yes, he’d been kind last night in walking her to Tara’s, but that didn’t mean they were best buddies now. “I’d better get on.”

“I heard you spoke to the police.”

God, she loved her old neighbours, but they really were gossips. Or, most likely, Martin had told him she’d spoken to PC Bedford earlier.

“I did, yes. I’d seen Zoe in Trends, plus at the Pass on my way home. Thought it best I let them know.”

“What did you say about me?”

*Why is he asking that?* “That we had a chat under the lamppost, then you walked me to my sister’s. There’s nothing else to tell. Listen, I really do have to go.”

She rushed off in the direction of Copse Road, eager to get inside the flat and shut the world out. She had her finances to examine, wounds to lick, and a FaceTime call to make to the twins. That wasn’t something she relished, but they deserved to know she’d left their father. God forbid they did one of their surprise visits and walked into their childhood home to find she wasn’t there. The most important thing to get across was that she loved them and parting from Martin wasn’t their fault.

As long as they knew that, she’d rest easier.



# Chapter Thirty

## ROMAN

He drove towards the allotment, annoyed Rachel had caught him spying on her. He'd slowly followed her from Copse Road in the car, and she'd been oblivious, in a world of her own, head bent, lost in thought. To begin with, he'd only wanted to kill her because she was an older woman and an easier target than selecting someone else, but now, after their conversation at the Pass... The more he thought about it, the more he was convinced she knew about the Session group. She had to have kept it to herself, otherwise, if she'd told the other women, he'd certainly have heard about it by now. Sandra wouldn't have been able to keep her trap shut, and as for Debbie... She'd have threatened to slice John's throat—or one of her brothers would actually do it.

Yes, he'd get Rachel tomorrow after art class. Shut her up for good.

Although he was supposed to be doing something work-related, he wanted to speak to Martin. Discuss things. Give him a reason to want to kill Rachel. If Roman was questioned after her death, seeing as he knew the couple, he'd quite rightly tell the police what Martin had said regarding the bombshell Roman was about to drop. First, though, he needed to collect the ammo and put seeds in the man's head and words in his mouth.

***“I thought you wanted Rachel's death to be blamed on the Strangler?”***

*Go away. I'm entitled to change my mind.*

He parked in the designated tarmac area beside the allotment, undid the padlock, and walked through the

diamond-wire gate between the wooden fencing. He meandered towards the plots. Old Taffy had stuck some taller, tepee-like poles into the ground to train his runner beans up—the others had been too short, although Roman hadn't bothered letting him know that at the time. Old Taffy thought he knew everything about growing veg.

In his shed, Roman picked up his watering can and used the outdoor tap to fill it. He quickly took the chance to feed his plants then replaced the can, locking up and moseying along to Martin's shed. Hot in his suit, he rapped on the door, imagining his friend tugging the bishop and scrabbling to stuff it back into his boxers. The door opened too quickly, though, and Martin didn't appear flushed or embarrassed.

He came out and tipped his face to the sun, squinting. "All right? Bad business with Zoe. That bastard needs catching. What are you doing here?"

"Came to see you. I've been thinking about something that was said last night with Rachel..."

"Oh shit, don't tell me she *did* confess to an affair and you've decided to tell me."

"No, it's worse than that."

"What could be worse?"

Roman gestured for him to be allowed into the shed then glanced over at old Taffy. "This needs privacy. He's old, but his ears still flap well enough."

"Fuck."

Roman followed Martin inside, locking the door behind him. Martin paced the limited space, his bucket hat casting shade over his eyes.

"I think she knows about The Gang," Roman said.

"*What?* How the hell can she? My phone needs a code to unlock it."

"So does mine, so she wouldn't have heard about it from Sandra."

Martin stopped. Paled. “Shit. It must have been Georgie.”

*Jesus Christ. Rent-a-gob.* “How come?”

“There was talk last night about Georgie watching porn with Dave, and we both know he’s shown her the pictures and links. She’s never discussed it openly before, though.”

Roman gritted his teeth. “When did she say this?”

“You were walking Rachel to Tara’s. How come you think Rachel knows anyway?”

“Look, this didn’t come from me, okay? I don’t want her thinking I can’t be trusted. If she knows I told you, I won’t get any more information out of her for you, will I, so button it.”

“All right, all right.”

“She mentioned she knows you have a secret group with Alice and Emma. I said something like, ‘Doesn’t everyone have a secret group?’ It was what she said next that got me thinking.”

“What did she say?”

“That there were some things she wished she knew about yonks ago, it would have changed shit, and she wouldn’t have felt guilty about wanting to leave you. She actually said she’d have a ‘valid excuse’.”

Martin sighed. “Christ, talk about frightening me for nothing. That doesn’t mean she knows about the group.”

“But that came off the back of a secret group being mentioned. Don’t you see? She was letting me know she knew. Feeling me out to see if I admitted it.”

“Nah, she’s so uptight about stuff like that she’d have told Sandra or had a right go at me about it. She wouldn’t have been able to help herself.”

“Maybe she’s changed. I mean, not being rude here, mate, but you had no idea she wanted to split with you, did you, until she slapped you in the face with it. Maybe she *doesn’t* go running to Sandra with everything. And what if she’s ashamed of you so she’s kept it quiet? We’re going to have to delete the

group chat and sort our phones in case she turns nasty and dobs us in. There's shit on there that can get us all arrested."

Roman thought of having to lose his videos and photos of the dead women. It would hurt, but it wasn't like he could store them in the Cloud, was it. That could be accessed. Damning evidence.

Martin took his mobile out. "Ring the others on a three-way convo. Put it on speaker."

Roman smiled inwardly.

Martin deleted the chat app then went to his settings. He paused. "No, this isn't going to be enough. New phones and SIMs for all of us. We can't risk the police going through them and finding shit, even with a factory reset."

"You seem to have forgotten we've all got SSD hard drives on them. They empty themselves of deleted information. If you remember, before the links and images were first sent, John asked us to check which type of phone we had."

"Yeah, but I'd still rather ditch mine."

"Whatever."

Roman connected to Dave's and John's numbers. Both men answered quickly.

"Not a good time to talk," John warned.

Roman didn't give a toss. "I'm on speaker. I've got Martin here—"

"Oh, fuck off," John said. "Is this about last night?"

"Yes and no," Roman replied, "but not what you're thinking." He told them his suspicions. "So regardless of SSD, we all get new phones and stop swapping pictures and stuff, got it?"

"Look," John said. "Session is end-to-end encrypted. No phone numbers to sign up. No data breaches. No *footprints*. You're panicking over nothing."

Dave sighed. "I've been called into work for an emergency and can't really speak or leave. Buy my phone for me and I'll

collect it and pay you in cash later. Make sure it has SSD.”

John let out a weird growl. “Do you think she’ll grass us up? And this is all supposition, right? She might not know anything.”

“Aren’t we better off being on the safe side?” Roman asked. “We knew the risks when we started the group. We agreed to disband if something came up where we’d get caught.”

“Georgie’s going to be right upset,” Dave muttered. “She enjoyed those links.”

Martin butted in. “Maybe you should ask her if she’s opened her big gob. You heard what she said last night.”

“Don’t tell me what to do with my wife,” Dave barked. “I’ve got to go. Some pill-popper has tried to top himself, and muggins here has to deal with the fallout.”

“Doing your Florence Nightingale act, are you?” John chortled.

“Piss off. I’m leaving the call. Speak soon.”

“Seriously, though,” Roman said once he’d gone, “we have to cover our arses. With Rachel moving into a flat, she might turn bitter and want to get revenge on Martin, putting us in the crapper along with him.”

“Hold up,” John said. “She’s *left* him?”

“Yes,” Martin grumbled. “I’d have thought that would be the obvious conclusion after what went on at the barbecue.”

“Sorry to hear about it, but I’ve got sod all to do with her decision. Listen, I’m at a scene—RTA after a car chase—but I can nip to Tesco to get a phone and SIM once I’ve had a word with the first responders, all right? Just buy yours and Dave’s.”

Roman nodded. “We’ll have to talk filth in person down at the Orange in future.”

“Whatever.” John cut the call.

Roman stared at Martin. “Actually, you go and get the phones. Draw cash out for them. I’m meant to be at work.”

“Fine.”

Roman needed an actual confession, an intent to kill, so pushed a bit more. “I saw her not long ago, by the way. At the Copse Road shop.”

Martin looked like a kicked puppy. “How was she?”

“Seemed in a bit of a rush. Like she had something she had to get back for.”

A scowl ruined Martin’s face. “Are you deliberately winding me up?”

*Yes.* “What?”

“Implying she’s got a bloke at the flat. I’ll kill whoever it is.”

“Mind you don’t kill her, too.”

Martin grimaced. “The mood I’m in, it’s highly likely.”

*Bingo.*

# Chapter Thirty-One

## THE INTRICACIES OF CHILDHOOD

*For his own amusement, and to stop himself from going mad with the boredom of his life, Roman had started winding people up and making them second-guess themselves. Their reactions gave him a sense of being in control, knowing he'd upset them. At sixteen, the sixth form looming, his life still governed to excess by his parents, he had to have something for himself.*

*He hadn't seen Timmy or Gareth for ages, but there they were, in the amusement arcade. Roman wasn't allowed in there —“Gambling is the Devil's work, son!”—but he nipped in for half an hour whenever Mum sent him into town on a Saturday afternoon to collect the meat from the butcher's shop. He earned pocket money for doing the housework and had saved quite a bit. Thirty quid, which he planned to waste on the slots. A bit of mindless fun. When he'd come in, he'd checked no one from church was in and had sat in the far corner so he could keep an eye out. If anyone spotted him, they'd tell Mum and Dad, and he'd be for it.*

*Gareth, on a Spinning Jackpot machine, whooped at it spitting coins into the tray. Jealous and annoyed, because he'd been playing on that previous to switching machines, Roman wanted to hurt him. Really hurt him. For having a Raleigh Racer. For fucking off at the Pass that time. For being able to do what he wanted. For winning all that money. Life, it seemed, was intent on treating Roman badly. One day, he'd run his own world, and he wouldn't let anyone tell him what to do. Not Mum, not Dad, and not the voice.*

*He got up, too incensed to care about a parishioner coming in and seeing him, and sauntered over to Gareth. "You only won because I fed it twenty quid before you got here."*

*"Piss off!" Gareth grabbed the money and stuffed it in his pocket as if he thought Roman would nick it. "Tough shit if it didn't pay out for you. Life's a game of luck, and you'll always be a loser."*

*"Not as much of a loser as you. I heard what Stacey Quinn said about you."*

*Gareth's forehead furrowed. "What did she say?"*

*"That you've got a little cock."*

*She hadn't, but Roman had heard Gareth shagged her at a house party last week and wanted to piss him off. Gareth had the life Roman wanted, and it bugged him.*

*"I haven't!" Gareth shoved his hands in his pockets, the coins jingling. "She's lying. Anyway, she has a baggy fanny, so that's what the problem is."*

*"Did you cop a feel of her tits?"*

*"Yeah."*

*"What are they like?"*

*"Massive. More than a handful. You should have a go with her next, then you'll see I'm not lying."*

*"Nah, I don't take sloppy seconds."*

*Gareth laughed. "I heard you're still a virgin anyway, loser."*

*"I heard you're a crap lay."*

*Gareth's face crumpled. At first Roman took it as anger, but the kid was actually wounded. Satisfaction curled its way through Roman—he'd released the arrow and pierced him hard. He had control. It felt good, maybe too good, but in another couple of years, when he signed up to do social work, he could move out and have more of this.*

*He could hurt people like he'd been hurt.*



*He walked out, pleased with himself. The memory of Gareth's expression would give him a lift all day. God knew he didn't get pleasure elsewhere.*

## Chapter Thirty-Two

### MARTIN

He knew he shouldn't, but Martin walked round to Rachel's flat after he'd bought the new phones and stashed them at home ready to hand out later. He stood at the royal-blue front door, aware she might have seen him coming. The Venetian blind slats pointed upwards at an angle but would still afford her a view of outside. He knocked, anxiety spiralling. Would she let her lover out the back way before she opened the door and acted like butter wouldn't melt? If it wasn't a man, what was so important that she'd had to rush back here? Or had Roman been playing with him, planting seeds in his head?

*Why would he? He's my mate.*

Martin knocked again, and the door inched away from the jamb.

She stared at him through the small gap, her face stone-like, lips set in a firm line. "What do you *want*, Martin? For God's sake, what part of 'we're over' don't you understand?"

"Please, just give me a minute of your time. Why did you *really* leave? What kicked it off? It wasn't me not noticing your hair."

"That was the final push I needed."

"But what else?"

She raised her eyes to the lintel. Seemed to ponder something and wrestle with it. Then she stared him in the eye. "Look, if I'd known I was married to a pervert, it would have been over years ago."

So she *did* know. Martin should have trusted Roman's instincts instead of going into denial mode.

Still, he'd fight his corner until the bitter end. Until it was obvious he couldn't keep up the ruse. "What do you mean, pervert?"

"Oh, come on! You know exactly what I'm talking about."

"I really don't."

"Okay, so you want me to spell it out. Fine. I was going to spare us both the embarrassment, I was going to pretend your sordid little secret didn't exist, but seeing as you're intent on pushing for answers, you can fucking well have them. I saw the group. The pictures. The links. Some of what you all said. The lot of you are disgusting, d'you know that? And the women, they're barely older than Alice and Emma, and some look younger. You should be ashamed of yourselves."

Heat infused his face. God Almighty, what if she went to the police about it? Had she followed a link and knew the sites were illegal? That underage girls were on display there? Martin had never clicked those, he wasn't into minors, absolutely no way. He'd never told Rachel the ins and outs of his PTSD and nightmares. It had been too painful to talk about. To click any links meant he was a paedophile, and he couldn't be tagged with that label. The fact he remained friends with three men who *could* be paedos didn't sit well, but he was stuck between a rock and hard place.

"The young ones, I didn't..."

"I should sodding hope not, but the others?" She glared at him.

"I... I looked at the pictures, that's all, and when I realised they were too young, I scrolled past." He'd never admit to buying DVDs. "We weren't having sex much and—"

"I *knew* this would end up my fault."

"It's not—"

"What do the addresses mean? The Conservative Club, all that shit?"

Should he be honest? Or by doing so, was he giving her ammunition to get him locked up? “What are you going to do with the information if I give it to you?”

“*Nothing*, I just want the truth. I’ve lied for too many years, I’m sick of it, and we need to be honest with each other.”

He believed her. He’d known her for too long to not recognise her expression of sincerity. “They’re places that sell DVDs. I’ve never bought any, I swear. If you’ve scrolled through the chat, you’ll have seen that what I’ve actually said on there isn’t bad.”

True. He’d been so careful in what he’d typed, conscious that if they got caught and the chat went into evidence, it would be scrutinised. Yes, he’d get done for being in the group and not reporting what the others had said or done, but he’d told himself to claim he hadn’t known some of the girls were minors, that with makeup, they appeared older.

“*Did* you scroll?” he asked, hoping to God she had.

“A bit. The only thing I saw you say was that I’d go mad if I knew you were involved.”

“Listen, it’s the other three who’re over the top, not me. I’ve got hold of them today and told them I’m leaving the group anyway. I’ve deleted it, look.” He fished his phone out and unlocked it. Handed it to her. He hadn’t set up his new phone yet because he’d needed this one as proof he wasn’t lying.

She opened the door wider and took the mobile. The Session icon wasn’t there, so she scrolled through his WhatsApp chats. She passed it back. “Of course you’ve deleted it. You wouldn’t want me to ask for a look at it again. It made me sick to my stomach, the crap on there. How the fuck did you even get involved in the first place?”

“It started as just a group of mates, that’s *all*, then Roman posted that shit, and it went from there. I wanted to leave then, I didn’t want anything to do with it, but John said we were all complicit, we’d *all* go down for looking at illegal stuff, and he’s a copper, he could manipulate things. I was too scared to

leave.” Another truth. “I realised later that John would get in trouble, too, but then knowing him, how devious he can be, he’d have made out he contributed on purpose, a sting operation. Not knowing whether to trust the bloke, I just went along with it.”

“You should distance yourself from him—and the other two. They’re not good people.”

“I know, but I’ll have to do it gradually else they’ll cop on. I’ve bought another phone so will send you my new number. In case, well, solicitors and things, if that’s the road you’re going down.”

She reached out and squeezed his hand. “I feel awful for using you, please know that. I’ll never forgive myself. Just... just watch your back, okay? I’m worried about what they’ll do now you’ve left the group. John being bent and involved with the Collinses... And the minors, I should really do something about them, say something, not just let it carry on. What they’re going through must be awful. They’re someone’s *daughters*, Martin.”

“No, don’t get involved. Leave it with me, all right? I’ll... I’ll sort something.”

“Make sure you do,” she said.

She let his hand go, and he knew, with awful, gut-wrenching certainty, that was the last time her skin would touch his willingly.

At home, he paced, going over how he could help the minors without anyone knowing it was him. To be honest, he should have done it months ago. The younger women had never sat well with him when the others had posted about them. An anonymous email would work well, but that could be traced to his IP address, or if he went elsewhere to send it, like the internet café, he could be seen on CCTV, going inside. A phone call was safer, a cheap pay-as-you-go burner keeping him unidentified, but then there was the mobile mast, and the

vicinity of the phone call could be discovered, then CCTV might be trawled in that area if they took him seriously...

*Stop panicking. Think.*

An old-fashioned letter would have to do; he'd put gloves on before touching any paper from the new A4 packet he'd bought on Amazon for the printer. He'd list the locations where the films were sold, state *what* was sold and on offer, ensuring they knew underage girls were involved, and leave it at that. As he'd deleted the chat, he no longer had the links—maybe he could remember a few of the words in them to give the police a direction to go in, at least.

John would automatically suspect Martin had tipped the police off, the man had always seen him as a do-gooder, but if Martin had to, he'd deflect and bring the others' names into the conversation, get John thinking it could be Roman or Dave.

All he cared about now was getting into Rachel's good books. Maybe, if he did what she'd asked, she'd find it in her heart to stay friends.

# Chapter Thirty-Three

## DETECTIVE INSPECTOR MONROE

Monroe returned to the Pass. Officers had been searching every speck of grass in orderly lines since this morning, but according to one PC, only rubbish had been collected. Discarded crisp packets, sweet wrappers, fag butts, and, so out of place, a small, greasy bolt that had no business being there.

The stream burred by, lazily coasting over the rocks. The late afternoon sun tortured his head, the heat trapped beneath his protective hood. Sweat dripped from his neck and wiggled down his back. He hadn't fancied another bollocking from Ingrid Clemmons so had suited up accordingly and stood beside her, watching Zoe King's body being loaded up now all of the evidence surrounding her had been collected. Keeping her in situ on a day like this, and under a baking tent, too, had produced an awful smell that stuck in the back of the throat, not to mention the oppressive warmth would have sped up decomposition. It could muddy the estimated time of death either side, widening the window for the team to look into.

"Gruff will need a nose peg when doing her post-mortem," he muttered and tagged on a chuckle.

"Not amusing," Ingrid fired back. "God, the dark humour really isn't funny. I don't get why you lot indulge in it. This is a *person* we're dealing with here. She had hopes and dreams, a full life ahead of her. Just because she's dead, it doesn't mean she's become an object."

"She was clearly an object before she died," he reminded her. "The Strangler would have seen her as belonging to him to do whatever he wanted with. A possession. A means to an

end. And, sorry to burst your bubble, but she's evidence now, plain and simple."

"She still deserves respect."

Her attitude got on his nerves. If you got emotionally involved, it fucked you up. He preferred to remain impassive and view the bodies as part of the jigsaw puzzle. If he thought about their hopes and dreams, he'd never get anything done. Ingrid was a Debbie Downer, and he always had to walk on eggshells around her.

"I don't recall saying otherwise," he said. "Wind your neck in for once. Your head must be giddy from being up there on your high horse. Don't you ever just kick back and relax?"

Ingrid's shoulders tensed; his words had wounded her.

She closed her eyes momentarily. "Sorry. I *can* be laid-back, you know, just not at work. You know how this sort of shit gets me."

"What, tense and grumpy, taking it out on everyone else?"

"That and frustrated. I want us to catch whoever did this, whoever raped and murdered all of the others. Just one little piece of evidence, that's all we need, but the man's so clever, he never leaves anything behind. He's forensically aware."

"Aren't they all these days. Too many crime shows to get pointers from."

"I could curse those programmes. They may as well label them as a how-to in getting away with it."

He glanced sideways at her. "Ever thought about looking at a half-full glass, or being grateful that your glass has even got a drink in it at all, rather than seeing it as half-empty?"

"It's hard to remain positive when there are so many negatives around." She lowered her mask and swung her heavy-lidded gaze to him.

"Is that a dig at me? You see me as a negative?"

"No. God, I didn't put you down as the insecure type."

"Insecurity isn't one of my traits."



“I suppose not, considering the size of your ego.” She must have smiled, because her eyes crinkled above her mask. “Meant in the nicest possible way.”

“Tacking that on the end doesn’t erase the barb, you know. Just own the fact you fired it my way, no apologies.”

She laughed as though she had plenty of barbs she could land on him but chose not to, then sobered. Two men carted Zoe past them down the gravel path to the ambulance waiting in Haven Avenue.

“I always wonder how much they suffered,” she whispered.

“Tormenting yourself with it won’t do you any favours. And they suffered a lot.”

“Did you have to go there?”

“What, by telling the truth? Of *course* they’ve all suffered. The Strangler *wants* them to.”

“Why, though?”

*Why indeed.* “I gather you haven’t found anything of importance or you’d have contacted me.”

“Just the usual litter,” she said, “so the Pass can reopen once us lot have cleared out. We can only hope one bit of rubbish is the Strangler’s this time. Then we might get DNA. If he’s not in the database, at least we have something to compare it to if a suspect without any priors is brought in.”

“Unlikely. He’s eluded everyone so far.”

“He’ll slip up somewhere. They always do.”

“Not always. All those unsolved murders, killers walking around living their best lives, no one any the wiser. He’ll get off on that, knowing what he’s done and no one suspecting it’s him. Bianca came up with a revised profile earlier. Family man, nobody anyone would imagine was the Strangler. Able to blend in.”

“Family man? What gave her that idea?”

He shrugged. “I don’t know how profiling works. Mind you, she’s cocked up in the past, and the fact she’s revised it

means she might be stabbing in the dark to cover her arse in case she's muffed up again."

"Why use her, then?"

He snorted. "She's one of Dorchester's darlings."

"Say no more."

He didn't, instead lifting a hand in a silent goodbye and walking away. He'd nip back to the station, debrief with the team, then go home. Dorchester would likely remain at the helm anyway, overseeing anything important. Not Monroe. Despite it being a murder case, sometimes, there was fuck all to be done that couldn't wait until the morning.

# Chapter Thirty-Four

## SANDRA

Pleased with how the new rug looked, Sandra reversed to the living room doorway to view it from there. Yes, she'd made a good choice, a nice fluffy pile, and the beige tones complemented the cream carpet. Once she had the spotlights put in, the room would be exactly how she wanted it. She hadn't consulted Roman about that, he wasn't interested in home decorating, and if she paid for it out of her own wages, what the fuck did it have to do with him anyway?

At one time, she'd have told him, she'd have felt it *was* his business, seeing as it was his home, too. Not anymore. She planned quite a few changes elsewhere, making the house more hers than his, considering she'd made up her mind that she'd be living here alone. He had to leave, but they needed 'the conversation' first. She'd been removing all the tat recently, preferring the minimalist look these days, and he hadn't even noticed. Maybe he wouldn't notice the spotlights either.

She'd booked tomorrow off for a doctor's appointment, so she'd be home in the morning for when the electrician she'd messaged on Facebook arrived to give her a quote. Owen had sent her photos of the types of spotlights he already had in stock, and she'd chosen some similar to what she'd seen in the magazine.

She backed into the hallway and was about to turn and go into the kitchen when Roman came in through the front door. He carried his suit jacket over one arm and grinned at her, clearly thinking everything was okay between them because of last night's sex. She couldn't bring herself to smile back at first but decided she'd play his game until she told him how

she really felt. She stretched a smile out, feeling wooden and deceitful, and got on with the evening, dishing up dinner and talking about being questioned by the police.

That was safer ground by far.

# Chapter Thirty-Five

## DOWN MEMORY LANE

Monroe sighed at the obvious emotional state of the team. One of their own had copped it, and that never went down well. Everyone, apart from him, had wet eyes and downturned lips. He wouldn't cry in front of anyone, and besides, *someone* had to remain calm and collected. Even Dorchester had damp eyelashes and wasn't much good to anyone, his rage overtaking him. He currently ranted about the press having a field day with this victim and expressed his hope that the powers that be might well let them have a few officers from another division and a bit more of a budget to catch the Strangler now an officer had been killed.

That wouldn't fly with the watching public, for all the stops to be pulled just because an officer was deceased. Dorchester clearly wasn't thinking properly.

Two PCs had gone to inform Fran's parents. Had she been a member of Monroe's team, like Claire for example, he'd have taken Kershaw with him to do it himself, but Fran had officially worked under Ingrid Clemmons in forensics, who no doubt wept over the body right this second.

He went to the table at the side of the incident room and prepared drinks for everyone. It would give them time to compose themselves, gather their wits before he and Dorchester actioned what had to be done next, then Monroe would visit the crime scene himself. He carried a full tray over to the desk in front of the whiteboard and distributed the mugs of tea and coffee.

People sipped. Contemplated. Likely thought of how no one was safe from the man who'd been terrorising the town for

some time. First the rapes, now the rapes and murders. Fran, the third murder victim, had liaised with Monroe's team and generally tried to make herself indispensable. *No one* was indispensable, he'd told her that, but she'd liked proving a point so had upped her game to insufferable levels, annoying many of his lot. The majority of the team had tired of her desire to be the best, but as others would see it, that didn't mean she deserved to die.

Dorchester had thankfully shut up while sipping his coffee, but he placed the mug on a desk and opened his mouth to launch into another tirade. "I'm telling you, when I get my hands on whoever did this... Fucking bastard. How *dare* he take one of us?"

"How dare he take *anyone*," Kershaw pointed out, always eager to mention that *all* victims were equally as important.

"What's he playing at?" Dorchester raged.

Kershaw stretched his legs out under his desk. "Showing us he can take anybody he wants, even the police?"

Dorchester nodded. "Could be."

As usual, Monroe played Devil's advocate. "At the risk of sounding like a cracked record, one-track assumptions don't do us any favours. We have to look at several reasons, not just one. Like I've said from when the rapes started, we can't allow ourselves to focus on a single train of thought until we have evidence to back that thought up. We don't go hurtling down a certain road, giving it our all, when there are other ones to navigate."

"Mmm," Dorchester said, "and that's all very well, but several investigation streams at once means more time lost, more manpower to carry it out."

"And as I've said before, focusing on one thing means we only have to backtrack when we find out we've gone down the wrong alley, so that's the same time and manpower as we'd have used anyway. And isn't that what an inquiry entails, following *all* avenues? It's only the bloody budget cuts that have changed the way we work."

Dorchester sighed. “Why are you always right? Why do you have an answer to everything?”

“Because I hedge my bets. Factor in all scenarios, not just the one we *think* we should deal with. We can’t afford to get egg on our faces, not now. I’d rather spread our resources out than home in on something that might not go anywhere.”

