

SAFE NO LONGER

BY

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Most of the locals called him The Raven or The Tramp, depending on what capacity they knew him in, due to the many occasions he slept in the rafters of Thorpe St Faith's church on Blue Green Square, or out in the open during the summer months.

Amos Geraint Browne was his full name. Very few people knew that about him. They were also unaware that he had a Cambridge degree and had worked as a copyeditor for the Telegraph before his world shuddered like a small earthquake, tilting his life on its axis until it finally settled, leaving a huge crack running through it.

Earlier that night, Amos had stumbled through the centre of the village square after it had fallen asleep following the bank holiday celebrations. It was littered with drink cans, screwed-up napkins, food wrappers and fag butts.

Amos wasn't interested in any of that: he didn't smoke or take drugs, and he limited alcohol to the bitterly cold nights in the rafters of the old building. Sometimes he would find shelter in the graveyard — it felt marginally warmer outside than in the draughty church, with its high ceilings, arctic stone floors and expanse of chilled glass. Even so, he was grateful for the roof that protected him from all weathers during times when his mental health took a dip. These moments had been more frequent lately, and the only solace he seemed to find was in the confines of this particular sanctuary.

Amos located what he was looking for. His stomach lurched and grumbled at the sight of the half-eaten food on the few tables outside the Drum and Monkey. It was the place to be whenever there was a bank holiday and, being the last one of the summer, Jan the landlord had laid on live music and a barbecue. On one of the far tables there was a plate that looked like it hadn't been eaten from, but it wouldn't be the first time Amos had seen a mirage in the desert. He stepped cautiously towards it — a double bacon cheeseburger with chips, the pub's speciality, and homemade coleslaw and salad. One bite had been taken out of the bun, but apart from that, it was untouched. Amos slid on to the bench and placed one hand over the food, feeling it beneath his palm. Confirming it was real and not a figment in the desolate land of food scraps he

usually experienced, he set about the plate, giving not one care to any manners he might have been taught as a child. Some moments later he sat up, stretching his stomach, which always pained him when he ate anything substantial. He ended his stretch and rested his elbows on the table, glancing around to see if anyone was about, but all the revellers had left hours ago. The only movement was the gentle breeze whispering through the dry leaves of the trees that lined Blue Green Square. There weren't many nights Amos didn't venture from the church during the dead man's hour to wander around the square and find somewhere to sit and watch the stars, or the wildlife that dared to creep around before daybreak. He loved this time of night when there was no one around – peace at last from all the noise he usually had to listen to.

That's when he saw the young boy lying beneath the oak tree in the middle of the green. He was facing away from Amos, towards the church. His bright white hands, tied behind him, looked like a cluster of little crabs as they shone in the darkness of the night. It was a trick, a silly bank holiday prank, it had to be. Amos crept slowly around the tree until he was facing the child, and that's when he recognised the boy. Rooted to the spot, unable to move or breathe for some moments, Amos stared at Raymond Hammond. He looked around again but there wasn't a soul about, not one light on in the ocean-dark panes

of glass that made up the windows of the houses surrounding the green. Amos sat down on the dew-bejewelled grass, his eyes locked on the boy he knew to be his son. Not many people knew this fact; it was something Amos and Kristen had managed to keep hidden from the glaring eyes of the town. Raymond and his best friend Cara often played in the churchyard where Amos liked to sit on warmer days. They would chat to him, share their sweets, and he felt privileged they wanted to spend time with him, when most people tended to avoid him.

Some minutes later, Amos stood up. There was a rucksack lying against the gnarled trunk of the tree. He felt like he was gliding towards it. He unzipped the bag and emptied the contents on to the grass: a couple of DVDs, a can of Vimto, some chocolate bars and bags of crisps. There was still something else in the rucksack, and when Amos reached in, he found a small boody, neatly folded. He smelt it, taking in the scent of fabric conditioner, a long-ago luxury for him, and felt something drop to the ground. It was an old Action Man, its dirty blond fuzzy curls peeling away from the plastic skull. It was scuffed on the arms, and the army trousers looked like they had once belonged to another doll – they were slightly too short in the leg, and the waistband had been re-sewn. Apart from the hooded sweatshirt, he placed

everything back in the bag along with the Action Man and laid it against a nearby oak tree.