“But that makes us look like we’re not coming up with any leads quickly enough,” Dorchester said. “And I need leads. The *super* needs leads. If I don’t give her something soon... God, she’s like a cat on a hot tin roof.”

“I get it,” Monroe said, “I really do, but going with Kershaw’s idea of the Strangler wanting to show us he can fuck with one of our own, when he might just have picked her because he fancied her... D’you see? You don’t know how his mind works. He could have a multitude of reasons for selecting Fran.”

“We know a few of them for a fact, though,” Neil said. “One, she lived alone. Two, she stuck to a routine that he’d probably been watching. Three, few friends, her family living elsewhere. Four, she’s got brown hair. Five, he chooses women who are easy to attack.”

“True,” Monroe said. “But as for *why* he picks who he does... How could you possibly know that? The reason could be a link to his childhood, or his life now, or his plans for the future. It could be an obscure reason. Take the Puppy Killer. He shot people’s dogs in the head because he stubbed his toe on the coffee table one morning. That was his excuse, the reason he gave. There’s no way we could have predicted a damaged toe was why he did it.”

“But it was the incidents *before* the toe that were the real reason,” Claire said. “The toe broke the camel’s back, but the load beneath it was what he felt was too heavy to carry, so we *could* have predicted that—life getting on top of him is an easy assumption to make when someone snaps like that, which is what happened in the Puppy case.”

“You’re missing my point,” Monroe said, “that we can’t sit here and *accurately* predict because the reason might be off-

the-wall, but let's not fall out over it.”

“You're just being pedantic,” Dorchester said. “And all this chat isn't getting us anywhere.” He swigged more coffee. “Right, everyone else, you know what your role is. It's not like we haven't done this before. Get on with it. Monroe, I'm going to the Pass with you.”

Monroe nodded and glanced at Kershaw who would usually accompany him. “Are you coming as well?”

Kershaw gave Dorchester the side-eye. “If I'm allowed.”

Dorchester huffed. “Of *course* you are. The only reason I'm going is to show my face in case the journalists are there.”

Neil jostled his mouse to bring his screen to life. “That's a risk, isn't it, sir?”

Dorchester gaped at him. “What are you guffing on about?”

“You didn't go to the other murder scenes. If you show up at Fran's, they'll write a story about how you're only interested this time because the victim is one of us.”

*Thank God someone had the balls to say it.*

Dorchester tutted and stared at Monroe. “I see he's been learning from you. No tunnel vision, thinking outside the box.”

Monroe smiled. “But he's right.”

Dorchester kicked the wicker rubbish bin, the contents spilling onto the floor. “I know he is. Aww, just fuck off and get on, the lot of you. I need a fag.”

He stormed out.

Monroe smiled at Neil. “Thanks for that.”

Neil grinned. “I didn't think you'd want him breathing down your neck.”

“No, absolutely not. Come on,” Monroe said to Kershaw. “We'd best get down there, else *we'll* be in the paper with a headline that says we took our time getting to the scene. Those sods will print anything to make us look bad.”



“I can’t handle this.” Kershaw wandered towards the opening of the tent, seemingly drunk on the visual of Fran’s body. He weaved across the undergrowth then burst outside.

Monroe remained impassive.

Ingrid sighed beside him. “You know I always give it my all when someone’s killed, but *this* time...”

“Hmm, everyone will be giving that little bit extra. Will it work, though? Will all of us putting in more effort make a difference?”

“I pray it does. Fran was an integral part of my team. She’s usually here in these situations, with me.”

“She *is* here with you,” Monroe pointed out, “just not in her usual capacity.”

Ingrid tutted. “That’s not funny.”

“Jokes are a way of coping.”

“They could also make people think you don’t care.”

“Oh, I care about a lot of things.”

“This is too raw to be making cracks when it’s Fran—or anyone for that matter. Have some respect.” Ingrid stared down at the body. Her eyes narrowed. “That’s new.”

“What is?”

“She’s got a long thorn sticking up out of her dressing gown. None of the others did.”

Monroe studied it. “Could have been from where she was brought here. Her dressing gown snagged on some hedges or whatever.”

“But what if it was *placed*?” She turned to a team member collecting a cigarette butt from between blades of grass. “Now the photos have been taken, can you remove that thorn there, please, and get it down to the lab straight away. It could have fingerprints on it.”

“Why would it?” Monroe asked. “It’s clear he’s used gloves before.”

“People slip up.”

“But on something so important?” he asked. “No, I don’t buy that.”

“It doesn’t matter *what* you buy. I’m doing my job. And as for you saying it could have stabbed into her from passing a bush... Aren’t you always telling everyone to look for other angles?”

“I just did by suggesting the hedge in the first place, but I get you were trying to make a dig. It didn’t work, just so you know.”

“God, you’re infuriating.”

He chuckled. “Okay, then, if he placed the thorn, tell me why you think he didn’t do it with the others.”

“I have no idea. That’s something you’d have to ask him when you catch up with him.”

Monroe studied Fran. All of her self-importance had been stripped out of her, leaving behind a pasty-grey shell. She’d always been a bolshy sort, sure of herself, but he had to admit, she’d been a good forensic copper. Diligent. Capable. But...

“She never did become the one person to find the lead that led to any arrests,” he mused.

“No.”

“Someone else always found the clue first.”

Ingrid sighed. “Are you seriously bringing up flaws when she’s lying there in front of us, dead?”

“Just making an observation. If you’d allowed me to finish instead of jumping the gun, then I’d have been able to add that it must be a horrible thing to know, when you’re dying, that you haven’t achieved everything you wanted to in life.”

Ingrid tutted again. “Do you *really* believe that would have been one of her last thoughts? When that...that *bastard* had his hands around her throat, she thought: *Oh dear, I didn’t manage*

*to do this or that?* Christ, man, you really need to think before you speak. What a bloody ridiculous thing to say.”

“It’s better than getting distraught.”

“Are you saying I am?”

He raised his eyebrows. “Well, *aren’t* you?”

“Now isn’t the time to push my buttons, Monroe. I’m not in the mood. And where the *fucking hell* is Gruff?”

“Maybe he’s got someone else on his table to deal with first. The Home Office path might turn up before him this time.”

“Well, *someone* needs to come, I don’t care who it is.” She folded her arms, her protective suit crackling. “I’m going to have a hard time finding a replacement for Fran.”

“*Now* who’s being unfeeling when she’s lying on the ground in front of us—you’re already thinking of her successor.”

“Bog off.”

Monroe smiled under his mask. “That’s not a bad idea to be fair.”

He left the tent and found Kershaw standing by a tree talking to a SOCO who crouched to pick up a sweet wrapper with a pair of tweezers.

“All right now?” Monroe asked.

“Better.”

“We’ll wait for Gruff, see what he has to say, then go. People to speak to an’ all that.”

Kershaw nodded. “It’ll be weird asking for statements from those we work with, like we do with other people’s friends and colleagues when they’ve died.”

Monroe sniffed. “Even weirder that someone will have to speak to *us* about our interactions with Fran. It’ll probably be Dorchester.”

“Jesus.”

Monroe laughed. “He’s not the most tactful of people, is he. Still, with the amount of times he bangs on about manpower and loss of hours, he’ll keep it short and sweet. I’ve got nothing to say about Fran anyway. I didn’t have much to do with her at work.”

“Me neither.” Kershaw stared over at the tent. “We need to get our heads out of our arses and catch this bloke.”

“And we also have to consider the fact we may never know who it is.” There, he’d finally said it.

“What did you have to go and say that for?”

“Because it’s a fact. I’ve decided burying your head in the sand does no good. Face it, he might get away with it. He’s done a good job so far.”

Kershaw clenched his gloved hands into fists. “Not if I have anything to do with it, he won’t.”

# Chapter Thirty-Six

## OWEN

Monday wasn't his favourite day of the week, considering he'd had the luxury of a weekend off. He didn't want to leave that lazy, laid-back feeling behind, but work beckoned, and his first port of call was to a woman called Sandra who'd contacted him on Facebook yesterday. He had the spotlights in the van, just in case she agreed to his quote, and he could get them put up in no time, seeing as he'd brought Liam, his apprentice, with him.

He parked outside her house, leaving Liam laughing at TikTok videos on his phone, and approached the front door, eyeing up the outside lamp on the wall and the wires hanging from the bottom of the broken casing. Dangerous, that, if it rained. He tsked, thinking he'd point it out to her and offer to fix it for a fiver.

He knocked, and the door opened, a flustered-looking older woman staring at him, her greying eyebrows knitted.

"Owen Bateman," he said. "The electrician?"

"Oh yes. Bugger, you're early..."

*Only ten minutes.* "Sorry. I can sit in the van until nine if you like?"

"No, no, come in. It's just I haven't had my first coffee yet. I can be a bit of a snippy cow without my caffeine."

*Fuck that.* "Honestly, I can wait..."

"No, don't be daft. It shouldn't take you long to sort a quote, should it?"

“Nah.” He followed her inside and did the necessary in the living room. “Do you have floorboards or plywood upstairs?”

“Floorboards,” she said.

“Good. That makes things easier.”

“What do you mean?” she asked.

“We’ll need to do the wiring from upstairs.”

“Oh, that’ll be Kallie’s room. She’s moved out, but her stuff’s still in there, the bed and whatever. Will that be okay?”

“Yeah, should be fine.”

She explained where she wanted the lights, six in all, and he totted up the cost for parts and labour then told her what it was.

“That going to be okay?”

“Oh, it’s cheaper than I thought. Brilliant! When can you do it?”

“This morning? If not, the next slot is Wednesday afternoon.”

“Today will be fine. You said *we*. Is someone with you?”

“Yeah, my apprentice, Liam.”

“Would you both like a coffee?”

“Please. Milk and two sugars. I’ll just go and get him.”

Owen left the house and tapped on the passenger-side window. He jerked his thumb for Liam to get out, then went to the back of the van and removed the spotlights and toolbox in case he needed something that wasn’t on his utility belt. Liam tailed him into the house, and they got on with measuring out to Sandra’s specifications, double-checking with her that they’d got it right.

Later, coffee inhaled and circles cut out of the ceiling, Liam remained downstairs ready to climb the stepladder and hold a spotlight in place while Owen went upstairs to lift the floorboards. In the bedroom, he gauged where the first light would go and moved a fluffy rug out of the way. He frowned.

They were proper floorboards, not the laminate click-together kind, and it looked like one was loose. Did this Kallie, he assumed Sandra's daughter, have a secret hideaway under there?

He crouched and, using his chisel off his belt, prised the board up. He stared into the hole and frowned again. White material with brown stains on it. Was that someone's shitty kecks? Why hide them there? Again with the chisel, he moved the garment to the side. The circular cut-out for the spotlight gave him a partial view of the living room carpet and Liam's ear.

Something yellow poked out from beneath the next board, more fabric, and Owen lifted that slat of wood and placed it behind him.

Was that used condoms? And a knife? And *knickers*? He worked out two men's ties had been coiled into rolls, and the corner of a spiral-bound notebook peeked out from under them. He shuffled back, unsure what to do, his heart thundering. He could wire the lights, put the boards back, and say no more about it; after all, this Kallie must have hidden these things for a reason, the weirdo, but... The blade had what he'd first thought was rust on it, but he reckoned it was dried blood. He slid the chisel beneath what appeared to be a shoulder strap now he came to study it properly, and lifted it out of the hole. He stood, and the material unravelled. A nightie of some sort? The kind with lace edging the bra section. What he'd thought was shit was quite clearly old blood, and it was in the stomach area, the fabric hardened by it.

He dropped the chemise and chisel and edged backwards, his arsehole clenching through fear. He'd had many a strange find in his time as an electrician, but none that so clearly screamed MURDER! His mind whirred with images of a woman being stabbed, maybe raped, what with those condoms and the evidence being stashed under the floorboards.

Was this Kallie some sort of *nutter*? Was Sandra?

"Fuck me..."

He sent a message to Liam.

**Owen:** DON'T SAY ANYTHING TO THE OLD DEAR, JUST COME UPSTAIRS.

He turned to stare out onto the landing. Liam's head appeared through the banister railings, and Owen beckoned for him to come into the room.

"Shut the door behind you, but use your elbow. Don't touch the handle," he whispered.

"Eh? Why can't I touch—"

"Just do it, will you?"

Liam shut the door.

Owen used his chisel to raise the chemise by the strap again.

"What the...?" Liam's eyes widened, and he stepped closer. "Is that...blood?"

"God knows, but look at the other stuff in the hole."

Liam moved to it and peered down. "Jesus Christ... She doesn't seem off, the woman. She's like my mum. Normal. Why would she have this lot here?"

"Dunno, but what about this Kallie? It was her room. Sandra might not even know about it. She can't do, else she wouldn't have let us up here."

Liam frowned. "Who's Kallie? And how do *you* know it's her room?"

"Bloody hell, because Sandra said!"

"Oh. Is she...is it the same Kallie we know, d'you reckon?"

Owen thought for a moment. "There's two."

"The one with the dad who always dropped her off and picked her up, like she wasn't old enough to do it on her own. She went out with Matthew Draper for a bit. That Kallie."

Owen accessed his Facebook messages to recall Sandra's surname. "Ah yeah. Her. Then this stuff can't be hers. She's too nice for this kind of thing. Unless she's got a screw loose



that we don't know about. We're going to have to tell her mum. Phone the police."

"You reckon it's got something to do with a murder?"

"It might not be anything like that, but the blood...and there's slits in the nightie."

Liam swallowed hard. "Shitting hell..."

"Go and get Sandra."

"Why do *I* have to do it?"

"Because I bloody well asked you to!"

Liam tutted and used his sleeve on the handle to twist it. He left the room.

Owen, the chemise still dangling from the chisel blade, studied the slits. Knife rips? The knife in the floor hole?

Footsteps pounded on the stairs, and a flushed Sandra came in, a pale Liam hovering behind her.

"What's going on?" She caught sight of the chemise. "What... Oh God, what's *that*?"

"I found it between the joists," Owen said. "And there's some other stuff as well." He pointed to the hole.

Sandra stared that way. "My knife!"

Owen dropped the chemise and backed away from her. *She* was the nutter? He glanced at Liam who'd shot out onto the landing, his phone in hand.

"What's it doing in there?" she asked.

"I don't know, do I, but we should phone the police."

Sandra nodded. "It's okay, I know someone who'll deal with this. Can you still put the spotlights in, though?"

"I dunno... I mean, if this is evidence, I don't want to touch anything."

"I've got some gloves... It's just, I really need the lights done. My husband won't like you leaving the holes in the

ceiling. I'll explain to the police you were here and it's got nothing to do with you."

Owen didn't particularly want to stick his hand into that hole and do all the wiring with the knickers and whatever so close by. "Um, I'm not comfortable with that. I've got to feed wires along and everything. I risk touching the...that stuff."

"Can you at least attach the spots so I don't have holes? You can come back and do the wiring another day."

Owen shook his head. "Even with gloves, I still risk touching it with my bare arms."

"Okay. Okay. I'll...I'll sort all this." She fled downstairs, crying.

Owen stared at Liam. *We should just go...* "Sod it. We're not doing anything until the police have been." He stuck his chisel in his tool belt and led the way downstairs, following the sound of Sandra talking. He found her in the kitchen on her mobile, her back to him.

"I need to speak to you face to face," she said. "The electrician's found something horrible in Kallie's room." A pause. "Yes, it's a police matter. God, it's so bloody awful..."

Owen waited for her to end the call. "If you can just pay for the spotlights, I'll leave them here. Come back another day once the police have finished. Will you pass my name and number to them? They might want a statement."

She nodded. "Give me your bank account number. I'll pay you for the whole job. Maybe you can come on Saturday? I'm at work all week after today, but the police should be gone by then. If not, I'll let you know."

Owen gave her his details and waited for the funds to clear in his banking app. Relieved he didn't have to stay, he grabbed the toolbox and left, Liam behind him, and they got in the van.

Owen scrubbed a hand over his face. "That's shit me right up, that has."

Liam stared ahead down the street. "What if it's like a Fred West house?"

Owen shivered. “Pack it in.” He switched the engine on. “I don’t know about you, but I’m going home for a bit to calm down. I’ll drop you off then pick you up for the job this afternoon.”

He drove away, his mind showing him visuals of the items in that hole on a loop, and he wished he’d never taken that bloody job on.

# Chapter Thirty-Seven

## MARTIN

Martin couldn't believe what Sandra had just told him on the phone. Something horrible in Kallie's room? A police matter? *What?* He'd only just got to the allotment after posting his anonymous letter about the underage girls from the links. He'd walked here to get some exercise and wasn't prepared to trudge all the way to Sandra's, only to have to return afterwards. This was his time to think about his life and how it had all gone so wrong. To take some accountability. He'd told Sandra to come here. He'd give her advice then let her get on with it. But if it was something the police needed to know about, why was she telling him? Why not just phone them?

*Maybe Adam hid a load of drugs under there and she doesn't want anyone knowing.*

If that was the case, why hadn't she just flushed them down the loo and kept her gob shut?

He opened his deckchair and sat, unscrewing his Thermos and pouring a cup of tea. His head ached. It seemed the past couple of days he'd gone into an alternate reality, where his old life had been turned upside down and he now lived in some kind of hell. Now he had Sandra to cope with on top of worrying about the police discovering it had been him who'd sent the information on the minors through the post. Then there were his daughters, who he still hadn't spoken to about Rachel leaving. She must have done it, as he'd woken to several WhatsApp pings this morning, the preview asking, **WHAT THE HELL IS GOING ON, DAD?** with a broken-heart emoji beside it. He hadn't had the guts to open the chat to see what else had been said, didn't have it in him to face it yet. He'd

sent them his new number yesterday, lied and said he'd lost his other phone.

He sipped his tea and tried to take his mind off things by watching old Taffy digging up a lettuce or two. The old boy gave his produce to a couple of families in his street who'd hit hard times. The kids loved his strawberries in particular, and he made out he wasn't a softie, but buying them a tub of ice cream to go with them said otherwise.

Martin sighed. Would he become a Taffy? Someone so eager for interaction and human contact that he gave his food away? All he could see in front of him was a lonely life without Rachel in it, maybe the occasional visit from Alice and Emma, and a drink down the Orange once in a while with Roman, plus the chats they had of a Saturday at the allotment if Roman wasn't doing overtime. How shit was that?

The rumble of a car engine drew his attention. Probably Sandra. She appeared at the diamond-wire gate, and he reluctantly got up and walked over there to unlock it. Everyone who rented a patch had a key to the padlock, and as Martin was security conscious, he always clipped it closed when he came here, unlike some of the others he could mention. He held his finger to his lips to warn her to keep her mouth shut. Taffy wasn't the only one here today. Roy and Hettie Haverstock potted around on their double plot, and Hettie was a right nosy cow. If they spoke within her earshot, the news would fly around the estate in no time.

Martin led the way to his shed and, once Sandra had entered, he secured the door and gestured for her to sit.

"What's the matter?" he asked.

She sank onto the armchair. "I've had electricians round to put some spotlights in the living room, and one of them found some things under the floorboards in Kallie's room. I *said* this on the phone."

"What, like a secret diary or something? A stash of Adam's drugs?" He chuckled.

“No. A knife, looks like it’s got blood on it, and it’s one that went missing from my block a while ago. At the time, I asked Roman if he’d seen it, but he said no. Then there’s this nightie with dried brown blood on it, and a yellow cloth that also went missing. I asked him about that, too, and he claimed he hadn’t seen it. And a notebook. Ties. Knickers. Filthy used condoms...”

Martin’s stomach griped. “Are you saying *Roman* put them there?”

That man was the last person he would suspect of hiding those sorts of things. Now their son, on the other hand... Adam had rebelled and been in trouble with the law in his teens until Roman had told him how his behaviour could affect his career. Roman couldn’t afford for his son’s stupid shit to get in the newspapers. It had all been smoothed over, hushed up, and Adam had behaved after that, but... Did he have it in him to hide stuff away like that? To have raped and killed women? Because that’s where Martin’s thoughts had gone. To the Strangler.

“Who else would it be?” Sandra said.

“Adam?” he suggested.

She frowned. “But he wasn’t living with us when the knife and cloth went missing.”

He noted she hadn’t said it couldn’t be him. Or hadn’t it sunk in yet that he’d accused her precious boy? “So? Both your kids still have a key.”

She paled. “No, it wouldn’t be my Adam.”

“You didn’t think he would sell wraps of cocaine but he did...”

“He was bullied into it by that lad, you *know* that!”

“*Roman*, though? Really?” Martin wanted to laugh. Her accusation was outrageous.

“Will you come and see it all? Please? Or should I go and speak to someone else?”

Martin would be the best one to deal with this—well, deal with Sandra at any rate. If, by some horrible miracle, Roman *had* stashed those things and got arrested, Martin couldn't afford for him to open his mouth about the chat group. Now Rachel knew about it, he was desperate to turn over a new leaf, be who he used to be—someone who wouldn't put a foot wrong. He could still help Sandra, just not let Roman know he'd dropped him in it.

A plan formed, and he nodded to himself.

“I'll come.”

In Kallie's room, Martin held the chemise up using Sandra's rolling pin. It was clear to him a knife or similar implement had ripped the material. His mind went straight to Louise Foll. *Was* it possible Roman was the Strangler? Martin couldn't wrap his head around that. The bloke was straight as a die.

*No fucking way. No.*

*Or am I guilty of not facing what could be the truth because he's my mate?*

He placed the nightie back on the floor where he'd found it and crouched to peer into the hole. A bright-yellow cleaning cloth, bunched up. What appeared to be knickers. Used condoms. A knife. All the other stuff Sandra had mentioned.

His head spun. “Erm, I'm going to have to get help, I can't deal with this on my own. In the meantime, I'll drop that nightie in the hole and put the boards back. Do you have any gloves I can use?”

Sandra nodded. “There's a new packet of Marigolds under the bathroom sink in the cabinet.”

“Right, I'm going to hide one of those condoms under the insulation in case Roman comes to collect it all. If he disposes of everything, we've got nothing on him. We need to have some evidence left behind, okay? You go and get the gloves, and I'll nip home to pick up a camera.”

“What sort of camera?”

“A video one. You know me, I like to keep Rachel and the girls safe. I’ve got them in every room on the windowsills, pointing into the gardens so I can see anyone approaching the house. If I hear any noise, I look on my phone because they’re linked.” Sadly, they didn’t pan far enough for him to see down the back alley or into the street at the front, but those views hadn’t been what he’d wanted at the time. He wished he’d chosen the panoramic option now. Maybe he’d have seen Roman—or Adam—going in and out carrying those hidden items. Maybe he’d have seen Zoe on Saturday night. If he set it up in here, he’d have proof of who’d put them between the joists when they came to look at what he was convinced were trophies. “They’re only cheap efforts but they do the trick.”

He went home, unplugged the one in the back bedroom, and took it round to Sandra’s. It looked like a large Cluedo figure, Miss White, except the ‘head’ had a grey lens in the front. It could be mistaken for a strange ornament. But would Roman clock it and know it hadn’t been there previously?

Martin set it up on Kallie’s chest of drawers between her line of old college textbooks and adjusted the angle of the head. On his phone, he checked it pointed directly at the hole. Satisfied he’d see whoever lifted the boards if Roman or Adam—or someone else entirely—came here, Martin put the gloves on, hid the condom, then put the nightie and floorboards back. Sandra dragged a rug over them.

“Keep this to yourself. Don’t mention it to Roman or Adam. No one, got it? Then once I’ve been to see someone, I’ll tell you what’s going to happen moving forward.”

She bobbed her head. “What if he...he killed those women?”

“Then we’ll know if he lifts the floorboards because you’ll tell me when he’s home and whether he comes upstairs. With holes in your living room ceiling, he’s going to panic. When you message me, I’ll look at the camera on my phone when I get an alert and hit the record button.”

“Why can’t we just go to the police?”



Martin couldn't risk confessing to her that he was too afraid of being arrested himself for a completely different crime. "I can't tell you that, but trust me, all right?"

He left the house and, much as he didn't want to, considering he'd punched the bloke in the nose, he got in his car and rang John.

At the back of the Orange in a secluded booth, John glowered. "You've got a cheek, asking me for help after what you did to me."

"I know, it's well rude, but I can't trust anyone else. Well, I could, but I don't know if they'd go running to Roman."

"Dave, you mean."

"Yeah."

"So what's happened?"

Martin filled him in.

John whisper-shouted, "You fucking what? *Roman*?"

Martin understood the man's shock. He'd been grappling with it ever since he'd been to Sandra's. He'd told him everything, even down to installing the camera. "I know, but who else could it be? Adam?"

"That lad hasn't got the balls for anything like rape and murder. A wet lettuce, that one. That's the only reason I helped cover up the drugs charges. It was obvious he'd been roped into it."

"It *has* to be Roman, then."

John chuckled, but it didn't sound like he thought this was even remotely funny, more as though he struggled with seeing their friend in such a bad light. "He seems so...straight. Well, not including the stuff he said on the chat, that's different. But people are good at hiding things so..."

“Maybe he’s got a dark passenger. Keeps it hidden. I don’t want to believe that, and I bet you don’t either, but... I mean, think about what he could do to us if he finds out we’ve rumbled him and doxed him in. Can we do it so no one knows it’s us?”

John’s face reddened. “Now I get why you’re so antsy. Because of the chat group.”

“Yeah, Roman will get us and Dave in the shit if his back’s against the wall—he isn’t above shifting blame, you know that. Look what he was prepared to happen for Adam. We have to make sure Roman doesn’t say anything about us. I doubt you fancy getting nicked for underage porn any more than I do.”

“It’s all very well setting up a camera and recording him adding stuff or having a pervy gander at what’s already there, but... If I go into work and tell my boss, he’s going to want to bring Roman in, then we run the risk of him dropping us in it for watching a few kinky films and saying derogatory things. I can’t lose my job over that. Dave will lose his an’ all. It’s all right for you, you’re retired. And Debbie will go nuts if she hears about that chat group, not to mention her family will cut my knackers off. They’ll see it as me cheating, even though I haven’t touched another bird. Shit.”

“Maybe tell Roman we know he’s the Strangler and warn him to pack it in?” Martin didn’t like that idea, but he was desperate, and throwing suggestions at John would maybe ease his frustration.

“Killers can’t just stop once they’ve got a taste for it. The proof of the pudding is he stopped for about six months and now he’s started again with Zoe.”

“Some stop for good.” Martin massaged his temples. “I’m struggling with it being him. The Strangler’s killed several women and raped quite a few. Do we warn him to stop, then carry on as normal, pretending we don’t know who hurt them? Can you do that?”

“I’m a bent copper, I won’t deny that, but there’s bent and then there’s savage. This is too far across the line for me. I

don't know if I could live with myself by helping him get away with it. Then again...the thought of him mentioning The Gang and the Collins lot having a go at me... Maybe we need to be selfish and save ourselves no matter what our consciences say."

"But he might not get away with it. Look how these things work. People get caught *years* down the line. What if we suggest he moves on? Things are rocky with him and Sandra anyway, so if he leaves his job and gets one elsewhere, fucks off to live in another town, we've at least got him away from Simwell. Sandra will be happier, I know that much."

"But it doesn't solve us knowing who the killer is and not doing anything about it. The families deserve justice. And he might start up wherever he goes to."

"I know, but... Okay, how about this. What if we take that nightie and plant it somewhere else, then phone in anonymously, saying where it is. Maybe put it in his office at work."