Amos observed Raymond for a few moments, then he leant forward and pulled Raymond towards him, as tears trickled down his face. Reaching into his pocket, he found his penknife and cut at the cable ties holding the boy's hands behind his back. Then, slowly and carefully, he pulled the boy's sweatshirt on over his head, not wanting him to get cold, slipping each arm through the sleeves, kissing his curled hands as they appeared.

Zippering up his own coat and pulling up his hood to protect himself from the chilly air of the small hours, Amos collected Raymond into his arms, holding his body close, and began walking back towards the church. It had been an unfavourably hot summer, but as the month had slipped towards September, the nights were turning colder.

Inside the church, sitting on the altar, Amos laid Raymond down and cried inconsolably, his heart aching so hard that he pressed his fist into his chest, then bit his knuckles, trying desperately to transfer the pain. Thoughts he'd often had of wrapping a rope around his neck and plunging himself from the rafters towards the cold stone floor seeped into his mind, stronger than ever now that the one purpose in his life had been snatched from him.

Amos prayed for a miracle – but, lifting Raymond up again, he could feel his son's body turning colder in his arms. He got to his feet and carried him from the church, laying him to rest where he'd first fallen asleep.

CHAPTER ONE

Someone was banging on the back door at Rachel's house, rattling the glass along with her nerves. When she peered out of the window, she saw Jason pulling at the handle.

'You never lock up, what's wrong with you?' he snapped, pushing past her and walking into the lounge. 'I told you to behave normally.'

'Sorry, I'm a bit shaky. I can't seem to calm myself down.'

'You have to. Is Cara here?'

'Upstairs, listening to music.' Rachel went over to the window and closed it.

Jason collapsed on to the sofa. 'Have you explained what's going to happen?'

The air was stifling, so she reopened the window and the patio doors. 'Kind of. She just thinks she's going away for a while and she mustn't tell anyone.'

'Oh, great, well, that clears everything up. Bloody hell, Rachel.'

‘What do you want me to say to her? You’re going to be kidnapped tomorrow but it’s not real, you just have to play along?’ She glared at him. ‘I’m a teacher, for fuck’s sake, do you know what I stand to lose if this goes wrong?’

‘I’m taking just as many risks as you. If you’re getting cold feet, just tell me and we can forget about it all.’

Rachel tipped her head to one side, like it was the most stupid thing he could ever say. ‘Of course I’m worried about it – I can’t think about anything else. But I can’t see any other solution. Cara simply isn’t moving any further forward at the club.’

‘Look,’ he said, ‘it’s a no-brainer. For God’s sake, pull yourself together. You know Cara’s safe with me.’

‘I’m just unsure of what’s going to happen afterwards. The police will be all over the place.’ Rachel began pacing the room, her nerves getting the better of her again. She swayed from it being a great idea to an absurd one and back again, every few minutes. ‘Bloody hell, Jason, this is too big. We can’t do this, it’s madness, a stupid idea. If we get caught . . .’

‘Make sure we don’t then.’ He stood up and forced her on to the sofa. ‘What’s the big deal? Cara’s just going on a little holiday, and while she’s away we’re going to be on Adrian Player’s radar. He’ll jump on this.’ His voice was softer now. ‘She’s one of his gymnasts and he loves getting involved in major news stories. It’ll make him look really good. He’ll give us whatever we want. And imagine the money we’ll rake in along the way.’

‘But we can’t hide her forever. How, where and when is she going to be found?’

‘It’s fine, I’ve been working out the details. She’ll turn up somewhere, not knowing where she’s been or who with. She’s a good girl, she’ll do what we ask her. She might need a little help along the way . . .’

‘What do you mean?’ Rachel searched Jason’s face, wondering if she knew him at all these days and what had caused him to change. She had always believed he was close to Adrian Player, but it seemed to her now that all he wanted to do was get back at Adrian and she didn’t know why.

Jason moved on to the sofa next to her and rested his elbows on his knees, linking his fingers together. 'We might have to give her some sedatives, just to keep her calm, in case she gets worried about anything.'

'No way, absolutely not,' she said. 'You are not drugging my daughter to get her to do what you want.'

'Listen to yourself. You're agreeing for your daughter to be kidnapped, but you're outraged at the thought of her having some sedatives to help her sleep. She won't be used to my flat, so they'll stop her feeling homesick or getting in a panic. Loads of people give their children a mild sedative, you know that.'