"We could do, but the nightie might not be enough. His DNA may not be present. The condoms, though, and that notebook..."

Martin thought about putting on Sandra's Marigolds and picking up the disgusting items. It had been bad enough when he'd hidden that condom. He shuddered. "I'm ashamed to admit I want to save my own skin more than anything. I don't want to be named and shamed in the papers as being a pervert."

"Me neither."

"The families don't know who the killer is, so what difference will it make if they never know? If Roman moves away, problem solved. I can't believe I said that. Of *course* it'll make a difference." He wanted to cry. Proper tears. "I've been mates with him for years. He's had my back at work more times than I can count. Never have I suspected him of doing anything wrong until that chat group got set up. The same went for you and Dave. I'll be honest and say the stuff that came up on the page shocked the shit out of me."

John laughed darkly. “That alone should tell you he isn’t averse to doing things he shouldn’t. You’re the only one who wouldn’t get in the shit if that chat was viewed because you’ve never said anything incriminating or derogatory. If he views women in that light, why *couldn’t* he be the killer?”

“That’s like saying you or Dave could be! You two haven’t exactly kept your filthy thoughts to yourselves, have you? Both of you secretly see women in a bad way.”

John nodded. “I see your point, but there’s no need to get aerated. Keep your hair on.” He fiddled with a beer mat. “The only other option is to shut him up permanently so he can’t hurt anyone else, including us.”

“No. No fucking way.” Martin leaned forward and said quietly, “I will *not* be involved in murdering him.”

“Who said murder?”

“What then?”

“He can’t speak without a tongue, and he can’t write without fingers and toes.”

“*What?* I’m not doing that!”

“I’m not going down for that ponce. It’s only a laugh, us lot in the group. We’re not hurting women.”

“But *he* could have! What if it’s a direct result of him watching those videos? What if it woke something nasty inside him? It affected me—I’ve been addicted to porn ever since. What have the bad films got on them? Are they snuff ones or what?”

“Some are.”

“There you go, then. He’s acted out fantasies and whatever. And what if they bring in one of those devices where he can use his head to tap words out on a device? He can still dob us in that way.”

“Then I’ll make sure he’s brain damaged. Debbie’s oldest brother will help me out.”

“Are you *serious*, bringing someone else in on this?”

John glared at him. “Do I look like I’m fucking laughing, pal? I *won’t* go down for him, do you hear me? And if that means using Callum to do it, then I will. You have no idea what he gets up to, do you? Callum should be in prison for life for what he’s done. He’s a master at his trade.”

Martin swallowed, sick to his stomach. “What trade is that, murderer?”

“Amongst other things. Are you still in on this or what?”

“Let me get proof it’s Roman first. It could be Adam.”

“You’ll know from the writing in the notebook. Collect that and the condoms so we have an advantage, *then* get video proof. Now drink your pint and stop being a baby. All you need to do is make sure Sandra keeps her trap shut about the shit under the floorboards. Think you can manage that?”

Martin nodded, but he didn’t think he could do that at all. He doubted Sandra would keep her mouth closed, not on this. He’d have to frighten her into keeping quiet.

*Bollocks.*

# Chapter Thirty-Eight

## SANDRA

Why had Roman come home for lunch? As far as she was aware, he never usually did that. Was he ill? Or had he taken a leaf out of Martin's book and installed cameras so knew the stuff under the floorboards had been discovered? Had he been *spying* on her? Jesus Christ, would he hurt her? Try to shut her up? Had he seen Martin leaving just now with the condoms and notebook in two of their sandwich bags?

Roman stared at her across the kitchen, one hand on the fridge, one on his hip. She wrung her hands then stopped herself. He'd pick up on it if she kept doing that, ask her what she was worried about. She stuck her arms behind her back and linked her fingers, desperate to contact Martin.

"Unusual for you to be home at this time," she said.

"How would *you* know? You're normally at work."

Was it her imagination, or was he brusque? He'd tried it on with her last night, but she'd rebuffed him. Maybe that was why he had a cob on.

"Pardon me for making conversation," she said.

He eyed her. "Why are *you* at home?"

"Aren't I allowed a day off without telling you?"

His infernal smirk spread. "Aren't I allowed to nip home for lunch without telling you?"

"Oh, so we're back to that, are we? Didn't take long. Just fuck off with your mind games."

"Sandra..."

A warning for her to stop being rude? He'd never liked her talking back. Sticking up for herself. Well, she'd been doing it a lot lately to wind him up, to make him question their relationship and leave her so she didn't have to kick him out. So much for their sexual encounter fixing things. He'd reverted to being an arsehole already.

She sighed. "I'm not having a row, so if you want one, go and find someone else to pick on." Maybe that hadn't been the wisest thing to say in the circumstances. If he *was* the Strangler, did he take his frustrations out on other women because he couldn't rape and kill *her*? Horrified by that thought, she rushed to the toilet and locked the door. Took her phone out of her pocket and, hands shaking, accessed WhatsApp.

**Sandra:** HE'S HOME. WHY IS HE HOME? HAS HE BEEN DOING THAT RECENTLY?

Quickly, she switched her mobile to silent.

**Martin:** CALM DOWN. ACT NORMAL. AND I DON'T KNOW IF HE'S BEEN NIPPING HOME. I'M AT THE ALLOTMENT MOST OF THE TIME.

**Sandra:** I HAVE TO GO OUT IN A MINUTE. DOCTOR'S APPOINTMENT.

**Martin:** OKAY. WATCHING THE FOOTAGE NOW, JUST IN CASE.

She stuffed her phone away and flushed the loo. Washed her hands. She left the toilet and bumped straight into Roman. "Oh, for God's *sake*! What are you *doing*, standing there?"

"Waiting for you." He scowled at her.

"What for?"

"Why are there holes in the ceiling?"

*Here we go. He'll have a pop because I didn't consult him.*

She pushed his chest so he stepped back, cringing at having to touch him. Even the heat from his body on her fingertips revolted her. "Oh, that. Spotlights. The electrician's coming back to finish them on Saturday."

"Spotlights? What for?"

“Ambience.” Had that sounded stupid?

“What?”

“Mood lighting. It’s a thing.” She strode down the hallway and into the kitchen to collect her handbag off the worktop. “Anyway, I’ve got to go out.”

“Where?”

“Bloody hell! The doctor’s surgery, all right?”

She went back down the hallway. He still stood where she’d left him, blocking the front door.

“Are you going to move, then?” She hung her bag strap on her shoulder. She just wanted to get out of here, away from him. Her fears regarding those things under the floorboards had grown since Martin had left. That she’d been living with a rapist, a killer, was inconceivable, whether it was Roman or Adam. What if it *was* Adam? Roman wouldn’t think twice about getting shit covered up if it saved his career. But could *she* agree to help cover that up? Her son or not, she’d struggle to let him go free this time.

No, not her boy. It wouldn’t be him. Not that. Selling drugs, as unbelievable as it had been at the time, yes, but never *that*. But it couldn’t be Roman either, could it? The man was a stickler for following the law. Christ, he’d waxed lyrical about it often enough. Or was that just one big lie?

He moved into the living room and stared at the ceiling.

Sandra took her chance to leg it. She wanted to speed down the garden path to the car but didn’t in case he watched her from the window. She didn’t glance back at the house. To see him standing there, staring through the Venetian blinds, would frighten her more than she already was.

She got in the car, put her bag on the passenger seat, and drove away with one thought in mind.

Had she been sleeping next to a killer?



# Chapter Thirty-Nine

## ROMAN

A tiny bit of yellow cloth peeped out of one of the ceiling holes. Roman's stomach hurt, all the nerves. He hadn't had a chance to ask Sandra whether the electrician had been in Kallie's room. Maybe, because only the holes had been created, the man hadn't got that far. Why start a job then bugger off until Saturday, though? Annoyed with himself for allowing fear to take over, for not questioning Sandra further, he stood for a moment to get his head straight. Deep breaths. A flick of his fingers. A shake of a leg to uncoil the tense muscles. A roll of his neck.

***“She’ll be out for at least an hour, longer when you consider the waiting times at the surgery. Collect the things and get rid of them. Now!”***

That was the sensible thing to do, but surely if the electrician had discovered his trophies, Sandra would have phoned the police. Like him—previous to his detour into the world of crime—she wasn't the type to break the law, so she'd have definitely called it in. It had been one hell of a job convincing her that sweeping away Adam's drug selling was the better route to take. The items Roman had hidden obviously pointed to something sinister, even a thick bastard could see that. He wouldn't be able to talk himself out of this situation, not with his sperm in those condoms and the women's DNA on the outsides.

***“Didn’t I tell you not to keep them? Then there’s that notebook!”***

Yes, he'd been told, but evidently, he'd felt he knew better. That no one on this earth would suspect him. He *had* to stop

believing he wouldn't be caught. To hide such damning evidence had been completely stupid, dangerous, and he'd relied on his good standing to keep him off the radar, the veil of respectability cloaking him in safety. That was no longer an option, counting on his reputation. The newspapers had got hold of a snippet from the police, and the article had stated the Strangler was a family man. Someone in the investigating team must be a leaker—you couldn't trust anyone these days, could you—so now all public attention would turn to men with wives and kids, people's eyes narrowing, lips pursed, asking themselves, "Is it *him*?"

"Fuck's sake!"

He didn't need this shite.

He stormed upstairs into Kallie's bedroom and kicked the rug aside, incensed he hadn't had time to think about where he'd stash the haul next. There was no way he'd risk putting it in his shed at the allotment. Should he let Sandra know he'd 'found' it all? That he'd noticed the yellow cloth and had gone up to have a look? He could lie to her, say he was dealing with it, perhaps blame the hidden items on someone who'd lived in the house before them. That wasn't unheard of, crap in the joists or in the walls for decades. But she'd expect the police to come round, to swoop in and collect swabs from the joists, fingerprinting Kallie's room, including the floorboards he'd touched.

He went into the bathroom and collected bleach. He'd have to scrub, and it would leave a telling smell. Forensics would pick up on the fact a cleaning agent had been used and query why. Regardless, he got on with it, then rushed downstairs for a carrier bag. He pulled the board up, ready to clean the other side of it, the edges, and stared in horror.

The condoms and notebook were gone.

# Chapter Forty

## THE INTRICACIES OF CHILDHOOD

*Experiencing proper, bone-chilling fear hadn't happened to Roman until today. He'd been in the process of nicking money out of Mum's purse in the kitchen, and she'd caught him. It wasn't her he was afraid of but Dad. Thou shalt not steal, the eighth commandment, and what he'd done would be seen as buying his entrance ticket into Hell.*

*"I thought I'd nip down to the shop for you," he said to cover for what he'd done. The tenner trembled in his hand. "Get that bit of shopping you said about earlier."*

*"You wait for me to hand you the money, you don't take it." She snatched the note off him and stuffed it back in her purse. "You'll be sorry when your father hears about this."*

*"You don't have to tell him."*

*"A woman keeps no secrets from her husband."*

*"So you want me to get a wallop, do you?" He hadn't meant to say that. Fuck it, he'd started so may as well carry on. "Because it seems like you do. All my life you've told tales on me. What sort of mother are you to watch and smile when her kid gets smacked?"*

*"That's enough, Roman. Those women were correct, you do have the Devil in you."*

*"You're not right in the head, either of you. Do you ever take a step back and look at yourselves? All this Godly shit, yet you're happy to slap me or use the slipper. Not very Catholic, are you."*

*“I’m warning you...” She advanced towards him, hand raised.*

*“Hit me, and you’ll regret it.” Fear pounded through him, worse than when she’d caught him stealing. He’d gone too far but couldn’t stop shooting his mouth off.*

*“Don’t you dare talk to me like that!”*

*Her palm connected with his cheek, and he staggered backwards from the force. His shoulder barged into the side of the fridge-freezer, and he lifted a hand to cover the sting. She glared at him, eyes seeming to flash, and he saw the Devil in her, too. An evil woman who paraded around as if she was made of goodness, when in reality, sourness and wicked intentions stitched her together.*

*“I fucking hate you,” he said and rushed towards her.*

*A shove to her sternum, and she went flying. She stumbled, veering towards the cooker, going down and whacking her temple on the sharp corner of the worktop. She landed on the floor and stared up at him, shock stretching her features.*

*“Don’t touch me again, you nasty bitch,” he said quietly, power pulsing through him.*

*She tried to get up but flopped down again, sagging against a floor cupboard. “Your father—”*

*“He won’t do anything to me. Never again. And neither will you.”*

*The knife from the block had appeared in his hand, and he had no recollection of having pulled it out. He rammed it into her stomach, whipping it out and piercing her again and again. She flopped backwards, lying flat on the floor, and he stared down at her, cold terror washing through him.*

*He’d finally snapped. Shit.*

*He washed the knife handle, leaving the blood on the blade, and used his sleeve to carry it back to her. He plunged it into her again, left it sticking out of her belly, and rooted in the top cupboard for the housekeeping tin so it looked like a robbery. He backed to the hallway door. He stripped, rubbing his hands*

*and hair and face with his top to get the blood off, processing what he had to do to get away with this. He ran upstairs, stuffed the clothes in a carrier bag he stored his football boots in and put it in his holdall. Clean clothes on, he put another set in the holdall with his swimming shorts and a towel and left the house, calling out to his mother that he'd be back later and rode away on his bike.*

*At the sports centre, he got undressed, pushed his clothes in the carrier bag, then had a shower, washing any unseen blood off him. He put his shorts on and went into the pool, swimming and swimming and swimming until his eyes stung from the chlorine. Two hours later, he got out, dressed, and took the cash from the tin, sliding it in his pocket. He left the centre, riding to the Pass and stashing the contaminated clothes and the tin in one of the rubbish bins beneath sandwich cartons and empty crisp packets.*

*Back on his bike, he prepared himself for what would meet him when he got home. Would he get away with it? At that point, he didn't care. All he thought about was that he hadn't taken the chance to feel Mum's tits.*

# Chapter Forty-One

## SANDRA

Dr Gamble, a sixty-something who rarely listened, eyed Sandra over his half-moon spectacles as though he despised any female above a size eight. She'd tried getting an appointment with someone else; she'd have preferred Dr Evans, a woman, and had said so, but the receptionist had denied her request over the phone as Evans was too busy. So Sandra had come armed for war. With the upset of this morning, plus coming here, she wasn't prepared to take any shit.

"You're in the obese bracket," he said in a slow drawl. "Your BMI isn't good. Do you exercise? Do you eat vegetables, or does your diet consist of processed ready meals loaded with carbs?" He sneered. "And cakes, do you perhaps like cakes a little too much?"

*What the actual?*

Sandra gritted her teeth, hoping her phone picked everything up. She'd hit RECORD prior to entering his room. Dr Gamble had fobbed her off on numerous occasions over the years for minor ailments, and she wanted to be ready this time. She'd report him if he kept on, and she'd have the evidence to prove what he'd said. Maybe she'd grass him up anyway, regardless of whether he helped her or not.

"That's the problem," she said. "BMI is always used to claim obesity, but I'm a sixteen, most of it bloating. That size isn't fat."

"We don't use the term 'fat' anymore."

“But it’s what you’re thinking, isn’t it?” Anger boiled inside her. He wasn’t exactly Slim Jim McGrim himself, about twenty stone and five feet four if she was any judge. Hardly the poster boy for a healthy weight, and she’d bet his BMI exceeded hers. But that was all right, he was a man...

“So what do you suggest?” she asked. *Let’s see what he comes up with this time.*

“A decent eating regimen and losing weight would solve your problem.”

Of all the humiliating and crap things anyone had ever said to her, this ranked high. He sounded like Roman. And why was weight and diet blamed for everything? Yes, she’d been eating vegetables, and yes, she’d cut out the bad carbs, her calorie intake down to nine hundred a day to create a deficit, yet she’d only lost two pounds in three months. Food wasn’t always the culprit.

“That’s a doctor’s answer to everything, isn’t it,” she said. “Sling a diet sheet at women. Send them on their way.”

He sighed. “Did you know that your overeating is triggered by *what* you eat? It sends a signal to the brain and makes you want more and more.”

Oh, he went *there*. He assumed she pigged out. And he’d ignored what she’d just said, insulting her again to boot. “Who said I’m overeating?”

“Well, look at you...”

“*Excuse* me? I’m sure you’re not meant to say anything like that to patients.”

He smiled. Calm. Indulgent. A façade, because in his mind he’d reduced her to some annoying flake who didn’t know her own body. Even her age hadn’t clued him in, not to mention her hair falling out, her nails going brittle, and her periods appearing every fortnight. She’d listed more than that when she’d first come in, his eyes glazing over. And this was the reason why she hadn’t wanted to seek help in the first place. Bastards like him. She’d spoken to enough women at work to know this was the reception she’d get from many a male

doctor, and she'd been bloody right to avoid coming, but her urge to prove that this went on in surgeries had pushed her into recording him.

Martin putting that camera in Kallie's room had helped plant the seed, too. Catching people in the act. Getting justice.

"So you're telling me to change my diet and everything will be fine, is that it?" she clarified.

"Yes."

"No blood test?"

"I don't feel it's necessary."

"So, the fact I may be suffering with the menopause hasn't even entered your head? My age...it's highly likely that could be the case, isn't it?"

"Well..."

"Let me reel a few things off for you again, as you don't seem to have heard me the first time. Irregular periods. Bloating. Mood swings. Headaches. Hot flushes. Night sweats. Tiredness. Irritability. Disturbed sleep. Sore breasts. All that because I ate some fucking *pasta*?" She hadn't meant to swear, but God, this was a battle, and one she'd gladly stormed into so *she* had the control and didn't have to face the bigger picture—her husband possibly being a killer, something she *couldn't* control. "And you're not going to do anything about it?"

"I suppose I could get you a blood test if it would put your mind at rest."

"Shut me up, you mean."

"I didn't say that."

"You don't have to." She dipped her fingers into her handbag and showed him her phone, the red RECORD button a silent threat. "Are you going to help me with HRT, or do I have to go and see someone about your attitude?"

His face paled, then his cheeks flared scarlet. "Err, um, of course I'll help you. That's what I'm here for. But you *will*



find changing your diet will be of benefit, too.”

“I already told you when I first arrived that I’ve done my research and have changed my diet accordingly. And if you want some advice, stop fobbing women off. We *do* know what we’re talking about, and we *don’t* deserve to be called obese when we’re not.”

She sat back. Now, if she could just speak to Roman like that when she told him they were over, life would be grand. Mind you, she might not have to tell him.

The police could take him away and solve that problem for her.

Back from the surgery, still annoyed by the doctor but with a greater worry on her mind now, Sandra went into the kitchen to make a cuppa, jumping at the sight of Martin in her back garden who half hid behind a bedsheet on the line.

She opened the door and ushered him inside. “What the *hell* are you *doing*, hanging about out there?”

“I didn’t want to go round the front in case he’s watching. I saw you coming back so...”

She closed the door, dread bringing on goosebumps. “Watching? So he’s been upstairs?”

“Yes.”

Shit. This was all too real now. A sour hole seemed to open in her stomach, and she fought the urge to be sick. She’d had sex with Roman the other night—the night poor Zoe had been raped and killed. He’d shagged Sandra after that. He’d had a shower, which had been odd, seeing as Martin had been there, waiting for news on Rachel. Being at the Pass meant Roman had ample opportunity. He’d had a window in which to kill Zoe—he might not have spoken to Rachel for as long as he’d claimed.

*I need to ask her. Find out how much time they spent together.*

Tears burned, and she blinked. “So what happened?”

“I’m so bloody sorry to have to tell you, but I recorded him taking the stuff out. He put it in a carrier bag.”

“Oh God...” All the bluster that had filled her while she’d been with Dr Gamble vanished. “So it’s him.”

“Or he’s covering for Adam. I couldn’t tell if the writing in the book is Roman’s. It’s all in capital letters. It’ll be analysed. Either way, he’s in the shit. Hiding the fact his son may be the Strangler, storing that stuff for him, is enough to get him in trouble. Aiding and abetting.”

She steeled her spine. “I’ve *told* you, it won’t be Adam. It would mean he’d have to travel all the way from Coventry to commit the crimes.”

“Anyway, it doesn’t matter, tests will prove who the sperm belongs to. We have the condoms, don’t forget.”

“How could I forget?” Alarm jolted her. “Who’s we?”

“Me and John. Well, not me anymore because he has them and the notebook.”

She nodded. “Makes sense you’d go to him, although I’m surprised he entertained you after that punch you threw at him. What’s he going to do?”

“I don’t know, but he said for us to keep quiet about it.”

Sandra reared her head back. “What? I can’t! And he’s going to sweep it under the rug? The fact Roman could be a *killer*?”

“No, no, he’s going to do something about it, make sure everyone knows it’s him. We just have to make out we didn’t go anywhere near the hole or know what was hidden.”

“Why can’t he just tell his boss the electrician found it? Owen gave me his details so they can contact him. The police can come here and do tests or something.”

“Because the condoms and notebook will be planted, and that will incriminate him, okay? John doesn’t want you drawn into this any more than you will be. The police will still go

through your home, and that's traumatic. And then there's the risk of you being accused of knowing about the murders and not informing on your husband..."

Scared, she fiddled with her fingers. The idea of officers touching her belongings didn't appeal, not to mention the press camping outside and taking pictures. The journalists would come regardless when news broke that Roman was the Strangler, but... And as for her knowing. Fuck that. She wasn't getting blamed for something she hadn't done. "I won't say a word. So long as he makes sure Roman pays for what he's done, though."

"He will. When you're spoken to by the police who'll ask questions about Roman, you just have to act shocked, like you would have if you didn't know about those...those things."

She didn't like lying, but then again, she'd lied to Roman for ages by staying in the marriage. She'd agreed to pretend Adam hadn't sold drugs. She'd have to process the fact her husband might well be a killer, but she wasn't ready to let those emotions in yet, not fully. For now, she'd put a wall up, pretend this wasn't happening. Until she had DNA proof.

"Right, right," she said. "When will the condoms and book be...?"

Martin shook his head. "The least you know the better."

# Chapter Forty-Two

## MARTIN

Martin and John met in the Orange again. Martin had passed him the condoms and notebook in separate Ziplock bags under the table last time, and they'd had a quick sandwich to hide why they were really there. Now, Martin needed a stiff drink—*and* to know how John had got on with sounding Debbie's brother out. Callum was a nutter and would love to get his hands on Roman. He'd never liked the bloke, nor Martin.

*He might not agree to do this if my name's mentioned.*

Over their pints of Coke, Martin wishing his had whiskey in it, he explained what he'd told Sandra. "So she thinks the condoms and notebook will be planted and he'll get caught that way. I told her you didn't want to cause her distress so it was better for her to pretend she knows nothing. She didn't sound like she was going to keep her mouth shut, so I scared her into thinking she could be accused of knowing what's been going on—the murders and whatnot, like she's an accomplice. She's agreed to behave."

John nodded. "Good. Callum's in, by the way."

Martin swore his stomach acid swirled. "Even though I'm in the mix?"

"I'm not stupid, he can't stand you and wouldn't help if he knows you're involved. I said Sandra came directly to me."

"I'll have to tell her that, then, in case Callum speaks to her. She doesn't know he's in on it."

"No, he won't approach her. He won't want anyone knowing what he's going to do, least of all her."

“Which is?”

John sighed. “For fu—” He took a deep breath. “We discussed this before.”

Martin had only wanted to make sure. God! “Fingers, tongue, and toes. Right.”

“Right.” John sipped his Coke. “Ask Roman to come out for a drink later. Tell him to meet you here at nine.”

Martin glanced at the landlord, Bob. “And what if the police come sniffing round here and ask questions once they’ve poked in Roman’s new phone and see I messaged him? Bob’s going to say me and you have met here three times today. That looks suss.”

“I’ll sort any issues.”

Martin thought of something else. “What if he hasn’t ditched his old phone? It might be in the house.”

“I’ve got a mate in forensics who’ll conveniently make it go missing when the house is searched and it’s found, even if it goes through the chain of evidence. It’ll disappear at some point. I’ll have to pay him, mind, so you’ll be stumping up the cash for that.”

“Why just me? You should pay half, seeing as it’s your arse on the line here, too. And drawing a large amount out might come back to bite me on the arse later on. I already did that when I bought the phones.”

“Good job I have a stash from backhanders, then, isn’t it. You can pay me in instalments. I’ll have a word with the electrician. Tell him it’s all being dealt with and to keep it to himself.”

This was all getting a bit much. Martin wanted to run, pretend it wasn’t happening. “So Callum’s going to get him after he leaves here.”

“Obviously, you spanner. You need to be seen with him so you don’t fall under suspicion. Keep him with you for an hour and a half. Callum doesn’t finish his shift at the garage until ten.”

“How long shall I stay here for?”

“Until kicking-out time. Later if you can get yourself included in a lock-in. Take a taxi home so there’s a record of it. Go to bed. Forget it all until a copper comes knocking, which they will, because he’s your best mate.”

Martin told himself to let the chips fall where they may. Callum would kick the shit out of Roman, really hurt him. Go to town. The thought of it was sickening. The pain.

*But brain damage, though.*

Martin winced. If the DNA on those condoms didn’t belong to Roman, they’d have battered an innocent man, and if it turned out it was Adam’s, Callum would go after him next. Sandra would be devastated.

He sent a message.

**Martin:** FANCY A PINT LATER? NINE?

**Roman:** ONLY FOR A QUICK ONE. I HAVE SOMEWHERE TO BE AFTER THAT.

**Martin:** WHERE?

**Roman:** NONE OF YOUR FUCKING BUSINESS!

Martin showed John the texts. “What if he’s planning on doing another woman?”

John shook his head. “So close to Zoe? The Strangler’s had time in between before.”

“Yeah, but...”

John stared at the ceiling, clenching his jaw in thought. Or maybe it was in annoyance at Martin. “He might be escalating. Now he’s had a few months off, it could be out of control, that urge.”

A shiver darted up Martin’s back and spread to his scalp, a million money spiders. “What if it all goes wrong? What if Callum gets caught?”

John glared at him. “Stop fretting about things you can’t control, for Pete’s sake. Play the game. And we *are* going to

win, you know.”

Martin didn't agree. No one was a winner here.

# Chapter Forty-Three

## ROMAN

It wasn't unusual for Martin to message him about drinks at the Orange, but Roman could have done without it tonight. Still, he'd have a quick one, like he'd said, and leave in time to wait for Rachel after art class. He'd already changed out of his suit into black Nike joggers, a matching hoodie, and trainers. If anyone asked, he'd say he'd been for a run.

He pushed open the door and stepped inside. The coppers were here again, having a drink or two, and he put his head down to avoid catching their eye. The place wasn't busy, it being a Monday, and that played to his advantage. It was more likely people would notice he'd been here as he wouldn't be lost in a crowd.

*“But it also means they’ll notice what time you leave.”*

He approached Martin at the bar and nudged him with his elbow. “All right?”

“Yeah.”

Roman ordered a pint. Just the one, he didn't want his senses addled by too much booze. “Any particular reason you wanted me to come out tonight?”

Martin shrugged. “Do I have to have a reason?”

Roman paid for his drink. “Suppose not.”

This didn't feel right. Martin seemed on edge. Did Roman have enough energy to deal with him, though? Martin tended to let depression cloud him, and to be honest, it was the last thing Roman needed, a Duncan Downer on his hands.



Despite that, he asked, “Do you need to talk to me about anything?”