'It doesn't mean I agree with it. I don't like the sound of this at all.' Rachel stood up again and walked over to the patio doors, enjoying the faint breeze that drifted through her hair and around her neck.

'Just think of the position we'll be in,' Jason said. 'You're always saying how fed up you are with the humdrum. You'll be on the television – not just rubbing shoulders with Adrian Player, but all sorts of influential people. Imagine what it'll do for Cara's

future in gymnastics. She'll be noticed again and receive better training. You're doing this for her, that's what you must focus on.'

Rachel pushed her hands into the pockets of her shorts and turned to look at him. She couldn't deny the entire package was really attractive. She recalled the first time she'd found out that Cara had been talent-spotted by Adrian Player. The recognition Cara had received had changed them both overnight, as it felt like the prospect of fame was just within reach. All at once there was life after Howard. She discovered a heady new confidence. But, lately, she'd felt like it was all slipping away, as new, younger talent was being chosen for the exclusive club. There was less contact with Adrian, leaving her feeling like she was at sea, drifting away from a large boat filled with people she aspired to be.

'We will go ahead with this,' she said, 'but on the condition you don't use any drugs on Cara, and that' – he moved over to her and grabbed her hands, trying to interrupt her – 'and that – listen to me, Jason – and that at any time I say it has to stop, you respect my wishes.'

‘Of course. I promise, you won’t be sorry, Rachel. It’s going to work perfectly. I know what I’m doing.’

‘It didn’t work out too well for that woman who drugged and hid her child under someone’s bed, did it? She went to prison.’

‘Forget her, she was an idiot. All I need you to do is act like a woman whose daughter has been abducted. Say as little as possible and don’t overdo the waterworks.’ Jason stepped outside the patio doors and lit a cigarette, offering one to Rachel, but she waved it away with her hand. She’d throw up if she smoked. ‘I was thinking, maybe you could do some research on fundraising campaigns. You know, find a tag that represents Cara, so people raise money, start crowdfunding on social media. Not immediately – give it a week or so, when we’ve got Adrian involved.’

‘Let’s just get the first part over with,’ Rachel said, still unsure of the whole plan. When Jason enthused about the ridiculous idea, it seemed real and achievable, like what they were doing wasn’t that huge. But when she was alone, lying in bed, unable to sleep, she swayed from it being a great idea to an absurd one, and by the

time the morning light pierced the gap in the curtains, she'd talked herself out of it.

'It's just a tiny step into a whole new life. This is completely within our reach; I can feel it. We just need to take what we deserve. Trust me, it's going to be fine.'

Rachel nodded, taking a deep breath. She did trust him; in some ways he was her best friend. They had the same thoughts and opinions, wanted the same things, and above all they understood one another. She'd known him for years – he'd worked with her husband when they'd both been in the police force – and he'd been a great comfort to her after Howard had gone.

'Do me one favour.' Jason finished his cigarette and flicked it into the flowerbeds.

'What?'

'Stop chasing after Dean Grayson. It's creepy.'

CHAPTER TWO

The following day, Rachel drove Cara to Adrian's private gym, trying to calm the fluttering nerves inside her stomach. The car stalled before Rachel was able to coordinate her foot to place it on the clutch and, yet again, she hadn't pulled up close enough to the intercom. She didn't bother to restart it; instead, she wrenched the handbrake on like she was lifting a large bag of bricks. Ignoring Cara tutting beside her, she stepped out of the car and approached the imposing iron gates leading to the gymnasium and pressed the buzzer, pushing her face up against the screen.

'You don't need to get out of the car!' a voice rasped. 'You just drive up to the gates, reach out of the window and flash your ID card.'

'Is Jason in?' Rachel shouted. 'I need to speak to him. Can you ask him to come out?' There was no answer, and she leant forward to say something else but then hesitated and just stared at the screen, cringing at her ineptness.

She recognised the voice as belonging to one of the personal trainers at the gym. Most of them were moody and exasperated; she put it down to all the steroids they took. Rachel didn't care – the novelty of working there still hadn't worn off. She was a fulltime teacher at one of the local high schools but had jumped at the opportunity to work at Adrian Player's exclusive gym at weekends.

She had to manage the reception on Saturdays and was often asked to give some of the children lifts there on Sundays, and to try-outs or competitions at other gymnasiums across the country.

There was a scratching sound, a bleep, and the gates seamlessly began to open. Her heart racing, Rachel ran back to the car, swearing at herself for not having been able to simply drive up to the intercom so she could smoothly glide through the entrance. Everything she did here felt clumsy and ill-planned. She found the entire complex and the air of importance it carried quite intimidating.

She moved through the gate and parked the car, then sat for a moment, trying to settle her mind. It didn't work; in the quiet, all she could think of was getting out of there and meeting up with Dean.

When she gave her head a shake and looked at Cara, the sight of her daughter sitting there still as stone, staring straight ahead, only made Rachel fidget even more.

'You haven't told anyone what's happening tonight, have you?' Cara shook her head but kept looking through the windscreen.

'Cara?' She grabbed her arm.

'No! You asked me that last time.'

'Jason's dropping you off at Raymond's later, and then I'll send you a text when I need you, something like "miss you, love you", and that'll be your cue to leave Raymond's house. Jason will be parked down Prospect Lane. It'll be about 3 a.m., so make sure you have your phone switched on. Do. Not. Tell. A. Soul.'

Cara didn't speak – simply continued staring through the windscreen. Rachel followed her gaze. She was focused on a large man putting his gym bag into the back of his car.

Rachel turned in her seat. 'Are you worried about later?' Rachel had discussed everything with Cara and had sold the idea in the same way Jason had to her, but Cara didn't appear to be fully on board and that concerned her.

'Not really.'

'What's wrong with you? When you first started coming here, you loved it. Loved Adrian too.'

'Maybe I don't anymore,' Cara said, shrugging.

'You're so lucky, you know. There are kids out there who would give anything to be a member of this club.' Rachel looked up to see Jason walking towards them. She squeezed the steering wheel, then turned her tanned hands towards her to check her newly painted nails.

'Yeah, well, he's not interested in me anymore. I'm too old. All they're interested in is Raymond and the new girls.'

'Don't be so silly. You're just as good a gymnast as Raymond.'

‘I heard one of the coaches talking to Adrian about him the other day. They think he’s brilliant . . .’

Rachel sighed deeply, trying to think of something to say to lift her daughter’s spirits. ‘Only because he’s a boy and there aren’t many of them who want to do gymnastics.’

Cara shrugged. ‘Whatever. Like I said, they’re just not interested in me anymore.’

‘But don’t you see, once we’ve started our plan, and you’re all over the news, you’ll be back in favour again.’

Cara didn’t speak, simply undid her seat belt and got out of the car, slamming the door behind her.

‘Cara,’ Rachel shouted out of the window, and her daughter slowed down and turned. ‘Come here a second.’

Eventually, and with plenty of attitude, Cara walked back to the car and leant in the passenger-side window.

‘I promise you, this will work,’ Rachel said earnestly. She didn’t know what else she had to do or say to convince Cara it would all be okay, and it was beginning to frustrate her. ‘You can’t keep complaining about things but be unwilling to take some small

risks to get there. And there are always risks with anything worthwhile.'

'It doesn't matter what I say, Mum. You'll go ahead and do what you want anyway – you always do.' Cara gave her a sarcastic grin and headed towards the gym for training.

Jason stepped up to the driver's-side window. 'What's up with her?' he said, frowning.

'How should I know? She's been like this for a few days.' They watched Cara walk away. 'I think she's feeling a little neglected.'

'I'll talk to her, she'll be fine.' He handed her an envelope. 'Wages.'

'Everything in order?' Rachel said, squinting through the window at the sun shining in her eyes.

'Just make sure Cara is in the lane by 3 a.m. The pubs will be shut and everyone home by then. If you see anyone loitering, just stall. I'll wait a few minutes. If you're not there by three-thirty, I'll assume it's all off. I'll park the van behind the garage next to the

Chinese takeaway. Does she know where she's got to go?' Rachel nodded.

'And whatever you do, don't call or text me. Wait to hear.'

Jason said this all without emotion.

'When will that be?' Rachel asked, but he just left her staring at his back as he walked away.

Rachel started the car, and wheel spun as hard as she could in the large car park, slowing to allow the gates to reopen, then sped off, heading for the Drum and Monkey on Blue Green Square.