Martin whipped his head round, his eyes wide, his mouth hanging. “What about?”

“I don’t know. You seem off.”

Martin barked out a loud laugh. “I should think I fucking *do!*”

Roman narrowed his eyes. Was his friend trying to tell him something without actually saying what it was because the police were nearby? Did he know about the shit under the floorboards? Was that why he’d been summoned, to be questioned?

*He can’t know. No way he’d keep it to himself. He’d have gone straight to John or Dave.* “Christ, no need to snap my head off.”

“Sorry,” Martin said, “but I’d have thought it was obvious why I might be off. My *wife’s* left me. I went round there yesterday, you know. To the flat. She was on her own.”

Roman hid a smirk. “Invite you in, did she?”

“No, but—”

“Then how do you know she was alone?”

Martin gave him a nasty glare. “Just stop it, will you?”

“Stop what?”

“Getting my back up. She hasn’t got another fella, okay?”

Roman nodded indulgently. “Whatever you say, pal.”

A big sigh. The drumming of fingertips on the bar. “Look, do you know something I don’t? *Has* Rachel been talking to Sandra and you’ve all promised not to tell me?”

“Nope.”

“Then why do you keep insinuating she’s got someone else? It’s getting right on my left bollock. Like you want me to be hurt even more than I already am.”

*Here we go. Woe is me. I'll be singing 'Stop Crying Your Heart Out' in a minute.* The Oasis song reminded him... "I see you didn't get your hair cut like I suggested. And you haven't tidied yourself up either—your clothes, I mean. Why would she want to come back with you looking like a Poundland version of Liam Gallagher? And I'm speaking from experience here. Sandra doesn't look too hot at the minute either, so it hardly makes me want to fuck her." Shit, he'd forgotten he was supposed to be making out they were getting along now. "Rachel probably feels the same way about you."

"I thought you said you were going to try harder with Sandra."

"I did."

"So why put her down like that? She's going through the menopause, you unfeeling bastard."

"Since when did *you* jump to her defence?"

Martin gritted his teeth. "Ah, sod off, will you?"

They drank in silence for a while, Roman watching him in the mirror behind the bar. Martin kept darting shifty glances at the coppers. What was his problem?

"Anyone would think you've got a guilty conscience," Roman said.

Martin faced him, his cheeks turning pink. "Eh?"

"Why keep staring over at them?" Roman jerked his head towards the officers.

"I wasn't."

"I *saw* you."

Martin clenched a fist. "Are you spoiling for a fight? Because if you are, don't. I've got enough on my plate as it is."

*Not as much as I've got on mine.* He still hadn't disposed of the stuff from Kallie's room properly. For now, they were in the boot of his car, the carrier bag inside a black bin liner so it didn't pick up any carpet fibres, but he'd dump the trophies at

the Pass later with Rachel. He'd thrown his phone, the battery separate, down two storm drains. Where were the condoms and the notebook, though? Those being missing messed with his head. *Someone* had to have gone into the hiding place and removed them. Who? Sandra? If so, why hadn't she said anything to him? Or had the electrician nicked them? Why hadn't the police got hold of Roman, then?

He downed half of his pint then placed the glass on the bar. He'd had enough. "I'm off."

Martin gaped at him. "But you haven't finished your lager!"

"So? *You* drink it if you're that bothered."

"Stay. Give it another hour or so."

"Why?"

Martin's face flushed brighter. "Oh, sod you. Just do what you want, you always do."

Roman frowned. Martin obviously had a case of the mardies going on.

*Doesn't mean I have to stick around and put up with it, does it.*

Roman strutted out. He'd leave the car here and walk home through the Pass to check if anyone was about. He glanced over his shoulder.

Martin had his phone out and typed furiously.

What the *fuck* was he up to?

Roman waited in the back garden of Rachel's ground-floor flat and checked the time. Ten past ten. Sandra usually rocked home about twenty past, so she'd be dropping Rachel off soon.

The interaction with Martin still pissed him off, mainly: *Give it another hour or so*. Why say that? Why would he need

to stay that long? Was Martin that lonely now he was desperate for company?

*Maybe he ought to go back to work. He's bored off his tits.*

He thought about his car still at the Orange. He'd parked it in a corner out of the way, but someone might spot it, think it odd that he'd left it there. Risky to have done so, too, considering what was in the boot. He should have factored that in but wasn't firing on all cylinders, his day at work a tough one, not to mention the fright he'd had about the trophies.

***“You're going to slip up. You're not in the right frame of mind. You had a scare today. Maybe take a step back and think this through?”***

*Should* he abandon this, collect his car, dump the stuff, and go home? Ask Sandra if the electrician had been upstairs, then find out his name so he could pay him a visit, see if he'd removed the condoms and notebook without telling her? Surely, if that had happened, the police would have been on the doorstep by now.

*Unless he's some weirdo who wants to keep them for himself.*

He drew the balaclava down over his face and gripped the knife by his side.

***“So you're staying? Really?”***

He'd be out when Sandra arrived home—unusual, something she'd clock right away, but he couldn't let the opportunity to kill Rachel pass him by. He was too desperate to get it done anyway. He'd already switched his phone off, so if Sandra messaged, it wouldn't bleep. He'd think of some excuse as to why he'd gone out. Maybe he'd say he'd been to the corner shop for some milk after having a pint with Martin. It didn't matter. There was no way she'd suspect this was him, even if she *had* seen the stuff in that hole.

It'd be in the papers tomorrow that he was definitely escalating, doing Rachel so soon after Zoe.

He shook his head at the thought of those journalists thinking they knew him.

No one did.

He wasn't even sure he knew himself anymore.

# Chapter Forty-Four

## RACHEL

Art class had run over by ten minutes. Rachel didn't mind, it meant she had company for a while longer. Living in the flat highlighted how alone she was now. But wasn't that what she'd wanted? Dreamed of? She ought to shut up complaining and get on with it. She *could* make the grass greener if she tried hard enough.

She'd finished her painting of London Bridge, all the lights twinkling against a pitch-black sky, and it would be sent to the local hospital to brighten up ward four. Maybe she should go to London for a little holiday. A change of scenery might do her good.

In Sandra's car, she clipped her seat belt in place. "Fancy a drink?"

Sandra glanced across at her and nodded. "Not in the Orange, though. Can we go to the pub near yours? And only the one, I'm driving." She switched the engine on and eased out of the community centre car park.

"Why don't you want to go to the Orange?"

"I just don't. Can I ask you something?"

"Of course you bloody can."

"How long were you with Roman on Saturday night?"

"We talked under the lamppost at the end of the street for about two minutes, then we walked through the Pass, so maybe fifteen minutes in total? Why?"

"If that's the case, he got home later than he should have if you add another fifteen minutes for him to get back. That

makes half an hour, and he was out for about fifty.”

*What’s she really saying? Does she think he’s got a fancy woman? She’d better not accuse me!* “Maybe he dawdled on the way back?”

“Or maybe he did something he shouldn’t.”

An uneasy laugh crept out of Rachel. “What? Like an affair?”

“No, more like... Oh, I don’t know.”

Rachel’s mind spewed out screenshots of the chat group and what she’d read, bringing it to the forefront. Had Sandra discovered it, too? “Um, has he said anything to make you think he’s being shifty about anything?”

“Said anything? No, but he was at the Pass when the Strangler was.”

“Bloody hell, you’re not talking about Zoe, are you? I mean, *Roman?*”

“That’s what I thought but...”

“But?”

“Nothing.”

An odd silence descended, the air seeming to prickle with it. Was it best to steer the conversation away from Roman? It was clear Sandra didn’t want to discuss whatever was on her mind anymore. She’d been about to reveal something then stopped herself. Why?

Rachel dithered on what to say. “Have you seen Martin today?” *Why do I still care after what he’s been up to?*

“No.” Sandra’s fingers tensed on the steering wheel.

Rachel frowned. “Are you all right?”

“Of *course* I am. Well, apart from seeing Dr Dickhead.”

Sandra had told Rachel all about it on the way to the art class.

“I’m glad you pushed for help. You did the right thing in recording him.”

“Sometimes, recording someone is the only way you can get proof that they’re guilty of something.”

“That sounded ominous.”

“It wasn’t meant to.”

*Why is she acting weird?*

Rachel could change the subject again, although she risked sounding like she wanted the attention on herself if she did that, so instead she went with, “Do you feel better, though, that you’re getting some help?”

“Yes. I’ve put it off for long enough. It’s about time someone else stepped in and dealt with things for me.”

“I wish someone would do that for me, but I made my bed, so I have to lie in it.”

“Your bed is better than mine at the minute, believe me.”

“God, is Roman still being a bastard?”

“The biggest bastard you’ve ever met. I can’t stop kicking myself for sleeping with him the other night.”

“*What?* I thought you weren’t doing that anymore.”

“I wasn’t. I fell for his charm, though. Had a bit too much to drink at the barbecue and let the wine do my thinking for me. Never again. That pervert needs—” She clamped her lips shut.

*Oh God, she knows about the chat group. If she mentions it, should I admit I already know? No, she’d be hurt that I haven’t told her. “Carry on...”*

“Forget it. I shouldn’t let him get inside my head and affect my mood. What he gets up to is nothing to do with me. Let’s talk about something else.”

“What like?”

“Oh, I don’t know. How your day was at work?”

“I don’t work on Mondays, remember. I went shopping. Retail therapy plus going to Tesco. Oh, and I keep getting messages from the twins. Martin hasn’t read what’s in their



secret WhatsApp group, probably sticking his head in the sand so he doesn't have to deal with it. They want to know his side of things. That's why I wondered if you'd seen him. You had the day off, so I thought he might have noticed and nipped round for advice."

"No, no, he didn't." Sandra swiped a shaky hand over her face.

"Are you okay? We don't have to go for that drink of you don't want to."

"Yep, I'm fine, but can I stay at yours tonight? I really don't want to go home and face *him*. He's...I just don't want to go back." Sandra's bottom lip quivered.

"Have you two had a barney?"

Sandra drove past Rachel's flat then round the corner, heading for the Admiral's Ship a few yards ahead. "No, but... look, there's stuff going on that I can't talk about. I wish I could, but... He makes my skin crawl, and I can't stand the idea of him pretending he cares by asking about my appointment today and not even listening to my answers."

"What about clothes for work tomorrow? I can go into yours and get some if you like."

"No, I'll nip there in the morning. He'll only ask you where I am, make a fuss."

Sandra had never asked to kip over before, so things must be bad. It hurt Rachel to see her so agitated and upset, but if Sandra wasn't willing to open up, what could she do?

"I've got a T-shirt you can wear to bed," she said. "And you can have a pair of my new knickers I bought today in Trends. Fifty percent off in the summer sale, plus my staff discount." She laughed to lighten the mood.

"They won't fit my fat arse."

"Oi. I'll have you know they're high-waisted efforts, so they bloody well will, and your arse isn't fat. If he's told you it is, he's a wanker."

“Not in so many words, no.” Sandra coasted into the pub car park and turned the engine off. “I’ve been wondering again about if I’d taken another road, where I’d be.”

“I do it too many times to count.”

“I think about it a lot, and if I hadn’t gone with Roman, it would mean I wouldn’t have had Adam and Kallie, I’d have had other children instead. Then I feel guilty because of that, for wishing I’d never met their dad, because it’s like I’m wishing I hadn’t had them.”

“I know what you mean. I’m glad I had the twins, I love them, but... What I did to Martin, lying all these years... I can’t be a nice person if I did that.”

“You can be nice and still make mistakes.”

“Tell my brain that, because it isn’t listening.”

“We’re all right, you and me. Yes, we’ve slagged them off and said some horrible things in private, but doesn’t everyone? I just wish...I wish I’d never laid eyes on him. I hate him, Rach. Fucking *hate him*.” Sandra took her seat belt off and opened her door.

The overhead light snapped on. Rachel held in a gasp. Sandra looked haggard, and the pain in her eyes...

“Oh, love, what the hell’s *happened?*” Rachel put her hand on Sandra’s arm.

“It’ll be all right soon,” Sandra said, going for cheery. “Come on, let’s get some wine down us.”

She left the car, shutting the door, and Rachel joined her outside. The *blip-blip* as Sandra clicked her key fob sounded so loud, like a warning, and Rachel shuddered. She peeked over her shoulder at the surrounding bushes to see if anyone lurked.

*I swear someone’s watching us...*

# Chapter Forty-Five

## ROMAN

He'd chanced going out the front of the flat to check where Rachel was. Sandra's car had gone past and turned left, so he'd rolled his balaclava into a beanie and run after them, catching sight of the Kia just as it veered into the Admiral's car park. So they were going for a drink, were they? What, to discuss their husbands? Pick them apart?

He'd hidden behind a bush and checked out the cars. Sandra's was directly in front of the pub, and he'd made out their heads in silhouette as they'd talked. Then they'd got out, and Rachel must have sensed his stare, because she'd paused and looked over her shoulder. They'd gone inside, sitting by the largest window, and he had to fight the need to go in there, drag Rachel out, and rape her in the car park.

*Now* what was he supposed to do? Wait even later for them to leave the pub?

***“Go home. It's too risky.”***

He agreed.

A walk to the Orange, and he stood by his car, his mind on his thwarted plans. He'd have to wait until after yoga on Wednesday. Maybe he ought to go inside for a pint, see if Martin was still there. The alcohol would take the edge off this madness careening inside him. He peered at his watch. Still enough time before last orders.

He walked towards the pub. Took a deep breath, then caught a glimpse of John staring at him through the window. Martin sat beside him, as did Callum Collins, the fucking

reprobate. Roman couldn't be doing with that knob, so he spun round to go towards his car.

The thud of heavy footsteps didn't register as danger until it was too late. The whack to his head sent him to his knees, and grit dug into them, his scalp barking, his breath snatched away.

“What the...?” he managed.

Another strike from behind, hands gripping him beneath the armpits and dragging him away.

“Not a word...” someone said.

Callum?

*Oh shit.*

# Chapter Forty-Six

## THE INTRICACIES OF ADULTHOOD

*Eighteen years old. He'd made it. He carried the last of his things to his car and shut the boot. The end of Roman's childhood was here, right in this moment, and he wouldn't look back. He did, however, look straight into his father's eyes and see the damage he'd done to him. Dad stood on the threshold appearing old and withered; he'd aged since Mum had died. Had he ever studied Roman and seen how broken he'd been at various times? Had he even cared that he'd treated his son like shit?*

*"You'll do well in your chosen career," Dad said. "Everyone at church has said that. They're all rooting for you."*

*"What about you?"*

*"Yes, well..."*

*Dad couldn't say it, even now. That he was proud. Maybe Roman could make that happen when he found someone to marry. Dad had been harping on lately that Roman ought to get himself settled by the time he was twenty, like Dad had done with Mum. Why did Roman care about making his father proud? What did it even matter anymore? But as much as he tried to tell himself it didn't, it did.*

*"Maybe next time you see me I'll have a bird," Roman said. "I might meet one on the uni course."*

*Dad tutted. "A lady, son, not a bird, and it's university, not uni."*

*Dad had taken over Mum's role of correcting his speech, and it pissed him the hell off.*

*"Just make sure she's a good girl," Dad said. "Someone who can tame the Devil in you."*

*Roman didn't reply. What was the point? His old man was too set in his ways to change. Even Mum dying hadn't altered him. He was still a God-botherer, still rigid in his ways. Still expecting Roman to do whatever he said.*

*"I'll be seeing you, then." Roman got in his car and drove away, not once checking his rearview mirror.*

*There was nothing back there he wanted to see for a while.*

# Chapter Forty-Seven

## CALLUM

Callum parked the stolen Transit deep in the woods on the outskirts of Simwell. He grabbed the duct tape and a piece of cut-to-size, dark-green tarpaulin from the passenger seat and got on with blacking out the front windows so no light would be seen from outside. The back didn't have any, so that saved a job. His knuckles hurt from when he'd slung Roman into the van at the Orange car park and punched his face a few times, needing to release some of the immense rage burning inside him. The whack to the monster's head with the tyre iron had created a bit of a dent, the wound bleeding, but it hadn't been enough to assuage Callum's anger, so he'd needed more violence.

This cunt had it coming to him, all of it, the sanctimonious prick. Years ago, banging on about not breaking the law, boasting that all of the Collinses would be arrested if they weren't careful. A threat, but one Roman had never dared follow through on—he'd reported nothing, despite shooting his mouth off every now and then. No, the bloke knew it wasn't wise for a Collins to be arrested. The havoc they'd created in the past, murmured warnings that the pigs' families would get their faces slashed, the pigs themselves harmed when they least expected it, was a good deterrent. Still, the man had thrown barbed comments, trying to goad Callum. He was overdue a beating just for that.

Behind the scenes, a truce of sorts between the police and his family. As long as no one got killed, the coppers turned a blind eye. But Callum had killed plenty. Buried the fuckers in these very woods. No one suspected him—as far as he knew anyway. And if they did, well, it got ignored—a wedge slipped

into the superintendent's palm on the weekly had ensured compliance. She'd spun it that she wanted her officers safe, not victims. Probably one of the reasons why Roman had also given up trying to pin something on them—it was pointless and wouldn't amount to anything. That and he was likely scared deep down. Wouldn't have wanted his pretty face ruined, and maybe Callum's promise to maim his kids had helped.

Well, that face was ruined now. A skewed nose. Split lip. Bruises blooming. A cut to his eyebrow from Callum's sovereign ring. That might get him in the shit. It had left an identifiable impression in the skin. Not to worry, he had a remedy for that.

Callum chuckled to himself and climbed into the back. Roman, sitting on the floor in the corner behind the driver's seat, gasped—he'd likely be cursing himself for that, showing vulnerability. His fear. Fear the women had experienced at his hands. Gone was his bluster, his sneers, his sly comments, his holier-than-thou attitude. Gone was his need to incite panic. What he didn't know was, Callum rarely panicked. He didn't give a fiddler's *fuck* about Roman's reach in the community, never had. Mum and Dad had brought them up to be courageous, to believe they had every right to do what they did, so no one, especially Roman, could tell them what to do.

With his arms tied behind his back, a cable tie digging into his skin, his ankles bound the same way, Roman was nothing more than a hog, tied and ready for roasting. Callum sat opposite him on the wheel arch and switched his big torch on. It gave ample light to make out Roman's features. No more smarmy grin. No more calculating stare. He'd been reduced to a man about to soil his kecks.

“D’you know what gets me the most?” Callum asked quietly. “The fact that, oh, bloody years ago now, you told me and my brothers that you’d be watching us, and the minute you saw us doing something we shouldn’t, you’d report it. No one likes a sneaky grass. No one likes a *hypocrite*.”

“What do you mean, hypocrite?”



“You can frown, you can act all dim, but you *know* what I’m getting at. You’ve been breaking the law, haven’t you, and it’s a damn sight worse than anything me and my lot have been up to. We have a code: don’t touch women. It seems you don’t follow the same rule.”

Roman’s face paled, the bruises standing out more. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

Callum took the Ziplock bags out of his pocket and held them up. “These say different. These say you raped and killed women.” He popped the evidence away.

“What the *hell’s* in those *bags*?” Roman sounded horrified, the actor in him coming out.

*Oh, he’s good.* Callum laughed, low, deep. “You’re a bloke. You must have seen a fair few condoms in your time.”

“Condoms? But I don’t use them.”

Callum sighed. “Do you *really* want to go through being held somewhere until I’ve got results back from the tests on them, only for it to prove the shit inside them belongs to you? Do we need to go down that route before you’ll talk? I don’t mind, I’ve got a lock-up. Granted, it’ll give you a few more days alive, but what’s the point? I won’t feed you. There’ll be no luxuries like you’re used to. And I’m going to fucking bust your skull anyway, so you may as well stop dicking me about so I can get on with it.”

“Fuck.”

“Yeah, that’s what got you into this position. Fucking people without permission. What gives you the right, eh? Who the *hell* do you think you are? You tell me and mine not to break the law, yet it’s all right for you?”

“I couldn’t help it. Something snapped.”

“Ah, so you’re going with laying the blame elsewhere. It’s ‘something’s’ fault, is it? Because it snapped? You didn’t have control over your own actions, is that what you’re going with? Piss off. You’re not a mental case, you knew *exactly* what you were doing. Get up.”

Roman's eyes widened, but he rose, wary. "What are you going to do?"

"I'm not killing you if that's what you think. There are things worse than death."

"What...what...?"

"Turn around."

"Please. I'll move away. I'll disappear. You'll never see me again."

"Disappear? So you can start up somewhere else? I don't think so, pal."

Roman turned to face the side of the van. Why wasn't he fighting? Had he accepted his lot already? Callum stared down at the bloke's hands. They shook uncontrollably. He reached into his toolbox and removed a small battery-operated saw he usually used in his garden for pruning his bushes. He liked topiary; it calmed him to create the cats and dogs, the foxes.

He switched the saw on.

"Oh fuck. Oh God, w-what are you d-doing?"

"Shut the hell up."

Callum gripped one of Roman's wrists, held the hands up and, in one single move, sliced off all eight fingers at varying lengths. Roman's scream echoed, bouncing off the interior, and he danced in place, the scent of hot urine rancid. Callum, uninterested in the squawking, perused the fingers on the floor—fingers that had wrapped around throats and squeezed the life out of innocent women. Roman hadn't denied it, he'd said something had snapped, an admission as far as Callum was concerned, but still, he liked to double-check, and he would.

"Shut up!" he shouted. "Shut. Up!"

Roman's screams reduced to gibberish. Undecipherable words.

"Now then, that's just a little nudge to let you know I mean business. Your thumbs are my priority in a bit, and I'm telling you just so you can prepare yourself. I'm nice like that." A

laugh rumbled out of him; he'd only said what was coming next so Roman had time to torment himself with how much it would hurt. "Are you the Strangler?"

"Jesus Christ, my *hands*...they're on fire."

"They're the least of your worries. Are. You. The. Strangler?"

"Yes! *Yes!*"

Callum wrenched the wrist round so a thumb stuck upwards. He lopped it off. Roman lurched forward, his forehead banging on the van, and his knees bobbed. Callum let go and gripped the bastard's hoody at the back, shoving him forward, pressing him to the van wall. He straightened his arm to keep him upright, moved to the side, and sliced off the other thumb.

He released him. Roman slumped to the floor—the weak fucker had fainted. Callum put the saw down, pulled Roman's shoes and socks off, and got to work on the toes. John had been specific on what he wanted. Each toe plopped down beside the fingers, and Callum reckoned it was a shame Roman wouldn't be slaughtered. Brain damaged, that was what John said, enough that he became a vegetable but still lived and breathed.

"Lock him inside his own mind," he'd said. "So he knows life's going on around him but he's not a part of it. Torture, that's what he'll go through every day. Make it so he has to wear nappies. He'll hate that."

Callum put the saw to one side in a black bag, ready for cleaning later, and selected a Stanley knife. He rolled Roman over, slapped his cheeks to wake him up. Roman's eyes snapped open, and he screamed again. Sick of the racket he made, Callum straddled his torso, smiling at the thought of Roman's hands getting squashed beneath him, how they'd throb, the pressure exacerbating the pain in his finger and thumb stumps.

"Quiet!" Callum roared. "You're doing my nut in!"

Roman toned it down to whimpers that came out on every exhale. “Please...I s-swear I won’t do it again. I p-promise!”

“No, you *won’t* do it again.”

Callum flicked the blade out and sliced off the ring imprint on Roman’s face. Blood ran in a sheet. He forced Roman’s chin down to open his mouth and attacked the tongue, not giving a shit where he stabbed, intent on drawing out the agony, one laceration for each of the women, then a final slice to cut the muscle in half. He snatched it out, blood coating his pale disposable glove, and inspected the savaged flesh. He dropped it, then got off Roman and left the van, unable to stand listening to the new round of screaming interspersed with gargling blood—he had the urge to shut him up permanently, but he’d promised not to kill him, so coming outside was best.

“Always distance yourself for a bit of it gets too much,” Dad had said.

He stripped the gloves off, stuffed them in his pocket. He’d be burning his clothes and the van later, so transference didn’t matter. He had a new outfit in the footwell.

Roman had gone quiet. He’d probably passed out again. Callum lit up a fag, sucking in the nicotine hit, and studied the sky. Darkness above, a grey-peach ribbon below, then the manufactured brightness of Simwell; streetlamps, glows from people’s windows, the thrum of life going on, everyone but John and Roman oblivious to what Callum was doing. He hadn’t even told his brothers or Debbie—John didn’t want his name linked to this, and understandably so.

Callum remained there until he’d finished his fag, stubbed it out, and put the filter in his pocket. He climbed into the van, grabbed some new gloves, put them on, and hauled the bloke out, throwing him on the ground.

He kicked him again and again in the head, his steel toecaps doing a right bit of mutilation. Thirty seconds later, Roman lay still, unresponsive to Callum asking him questions. He knelt, checked for a pulse. There, steady and strong. One last kick to the back of the skull for good measure, and Callum

dragged him into the Transit. He switched the torch off, popped it in his toolbox, put the Stanley knife with the saw, and climbed in the front. Stripped the tarpaulin off the windows and drove back into Simwell. In Haven Avenue, he parked closest to the alley that led to the Pass and sat for a while, scoping out the street ahead, then behind in the wing mirror.

All clear.

He slid on a balaclava and collected Roman. With the man draped over one shoulder, he jogged down the alley and veered left into the trees. A few metres in, he placed him on the ground, propping him against a thick tree trunk. The head and face, what a mess. But had Callum done enough? Would the attack have fucked his brain over?

“Sod it.”

He ran back to the van and got in the back. Felt around in his toolbox. A hammer. A two-inch nail. He checked the street again, then ran back to Roman. Placed the pointed tip of the nail to the wanker’s head and smacked the other end with the hammer. If he wasn’t brain damaged before, he would be now.

He took the Stanley knife out. Sliced Roman’s joggers at the groin. Yanked the boxer shorts down. Another of John’s requirements...

Callum sliced the cock off.

“I don’t want him being able to have sex with anyone again,” John had said.

Satisfied he’d done enough, Callum planted the condom and notebook bags in Roman’s pocket and smiled at the results coming back as his DNA, his handwriting. His name would be tarnished, his good reputation smashed.

Good. He deserved it, but Sandra didn’t.

Unfortunately, she was collateral damage.

# Chapter Forty-Eight

## DETECTIVE SERGEANT KERSHAW

The six a.m. call wasn't what he'd expected, not so soon after Zoe's death. Another murder, and Kershaw's mind had gone straight to it being a woman and the Strangler escalating. He'd got up, rushed here, and found he was one of the first people on scene. A couple of PCs, Ingrid, and Gruff had already been in attendance.

In the woodland of the Pass, the tent or a shield not even erected as the rest of the SOCO team hadn't turned up yet, Kershaw stared down at the body. A man this time, beaten and bloodied. The face, ruined, the features bloated, hiding who he really was. Kershaw recognised the victim's clothing from the Orange last night, though. Black joggers and a hoodie. He knew the victim. Dithered over whether to say anything, but Gruff might snap his head off for suggesting a name—the pathologist didn't like guessing games.