Earlier that day, Rachel had texted Dean to see if he was at the pub barbecue. A message came back almost immediately:

Meet you in the store, back of the pub at 2 X

Dean worked in the bar at weekends. Although he wasn't old enough to serve alcohol, he took orders for meals and collected glasses. Rachel knew him from school; he was one of the students in her media class.

Very few people knew Rachel properly – not even Howard, whom she'd only married two years ago after he'd proposed several times in the ten years they'd been together. They'd had a

nice house, a small mortgage, a landscaped garden, and a large flatscreen television which they had sat in front of every night to eat their dinner. Rachel had been a well-respected teacher, and still was to most people. She was pretty, in a girl-next-door kind of way – with her long, dark wavy hair and huge blue eyes – and her appearance made everyone trust her. If her colleagues and friends knew the truth behind it all, knew the person she really was, they wouldn't believe it. But being married to Howard had brought this side of her out. If he hadn't been so controlling, she wouldn't have felt the overwhelming need to rebel and begin having affairs. The first time she'd had sex with someone else she'd felt a huge relief and a fulfilling, smug satisfaction that she'd done something Howard wouldn't approve of. It had become an addiction, the exciting risk of getting caught making her feel reckless and empowered. Then Jason had offered her a job at the club, and he'd welcomed her into a tempting fold where she'd become enticed by the celebrity surrounding Adrian Player, and the thrill of being a part of that world had been too much to resist. It was

a spiral, one reckless decision leading right to another, and she did it all without fully understanding the consequences.

Being a wife had been suffocating. As soon as she'd got married, she'd noticed the changes within her, and they'd only built over time.

The first day Rachel had returned to work following some compassionate leave, she had been about to go home when she'd caught a student smoking in one of the toilet cubicles. Dean Grayson, a fifteen-year-old pupil in her media studies class; a charismatic, shrewd lad with no ability to apply himself.

Rachel remembered kicking the toilet door open and finding him leaning against the cubicle wall, smoke drifting out of his nostrils as he grinned at her. He'd been inappropriate towards her on several occasions, wolf-whistling when she leant over the desk to help him with his work, complimenting her on the way her arse looked in a skirt, and once, when she'd had to keep him behind, he'd tried to kiss her.

'Want some, Miss?' Dean said now, tipping the roll-up towards her. That's what she had thought it was, anyway. Instead

of reprimanding him, she found herself taking it and drawing the smoke down into the very bottom of her lungs. They'd ignited in response and her whole body had lifted from the ground, like she was some kind of human hot-air balloon. Then they were kissing, and his hands were all over her, and hers all over him. From that day onwards, it became her purpose in life, to reach that high, trying to replicate the very same one she'd experienced in the toilet cubicle with Dean Grayson.

It was a defining moment in her life, like Rachel had stepped into a secret world, and she had begun plotting and planning how she could hide it from everyone. It was different to the other affairs; she had far more to lose. It had become an exciting obsession, a distraction from everything else around her. Her life was filled with Dean, and how, when and where she could see him next. This had all worked well for a while, or so she thought. But Rachel had failed to notice that her bad moods were obvious, that her personality had changed significantly, and that the quality of her work had slipped. It was as if she had assumed everyone around her was stupid. It had been fun and exciting at the

beginning, but the strong feelings she felt towards Dean had begun to eat away at her, and she became obsessed with him and paranoid about everything he did.

Dead on 2 p.m., Rachel entered the storeroom at the back of the pub – where they often met because it was easy for her to walk from the car park, making it look like she was wandering into the bar for a drink.

She hitched herself on to one of the freezers, opening her long, bare, tanned legs the moment Dean walked in. He went straight over to her, a huge grin on his face. She wrapped her legs around his back and, placing his arms over her shoulders, he slid her body towards him, pressing against her. Dean breathed into her ear before kissing her gently on each closed eyelid, pulling his chin down the bridge of her nose before running his tongue around her open mouth.

‘I’ve missed you,’ he said, licking the sweat from her collarbone as he hitched her skirt further up her thighs.

Rachel was just removing Dean's T-shirt when Jan, the landlord of the pub, walked in with two other men. Rachel and Dean separated like scalded cats, straightening their clothes.

'Rachel Fearon? DS Fraser, DC Connor.' Both officers flashed their warrant cards in front of her. 'We need to have a chat. Step outside, please.'