*Christ.*

Gruff had done his usual, and all the photos had been taken. He'd moved on to listing the injuries. "Kicks to the head, I'd say. I've been around the block enough to know steel toecaps were involved." He winced. "A big ouch. Blunt force trauma at the back of the skull from a weapon, likely a metal bar of some sort, probably used to incapacitate him. Whoever this is, he took quite the beating. Also, a nail to the skull, hit so hard the round end has embedded. I'd say a hammer was used—you can see the circular indent, and it's created a dip. Fingers and toes removed, possible gangland attack, seen that before. Broken nose, oedema around the eyes—you can't even *see* the

eyes, they're that swollen. A split lip, no tongue, skin sliced off at the eyebrow, and his penis has been removed."

Kershaw cringed. The dead man had pissed someone off big time. Why, though? Who would go to these lengths? A tongue being removed usually pointed to silencing the person. What for? What had the victim seen, heard, or done? This stank of a Collins hit.

"I'll check for ID so you can get along and inform the NOK." Gruff put on fresh gloves and stuck his hand into one pocket of the joggers. He pulled out two sandwich bags. Held them up. "Oh. Oh. That's...distasteful."

Kershaw stared, his mind taking a moment to catch up to what he was seeing. A spiral-bound notebook. And condoms, which had been tied off at the top to keep the contents inside.

*What the fuck?*

"Condoms?" He automatically turned to look at Monroe to get input, but Ingrid stood beside him instead. "Used."

"Yep," she said. "And quite a few of them. Are you think what I'm thinking?"

Kershaw blinked, tried to clear his racing mind which chugged along with all manner of scenarios. "What, that they belong to the Strangler?"

"Hmm. The fact this is a man, the shit beaten out of him... Someone might have worked out it was him and went to town on him. Could even be a family member of one of the female victims."

That wasn't unheard of. Plenty of people took the law into their own hands, but how come this killer had discovered the Strangler's identity and the police hadn't? *If* this dead man was the Strangler. It could be like Gruff had said, a gangland issue, and that definitely meant the Collinses were involved. They were the only gang around here who had the balls to go this far.

He thought of John, married to Debbie Collins, and how he'd assured the super he wasn't anything to do with their crime syndicate. Had he worked out who the Strangler was

and told the Collins brothers? Then there was the blackout, where officers had been warned, for their own safety, to leave the family alone. Kershaw didn't agree with it, he felt people like them needed to be brought down regardless of officers' safety, but everyone had been advised to follow orders. By the superintendent, no less. A woman on the take?

If a Collins had done this, it would be swept under the rug. Retaliation against the police when they were arrested couldn't be allowed to happen.

"Monroe needs to get his arse down here," Ingrid muttered. "Photos won't do the scene justice. He has to see it to believe it."

Any imagery would pale compared to viewing it for real. The victim must have gone through immense pain. Those fingers and toes being chopped off spoke of torture. *Had* this man had a run-in with the Collinses? Had he annoyed them so much they'd killed him? Had he threatened to expose something they'd done?

*The condoms, though. They're a message.*

"I'll get the bags sent to the lab now," Ingrid said. "The sooner we test the sperm and any residue on the outsides, the sooner we'll know what's what. And someone will need to read that notebook."

Gruff placed the Ziplocks in separate evidence bags, wrote the details on them, and passed them to Ingrid.

She whistled over one of her team. "Get these down to the lab."

Kershaw struggled to accept the sight before him. It was so vicious, such an immense amount of violence. Anger.

Gruff felt inside the other trouser pocket and brought out a wallet.

Kershaw held his breath.



Again, he'd been sent with PC Afra Hameed to deliver the news. Kershaw knocked on the front door at seven-thirty, hoping the man's wife would be up and not still in bed. How the hell could he phrase this? Should he tell her what they suspected, that condoms had been found and may prove her husband was the Strangler? Maybe he ought to leave that bit out.

Afra shifted from foot to foot. "I hate this."

"Me, too."

A shape appeared behind the leaf-patterned glass in the door, and Kershaw steeled himself. Death knocks were rotten at the best of times, but this one was particularly awful. He was still trying to come to terms with the man's identity, how he could have either got himself involved with a gangland outfit or was the Strangler. The wallet had done what Kershaw had struggled to do—given everyone a name.

The door opened.

The wife's face clouded.

Kershaw took a deep breath. "Could we have a word?"

Sandra frowned then attempted a smile, whittling her fingers. Having coppers at your door brought on a raft of worries, and she'd possibly be thinking her husband had had an accident. "Everything okay?"

"Can we come in?"

"Of course. Are you here about Roman not coming home last night?"

"Yes," he said and followed her inside.

Sandra went off into the kitchen.

Afra joined him in the hallway and pulled a face. "Wonder why she didn't phone it in?" she whispered.

"Maybe it's normal for him to stay out overnight."

Afra raised her eyebrows and shut the door. "Hmm."

Kershaw walked into the kitchen and took Sandra's elbow. "You need to sit down."

"Oh God, has he...is he hurt? Is he in hospital?"

Kershaw guided her to the small dining table. "Afra will make you some tea." He sat beside Sandra and held her hand. "You said Roman didn't come home last night. Does that happen often?"

She nodded. "He works late and sometimes kips in the car so he doesn't disturb me when he gets in. It wouldn't have mattered last night anyway because I slept round a friend's."

It felt like a lie, the sleeping in the car, but Kershaw ignored it for now. Some people didn't want others to know if their marriage was in trouble. That they'd had a row and one party had stormed out. "When was the last time you had contact with him?"

"He came home yesterday lunchtime. I didn't speak to him for long as I had a doctor's appointment. When I got home, he wasn't here, so I had dinner on my own—nothing new there—then got ready for art class. I go there with Rachel Forest from next door. Well, she isn't there anymore, she's got a flat."

"Martin Forest's wife?"

"Yes. I just nipped in this morning to have a shower and change my clothes."

Kershaw perked up. Could Sandra have offed her husband? He glanced at the washing machine, but it wasn't humming, and no bubbles peeped through the glass door. He checked through the window. Nothing hung on the outside line. "Err, why?"

"As I said, we went to art class, and afterwards, I usually drop Rachel home. I didn't want to come here so asked if I could stay with her. It was an off-the-cuff thing, so I didn't have a bag packed."

"Why didn't you want to come here?"

She sighed. "I'm going to end my marriage. I've had enough. He's hardly ever here, and when he is, he picks on

me. My weight, what I look like. I'm tired of it. Last night, I just needed to chat to my friend and find the right way to put it to him."

"So when you saw him at lunchtime, how did he seem?"

"Agitated. A bit pissed off. I assumed work was getting on top of him. He's often moody when he's busy. Plus, he was annoyed about me getting spotlights fitted." She grimaced. "I suppose I *should* have spoken to him about it first. The electrician created the holes but had another job to get to, so he said he'll be back on Saturday. Roman won't have liked that, the holes being left. Maybe that's what got him arsey."

"I see. So other than that, he was his usual self?"

"Yes. What's this about?"

Afra interrupted the flow of conversation by placing cups of tea on the table. She moved around to sit on Sandra's other side and dipped her head.

"There's no easy way to say this..." Kershaw might as well get on with it. "A body was found at the Pass this morning by someone walking their dog."

"Oh God, not another one," Sandra wailed. "Those poor women. When will this end?"

"No, it was a man. We'll need to do DNA identification as his face is...is unrecognisable, but he had a driver's licence in his wallet. It was your husband's."

"What?" she shrieked. "You *what*?" She slapped her free hand over his and squeezed. "Roman... What happened? You said a body. He's *dead*?"

Kershaw nodded. "I'm so sorry."

Her face flushed, and her eyes watered. "How...how did he die?"

"Someone beat him up."

"How can he have died, then?"

"It was the type of beating that we think involved being kicked in the head. One wrong kick..." *One wrong nail*

*hammered in...*

“What else? I want you to tell me everything. No hiding things.”

Kershaw sighed. “I shouldn’t really...”

“I mean it. Tell me or I’ll find someone else who will. I have a right to know.”

“He had trauma to the back of his skull, from a weapon. A nail... It was in his head. A hammer had possibly been used. His fingers, thumbs, toes, tongue, and...penis had been removed.”

“Oh God.” Sandra closed her eyes. Opened them. “So what is this, someone retaliating against him because of what he does for a living? He’ll have pissed a lot of people off with the decisions he’s made.”

“We’re not sure yet.”

She eyed him. Shrewd. Calculating. “There’s something else, isn’t there. Don’t bullshit me.”

Kershaw blurted, “A sandwich bag with condoms inside it was found in his pocket, as was a notebook.”

“Condoms? So he was having an affair? Did an angry husband cut his...cut his penis off? And why on earth would he have condoms in a sandwich bag and not in his wallet? This doesn’t make sense.”

Kershaw bit his lip. “They were used.”

Sandra stared at him blankly. “Um...*what?*”

“They appeared to have been tied at the tops.”

“Oh, that’s disgusting. Used!”

“They’ll be tested, and the notebook will be read, the handwriting analysed.”

“What else are you hiding?” She let his hand go and removed her other from beneath his. Picked up her cup, which shook, and sipped her tea. “I know there’s something, so you may as well tell me.”

Kershaw glanced at Afra who nodded. He focused on Sandra. “This can’t go any further, not until we know for sure. It’s just a theory at the moment, all right?”

“All right.” Sandra lowered her cup. Stared at him.

“We think he might be the Strangler.”

With Sandra refusing a FLO, Kershaw dropped Afra back at the Pass so she could help out there, and he returned to the station. The team had their attention pinned to the whiteboard, Dorchester pacing up and down in front of it. Kershaw stared at the new section. The name at the top and the questions beneath.

How the *fuck* had this happened? How had they not seen this?

He swallowed bile.

“To say this has come as a shock is an understatement,” Dorchester bellowed. “We were all hoodwinked. His charm, his dedication to ensuring the community ran smoothly. His unwavering support to the police. Bullshit, all of it! And to think I had him round my table for dinner. He sat there and discussed the Strangler case, knowing *he* was the Strangler. Laughing at us, all of us. Bloody wanker.”

“It might not be him, sir,” Claire said. “It could be something else entirely. The condoms could point to him having an affair—the penis being chopped off speaks volumes. What if the woman he was seeing is the warped kind and kept every condom he disposed of at her place? He might have finished with her, and she got someone to do him over.”

“Yes, that could be it, but my gut’s telling me otherwise.” Dorchester spotted Kershaw and jabbed a finger at him.

Once again, Kershaw glanced around for the DI to save him, but no help was forthcoming. He was on his own. “I’ve just got back from speaking to his wife. Sandra said he didn’t

come home last night but that it wasn't unusual. I felt she'd lied but didn't press her on it."

"Why?"

"Because I was there to say her husband was dead! You *know* too much information at once can have a detrimental effect." *Yet I told her everything anyway.* "She mentioned an affair, so that matches what Claire said. We could be pulling him to pieces and all he's done is got his end away every now and then."

"No," Dorchester said. "No. He's the Strangler, I'd bet my house on it. I want you to go and speak to his buddy, Martin Foster. Ask him about the staying out at night. He's a nosy bastard, he'll have noticed whether Roman didn't come home on the regular. Go now. Take Neil with you."

Kershaw jerked his head at Neil, pissed off he'd been paired with him. Everyone knew they didn't get along but not why. Neil had been seeing Kershaw's sister, Beth, a couple of years ago, and when he'd ended the relationship with no explanation, ghosting her, Kershaw had had it out with him. Beth had been heartbroken, she'd thought they'd be getting married. Neil had clearly had other ideas.

Kershaw left the room. Not doing this with Monroe felt weird. They'd been joined at the hip for ages, but it wasn't like he could go against the DCI's orders and refuse. He got in his car, Neil sliding into the passenger side, and drove off.

"How...?" Neil clipped his seat belt in. "I mean..."

"I know. I can't talk about it. Too much to take in. He was...I'd swear blind he was as honest as the day is long. I won't believe he's the Strangler until those results come back. If that's his sperm and there's DNA from the victims, then okay, I'll accept it, but until then..."

He didn't want to talk anymore, especially to Neil. Five minutes later, he pulled up outside Sandra's again. They got out and knocked on Martin's door and, receiving no answer, Kershaw went up Sandra's path and rang the bell.

She opened the door, face puffy, her eyes red.

“Martin,” he said. “We need a word. Do you know where he might be?”

Sandra blinked. “What for?”

“To double-check where your husband might have been last night.”

“Oh. Right. He’ll be at his allotment.”

“Thank you.” He turned to walk away.

“Rachel’s here if you need to ask her if I was at hers.”

*I’d better speak to her else Dorchester will want to know why I didn’t.*

They nipped inside, took a short statement, then left.

In the car on the way to the allotment, Kershaw grimaced. He hated the fact he’d have to ask Neil a question, but he had to get something off his chest so would be professional. “If you were best mates with someone and they were having an affair, would you lie about it if the police asked questions?”

Neil shook his head. “Nah, but I’d ask that they didn’t tell the wife I knew.”

“That’s what I thought.”

“I felt well bad for Sandra.”

“Same.”

They lapsed into silence again, and inside two minutes, Kershaw cut the engine in the allotment car park. Out in the sunshine, they walked to a diamond-wire gate. A grey-haired man tended to his crops and looked over.

“Police,” Kershaw called and held up his ID.

The gentleman ambled over. “You won’t find no bodies here.” He chuckled, slid a key into a padlock, and opened the gate. He drew it wide. “What’s the problem?”

“We’re here to see Martin. Martin Forest?”

“That shed over there.” The old boy pointed. “The one with the curtains across the windows. There are some around here who’d say he has it dark because he’s growing weed and

doesn't want the lamps showing, but that's not likely. Not Martin." Another chuckle.

"Who'd say that?" *And why would he even say it?*

"Roy and Hettie Haverstock. Nosy pair of fuckers. I personally think he goes in there for a kip."

"Right, cheers." Kershaw walked towards the shed in question, nerves giving him a bit of bother. He checked over his shoulder that Neil was behind him then tapped on the door.

It swung open, a standard bulb from inside showcasing a telly, a fridge, and an armchair.

"Oh. A visit from plod," Martin said. "To what do I owe the honour?"

"Just a quick word."

"What do you want?"

Kershaw glanced across at the old man who'd returned to his plot. "Can we come inside?"

Martin nodded and stepped back.

The interior reminded Kershaw of a Tardis; it was deceptively bigger than the outside had led him to believe. As well as the furniture he'd spotted from the doorway, behind the chair stood a bench with various seed pots on it beneath a desk lamp. He immediately thought of the weed then dismissed it.

Martin drew the curtains across on both windows, light flooding in, and folded his arms. "Well?"

"Err, Roman," Kershaw said.

"Roman?"

Kershaw nodded. "Odd question, but is it usual for him not to come home of a night?"

"Who said he does that?"

"His wife."

"Yeah, it's usual. I've long since thought he's been having an affair."



“Has he told you he’s been seeing someone else, then?”

“No. Before I continue, because this is his private business, why do you need to know whether he’s been playing away?”

“He didn’t come home last night, and his body was found at the Pass this morning.”

Martin staggered over to the armchair and plonked onto it. “Body?”

“He was dead, sir.”

“Dead? Oh, fuck me sideways... No, he *can’t* be dead.”

“He is, I’m afraid. We were wondering if maybe a scorned lover...” The word ‘scorned’ sounded so stupid coming out of Kershaw’s mouth, but what other word *was* there?

“I wouldn’t know.” Martin knuckled his eyes. “Shit a brick. I mean... This is a bit of a shock.”

“Is there anything you can think of that we’d need to know?”

Martin shook his head. “No, no... I can’t...can’t get my head around him being dead.”

Kershaw had heard all he needed to. He could report back to the station and say it was possible an affair had been going on. What he couldn’t say, though, was why the dead man had turned to raping and murdering women.

It just wasn’t something Kershaw thought DI Roman Monroe would do.

# Chapter Forty-Nine

## DOWN MEMORY LANE

At every crime scene, he'd 'forgotten' to raise his protective hood and had scratched his head. Paranoid at leaving DNA behind, he'd had his body waxed every six weeks since his first rape victim, Carmen Smith. That episode had pushed him to ensure some hair fell near the bodies. Being caught by Ingrid had only played into his hands. Then there were Kershaw and Gruff, warning him, time and again, to put his hood up.

If he got caught, would they remember that? Would they twig why he'd done it?

Roman Monroe smiled. No, because he wouldn't *get* caught. He had the benefit of police and forensic knowledge, he'd studied psychology for being a social worker before he'd changed his mind and gone for a police career, although he had to admit that being on the other side of the fence, a criminal, had been harder than he'd imagined. He hadn't factored in his urges, how they'd overtake his police reasoning. How needing to get Sandra out of his life for good clouded his judgement.

He'd originally planned to just kill Sandra, but then his detective mind had kicked in. He needed to practice. He'd been on too many cases where people had committed murder without forethought. They'd been apprehended quickly, their mistakes securing their downfall. He couldn't risk that happening to him. Just one murder before Sandra's, that's what he'd told himself. But it had turned into a rape instead, and killing Carmen afterwards, well, he'd bottled it, hadn't he. He'd taken a knife to threaten her with but hadn't stabbed her.

Didn't want any blood at the scene as it could have tripped him up. And he'd intended to strangle her so the murder didn't mirror his mother's. In the end, he'd run out of the house, the small piece of goodness inside him pushing him home. That night, he hadn't slept, and he'd prayed Carmen would be too ashamed to go to the police. Thankfully, it had worked in his favour. No police report on a rape. He'd vowed that next time, he'd be more careful.

The rapes had become an addiction. Those images and links in the Session group were to blame. They turned him on so much he hadn't been able to control himself, and something inside him had snapped. Broken. Overtaken him. And the more he raped, the more he got away with it, the more he wanted to do it.

***“It's about time you thought about what you've been doing. You can get caught, you know.”***

He nodded and glanced around the incident room at the team who'd gathered for a debrief regarding Zoe King, coffees being made, chatter muted, sadness in the air. He shouldn't have killed Zoe, but there you go. Nothing he could do about it now but keep an eagle eye on the investigation and stall anyone who got too close to the truth.

His mind wandered again. Earlier, when taking a break, he'd sat outside the corner shop in Copse Road. Rachel had come out and spotted him, and it had shocked the shit out of him. How could he have been so stupid as to park in plain sight? He'd followed her back to the flat and watched for a while. Ten minutes of observing, and he'd abandoned his task; his mind had thrown up the points he still had to cover in order for Martin to be the prime suspect in his wife's murder. Seeing him had been more important than spying on her. Roman had visited Martin at the allotment, planted the seeds in his head, and then returned to the Pass to wind Ingrid up to lighten his dreary mood.

Now, if he could slip it into the conversation, he'd do his usual and insist the team looked at all avenues—mainly because he didn't want them going down the road that would end up with him in handcuffs. Subtly, he steered them away

from catching him, muddying the waters, confusing them, getting them to doubt their capabilities. It amused him that they looked to him for answers, as if he knew them all, when he really did. He knew *everything* about the Strangler.

Dorchester paced, as usual, in front of the whiteboard. “Claire, what did you get from poking into that fella who pissed against a bush?”

“The witness who saw someone in shorts and a baseball cap?”

“Yes, him.”

“No priors, nothing to make him a suspect. I nipped out to have a chat with him—no offence to Bedford, but I wanted to interview him myself.”

Dorchester chuffed out air. “I don’t care if he takes offence. I *told* you to poke into him.”

Claire smiled. “He’s still adamant he saw someone. He wasn’t sure before, but now he’s certain it was a man. What I’d like to point out, though, is the man didn’t have the same clothing on as the rape victims mentioned: black clothing, a balaclava.”

“Maybe he stripped them off after killing Zoe,” Neil suggested.

*He didn’t.* Roman nodded. “Then we need to be on the lookout for discarded clothing.” Good, another false lead, one that would waste time. “Although PCs are still out there, searching for evidence and might find it anyw—”

“Hang on...” Dorchester said. “Neil, ring the scene sergeant and let him know bins and hedgerows need to be searched in the street again where Piss Boy saw the man.”

*Oh, so it’s all right to search again when you say so, but when Kershaw suggested similar, you shot him down.*

It was on the tip of Roman’s tongue to point out the use of manpower, but he kept it to himself. This search was something he wanted to happen, so saying anything might change the DCI’s mind.

“What about any phone calls off the back of my chat with Pete at the *Simwell Star*?” Roman asked.

Claire consulted her notes. “Three calls. One from a man who was with his girlfriend. They saw who I think is *Piss Boy*.” She grimaced and shot Dorchester a withering glare. “Better known as Jason Brent. The clothing description matches his, as does the hair colour—they saw him under a streetlight as they passed him in Haven Avenue.”

*Shit!* “What time was this?”

“After the man in shorts had gone. They weren’t sure of the time, though.”

“Damn, we could have done with knowing,” Roman said. He relaxed a little. “Okay, go on.”

“The second call was from a woman who’d been with three friends. They’d been in the Admiral’s Ship all night and saw who I think is Jason. This was in Copse Road at about ten past twelve, so that matches Jason’s statement he gave to me. He’d gone to the corner shop—it’s open twenty-four hours—to get some paracetamol for the morning, something he’d forgotten to mention when he spoke to Bedford. I’ve confirmed he went in there. I’ve seen the CCTV.”

*Time to put a misdirection in.* “Right, but depending on when Zoe was killed, Jason could still have done it, *after* he went to the shop. The third call?” Roman’s heart pattered too fast. If someone else had seen him walking from Haven Avenue to his street, Kiddleton Rise, he could well be fucked.

“A resident in Kiddleton Rise.”

*Oh, bugger me...* His knees lost their strength, and he casually lowered to a chair. “And?”

“An elderly woman, a widow. Mrs Edith Cambridge.”

*Nosy old bitch.*

Claire ran a finger around her blouse collar. “She hadn’t been able to sleep because of the music from the barbecue, then the noise of everyone leaving, car doors slamming when they got into taxis.”

“I turned the music down pretty early,” Roman said. “Some people, eh...”

“Hmm. She sat at her living room window, knitting, and saw you going into your house.”

Roman kept his expression neutral. “I did, yes, at ten to twelve. That’s already on record.”

“That’s the time she said, so it correlates with what you’ve already told Bedford, plus your wife confirming when you got home. As we know, Rachel Foster has said you walked her through the Pass to her sister’s in Farm Acre.”

So far, no one had thought to speak to Tara, and he wasn’t about to remind them. “That’s right. We walked slowly, had a chat about her circumstances.”

Claire sniffed. “We know you’d have called it in if you’d seen or heard anything, so asking you again if you saw anyone is a waste of time.”

Roman rubbed his chin. “I didn’t see a thing.”

“Just so we can get things squared away,” Dorchester said, “what were you wearing, Monroe?”

Roman’s stomach all but bottomed out. Sticking as close to the truth as possible usually worked. Lying meant creating issues—Sandra could be spoken to again, and Rachel, and they’d say what he’d had on. “Shorts.” He paused to take in the team’s raised eyebrows, although it looked like they were winding him up. “What, it’s summer, loads of people wear them.” He laughed. “Next you’ll be saying the man Jason Brent saw was me.”

“It could well be,” Claire said. “He spotted you a couple of minutes before Mrs Cambridge said you arrived home. Enough time for you to get from Haven Avenue to Kiddleton Rise. She also saw Clive and Sally King coming home around eleven. Out of interest, why didn’t you say about your clothing when we first discussed Jason’s witness statement?”

Roman shrugged. “Because I thought it was another person entirely. I know I’m innocent so didn’t think to offer up the information.”

Dorchester let out an alarming “Ha!”

“What?” Roman asked, his skin going cold.

“Then we can scrub it off the list,” the DCI said. “Piss Boy saw *you*, end of story. There’s no one in shorts to find. Did you have a baseball cap on by any chance?”

“Probably. You could ask Sandra to confirm.”

“Well, then.” Dorchester struck a line through the writing on the board regarding Jason’s call. “We can concentrate on other things, although with no leads now, unless Piss Boy’s our man, we’re back to square one.”

Roman arrived home, his earlier jitters receding. It had got a bit hairy at the debrief—he could have sworn the ruse was up and they’d cotton on that he’d killed Zoe. But why would they? He was a copper, for God’s sake, trustworthy, determined to solve crimes, a nice face in the community. They weren’t the same as him, knowing how other police officers behaved like deviants outside the law. John and Dave, for example, sergeants who thought nothing of degrading women in the Session group. He’d always appeared squeaky clean—and he *had* been before all this, not counting his mother’s murder—so the idea of him being the Strangler would seem ludicrous.

In the hallway, he smiled at Sandra, hating having to do that. She stared at him as if he had three heads, then smiled back, although it appeared wooden. Fake. Did she have regrets about having sex with him? For agreeing to give things another go?

“I didn’t expect to see you home this early, not with Zoe and everything,” she said.

“Dorchester’s staying on to deal with anything that comes up.” He hung his suit jacket on the newel post.

“A PC came here. He asked about the guests at the barbecue.”

“He spoke to me, too.” *Sod this conversation.* “Something smells nice.”

“A recipe from Weight Watchers.” She gave him a pointed stare, as if to dare him to mention her ever-growing body. “Chicken casserole. It has a fancy name, but buggered if I can remember what it is.” She walked off into the kitchen.

He followed her, sitting at the table which had been laid for one. She really *hadn't* expected him home. He got up to collect a placemat and cutlery, then sat and watched her bustling about like some overweight heifer, her fingers podgy against the serving bowl she held. Bloating, she'd call it. Fat, he'd call it. She carried it to the table and placed it in the middle on a trivet, her chubby arm brushing his. He shuddered. God, how he hated her. Throughout the day, imagery of the sex they'd had last night had jumped into his brain every now and then to torment him. It had been gross, as gross as her, and he didn't want to repeat it but would have to.

“Maybe we can have an early night after dinner,” he suggested.

She jolted. Stiffened. “I'm a bit tired. I cleaned all day, then nipped to Home Bargains to buy a rug to cover the bloodstains in the living room. I told the policeman it was red wine because he stared at it. Thought it best Martin didn't get into any trouble for thumping John. I used the Vax, but it didn't get it all out.” She returned to the worktop and brought over another serving bowl containing broccoli and mange tout.

Relieved she'd rebuffed him, Roman waited for her to sit and pick up the ladle first, a gentlemanly thing to do, one that would hopefully show her he considered her before himself, that he was, in fact, turning over that new leaf. She didn't appear to have noticed and spooned a load of casserole onto her plate, more than he felt she needed. He sighed inwardly. Smaller meals meant a smaller body, but he was sick of telling her that. If she wanted to remain fat until her dying day, that was her call. He'd have to buy her a wider coffin at this rate.

“Terrible, what happened to Zoe,” she said and attacked the broccoli. At least she'd put more of *that* on her plate.



“Yes, the Strangler doesn’t discriminate.” *I don’t want to talk about that part of my life with you.*

“What do you mean?”

“She was autistic.”

Her eyebrows rose. “Oh, I didn’t know that. Sally never said.”

“Apparently, only her family knew. And her boss. I spoke to him today. Keep that info to yourself, obviously. No telling Georgie. She’s got a gob as wide as the Mersey.”

“Bless Zoe. I wonder why she never told Kallie?”

“Maybe she did and Kallie didn’t feel it was something she needed to pass on.” His irritation spiked. He had to stop himself from attacking his wife with a fork. Poking holes into her face.

While they ate, he thought about Zoe. He’d fucked a vulnerable person, and it upset him. He’d never have touched her if he’d known. The voice had warned him not to, so maybe at some point, Clive had mentioned the autism and Roman hadn’t felt it was important enough to file away.

***“And you fucked her when she was dead.”***

A piece of chicken stuck in his throat, and he coughed it up. He hadn’t wanted to recall that bit. To acknowledge he’d gone that far. At the time, it had been exciting, but now, it sickened him. A small part of him was ashamed of what he’d become. He was a hypocrite. A bastard. Would they know, at the post-mortem, that she’d been violated after death? Gruff hadn’t phoned him to say he’d be sending his email report through to Roman and Dorchester, so perhaps the PM wouldn’t be done until tomorrow. Roman was curious as to how she’d died so quickly, too.

The post-mortem results after every murder had been exciting. To read what Gruff thought had happened compared to what actually had. Gruff had been spot-on nearly every time, which was unnerving, but then he was good at his job, so why was that a surprise?

“Do you think I should nip down and be with Sally and Clive?” Sandra asked.

He jerked out of his thoughts. “No. They’re not at home anyway.”

“Where have they gone?”

“Sally’s sister’s. Forensics are at their place.”

“Oh. So it’s definitely looking like the Strangler, then. Was she...was she raped at home then taken to the Pass like the others?”

“We don’t know yet.”

“God, it’s all so sad.”

“Hmm.”

They continued eating, Roman musing on what Rachel was doing on her last evening on earth. He smiled at the thought of Martin being gutted this time tomorrow, crying on his shoulder. Then, perhaps next week, he’d kill Sandra. She’d be muddled in her head, grieving for her best friend, not paying attention to her surroundings. He’d snatch her, his ultimate goal finally here.

Then he’d play the biggest part of his life. The mourning, devastated husband. He knew what that looked like, he’d watched his dad go through it. He’d paid attention.

# Chapter Fifty

## THE INTRICACIES OF ADULTHOOD

*He didn't see much of Dad if he could help it. Roman visited him once a month, but at church so he couldn't admonish him too much. Dad wouldn't want to let Father Brown see who he really was underneath it all. That was something Roman had thought about a lot since he'd left home, how Mum and Dad had lived a life of lies. One side of them presented to the world, another revealed at home, neither of them like the other, poles apart. He'd been taught by the best and had adopted the same way of living, although he was a master at it anyway, considering he'd done the same throughout his childhood. Good boy in front of his parents and the community, someone else with his mates.*

*Policing had taught him that many people lived the same way. The woman who walked around as if she had her shit together, but at night, she shot heroin into her veins. The man who smiled at people as they went past his market stall but he'd turned out to be a paedo. Roman, a PC who promised to help everyone he could when he was a killer.*

*Was that because of his upbringing? He'd gone into policing to make his father proud, then thought about killing so at the same time, he was doing what he wanted. Control was at the heart of it, his studies in psychology had told him that.*

*He didn't regret what he'd done to his mother, only regretted that he hadn't done it to his father, too. The voice had warned him about that, and he'd listened.*

*One month shy of his twentieth birthday, he walked into church with Sandra on his arm. Dad would like her, she was*

*'decent', one of the requirements, and she and carried herself as Dad would expect. Roman guided her to the front pew where Dad always sat and stood in front of him, staring down.*

*He wanted to crush his skull like a grape.*

*"All right, Dad?"*

*"Could be worse. Who's this, then?"*

*"Sandra. My girlfriend."*

*"Nice to meet you, Mr Monroe," she said.*

*"Manners, so that's a good start. Sit next to me, girl. Catholic, are you?"*

*Sandra sat. "No. I don't go to church usually."*

*"You'll have to change that if you're going to marry Roman. I want a full-on Catholic wedding."*

*Sandra glanced at Roman, her eyes wide, a laugh clearly bubbling to come out. Roman smirked and subtly shook his head: Go along with it.*

*"I will," she said and glanced away, biting her bottom lip.*

*Roman sat on the other side of his father and caged him in—on purpose, giving Dad a dose of what he'd felt like all those years as a child, sandwiched between him and Mum, unable to escape. It was the small things. Even though Dad wouldn't know why he'd done it, the act gave Roman pleasure. Control.*

*He never wanted to be without it.*

# Chapter Fifty-One

## MARTIN

He missed his job as a DCI. Never thought he'd say that. At the time, just prior to his retirement, the weight of crime had pushed down his shoulders, filled his mind with the horrors some humans did to others. He'd worked closely with Roman for years, the pair of them intent on bringing down scum. But *That Awful Day*, the one that ensured he suffered from PTSD, had made the final call. Therapy had helped, as had growing veg on the allotment, but he hadn't been able to completely stop the flashbacks, the nightmares. No wonder he erred on the side of depression. No wonder he'd left the force a year after. What he'd been through was enough to bring even the hardest-hearted person down.

*He scrabbled through a doorway with those stupid plastic strips hanging down, supposedly to stop flies from entering. It hadn't worked. They buzzed, a whole swarm of them alighting from the naked body to circle in the air or headbutt the partially open window. And that body, so tiny, belonging to an innocent five-year-old boy who'd found himself caught up with a paedophile. Used and abused.*

*Martin brushed off some strips that had draped over his shoulder and stared at the child, his heart beating painfully, his throat dry from where he'd run up sixteen flights of stairs to this flat because the bastard lift wasn't working. A flat next door to the woman who'd called in a nasty stench. PCs had responded first, breaking in as they'd recognised what the smell was, relaying that the flat was rented by a known*

*paedophile. Martin knew that. He'd spoken to the pervert last week. The PCs stood out on the front balcony walkway now, heaving their guts up over the safety railings, pale as anything.*

*It was obvious who the boy was, but Martin tried to change the visual. Convince himself that the hair was the wrong shade, the freckles were too abundant, the little finger wasn't curved from where the lad had trapped it in a slamming door when he'd been three. So many things the mother had told him, things the public had to look out for while searching.*

*"Oh God, no." Martin's shoe covers, which he'd paused to put on before going into the property, rustled with his steps. "No...no..."*

*No point in denial. It was him, Danny Bennett, who'd gone missing ten days ago. He'd lived on the ground floor of the high-rise with his mother and stepfather, assumed to have wandered off after he'd been playing on the green outside the family's front door. It had seemed the whole of Simwell had come out to help in the search for him, vigils held, posters put up. Journalists from the nationals had converged, suspicion falling on the stepfather until he'd proven he'd been at work, colleagues and internal camera footage giving him an indisputable alibi. Streets had been scoured, street CCTV watched, yet no one had seen the lad vanish. He'd been there one minute, gone the next.*

*On the day the call had come in, a Saturday afternoon, Martin had attended the scene. Roman and Kershaw had gone inside to speak to the parents, and Martin had remained outside to view the area in an attempt to work out where Danny could have gone. He'd spotted a doorway down the side and had entered with a PC, discovering a stinky communal bin store which had then been searched. Nothing. The one on the other side had also been looked at, and again, nothing.*

*The back of the high-rise hadn't given up any secrets either. A wide expanse of grass, with trees dotted about, benches placed by the council, giving it the appearance of a park, somewhere for residents to sit, for the kids to play. Someone*

*had abandoned their Swingball set, the plastic racquets on the grass beside a red football, the leather scuffed. Children had been kept inside once the alarm had been raised, parents too afraid to let them out of their sight, grateful it hadn't been their child who'd gone missing.*

*Martin had seen it all inside his head, the scurry of mums and dads holding their boys and girls tight. He'd gone about his business, setting actions, giving orders. As the day had progressed into another, Danny nowhere to be seen, he'd known it wasn't just a child going off when he shouldn't. Abduction had been at the forefront of his mind, and he'd stayed on the job, refusing to go home to sleep. He'd worked hard the next day, then the next, and those that had followed, and now, here he was, ten days later, desolate inside, so sick with grief that he hadn't been able to find this little boy in time.*

*The tenant, Lesley Attenborough. Where was he? Where was the fucking pervert?*

*The smell caught in the back of Martin's throat, and he resisted gagging. There was no point in checking for signs of life, although he went and stood by the body on the bed anyway. Took some gloves out of his pocket and snapped them on. Touched two fingers to the purple-stained neck, those stains in the shape of thumb prints. Flies dared to come down and feast on a dried gash on Danny's forehead, and Martin batted them away.*

*"Get off him, you bastards! Get off!" Tears blurring his vision, he backed away to call through the flat, "We need a SOCO team. And Gruff. Warn Ingrid what she's going to walk into."*

*She took scenes to heart, really felt them, and if he could at least give her some idea of what she was about to face, it might take the sting out of it.*

*Who am I kidding? Nothing will take this sting away.*

*"I'm so sorry," he said to Danny, a sob hiccupping out. "So bloody sorry, kid."*

*He reversed through the annoying doorway strips, hating leaving the child. How long had he lain there like that? When had Lesley killed him? Where was the paedo now? Martin stalked to the front door and issued orders. Another couple of PCs had arrived, and he sent one of them to get the ball rolling on finding Lesley.*

*Martin glanced down the walkway. Roman marched along, his face a mask of thunder, fists clenched.*

*“Don’t,” Martin said. “Don’t go in there.”*

*“Let me past,” Roman snapped.*

*“No. The scene photos will be enough. You don’t need to see it for real.”*

*“But it’s my job.”*

*“I know, but listen to me. Trust me. You don’t need to go in. I’ll deal with Ingrid and Gruff. You go and help search for Lesley.”*

*“We spoke to him,” Roman gritted out. “He had an alibi.”*

*“I know, but he lied.”*

*“We should have known. He’s a paedo, so we should have looked closer.”*

*“We did,” Martin reminded him. “We fucking did. No blame. We followed the rules. Did everything by the book.” But Martin would take on the blame. It already sat by his ear, whispering cruel things, like how, if he’d taken a break in the early days of the case, got some sleep, he might not have been so fuzzy-headed. He might have seen things clearer. Might have interpreted Lesley’s microexpressions better, tells that would have told him they had their man. Danny might have still been alive.*

*Roman strutted off, and Martin sighed with relief. With the DI out of the way, he could think.*

*Lesley must have lured Danny to the communal door. The CCTV in the broken lift was defunct, and no cameras had been installed in the stairwells. It would have been easy for him to spirit Danny up to the sixteenth floor and take him into his flat.*



*The Saturday afternoon in question had been a wet one—many a person had questioned how Danny’s mum, Karen, could have let him play outside in the rain, but he’d had his Spider-Man umbrella, one she’d bought him that morning when they’d gone shopping in town, and he’d been eager to try it out. People wouldn’t have been out and about in that weather, preferring to stay in their flats. Lesley had been safe to coax Danny without being seen.*

*Martin returned to the bedroom, the horrible room where Danny lay. The umbrella leaned against the wall next to a scar-topped bedside cabinet, his clothes in a pile on a dresser. The body looked so small in the double bed, the sheets stained with the lad’s blood. Bruises coated his skin, skin that had bloated since he’d been brought here, decomposition bringing it on. By that, Gruff would know an average time of death, but Martin had an idea. He’d paid attention to the pathologist at every scene. Three to five days after death, the bloat began. It was still there, so as Danny had been taken ten days ago, he’d been kept alive for a while, then killed.*

*What had he been through? What had Lesley done to him?*

*The material between the lips, a thin blue strip, held white fabric inside the mouth, so he’d been kept quiet. The thought of standing at the front door last week when Martin had asked Lesley his whereabouts, and Danny being here all that time... Where had he stashed him, because Lesley had invited them in to have a look around. Martin and Roman had checked under beds, the wardrobe, the built-in cupboards.*

*Martin studied the bed. It appeared to be an average divan but without any drawers underneath. One side caught his attention. The valance sheet had been pushed aside and tucked beneath the mattress. Fabric covering the base had flopped forward at one corner, exposing Velcro which must be used to hold the material in place.*

*To cover a screwed-on wooden panel.*

*Lesley had hidden Danny inside the bedframe?*

*Anger rumbled through Martin. He’d lifted that valance himself during the search, but at the other end. If only he’d*

*checked all round, things might be so different now. It should have been the first thing he'd done, what with the Shannon Matthews case in 2008. She'd been stored under a bed, too. Not doing that would torment him for the rest of his life.*

*He spotted the umbrella again, imagined the lad standing beneath it and smiling, his mother periodically checking on him through the kitchen window. His mind flashed farther into the timeline, everyone looking for Danny, calling his name in the dark of that first night. Had he heard their faint cries from this room? Had he tried to respond but couldn't, the cloth in his mouth preventing speech?*

*Martin couldn't hold it back. Sobs erupted, and he cursed himself for letting this child down.*

*The nightmares were exactly the same every time. Danny, running ahead across a field, the Spider-Man umbrella bobbing with each step. Martin following, trying to save him from Lesley who stood in the distance, his arms wide, his grin feral.*

*"Stop!" he called. "Don't go near him."*

*Danny carried on, laughing, his eyes on the prize—sweets produced from Lesley's pocket, held out, an enticement. The boy flung himself at Lesley who scooped him up and twirled him round.*

*"Get your hands off him, you bastard!" Martin wheezed, running faster, but he couldn't get close to them. An unseen force pushed him back. "Danny, don't take the sweets."*

*Lesley put Danny down and held his hand. They walked away, towards the bedroom that had appeared out of a sudden fog, fly-catcher strips dancing in the breeze.*

*"Don't go in there," Martin screamed. "Please, let me take you home to your mum."*

*He woke, sweating, thankful the nightmare hadn't shown him the day he'd discovered Danny's body. But it didn't need*

*to, it was always there. Waiting. Lingerin. Ready to show him he didn't deserve the title of Chief Inspector.*

*He didn't deserve to be on the force.*

Martin paced his allotment shed. Kershaw had just been to deliver the news. What the fuck? Roman, dead? He gathered up the DVDs ready for disposal. He'd clean the cases and discs, then dump them. He'd get rid of the DVD player an' all. That way, he wouldn't be tempted to watch any more filth. The police would inevitably end up on the allotment at some point, searching for more evidence on Roman. He didn't need his porn stash revealed to ex-colleagues.

He rang John, who might well have heard about Roman already, but he needed to find out what the hell had happened.

“What did I tell you about phoning me after?” John said. “No contact for a bit, I said.”

“Where are you?”

“Just filing my paperwork about a hit-and-run, why?”

“Haven't you heard?”

“Heard what?”

“Roman's dead.”

“*What?*”

Martin sighed and lowered his voiced in case Taffy loitered outside, wanting to ask why the police had been here. “Callum went too far.”

“Shit.”

“Can you find out what he did to him?”

“Yep. I'll see what I can find out. Give me an hour, then meet me in the Orange.”

Martin ended the call. He phoned Sandra.

“Martin?” she squeaked. “Rachel’s here. Have you heard the news?”

“I take it you can’t talk freely, then. If I ask questions, be careful how you answer.”

“Okay.”

“Kershaw came to ask me if Roman’s been having an affair. I’m guessing you told him it isn’t unusual for him to stay out overnight. I backed you up on it anyway.”

“I said he kips in his car when he’s working late so he doesn’t disturb me.”

“Right, so I’ll say the same if they ask me anything like that. What about Rachel, though? She’d know he doesn’t do that because you’d have told her if he did.”

“I’ll think of something.”

“He wasn’t supposed to die, Sand.”

“I know, but it’s okay.”

“What, it’s better this way?”

“Yes.”

Martin blew out a breath. “Have you told Adam and Kallie?”

“They’re on their way here now. All they know is that something’s happened to their father. I haven’t told them he’s dead.”

“I’ll come round after I’ve been to the Orange. It’d look weird if I didn’t. I have to go and meet John, see what the fuck went on.”

“He has no penis,” she said.

Martin reeled. “What?”

“It was cut off. So were his toes, fingers and thumbs, and his tongue. They hammered a nail into the side of his head.”

“Oh my God... I’m so sorry. I had no idea it would go this far.”

“I’d hoped it would.”

“What?”

“You heard me.” She sounded vacant.

“You hated him that much?”

Movement, as if she walked into another room. “He deserves to be dead,” she whispered. “Kershaw said they think he’s the Strangler. I’m not meant to say anything about that, though. He only told me everything that had happened to Roman because he knows me and I forced it out of him. I doubt he would have otherwise.”

Grateful she was letting him know the state of play, difficult as it must be with Rachel there, Martin let out another breath of relief. “It won’t come back on us, John will see to that.”

“I hope not. I had a phone call from Dorchester. He said the DNA test is being fast tracked because of it being a copper. If it comes back as Roman’s, they’re going to search my house. It smells of bleach in Kallie’s room, and it wasn’t me.”

“I forgot to tell you he was cleaning the floorboards in there.” His skin pimples. “Shit! The camera! Make out you’re going to the loo and get it. Throw it over the fence into my garden.”

“Okay.”

“I’ll see you in a couple of hours.”

“Thank you.”

“For what?”

“You *know* what.”

The line went dead.

It felt well weird talking to John when he had his uniform on, as though people who didn’t know Martin had been a copper might think he’d done something wrong. No one took any

notice, thankfully. Besides, he'd been here enough times, having a natter with his ex-colleagues. "Kershaw came to the allotment and asked questions about Roman. He told me he was dead, so that's why we're here if anyone asks, okay? I'm asking you about it."

"Stop fretting." John leaned forward and spoke quietly. "Listen, I've spoken to Callum. The prat hammered a nail into his head to make sure he was definitely brain damaged, so it must have gone in too far and killed him. Personally, I think he did it on purpose, but I can't exactly call him out on it, can I?"

"No. And his cock, that wasn't what we discussed."

"How did you find out?"

"Sandra told me. Bloody Kershaw spilled everything to her."

"Knowing Sandra, she probably made him. You know what she's like lately, Pushy Patty."

"Hmm. So, the cock?"

"It occurred to me that if the brain damage didn't work, cutting his cock off would stop him, know what I mean?"

Martin nodded. "But he'd have been stopped anyway because of the DNA in the condoms. He'd be in the nick and nowhere near women. This had better not land us in hot water."

"It won't, trust me. The van Callum used has been torched, and guess who was sent out to deal with that first thing this morning?"

"You."

"Yeah, me. It'll be all right."

"Where are the fingers and whatever?"

"Burned in the van."

"Fuck, what if it gets sent to forensics and they find bones?"

“I’ve got the van down as stolen and used in a joyride. It’s a write-off, and the owner has already had it collected to be crushed.”

“Right.”

“Stop panicking, for Pete’s sake.”

Martin sipped his Coke. “What if it wasn’t Roman?”

“It was. He confessed. Said he snapped.”

Martin sighed. “God knows what’s in that notebook.”

“The prick probably documented what he’d done. You’d think he’d have had more sense, being a copper. Mind you, he’s always known best. That was one of the things I hated about him, not accepting he could be wrong. Still, he’s gone now. We’re safe.”

Martin could only hope that was true.

# Chapter Fifty-Two

## SANDRA

She struggled with the elation thrumming through her. Her mind ought to be filled with disgust about what Roman had done, *and* that Martin had arranged for something so hideous to happen to him, but she was glad. Glad her husband had suffered immense pain. He deserved it after what he'd done to those women. Him being dead wouldn't bring them back, but it would go some way to easing the minds of the rape victims. They probably worried every day that he'd come back and hurt them again.

After Kershaw had gone, she'd put some washing on a quick cycle then phoned work and explained Roman had died and she wouldn't be in for a while. Then Rachel had arrived and Martin had phoned. Once the call had ended, she'd claimed she needed the toilet and went upstairs to retrieve the camera. Rachel, sitting in the living room, hadn't seen her bringing it back down, and in the kitchen now, Sandra put it in the bottom of a washing basket and covered it with wet laundry from the machine. She went into the back garden, pulled the camera out, and threw it over the fence.

*Rachel had better not go round there and see it.*

Sandra hung the washing, the menial task giving her a sense of normality. A pretence that her life hadn't turned to shit and she didn't have to face the police, the press, and the scornful, accusing glances from her neighbours and colleagues.

"What are you doing?" Rachel said.

Sandra turned. Rachel stood in the back doorway.



“I need to keep myself occupied.”

“I’ll help.” Rachel stepped onto the patio.

“No, it’s okay. Honestly, I’m fine.”

Rachel came to stand beside her on the grass. “I heard what you said to Martin. Roman being the Strangler. What the hell?”

*Shit, she must have got up and stood in the hallway while I was in the kitchen.* “It shocked me, of course it did. How could I not have known?”

“People hide things well.”

“Clearly.” Sandra snapped out one of Roman’s shirts. “I don’t know why I’m bothering to hang his stuff out now.”

“The police might need it, even though it’s been washed.”

“I suppose.” She pegged it up. “God, what if they accuse me of washing evidence away on purpose?”

“Don’t be daft.”

Sandra swallowed down her fear. Changing the subject, she said, “Fair warning, Martin’s coming round in a bit.”

“How did he take the news?”

“He’s devastated, as you can imagine. It’s his best friend.”

The mad urge to tell Rachel everything flitted through Sandra, but she stopped herself. To let on that John had likely gone after Roman, or he’d got a Collins brother to do it, wouldn’t go down well. Rachel would grass them up, then everything would be called into question. No, this was one secret she could never share with her.

“At least it saved me splitting up with him,” Sandra said on a laugh.

Rachel giggled nervously. “Bloody hell, Sand...”

“Well, it’s true. What that bastard has done will change my life. I’m always going to be seen as the Strangler’s wife. Some people won’t believe I didn’t know.”

“Fuck them. *None* of us knew. And anyway, until the DNA results come back...”

“No, it was him. I even joked with him about it. The murders always happened on a Monday or Wednesday when me and you were out. Then a knife went missing, and he claimed he didn’t know where it was. He told me about Louise Foll the next day after work.”

“You didn’t say.”

“I thought I had brain fog, that I’d put it down somewhere.” Sandra pegged up a pair of his suit trousers, and it reminded her of one night in the past. “I came home once, can’t remember if it was an art class or yoga night, and the tumble dryer was on. It annoyed me because it was summer and a waste of electric. Anyway, he’d done some washing. He’d *never* done that before. Said he wanted to help me out. Now I know why. He was getting rid of evidence. How many times have I done his washing, not knowing where he’s been and what he was doing? I think of all those women he killed, for what? And the ones he raped, it’s all going to come back for them now. Bastard. I hope he rots in Hell.”

“He must have been perverted and you didn’t know it,” Rachel said.

“He was something.”

Rachel picked up the empty basket. “I’m going to take this inside and nip to the corner shop for some wine. We’ll probably need it for when Kallie gets here. I’ll stay out of the way until Martin’s gone. Shall I buy Adam some beer?”

“Take my card. I’ll get it for you.”

“It’s okay, I can manage.”

“No,” Sandra said, a smile pulling wide. “I’m due some life insurance, aren’t I.”

“Sandra!”

They laughed all the way into the house.

# Chapter Fifty-Three

## RACHEL

She dawdled to the shop, intending to hide out in her flat afterwards. She'd asked Sandra to let her know when Martin had been and gone. She didn't want to see him today. He'd be gutted, and she'd feel sorry for him, then she might relent and go home with him so he could talk about it, and he'd get the wrong idea.

Mentioning that Roman must have been a pervert had been Rachel's way of feeling Sandra out. If her friend knew about the chat group, it was obvious she wasn't going to admit it, so Rachel had kept her mouth shut. Sandra had enough to deal with without her adding more to the pile. Strange, though, how Sandra was so detached, as if the news of his death and who he'd been didn't affect her. Rachel would be screaming the house down, fit to burst, but she supposed everyone took that kind of news at their own pace. Maybe it hadn't really sunk in yet.

Kershaw telling Sandra about what had happened to Roman was a bit below the belt. Rachel had always got along with him whenever there was a gathering at the Orange, but she wasn't sure he should have, or would have been allowed, to tell her of the injuries yet—or that they suspected he was the Strangler. Perhaps, because he knew her through Martin, he felt he could trust her with the information.

Having all those things cut off must have been hideous. Rachel had tried not to think about the pain and suffering while at Sandra's, Roman deserved it, but she couldn't help but contemplate it. What were Roman's last thoughts? Had his

family popped into his head? Did he feel guilty over what he'd done?

She remembered seeing him outside the shop on Sunday. He'd been shocked to see her. Why had he been there? Oh God, had he been stalking her? Was she supposed to be his next victim? The idea of that sent her scurrying. She'd possibly had a close call. He'd made it clear he fancied her on the day of the barbecue. Wished he'd met her sooner.

She ought to ring the police to tell them the timings on the night he'd walked her home. Sandra mentioning it after art class yesterday had got Rachel thinking. Yes, he *had* been out for longer than it would take to walk her to Farm Acre then return home. He had about twenty to thirty minutes to play with. And why had Zoe even been on the platform by the stream at that time of night anyway? Now Martin wasn't on the force, she couldn't find out any details, and visiting Sally and Clive to fish for information was rotten.

She entered the shop and paid for the wine and lager, then went to her flat. Picked up the phone. Dialed a number and asked for DCI Dorchester. The quicker she got this off her chest, the quicker she'd get back to normal, but it burned inside that she couldn't mention the chat group.

Maybe she wouldn't need to. Martin had said he'd deal with it. And they'd do a search through Roman's phone, wouldn't they?

*Unless he got a new one like Martin...*

The idea of all four men ditching their old ones popped into her head. Of *course* Martin would have warned them about her knowing. Annoyed he'd possibly put her on Dave's and John's radars, she gritted her teeth.

"DCI Dorchester."

She jumped. "Oh, it's Rachel. Foster. Martin's...wife."

"Ah, what can I do for you?"

"I need to add something to my statement, the one I gave to PC Bedford about Saturday night. To do with Zoe King."

“What’s that, then?”

“The timings for when I was with Roman Monroe.” She rattled off what they were. “I couldn’t think straight before, sorry. The shock of Zoe being murdered and everything...”

“That’s fine, and thank you for calling in about this. Can you nip to the station at some point so we can get your statement amended?”

“Yes, I’m going to Sandra’s soon, but once her son and daughter arrive, I can pop down. It’ll be a while, though, as they live a fair way from Simwell.”

“Good. That’s helped us a lot, what you’ve said. Bye for now.”

She imagined him punching the air. She’d given them something to go on, on top of the DNA evidence they already had, and while she hadn’t been able to fuck Roman over in life, she’d done it in death.

The question was, did she want to get Martin, John, and Dave in the shit, too?

*No. John’s married to a Collins. Keep your mouth shut.*

She sighed, nodding to herself. It looked like she’d be taking their secret to her grave.

# Chapter Fifty-Four

## INGRID

The day after Monroe's murder, Ingrid opened the DNA results. For the elimination of police personnel fingerprints and DNA early on in an investigation, which reduced time spent on legitimate scene contamination, Roman was already in the database. She thought of how she'd recently barked at him for not having his hood up and for scratching his head. He'd done it on purpose, the wanker, to give a reason why his hairs were there. He'd been covering his arse.

*If he's the Strangler.*

She sighed. Read the information. The DNA in the condoms was a match. She'd tried to convince herself it wouldn't be, that he'd been killed for some perceived slight, and to see it as clear as day that he was the one they'd been searching for...

Cold dread flushed her body, and she leaned against the wall beside her desk, her chest tight, the armrest of her chair digging into her side. Other tests were being performed to establish whether DNA on the outside of the condoms related to the victims. As there were many, it would take time. She wouldn't complain. She was just grateful the lab had pushed Roman's test through within twenty-four hours. It meant as a force they had closure—and the proof almost all of them had denied. That the DI who'd presented as a good man, albeit a wind-up merchant and somewhat emotionless, had in fact been a rapist and killer.