Rachel slid off the freezer, tugging her skirt over her thighs, her heart racing, her mind jumbled as she tried to think of what she was going to say. She turned around and gave Dean a look, pleading with him to keep his mouth shut, before stepping outside into the bright summer sunshine.

Before the police had a chance to speak, Rachel foolishly tried to make a run for it, racing across the car park and attempting to scale the back fence before she was dragged to the ground, cautioned and cuffed.

'Rachel Fearon,' said the officer who'd run her down, still breathless from the chase, 'I am arresting you on suspicion of abuse of trust under the Sexual Offences Act. You do not have to say anything, but it may harm your defense if you do not mention

when questioned something which you later rely on in court. Anything you do say may be given in evidence. Do you understand?’

CHAPTER THREE

The restaurant was full of Sunday diners when Adrian and Gloria Player arrived. A few people looked up when they were escorted to their table, but it wasn't the kind of establishment where people rushed over for autographs or photos. Nonetheless, Adrian liked plenty of attention and would always insist on a table just off-centre but near the window. Gloria knew it was so that not only could everyone in the restaurant see them but also people walking past on the street outside. Adrian also made sure they arrived a little earlier than the rest of their party, with the idea that they could bed themselves in and be open to anyone who might want a selfie opportunity, even though it was rare for that to happen. It all made Gloria feel extremely uncomfortable – conspicuous, even – and a couple of large gin and tonics were always in order before they left the house while Adrian constantly shouted up the stairs for her to hurry up, causing her to change her outfit again. The gin helped her feel more comfortable in her clothes and was also

a way to calm her nerves, so she could deal with Adrian's temperamental behaviour.

Once they'd taken their seats, Adrian spent the first ten minutes staring out of the window, not speaking; he didn't turn to her once. She may as well have not been there. She realised, when he touched his tousled silver hair, that he was looking at his own reflection. Adrian had more beauty treatments than she did – spray tans, pedicures, manicures, waxing and massages.

Gloria turned towards the door to see if the others had arrived. The sight of her children always lifted her spirits, but this particular evening she was worried. Things had always been fraught between Adrian and his sons. It was the first time they'd all been together for dinner in a very long time and, depending on what mood Emma was in, it would go one of two ways: exceptionally well or very badly. But Adrian had insisted they meet up to celebrate his birthday – just their immediate family; they'd be celebrating with others throughout the upcoming week.

Scott and his wife Belinda arrived first, and while they were deciding on drinks Adrian and Gloria's youngest son Brett came

in. Emma was late, and that always made everything difficult. Adrian wasn't Emma's father. Gloria had been in another relationship before she'd met him, and it had ended soon after she'd found out she was pregnant. Emma had never been particularly close to Adrian, and Gloria, if she was to admit it, knew he had always treated her differently to the boys.

After half an hour, Gloria left the others to chat and went to call Emma to find out where she was. It was quite likely she'd been held up at work and had missed the train. She was an events planner and worked in the city, and it wasn't unusual for her to stay there after an event.

On her way outside, Gloria spotted Emma at the bar ordering a drink.

'What's going on?' she said as soon as she'd greeted her daughter. 'We're all waiting for you.'

'There's no hurry, is there? I'm sure Adrian's keeping you all entertained.'

'Emma . . .' Gloria was about to ask her not to cause any problems.

‘Do you want a drink, Mum?’ Emma asked as the barman placed a tumbler in front of her. ‘She’ll have a gin and tonic, please.’

‘I’ve got a drink at the table.’

‘Well, you can knock one back with me, can’t you?’

‘Why not?’ Gloria said, perching on a bar stool. ‘Just one though, eh.’

‘Of course. We wouldn’t want to *upset* Adrian.’

Gloria sensed something in Emma’s voice but decided not to make anything of it. They chatted for a few minutes, Gloria distracted, anxious that the passing minutes would ramp up Adrian’s temper.

‘Come on,’ she said at last, ‘we need to get to the table. It is his birthday, Emma.’ She pushed her empty glass along the bar and stood up.

‘Sure,’ Emma said, downing her drink and following Gloria into the dining room.

She didn't know why she'd worried so much. Adrian was entertaining some people on the next table. She could hear his laughter from the other side of the room.

'Glo,' he said as they approached, 'these people are related to Rose Bale. Do you remember? Fantastic gymnast, one of the best. She's their niece. This is Angie and Tim.'

'Of course I remember Rose. Hello,' Gloria said, smiling at the couple, whose chairs were turned towards their table. 'She won a couple of gold medals, didn't she?'

'Yes. It was a long time ago – she's retired now.' The man, Tim, looked up at her.

Emma sighed heavily, kissed the others seated around the table and took her seat, muttering something that Gloria didn't quite catch.

Adrian went on chatting animatedly about Rose and the exact time he'd spotted her talents in one of his gyms. The couple were in awe, as most people were when they met him. Then, to Gloria's horror, Adrian shouted for a waiter to make room for two more guests at their table.

‘You’ve got to be fucking kidding me,’ Emma said, quite loudly.

The couple halted and looked awkwardly at everyone around the table. ‘Look, it’s okay, we don’t want to intrude.’

‘Don’t worry about her. It’s fine!’ Adrian stood up to encourage the couple to sit down, which they did, reluctantly. ‘It’ll be my pleasure.’

‘It’s fine?’ Emma stood up, making Gloria nervous. ‘*It’s fine?*’

Adrian flung his chair back, startling everyone, and moved towards Emma. ‘Let’s go outside for a chat,’ he said, gripping her arm.

‘Yes, let’s,’ Emma snapped sarcastically, grabbing her bag and making her way out of the restaurant.

Scott’s wife, Belinda, tried to defuse the situation by asking the couple if they were celebrating, did they live far, had they any children – annoying, chattering small talk, but Gloria was glad for it. Moments later the atmosphere lifted, and Adrian and Emma were forgotten as the group ordered more wine and drank faster than usual, but Gloria’s nerves were still jangling.

Halfway through a heated conversation about politics, Gloria realised quite some time had passed, and she decided to go in search of her daughter and husband, using the excuse that she was visiting the Ladies.

Gloria couldn't find them outside when she glanced up and down the street, having assumed they had stepped outside for a cigarette, so she searched the bar, wondering if – hoping – they might be having a heart-to-heart over a drink. They'd never got on, apart from a brief spell when Gloria had first introduced Emma to Adrian when she was just six years old. It had lasted no more than a year, and then Emma had turned into a difficult child, so badly behaved that Gloria had eventually taken her to see their GP. The advice given was that it was normal, and she was probably struggling because Adrian wasn't her biological father. Gloria was pregnant with Scott at the time, and it had been easier to accept these theories, instead of looking a bit deeper or listening to her daughter.

Neither Emma nor Adrian was in the bar or the lounge area. Gloria stepped outside again, wandered up the road and back

again, but they were nowhere to be seen. It had been almost half an hour since they'd left.

Gloria stopped in the wide entrance to the restaurant and focused on their table, where she could see Adrian and Emma had joined the others. She frowned, puzzled at where they could have come from.

Relieved, Gloria stopped one of the waitresses holding a tray of drinks and ordered a bottle of champagne. Anything to keep the atmosphere light and cheery; Adrian loved champagne.

'Where have you been, Glo? We're starving!' Adrian said, resting his hand on her lower back as she took a seat. 'Hurry up and choose something.'

'I could say the same about you two. I've been looking everywhere. Down the alley having a sneaky fag, I should think.' Gloria laughed and patted Adrian's knee, glad he was in better spirits.

'You didn't look very far,' Emma said, voice deadpan. Her eyes were smudged with mascara, and she looked pale and drunk.

‘We were in the toilets, fucking. You know, Mother, for old times’
sake.’

CHAPTER FOUR

The garden gate was locked when Jody arrived at Kristen's house, and there was no answer at the front door, so she pulled herself on to the old coal bunker, scaled the wall and jumped down into the flower beds on the other side. She could see the two children sitting in the tent further down the garden. Raymond was illuminating his face with a torch and appeared to be telling Cara a ghost story. They momentarily stopped because one of them thought they'd heard something, so Jody crept along the wall, hidden by the darkness of the shrubs, around the back of the tent and ran her fingers across the shiny material. Raymond stopped talking and she heard Cara whisper something. Jody crept around the other side and carefully placed her hand on the canvas, pressing it slowly into the material and then quickly snatching it away.

'What was that?' Raymond said.