All the times he'd spoken to her at scenes, how he'd viewed the bodies as evidence, not as people. She'd assumed it had been his coping mechanism, but now it shed new light on

his behaviour. Narcissists, psychopaths, and sociopaths didn't have empathy, or in some rare instances they had it, but not much. Or they *pretended* to have it in order to mask who they really were. Had he always had terrible thoughts? What had triggered him to step over to the dark side? How had someone so good turned so bad?

Digi forensics hadn't found much on his phone. It was new so hardly had anything on it, and what was there wasn't incriminating. His old number had been a pay-as-you-go, unregistered, and didn't appear to be in use. Had he removed the SIM and battery? The service provider would be contacted for help. Hopefully, they'd be able to retrieve some text messages, but if the phone had an SSD hard drive...

Had anyone else been involved? She bloody hoped not.

Now the DNA results had confirmed the Strangler's identity, Roman's house would be searched. Why hadn't it been done yesterday anyway? Had Dorchester held off because he didn't want to put Sandra through unnecessary stress? Or in case it wasn't Roman and he didn't want egg on his face? Or had the magistrate denied a warrant until they had proof?

Ingrid picked up the phone to speak to the DCI. She'd heard he'd accepted it would be Roman, but whispers had gone round that he was so eager to wrap up Operation Dove that if the condoms hadn't been in evidence, he'd have blamed it on Roman anyway.

She took a deep breath, and as the rings trilled in her ear, braced herself for the fallout.

# Chapter Fifty-Five

## THE NOTEBOOK

**January 1<sup>st</sup>, 1998**

*It's that time of year again where you evaluate your life. You check the current signposts, see if they're pointing in the right direction. Some are, like at work, but others, at home, they're all wrong. The posts should never have been hammered into the ground in the first place. I should have said no. Refused to do what Dad wanted. But I didn't, and here I am.*

*I married her to fit in. To give my parents the grandchildren they wanted. To be a good little Catholic boy and follow the family tradition of tying the knot by the time I was twenty. She was a decent girl, "Passed muster," as Dad said and, "She has fine hips for breeding." Hips that expanded so much after she gave birth that I couldn't stand to look at her. Still can't. She's going to turn into a fat cow, I know it.*

*I resent her. Them. I resent not being able to be me. The real one I have to hide behind the guise of a police officer, making out I'm obeying the law when I want to break it.*

*Life isn't fair, and then you die.*

*Happy New Year, arseholes!*

**January 1<sup>st</sup>, 2000**



*Can't fucking stand this. Going to explode. It's fake, all of it. Happy New Year! Hope for the future! Does anyone really believe that with the tick of the clock past midnight, their lives are going to change for the better? It's crap. My life is crap. I'm stuck in this mess. Can't see a way out.*

*Unless Sandra's dead.*

## **January 1<sup>st</sup>, 2001**

*I've been thinking about it for a whole year. Killing her. Imagining life without her in it. Coping with the kids by myself. They're still so young, young enough to forget her. Forget her face, her voice, her smile. Everything. I shouldn't complain. She works, she juggles the house and children. She manages it all as if it's nothing. Doesn't complain. It's as if she likes this life we've created. As if she's happy.*

*How can she not see the darkness inside me? Do I hide it that well? There are times I want to lash out, to hurt her. She's the reason I'm stuck, or maybe I should cut her some slack and say it's my parents' fault.*

*Or mine for doing what they wanted.*

*I should have stood up for myself. Said no.*

*So, here's to the end-of-year musings. I hoped for a better New Year at the party last night, yet here I am, same life, same problems.*

*Like I said before, it's bullshit.*

## **January 1<sup>st</sup>, 2005**

*She's like a stain on a nice white shirt, stubborn and won't get out. I've been acting a bastard recently, trying to push her*

*away, make her leave so it isn't me who'd be filing for divorce. Dad would be devastated if I wanted one, so it has to be her.*

*She's put my moods down to my job. I've been promoted to DC. Got a lot more work on. I'm out for longer than I was as a PC. She says I'm bound to be arsey if I'm tired. She has an answer for everything. Why won't she fuck off? Why is she putting up with me? What kind of doormat did I marry?*

### **January 1<sup>st</sup>, 2010**

*I've tried not to think about it. Killing her. But it won't go away. The voice, it warns me not to do things. I don't want to listen to it when it comes to getting rid of her. I've learned a lot since I became a DS last year. Have studied the cases I've been on to see why the offenders got caught, what they did to fuck it all up.*

*I could do it, what they do. Except I'd be better at it. I'd never get caught.*

*My life's lies extend to my job. I'm Mr Trustworthy, someone who'd never put a foot wrong. I'm paving the way for when I do it, so when she's dead, no one will suspect me. Sometimes, though, my darkness slips out. I say things to get a rise, to hurt people, which appeases the part of me that wants to inflict pain, and people laugh, they say I'm winding them up. They think I'm joking.*

*Except I'm not.*

### **January 1<sup>st</sup>, 2015**

*One hundred ways, one hundred reasons why I shouldn't, but I still want to kill her. If she won't go of her own accord, I'll have to force her. I've been plotting. Working out the best way.*

*My studies on murders in and around this area show that the preferred method for men is strangulation. It may be different elsewhere, but I need to copy them—there are two killers we haven't caught, and maybe one of them can cop it for Sandra's death.*

*Would I do it from behind or the front? Do I want to stare into her eyes one last time? Do I want to watch the light leave them as she dies? I don't know.*

*Alibis are another thing. I'll have to have a solid one. Kill her at night when no one else is around. Dump her body. The Pass, that would be a great place. All those trees around the edges, good coverage. How would I get her there, though? And what about the kids? They still live at home. Adam's nineteen and goes to the local uni, so he might well be around, noticing I'm out. Kallie's seventeen and a pest the way she uses the place like a hotel. She's out more than in, though, so it's less likely she'll know I wasn't home.*

*Do I have to wait until they leave? Get their own places?*

*How long will that be?*

*Jesus Christ, Unhappy New Year!*

## **January 1<sup>st</sup>, 2019**

*It's getting harder to contain my emotions. We had a row, a big one, and I ended up storming out. Childish, maybe, but if I hadn't left, I'd have smashed her fucking face in. The kids had been out, so at least they hadn't seen me getting right in their mother's face; Adam would have gone for me. Then again, he owes me for the shit I got him out of with the drugs, so maybe not.*

*Sandra has been moaning about me not helping more around the house. She claims she works just as hard as me so we should share the load. I disagreed. Told her it was her job*

*as a wife and mother to get on with the housework. She reared up, went mad at me.*

*I stood there and prayed she'd kick me out.*

*She didn't, but she looked at me as if she hates me.*

*I've been pretending for so long it's become normal. My life feels like my life, the one I want to live, when it isn't. How insidious it all is, normalcy creeping in and convincing me it belongs. I've fought becoming comfortable, fought liking this existence, because to like it means my parents were right. They weren't. I chose the wrong person, like Rachel did.*

*I heard her talking to Sandra the other day. She's not happy, wishes she hadn't agreed to marry Martin and have kids. I know the feeling. Kindred spirits, Rachel and me? Should I have met her all those years ago instead? Would it have been a match made in Heaven? Would things have been different?*

*No, Martin's been moaning about the lack of sex. It got me thinking about my sex life, how I don't want to touch my wife now she's piling on the pounds. There's pretending, then there's outright lying to yourself. I can't get an erection unless I think of someone else. Someone younger, prettier, slim.*

*There is a bright side. Adam's moving to Coventry next week, and Kallie's said her boss wants her to transfer to Dorset. If she goes, I'll be free to kill their mother.*

*I'll create a proper plan. A solid one. Check the life insurance will be enough. Up it if I have to. Wait for a few months so it doesn't look suspicious.*

*This time next year, Rodney, I'll be a millionaire.*

*Well, maybe not that much, but I'll feel like one.*

**January 1<sup>st</sup>, 2021**

*That bastard virus. I was all set to kill her in March last year, but lockdown happened. She got to work from home while I continued to be out there, amongst it all. Coming into contact with people who might have been infected. God, how I wished she'd caught it and died. Alone in hospital. Alone at home, it didn't matter, just that she was gone.*

*She didn't catch it. A bottle of disinfectant was never far from her hand, and when I came home from work, she made me strip off and shower. Slung my clothes in the machine straight away, ruining one of my suits in a hot wash. We hadn't seen the kids for months prior to lockdown. Sandra had taken to eating snacks throughout the day, depression tiptoeing in, her waistband expanding even more.*

*There are murmurs of another lockdown happening on the 6<sup>th</sup>.*

*Why do I get the feeling the world is trying to stop me?*

*Or is it God, like Dad would have said?*

## **January 1<sup>st</sup>, 2022**

*It's here. This is it—I'm doing it. No more putting it off. Covid is still a pain in my arse, but I can't hold off any longer.*

*I've been thinking about it for years, and in all that time, I hadn't thought about a practice run first. Until last night. At our New Year 'party', me and Sandra by ourselves, when she got drunk, I sat there, imagining her as a moth, pinned to a board, unable to get free. Stuck there so I can do whatever I want to her. I worked out whether I could finally get things moving. It had come to me, as she'd twirled around to some song or other, that I might get it wrong. Sandra might not die, and she'd tell everyone I'd tried to strangle her. If I do it to someone else first, I'll be more prepared.*

*Her name is Carmen Smith—her nametag told me. She works in the little shop on Copse Road. The later shift, four*

*until eight, a perfect little keyworker. Ideal for me to follow her home in the dark, see where she lives. I can't use the police database to check or it'll be a red flag to the team—we're bound to be assigned to her murder case. Me being a DI, I can steer the investigation where I need it to go.*

*I'll watch her for a couple of weeks, then do it. Monday 17<sup>th</sup>.*

*Wish me luck!*

**June 13<sup>th</sup>, 2022**

*I still haven't killed anyone. I've been practising a lot, though. Many rapes but no murders. Couldn't seem to go to the next stage. But tonight, I'm going to kill someone. I promise.*

*Her name is Louise Foll.*

*Oh, and I caught a moth today.*

## THE BACK OF THE NOTEBOOK

### **Kill Kit**

*Balaclava*

*Gloves*

*Black joggers and hoodie*

*Trainers*

*Knife (for threatening)*

*Gag (her knickers?)*

*Lock pick (already bought last year from a craft fayre)*

*Ties (already bought in Kent—I'll need to go back and buy more for Sandra's murder; must check when the next Effective Policing convention is but might not even need ties, will see how it goes)*

*Condom (just in case I get lucky)*

**Itinerary**

*Kill the test subject in her house.*

*Take her to the Pass on foot (can't afford for the car to be seen).*

*Get home by ten so Sandra doesn't know I've been out.*

*Put black clothes away, hide balaclava and gloves.*

*Wash boxers in bathroom sink and leave to dry in Kallie's old room so Sandra won't see them (if I do get lucky!).*

*Repeat when it's Sandra's turn.*

# Chapter Fifty-Six

## DETECTIVE SERGEANT KERSHAW

The team sat and waited for Dorchester to calm down. He'd had a call from Ingrid, who'd confirmed the DNA was a match. While everyone else had sat in shock, digesting that information, Dorchester had done his usual pacing and called Monroe all the names under the sun. He'd gone to his office, had been a while, and reappeared now, slightly calmer.

“Right.” He took a deep, shuddering breath. “While my ego's taken a bashing because we've been duped, we need to crack on. Zoe's PM has been done, just read the report. She died from collapsed lungs. Pneumothorax. She had underlying lung disease, undiagnosed, poor cow. Strangulation didn't kill her, as we'd assumed. Okay, not to dwell, or we'll all get maudlin... The warrant has been granted and sent through. Monroe could have all manner of shit hidden in that house. Sandra will have to come down to the station and be properly interviewed today. While I highly doubt she knows anything, we can't be too sure. We didn't think Monroe was capable of being a killer, the SIO on the case, no less, and look what happened there. A shitting travesty.”

Claire rubbed her eyes. “I honestly thought he'd been beaten up by a Collins. You know how he didn't like being told we should steer clear of that lot and leave them alone. I thought maybe he'd ignored the super's warning about keeping us all safe and he might have taunted them about getting them arrested. One of them snapped...”

“Well,” Dorchester said, “much as I'd have loved that to be the case, the DNA says it isn't, although it could still be a Collins who offed him. They've got their mucky fingers in



many a pie, could have been looking for the Strangler themselves. Unfortunately, unless we have evidence to prove a Collins was involved, we can't go around accusing them or bringing them in." He slapped his forehead. "Do you know what galls me the most? I liked Monroe. Fucking *liked* him. He's been round my *house!*"

Kershaw waited for the retelling of Monroe going there for dinner, but it never came.

"Okay." Dorchester paced some more. "We'll get down to Monroe's and conduct the search. I want everyone togged the hell up before you go in. Ingrid mentioned Monroe with no hood up and scratching his head at Zoe's scene—she caught him, gave him a bollocking. I've just checked the files for each murder scene. Monroe's hair was at *every single one*. Yes, there are other officers' hairs and fingerprints, but they're all random, never the same officer twice. It's pretty clear what he was doing."

Kershaw's heart thumped faster. "I told him to put his hood up, there and at every scene. Gruff did, too."

"Yeah, well, that's water under the bridge now. The clever bastard wasn't clever enough, though, because he had the condoms and notebook on him when he was attacked."

Neil tapped his desk with a pen. "I don't understand why he did it."

"What, scratched his head?" Dorchester shouted. "I'd have thought it was obvious. He contaminated scenes because he was the bloody killer!"

Neil rolled his eyes. "No, why he raped and killed."

"Who the hell knows? He must have been laughing at us when he was banging on about reasons people murder. All that shit about that Puppy bloke stubbing his toe." Dorchester stared at Kershaw. "You worked closely with him. Did you have any inkling he was off?"

"No, and if I had, I'd have said so. He behaved the same with me as he did with everyone else here. What about Martin Foster? Should we have another chat with him? When I visited

him at the allotment, he seemed genuinely shocked Monroe was dead.”

“People can act shocked to hide what they’ve done,” Dorchester said. “What if Martin found out what Monroe was up to and beat the shit out of him? The text messages on Monroe’s phone show Martin asked him out for a drink on Monday night. Why? Did he want to get him pissed up then kill him?”

“Martin?” Neil said. “Not a chance.”

Dorchester ignored him. “I want alibis for the night of Monroe’s death.”

Claire got up and went to the board. She tapped a small list she’d written up yesterday afternoon. Names. Times. “Already done, sir. Martin was in the Orange Tree. We were also there. Monroe came in about nine. His description—the clothes he was found dead in. I assumed he’d been jogging or something after work. Monroe left not long after he’d arrived, he didn’t even finish his pint. Then John came, sat with Martin in a window booth. Callum Collins joined them. They appeared to be having a drink and a chat, nothing more. I didn’t see when they left as I went home before them.”

Dorchester blushed. “Sorry, I didn’t see all that on the board. Too busy now Monroe isn’t here. What time did you leave?”

Claire glanced around at everyone. “I can’t remember, can you?”

Kershaw shook his head. “I didn’t notice. I don’t even know what time *I* left, but it was shortly after you.”

“Same,” Neil said.

Dorchester wiped his forehead with the back of his hand. “So we know Monroe was in the Orange about nine. Where did he go afterwards, that’s what we need to know.”

“Street CCTV is being looked at, has been since yesterday,” Claire said. “Nothing so far. Officers went into the Orange as well and spoke to the landlord. His CCTV is on the blink.”

“Convenient,” Dorchester muttered.

Claire nodded. “That’s what I thought, but if Callum told him to wipe the footage, can you blame him? Bob confirmed Monroe, Martin, John, and Callum had been in but also couldn’t recall the time. In his defence, it wasn’t busy in there, and I remember him writing in a puzzle book on and off, so he wasn’t really paying attention.”

“Martin kept glancing at us lot, though,” Neil said, “when he was talking to Monroe. I just assumed they were nattering about us or the case and he was checking we couldn’t overhear. You know, because Martin’s retired and Monroe shouldn’t be passing on information.”

Dorchester picked a pen up and twirled it between his fingers. “I definitely want to speak to Martin. Once the house search is underway, I’ll nip round to his.”

“As Callum was in the pub,” Claire said, “that’s a good reason for us to speak to him, too, as we would any other witness. He can’t accuse us of singling him out because we’ve been speaking to other customers, too. He stared over at us, so he can’t squirm his way out of saying he wasn’t there.”

“I’ll deal with him,” Dorchester said.

Claire nodded. “Monroe’s car was spotted in the corner of the Orange car park. It’s still there. I left a note on your desk for it to be collected.”

Dorchester grimaced. “Shit, it must have got lost in the pile. No excuses, though, I dropped the ball. Seems finding out your DI isn’t who you thought he was throws you for a loop.” He attempted a laugh that fell flat. “Anyway, I’ll action that in a sec. Kershaw, you can come with me to question Callum, John, and Martin. Right, let’s get down to the house first. Kershaw, you’re my right hand.” He pointed to a uniform in the corner, PC Statham. “You stay here in case something comes in. Report to me if it’s significant.”

Kershaw stood, relieved he hadn’t been paired with Neil again, although spending the day with Dorchester might be a worse fate. If the DCI had dropped the ball, what else had he

dropped? Kershaw hated himself for it, but his mind went to Dorchester being dodgy.

Was that how it was going to be now? No one trusting each other?

In protectives, Kershaw kept checking his hood was up, his mask in place, his gloves on tight, paranoid about leaving anything of himself in the house. The last thing he needed was to be accused of contaminating a scene on purpose. Monroe being the Strangler meant everyone now looked at each other in a different light, it was obvious. Who else could be keeping secrets? Kershaw had nothing to hide, and he'd go about his day as usual, but it still left him with an uneasy feeling in his stomach of being observed.

Sandra had gone down to the station and had said she'd be staying with Rachel Foster in Copse Road until she could return to her house. Her children would stay at the Premier Inn. It felt weird walking into Monroe's home, as if he was doing something he shouldn't because Sandra wasn't here.

The living room didn't yield any insights into who Monroe had been at home. Modern and mainly cream, it had a minimalistic air, no family photos, nothing but ugly porcelain frogs in a display cabinet. He couldn't imagine they'd belonged to Monroe. A fluffy rug had been pulled up, and a SOCO swabbed the carpet beneath. It looked like faint splashes of beige blood in the pile, although Kershaw had noted yesterday, while going through the officers' statements from house-to-house, that Sandra had told Bedford it was red wine.

If it was blood, why had she lied?

He walked into the kitchen and looked through the window. Another SOCO took washing off the line and placed it in evidence bags—most of it was male clothing. The room itself gave nothing away either, and as he climbed the stairs, he had

the nasty thought that Sandra had washed those clothes to get rid of any evidence.

*No, she's not in on it. She wouldn't do that.*

He poked his head into the bathroom. A forensic officer had taken the pipe off beneath the sink, a procedure to check if any blood or other evidence had been washed down it. Kershaw continued on to a small bedroom, an office. A desk, ergonomic chair, a computer in the process of being boxed up. Next, he found Ingrid and two other forensic officers in what appeared to be a spare room; a bed, chest of drawers, a wardrobe, and the rug had been rolled up and put to one side. A floorboard had been removed, and the air smelled faintly of bleach. Had Sandra cleaned this room recently? Or had Monroe?

Ingrid shone a torch into the hole. It appeared as if nothing was there, but then she moved the insulation to reveal foil-faced board beneath. In a corner where the joists met, something had been wedged in there.

“How did you know to check there?” Kershaw asked.

“I took the rug up to bag it and saw a board seemed loose. Good job I did, because *that* is another condom.” She pointed to it. “I think we’ve found his hidey hole.”

“He cleaned it?” Kershaw asked.

“Hmm. He should have known bleach won’t stop us. My guess is he took his trophies out of here and was on his way to destroy them when he got attacked.”

Kershaw sighed. “I’ll go and let Dorchester know.”

“Let Dorchester know what?” The DCI stepped inside.

Ingrid filled him in.

“I’ll make the interviewing officer aware,” he said. “Sandra will need to be questioned about this. Maybe she was the one who used the bleach.” He walked out.

Kershaw called him back. “Did you know there’s what looks like blood in the living room on the carpet?”

“No...” Dorchester rolled his eyes. “I’ll pass than on an’ all.”

“She told Bedford it was spilled wine.”

“Okay.” Dorchester tromped down the stairs.

Kershaw moved into the main bedroom. Minimalist again, featureless apart from an excessively large headboard that reached three-quarters of the way up the wall. Cream suede. The vanity table held one bottle of Alien perfume and a hairbrush. A SOCO looked through the wardrobe, shifting suit after suit aside.

“Do you want some help in here?” Kershaw asked.

“You can check those drawers for me, the ones under the window,” she said. “Cheers.”

Kershaw walked over there and opened the first drawer. Bras and knickers, neatly put away in little compartments. Sandra was clearly the sort who liked order. Or had that been Monroe, insisting everything had a place? He pulled the compartment/dividers out and checked behind. Nothing. The next drawer contained boxers and socks, again put away in an orderly manner. Kershaw removed those dividers and bent to see the back.

He frowned. “Um, I think I have something here.”

The SOCO came over and used tongs to pick up the first item. “A balaclava.” She found an evidence bag and put it inside. Wrote on it. Put it into a cardboard box. She used the tongs again and brought out a pair of gloves. “Brilliant. These might give us something. He’d have touched the women, so skin cells might have transferred.”

Kershaw opened the third drawer at the bottom. It must have been Monroe’s, as it contained several ‘man’ things—a boxed, old-fashioned shaving kit that he may have received for Christmas; socks with ‘Dad’ across the toes; a ‘Best Husband’ mug, two Mars bars inside. He took a Mars out and checked the best before date to see when Sandra had thought he was, indeed, the best—2006. Other items, all placed to fit like a jigsaw puzzle. He removed those on the top layer and stopped

short. A wooden display case with a glass door, filled with pinned moths. What swept the wind out of Kershaw's sails were the names underneath on strips of white cardboard in Monroe's handwriting. Every rape victim, every murder victim, and four missing spaces at the bottom. Two of the names were there, though. Rachel Foster and Sandra Monroe.

"Oh, sodding heck," he muttered.

Monroe had walked Rachel through the Pass. Had he intended to kill her then? Had he stopped himself because her sister had been expecting her? Had he then had excess energy and had killed Zoe as a substitute? Zoe's moth or name wasn't there, so that must be what had happened. Kershaw swallowed tightly and stood.

"Something else," he said to the SOCO. "That man was a nutter. Bloody hell..."

Sickened by Monroe's depravity, he stepped out for a moment to collect his thoughts. The DNA had proved it already, but to see the balaclava and gloves, those moths, seemed to bring it home more.

*How the hell didn't I see who he was?*

As Martin wasn't in next door, Dorchester had opted to speak to Callum at Collins Car Repairs first. He turned right onto the trading estate and rubbed his cheek. "I've had a call from Statham. A carrier bag's been found in Monroe's car boot. Definitely a man who kept trophies."

All the blood seemed to drain out of Kershaw. He'd known today would be one full of shocks, but sodding hell... "Oh God, what was in there?"

Dorchester listed the items. "If he were alive, he'd be going down for a couple of life sentences."

*Knickers?* Kershaw felt sick. Those were private items, and they'd been stolen, kept for Monroe's pleasure. *Sick bastard.*

“I don’t think I’ll ever get over this,” he said. “Those moths, the names... Rachel and Sandra had a lucky escape.”

“It’s certainly something that will play on the mind, especially the two empty spaces. So he’d planned to kill two other women once he’d done Rachel and Sandra? No more killing after that? And why wasn’t Zoe there? Couldn’t he catch a moth for her or something?”

Kershaw explained his theory about Zoe being an off-the-cuff kill. “So she didn’t deserve to be in the box, is that it?”

“God knows. But it would explain why he’d switched to blonde. He might not have cared what colour hair she had, too excited, the pervert. And like he said to us, we’ll sometimes never know the reason someone kills, and it seems we’ll never know why he chose Zoe.” Dorchester gestured outside. “Here we are. I’ll do all the talking. I don’t want to piss a Collins off by both of us going at it, bull at a gate.”

They got out and approached the garage. Inside, all of the Collins brothers worked on various cars. Callum glanced up from polishing a bonnet and walked over.

“What do you fucking want?” he snarled.

“We’re speaking to anyone who may have seen Roman Monroe on Monday evening. Nothing for you to worry about. You were in the Orange that night.”

“Yep, with my brother-in-law, John. Oh, and Martin.”

“Forest?”

“You likely already know that. Enough of your spies were in there.” Callum shoved a rag in his pocket, one corner poking out.

“Did you see Roman at all?”

“No.”

“What time did you leave?”

“No idea.”

“Where did you go once you left?”



“Home. Ask the missus.”

*She'll say anything you tell her to.*

“We will.” Dorchester smiled. “Thank you for your time.”

It galled Kershaw that they had to walk away. That one family could dictate what went on around here. *Better that than find ourselves dead.* Ridiculous, but that was the way of things.

Back in the car, Dorchester drove away and slapped the steering wheel. “He’s got such a poker face, I couldn’t read him.”

“Me neither. He didn’t even want to know why you were asking about Monroe. Should we be worried about that?”

“Why? It’s all over the ruddy news. He’ll know why we asked. Find out where John is for me, will you? See whether he’s even on duty today.”

Kershaw rang the station, and after a couple of minutes’ wait, he had the answer. He put his phone in his pocket. “He’s in a meeting at the community centre.”

“I set that up to talk about any concerns the public have about the Strangler after Zoe was murdered. I bet it’s mayhem there now Monroe’s dead.”

They arrived and entered the centre. The function hall, wall-to-wall full, buzzed with dissension, people shouting towards the front at John who chaired the meeting. He spotted Kershaw and Dorchester and leaned across to whisper to the local MP sitting beside him at a table, then got up and gestured for them to go with him out of a side fire exit.

In a courtyard, he sparked up a cigarette. “They’re not happy. Zoe King being autistic has lit a bonfire, not to mention news leaking that Monroe’s copped it. They’ve put two and two together. I’ve told them not to cast aspersions until the results are in, but it doesn’t seem to have worked.”

“They came in this morning,” Dorchester said. “A match.”

“What?” John almost dropped his fag. “*What?*”

Dorchester pulled a face. “I know. You lived in his street. You knew him as a friend, so—”

“Don’t go asking if I noticed anything, because I didn’t. This is a right old shock. Is Sandra all right?”

“She’s being questioned.”

“*She* won’t have had anything to do with it.”

“Standard procedure, you know that. What we’re here for is to check what time Callum Collins left the Orange on Monday night. You were with him and Martin Foster.”

“Yeah, we had a couple of bevvies and chatted about football.”

“Did you see Monroe? He was there around nine.”

“I wasn’t there then. I didn’t get there until about quarter to ten or thereabouts. As for when me and Callum left, I couldn’t tell you. I’d necked a couple of pints by then. Head was a bit squiffy.”

Dorchester puffed out his cheeks. “I haven’t heard any rumblings that Callum had a beef with Monroe anyway. You?”

“Nah, Callum hasn’t said anything.”

“Okay, I’ll let you get back to your lovely meeting, then.” Dorchester grinned.

“Cheers?” John took another drag of his cigarette then stubbed it out in the fag bin provided.

Kershaw studied him for signs of deception and found nothing.

At the allotment, Kershaw spoke to the old man who’d opened the gate last time.

“Here again?” the fella said. “I’m starting to wonder what Martin’s done...”

Kershaw smiled at him. “Nothing.” He led the way to Martin’s plot.

The ex-DCI sat in a deckchair, staring ahead at the row of houses opposite, the top windows and roofs the only things visible. "I was only saying to Roman on Saturday how those houses still haven't been torn down," he said by way of greeting. "The murder came up, Louise's, and he bloody well sat there and talked about it as if he hadn't done anything." He pushed his sunglasses up his nose. "I didn't have a sodding clue."

Dorchester admired Martin's vegetable patch. "Which one's Monroe's?"

"The one directly to my left. That's his shed an' all."

Dorchester took his mobile out. "I don't need to say for you to keep this phone call under your hat, do I? As in, I'm conducting police business in front of you which should be done out of your earshot."

Martin scoffed. "Do whatever you've got to do. I won't be saying fuck all. I had your job before you, remember, so I'm not likely to grass on you."

Kershaw glanced over at Monroe's plot. Had he buried more trophies there? Were any in the shed? While Dorchester called in for more SOCO, Kershaw turned back to study Martin. Difficult to tell his true expression with his eyes covered, but his body language didn't speak of him hiding anything. Then again, he'd know what the police looked for and would act accordingly.

Dorchester slid his phone away. "A team will be down here shortly, so you might want to collect anything personal from your shed as it'll be gone through."

"There's nothing personal in there," Martin said. "It's a potting shed with a chair, a fridge, and a telly. Go in there now, if you like."

"I'll leave that to SOCO." Dorchester stuffed his hands in his pockets. "You were in the Orange Monday night."

"Yep, I'm there most nights."

"Monroe joined you."

“He did. I asked him out for a drink. Want to see the messages?”

Dorchester nodded, and Martin unlocked his phone, opened the text app, and passed it over.

Dorchester read the screen then showed Kershaw.

**Martin:** FANCY A PINT LATER? NINE?

**Roman:** ONLY FOR A QUICK ONE. I HAVE SOMEWHERE TO BE AFTER THAT.

**Martin:** WHERE?

**Roman:** NONE OF YOUR FUCKING BUSINESS!

“What do you make of that?” Kershaw said. “Him having somewhere to be.”

“No idea. He never said anything when he got to the pub either.”

Dorchester looked at Kershaw, then seemed to make a decision. “Listen, I trust you, and I need to run something by you, but it involves me giving out information we’ll likely keep out of the public domain.”

“Okay...”

“Did you, at any time, get the feeling Monroe didn’t like Rachel?”

Martin frowned. “What? No, he was fine with her. Hang on... She did mention he was a bit weird towards her on Saturday at the barbecue.” He explained what had gone on. “So he liked her more than he should?”

“What about Sandra? Anything you can tell us there?”

“I don’t think they were getting along, but he told me he wanted to give their marriage another go. I suspected he was having an affair. Why are you asking me this?”

Dorchester gave Kershaw the nod to take over.

Kershaw took a deep breath then explained about the moth case. “Why do you think he’d have wanted to add Rachel and Sandra to it?”

Martin took his sunglasses off and rubbed his eyes. “This is... He wanted to *kill* them? Fuck me... I sent him out after Rachel on Saturday night, I told him to go with her. I *trusted* him. Thank God he decided not to kill her. It...it doesn't bear thinking about.”

“What did you discuss with him at the Orange?”  
Dorchester asked.

“He was acting weird. Jittery. Asked me if I needed to tell him something. Maybe he thought I'd asked him there for a reason. I hadn't, it was just one of our usual drinking sessions. We talked about my wife leaving me—sore subject, so don't ask. Before I forget, I expect you'll be at Roman's house, going through it, and I'll tell you now, there's blood on the living room carpet. If Sandra says otherwise, it's because she won't want me getting in the shit for punching John. I thought... Look, I was drunk, had my head up my arse, and accused him of sleeping with Rachel. I knew he wasn't, but I hit him.”

“We know she said it was red wine, but thanks for mentioning it because she'll be asked why she lied. If she tells us the same as you, then there's nothing for her to worry about.”

Martin appeared relieved. “Anyway, I'll get back to what I was saying. Ever since the barbecue, Roman's been winding me up, keep insinuating Rachel's seeing someone. We talked about it again in the Orange, and I had a go, basically telling him to pack it in. I'm wondering now whether he banged on about it so I'd think her lover killed her.”

“That could very well be the case,” Dorchester said. “Or he could have been engineering it so you got angry at her having another man and you got the blame.”

“What a wanker.”

“Hmm. What else was said?”

“He asked me why I kept looking over at your lot, but I was trying to catch someone's eye so they'd come over and save me from him. He was in one of those moods. In the end,

he buggered off without even finishing his pint. That was the last time I saw him.”

Dorchester nodded. “He did have a habit of winding people up, I’ll give you that.”

“You had some balls hitting John, considering who he’s married to,” Kershaw said.

“I know. As I said, I was drunk.” Martin pulled at his bottom lip, then shot to his feet. “Oh God. What he said in the texts. That he could only come for a quick drink because he had somewhere to be. Do you think...do you think he was going after Rachel? She’d have been to art class, and he knew that because she goes with Sandra.”

Kershaw’s skin goosepimpled. “Sandra said she stayed over that night with Rachel. Didn’t want to go home.” *Did she know what was about to happen to Rachel and went there to stop it?* He’d put that to Dorchester once they’d left. She needed to be questioned about it.

Martin took his bucket hat off and rummaged a hand through his sweaty hair. “So if he’d been waiting for Rachel, he’d have seen Sandra going into her flat. Let me ring her. Rachel, I mean.”

“Put it on speaker,” Dorchester warned.

Martin got on with it, and Rachel picked up after ten rings.

“What do you want?” she asked.

“I’m with Dorchester and Kershaw. You’re on speaker. Did you notice anything odd when you got back from art class?”

“Not at the flat, no, but we went for a drink in the Admiral, and I swear someone was watching us when we got out of the car. I didn’t see anyone, just felt it.”

“Fuck,” Martin muttered.

“What’s the matter?” Rachel asked.

Martin looked at Dorchester who shook his head.

“Nothing,” Martin said.

“You’re worrying me now...”

“It’s fine, just had to check something.” Martin pinched the bridge of his nose. “I’ll...I’ll see you when I see you.”

“Make sure you answer the twins, please. They’re worried about you.”

“Will do.” Martin ended the call and threw his phone onto his deckchair. “He was watching her.”

Dorchester scratched his eyebrow. “Seems so. Why would your twins be worried about you?”

“Splitting up with their mum and all that goes with it.”

“Okay. We’ve taken up enough of your time, so we’ll be off.”

Martin blurted, “When they went to the pub, he could have killed my *wife!*” He’d said it as if it had truly sunk in.

“Don’t torment yourself with it.” Dorchester patted his shoulder. “He didn’t do it, so no point in playing what-if. Events out of your control aren’t your fault, remember that.”

*He’s referring to Danny Bennett. This mess might send Martin backwards in his recovery. Monroe’s got a lot to answer for.*

“We’ll be in touch if there’s anything else.”

Kershaw followed the DCI to the gate, and the old man scuttled over to undo the padlock. On the way back to the station, Dorchester received a call, and he put in on speaker.

“Driving, so make it quick,” he said.

“It’s James on the front desk. We’ve received a letter about minors being used in sex tapes. Have you got time to take it on, or should I pass it to the other team?”

“I haven’t got time to take a piss let alone anything else,” Dorchester moaned, “so yes, pass it on.” He reached over and cut the call. “What the *fuck* is this town coming to?”

# Chapter Fifty-Seven

## **TEEN GIRLS IN SEX TAPE SCANDAL!**

*An anonymous letter to Simwell police a month ago revealed minors have been used in pornographic films. Officers swooped on three locations in the early hours of Friday morning: a newsagent's in Blackwell Street, the Conservative Club in Crowley Way, and Better Bets in Hemming Road. Several arrests were made after a four-week investigation. The girls had been trafficked, previously reported as missing from as far afield as London. They are now back with their parents.*

*All films were paid for in cash, so tracing the buyers is an impossible task. If you know anyone who has purchased videos, please phone 101, crime number 65784, or contact DI Ken Wakefield at Simwell police station. All calls will be in the strictest confidence.*



# Chapter Fifty-Eight

## RACHEL

Thank God! Martin had done what he'd promised. She'd begun to doubt him, seeing as so many weeks had passed. He'd messaged to tell her he'd sorted it, but with nothing happening, she'd allowed herself to think badly of him. Again. She should have known he'd be true to his word on something like this. The police had been working in the background, collating evidence, waiting until they had everything sorted before they made arrests. She should have *known* that, yet she'd jumped to the unfair conclusion that he'd lied to her.

She closed her newsfeed, thinking of the minors back with their parents. They'd be getting counselling, no way could they be left to fend for themselves after what they'd been through. It had been left to her imagination to conjure up their experience. Not pretty. Had they been locked away in stark rooms in between filming? Had they been hurt? Their minds had undoubtedly been fucked with, a horror something Rachel had to stop herself from contemplating. If she hadn't seen the chat group, they'd still be suffering. She shuddered at that. Thank goodness she'd been nosy enough to pick up Martin's phone that evening.

It was a Saturday in July, and the twins had travelled back to Simwell for a couple of days' break. They'd arranged to stay with Martin. Rachel didn't mind, it was their childhood home after all, their bedrooms still containing what they hadn't taken to Nottingham with them. She looked forward to seeing them now Alice and Emma had accepted that sometimes, couples grew apart. Martin hadn't blamed her, and she was grateful. She was even amenable to having a meal out later, him included. She'd messaged him about it, saying they

could put on a pretence for the girls' sakes. He'd agreed, although she anticipated him grabbing a chance to have a chat with her alone. They hadn't discussed it all yet, the intricacies of the breakup, but at last, she was ready to. She'd kept him dangling long enough, another cruelty she shouldn't have indulged in. First, she planned to apologise to him again. She'd wasted eighteen years of his life, something he could never get back. He was a good man, just not for her.

Life in the flat had become bearable. She'd got used to living by herself, enjoyed being alone now, a chance to sift through her past motives and behaviour and own it all. It had been difficult, and she'd cried a lot; to properly admit you'd been nothing short of a spiteful bitch stung. But she *had* been a bitch, and she'd promised she'd never lie to herself, or him, again. And oddly, facing who she'd really been was cathartic. She'd stripped the veil away, poked and inspected, and found herself lacking in so many areas.

It was time to make amends.

To at least be friends.

The Orange hummed with voices and the clatter of cutlery against plates in the restaurant area. Rachel weaved between tables towards the one where Martin and the girls sat. There they were, her family, and for a brief moment she found herself caught short. Unexpected emotions swelled. The nucleus before her should have been her whole reason for living, it should have been enough, but it hadn't. Martin had been surplus to requirements once she'd given birth—perhaps, if she were truly honest, the moment she'd found out she was pregnant. That little blue line on the test had shown her they didn't belong together, she'd chosen the wrong man. He hadn't *done* anything back then, he'd been the same fun-loving Martin he'd always been, but a stark prod in her psyche had let her know she'd made a mistake.

The rest was history, carved into all of their lives now, her deception, creating a tissue of lies, moulding their world

around the fact she'd been prepared to fake it until she made it, much like Roman had. She'd engineered how their lives had panned out. Controlled the narrative. Would the twins be happier if she'd left him? Would it have been better if she'd brought them up alone, Martin seeing them on the occasional weekend? Rachel wouldn't have been so depressed if she had. Her girls' lives would have been sunnier with a lighter-hearted mother, maybe a stepfather, a man Rachel *should* have married.

*I wish I'd had the courage to leave. To stand up for what I wanted.*

She moved closer, catching Alice's eye. Rachel smiled, so pleased her child got up and ran towards her. So *relieved*. Emma raced out of her seat, too, the pair of them enveloping her. Tears pricked her eyes. They still loved her, then. Despite what she'd done, ripping their family apart, she was still their mum. Martin watched them, his eyes misty, and hatred for herself singed a nasty path up her windpipe.

"I'm so sorry," she mouthed to him.

He nodded, sadness seeming to seep from his pores. "I'm sorry, too."

Alice and Emma stood at the bar talking to some old school friends. Rachel watched them, so proud of how they'd turned out. They'd matured while away, growing into adult bodies they'd never quite fitted into before they'd gone to university. Now, they were well on their way to becoming women, and she prayed they'd always be true to themselves, unlike her. She hoped they had the courage of their convictions, no matter what others expected of them.

"I read the news this morning," she said quietly, her stomach overfull from having a pudding on top of a meal. The jam roly-poly and custard sat awkwardly. As Alice would have said when young, 'I'm full right up to my neck.'

“It’s a relief,” he said, “that they took it seriously and did something about it.”

“Do you think John and Dave will wonder if it was you?”

“Probably, but I’ll blame it on Roman. The letter was sent while he was still alive.”

A dark cloud settled over her. “I still can’t get my head around him.”

“Me neither.”

“Do you think...” Hesitation stalled her words. “No, it doesn’t matter.”

“No, go on. Some thoughts are better out than in.” He sipped his lager.

“Do you think he’d have killed me on the Pass that night if I hadn’t been on my way to Tara’s? Like, if I’d just gone for a walk to cool off?”

“My answer depends if you want the truth or not. Whether you can handle it.”

She froze. “You know something, don’t you.”

“I do.”

She asked herself if she wanted to find out what it was. If it would help her to move on. She’d tormented herself about that night for weeks. Maybe if she knew for sure, she could put it to bed. “Tell me.”

“Let me preface it by saying that harsh realities can mess you up. Take me as an example. Look how I was with the PTSD, the nightmares.”

“You could have talked to me about that.”

“Could I? Be honest, you might not have wanted to listen. We were well on the rocks by then, I just didn’t see it. Anyway, I didn’t want to inflict the pain on you, which is why I need you to be sure about what I know before you agree to hear it.”

She blushed at him being right. She *wouldn't* have wanted to hear it. What a horrible person she'd been. "Is it bad? The Roman thing?"

"I think so. I haven't been sleeping well since I found out."

"Oh." She asked herself again: *Is being oblivious better than knowing?* No. "Like I said, tell me."

He drank more lager. "Fucking hell, Rach..."

"Please. I need you to."

A deep breath, then he told her about the moth case. She imagined it, an empty space with her name underneath. Her expected death, just waiting to be immortalised in that creepy box. A pin, ready to be stabbed through a moth's body. Would she have been a Brown Tail or an Emperor? A Six-Spot Burnet or a Luna? Would it have devastated Martin if she'd been found dead at the Pass? And the girls...oh God, she couldn't think about it anymore.

"What a monster," she whispered.

"There are many of them about."

"You must have coped with so much, being a police officer. I wasn't there for you. Too wrapped up in myself."

"It doesn't matter. It's gone, and we're moving on."

*Why does it hurt that he's accepted it, us not being together?* She still had a lot of work to do on herself, it seemed. Wanting him but not wanting him was mean. "Do you want to talk about what set off your PTSD?"

He smiled, a sad one that didn't reach his eyes. "One day. I think you've got enough to be going on with, considering what I just told you."

She saw him, *saw him*, for who he really was. Kind, caring, respectful of her mental health. Always doing what was best for her, right down to accepting she didn't want to have sex. He'd turned to images of women because she'd denied him.

"I really am sorry," she said.

"I know."

Alice and Emma walked over, slightly tipsy, their eyes alight with happiness. Rachel slipped her hand under the table and held Martin's. Squeezed.

He squeezed back.

# Chapter Fifty-Nine

## MARTIN

Rachel and his girls had gone off to the cinema after the meal. Martin wanted them to have some private time together so had stayed in the Orange, nowhere else to go on a Saturday night. Kershaw and that lot stood in their usual place at the bar, and he watched them, the comradery, something he'd missed since retiring. Should he go back? Immerse himself in the life of a policeman again? It'd fill his time, save him thinking about stuff he couldn't control. He'd like to think he'd got a handle on his issues lately, his nightmares about Danny Bennett few and far between, replaced by Monroe chasing Rachel through the Pass, his intent to put his hands around her throat and kill her. Would Rachel have similar nightmares now? Or had she already been having them before he'd told her about the moths?

John walked in, his gaze scouring the pub, landing on Martin who stood close to the other coppers. John jerked his head towards the booth area, and Martin prepared himself for what was to come. He'd do what he'd said to Rachel—lie, no question. If he admitted he'd been the one to send the anonymous letter, he'd be facing Callum in a dark alley later.

Martin bought John a pint and joined him in a booth. He slid the glass across the table. "My round, if I remember rightly."

John took a hefty swig and put the glass down a bit too forcefully, lager sloshing over the rim and his fingers. "Got something to tell me?"

Martin's stomach flipped. "Err, no?"

“How do you think I felt, being at work earlier and hearing one of the teams congratulating each other for storming the DVD outlets in the early hours of this morning?”

“*What?*”

“You heard. Are you playing me? Pretending to be shocked?”

“Eh? No! I haven’t seen the bloody news. Been too busy cleaning the house. The twins came back today for a break. What the hell happened?”

“I didn’t hear a thing, not a rumble at work, about an operation to storm the Con Club, the bookies, and that pissing newsagent’s.”

“It would have been on a need-to-know basis. You *know* that’s how it works. The least amount of people who are told about raids the better. Wonder how they found out?”

“That’s what I wanted to ask you. I *wonder*, eh?”

Martin widened his eyes. “Hang on, you’re not accusing *me*, are you?”

“You never liked what went on in that group, so why not?”

“Listen to me, you. I had sod all to do with that raid. We deleted the chat, ditched our phones, and as far as I was concerned, that was the end of it.”

“Then it must have been Rachel.”

Martin wasn’t having that. “You what? Are you having a fucking laugh? If you remember, we only had Roman’s word on her knowing about the group. What was it he said? Something like there were things she wished she knew about ages ago, shit would have been different and she wouldn’t have felt bad about wanting to leave me. She’d have a valid excuse or something. Seeing as he was Billy Bullshitter extraordinaire, he could have said that to cover up the fact *he* was going to let the police know. Think about it, a feather in his cap for finding out minors were being used. He’d have looked the hero, probably made out he’d been working



undercover or something. And what Rachel was supposed to have said, that could mean anything. I told him as much.”

“Like what?”

“I don’t know, maybe it has something to do with the fact she used me, stayed with me so her family didn’t say ‘I told you so’—and that’s between you and me. She was with me all those years because of it.”

“Burn. So what was the shit she wished she’d known about, then?”

“That we weren’t compatible after all? That she’d realised her family’s expectations were holding her back? Fuck knows.”

“What you said about Roman telling someone at work about the minors—it couldn’t have happened.”

“Why?” Martin knew why, but he had to play dumb. To let John think he didn’t have a clue about how the police had found out. So John didn’t know Martin had read the news.

“Because whoever it was sent an anon letter.”

“Blimey.” Martin drank some of his now-warm lager and wished he’d ordered himself a fresh pint when he’d bought John’s. “Seriously, mate, I had no idea.”

“Think it might be Georgie? She liked the group. What if us deleting it naffed her off?”

“Nah, she wouldn’t want you finding out and sending a Collins after her. I reckon it was Roman. When was the letter sent, do you know?”

“He was still breathing, put it that way.”

“There you go, then.”

“So if it *was* him, he was okay with getting us in the shit? His *mates*?”

Martin should feel bad, because that was exactly what *he’d* done, but it had been for the young girls, to save them. He should have said something about minors when they’d first started cropping up, but he hadn’t wanted to open that

particular box. It would have brought memories of Danny to mind, and selfishly, he'd ignored it. "You have to admit, the underage thing was bad."

John nodded. "Roman put the first one up if I remember rightly."

Martin thought back. "Do you think...?"

"That he did it to mess with your head? Because of the Bennett case?"

"Yeah."

"It's likely. He *did* wind people up on the daily. Got a kick out of it."

"Why pick on me, though? I was his *best* mate. He knew damn well what I went through after Danny."

Martin would have to come to terms with the fact his 'friend' hadn't been his friend at all. All those years working together, the drinks in the pub, the chats at the allotment. What a waste of years.

Seemed he'd been used by *two* people he cared the most about.

*No, forgive Rachel. Just...let it go.*

He got up. "Want another pint?"

John nodded. "Yeah, although it's my round." He took twenty quid out of his wallet and handed it over. "I take it, if you even bought any, that you ditched the DVDs, that you paid cash when you went to buy them. I forgot to ask you when the police raided the allotment last month."

"Didn't buy any," he lied.

"Good, because the newspaper article asked for people to come forward about buyers. You wouldn't want the sellers to give up your name, would you." John stared at him, menace in his eyes.

"Nope." Martin hoped he'd sounded nonchalant, but he'd thought the same himself. *Fucking good job I slapped a fake beard on when I went to the bookies, then, wasn't it.*

John seemed to accept his answer. “Dave’s bricking it.”

“Oh no. He *didn't*...”

“He bloody well did. Walked in the Conservative Club, bold as brass, the dick.”

“If he gets caught, d’you think he’d...?”

“Nah, he knows I’d get him sorted, even if he was in the nick. Don’t worry about it. We’re safe. Are you going to Roman’s funeral? They’ve finally released his body.”

“No. You?”

“Nope.”

Martin walked towards the bar. He had a new nightmare to add to his repertoire. The worry of Dave opening his mouth, regardless of what John had said. He nodded to Kershaw and ordered two pints.

He had the urge to get smashed.

# Chapter Sixty

## SANDRA

Life hadn't turned out anything like she'd imagined, but it was as close to happiness as Sandra could get. It hadn't been pleasant, watching her kids crumble the day they'd found out their father was dead—and the day after, when the news had come via the family liaison officer that he was the Strangler.

She didn't live in Kiddleton Rise anymore. The house held too many memories in its walls, ones that had climbed out to claim her on the nights she'd stared at the dark ceiling. With the sale of the property to a morbid couple who'd been overexcited at living in a killer's house, she'd rented the perfect home in Haven Avenue, a street Roman had always aspired to live in. A final *fuck you*, to him, that she'd got there and he hadn't.

She was free of him but not his dreadful, heartbreaking legacy. Who he'd been followed her, a cloud waiting to pelt stinging hailstones at her when she least expected it. She'd learned, through counselling, to recognise when the black dog approached, to avert her thoughts to brighter things, like how she'd been made partner at Stafford Solicitors and her colleagues had rallied round, assuring her they didn't think she'd had anything to do with what Roman had done. Adam and Kallie, though, they'd asked *that* question, and at the time she'd been shocked, so *hurt*, that she'd burst out crying. Now she looked back on it, she supposed, even though they knew her so well, that they had to make sure their mother hadn't been in on it. After all, they'd thought they'd known their father and hadn't.

Her world had settled into some semblance of normality over the past weeks, where she went through her day-to-day activities, giving the appearance she could cope. In reality, shadowy thoughts pervaded her mind, ones where she'd killed Roman herself.

Last month in July, as she'd come out of her house shortly after the fallout, she'd seen John, and he'd nodded, winked, and walked to his car, their secret lingering in the air between them. He'd driven away, leaving her standing on her garden path, lost and out of sorts. She still didn't know if he'd murdered Roman or whether he'd asked a Collins to do it. Debbie had left their house, then, glancing over. She'd waved, and Sandra had scrutinised her features to see if she'd known about it all, but it seemed she hadn't.

As for Rachel... They still saw each other on Mondays and Wednesdays for their classes, but a wedge had cropped up between them. A distance had formed. Where once they'd been thick as thieves, they were more like casual acquaintances now, Rachel troubled by something she wouldn't share, Sandra too embroiled in her own issues to even want to know.

That's what grief did to you. Changed you, sent you insular, only interested in yourself and how you were affected. At least that's what had happened to Sandra for a time. She'd come out of that—one of the many stages of mourning, her therapist had said—and had entered the angry phase, where she'd railed about Roman and the life he'd paved out for her. She couldn't control how others saw her, how some gave her evil stares and clearly thought she'd known, but she could control how she reacted to it. In the next phase, she'd adopted a fake devil-may-care attitude, brushing off anyone who upset her, and so far, it appeared to be working.

One day, she'd be past all this. One day, she'd laugh again.

Sadly, that wasn't today.

No clouds graced the blue sky on this Monday afternoon in August, and it gave Sandra a pinch of satisfaction. The heavens hadn't opened, no gods' or angels' tears falling on them as they stood around the grave. Roman's body had finally been released at the end of July. They'd finished with it as 'evidence', unable to find anything on him that pointed to his killer. Now Sandra had to play a part—for her kids.

She hadn't cried throughout the church service, hadn't had any fond feelings towards the man she'd married. She couldn't allow herself to remember they'd been happy once. How they'd laughed until they'd cried, danced until their feet ached. All that time, he'd been harbouring murderous thoughts, living as two personalities, one he showed her, their children, their families, his colleagues and friends, the other only *he* got to see, and later, his victims.

She'd come to terms with being duped. Used. Kershaw had let her know snippets from the notebook. All of Sandra's marriage had been a lie. Roman had shown her what he'd wanted her to see, and she'd taken it at face value. Why wouldn't she?

It hadn't been a gradual dislike of him that had crept up on her, it had slammed into her a few years ago, the evening he'd gone too far in leaving everything to do with running the home to her. From then on, after the row, everything he'd done had irritated her. Resentment had burrowed deep. Maybe she'd entered the menopause early and hadn't twigged. Maybe her hormones had been up the swanny even then. Or maybe he'd shown the cold blue and green of his true colours, keeping the red and orange hidden. She saw what he'd done to those women as red—for blood, anger, and evil. His sunny yellow had disappeared many moons ago, much like Martin's had vanished around the time that lad, Danny Bennett, had gone missing.

Everyone had secrets, she knew that more than ever now, but Roman's had been the biggest deception of them all.

She did her 'duty' and threw earth onto the coffin but refused to toss in a red rose. He wasn't the love of her life anymore, he was a monster, hopefully in Hell with all of the

other bastards to have walked this earth. Kallie threw a rose, perhaps for the father she'd thought he'd been, for the times when he'd swung her around and chased her through the Pass when they'd gone there for family picnics. Adam, though, remained still, no mud or rose for him, and he clasped his hands tightly at his groin. Did he think about what his father had done for him, hushing up the drugs thing? Did he tell himself Roman *had* been good sometimes?

He had, there was no doubt about it, but the man she'd married had pretended to be good to fit in, to disguise his psychopathic tendencies. She'd read up on people like him, how they blended, how you might not cotton on to the narcissistic tendencies until you were firmly encased in their web.

How true that was, and he'd revealed as much in the notebook.

The officiant had finished, so Sandra walked away, leaving only her children behind—no one else had come, something she was pleased about. She weaved between other gravestones to the path and stopped short.

Kershaw stood beneath the boughs of an oak tree.

“You could have come to the church service,” she said. “Everyone was welcome, although I see no one had it in them to attend. Apart from me and the kids anyway.”

“I didn't want to. I'm only here to make sure he's really buried. Gone.”

Sandra nodded. “That's why I'm here, too.”

He'd told her about the moth case, how sickened he'd been when he'd found it. Her name being there no longer surprised her, not after he'd shared some of what had been in the notebook. She had a burden on her shoulders, one of many Roman had put there—that all of the women were dead because of her.

“It wasn't your fault,” Kershaw said, as if reading her mind.

“I know.” She linked her arm with his. “And one day, I might well believe it. Just not today.”