‘Nothing, there’s no one there.’ Cara laughed slightly nervously. ‘Stop mucking about and get on with the story. Otherwise, I’m going in.’

Jody appeared at the entrance and said, ‘Oy, what you two up to?’, startling them both. After the initial fright, Raymond began to laugh, but Cara looked annoyed.

‘You’re such a dick sometimes,’ Cara snapped at Jody.

‘Don’t be such a baby.’

‘What are you doing here?’

Jody laughed. It was no secret that the two girls didn’t like one another. Jody knew that Cara had been used to having Raymond to herself. They had their own separate groups of friends, but rarely allowed anyone to join in when it was just the two of them. Then Jody had been asked to babysit on a few occasions. She and Raymond had become great friends, and Cara had grown jealous. Jody liked to wind her up by doing things to gain his favour. She mainly didn’t like the girl because she was obsessed with gymnastics; all she talked about was how Adrian Player had talent

spotted her. Although, come to think of it, she'd barely mentioned it at all lately.

'Bit of business with my friend Raymond here,' Jody said, nonchalantly, choosing not to say that Kristen had asked her to check on them.

'Did you get them?' Raymond said, his eyes widening. Jody had promised to get some horror films they were blocked from downloading and viewing at home.

'Yep.' She handed Raymond the DVDs. Jody, being older, was able to get things they couldn't otherwise have. In return, they ran errands for her.

'Thanks,' he said, stuffing them into his rucksack. Even though he was camping in his own garden, Raymond never went anywhere without his bag. And it made the whole experience authentic. Jody laughed at him and ruffled his hair.

'We've been training at Adrian Player's private gym,' Cara said to Jody, trying to impress her.

Raymond turned to Cara, giving her arm a swipe. 'You're not supposed to tell anyone about that. My mum doesn't know.'

‘I’m sure she does know,’ Jody said to him. ‘You can’t fart without your mum knowing.’

‘She doesn’t,’ Cara said. ‘My mum’s been giving us lifts and she told Raymond not to say anything. She thinks he’s still training at the gym in town.’ Cara was wide-eyed now.

‘Well, there’s obviously a good reason your mum doesn’t want you to go to AP’s private gym,’ Jody said to Raymond. He fiddled with his rucksack and said nothing.

‘That’s rich coming from you,’ Cara threw at her.

Jody glared at Cara. ‘What’s that supposed to mean?’ ‘You know,’ Cara snarled.

‘We’re going to be famous!’ Raymond sang, dragging Cara out of the tent so they could do some gymnastics on the grass.

‘I wouldn’t bank on it,’ Jody called to them. ‘I know kids who’ve been going for the last three years, and no one knows who they are.’

‘You know nothing about it,’ Cara hissed, standing up to face Jody.

Jody laughed. ‘Whoa. Chill your beans, love.’

‘It can’t be that bad,’ Cara said smugly. ‘Your dad’s been up there coaching since he was sacked from the police.’

Jody stared at the girl for a few moments, trying to work out if she was bluffing. ‘No, he hasn’t; he’d have told me.’

‘Well, I was up there earlier, and your dad was at Adrian’s, because he came out of the gym and spoke to my mum.’

Jody glared at Cara, hating her even more. She leant towards her. ‘Talk about my dad again and I’ll fucking kill you.’ ‘Not if I kill you first,’ Cara said. ‘I’m going home.’

‘Good, piss off then,’ Jody said darkly. ‘Hey, Raymond, come in here, I’ve got a good ghost story for you.’

Raymond stopped what he was doing and went back inside the tent, where Jody sat cross-legged on the floor, the torch illuminating her face, making her high cheekbones and chiselled nose look particularly macabre. Cara decided against leaving and joined them in the tent. Within minutes, they were both absolutely enthralled by the story Jody was telling them.

CHAPTER FIVE

The time had flown by. Kristen had only intended to call into the pub for ten minutes – twenty, tops – but she'd been stopped by one person after another, wanting to buy her a birthday drink. There was always a barbecue and live music at The Globe on a bank holiday weekend, as it competed with the Drum and Monkey across the other side of Blue Green Square, but there was also a leaving party for Patrick Devlin, the father of a woman called Lorna whom Kristen had legally represented. His wife Renee had recently passed away from cancer and, coupled with the loss of his daughter a few years previously, he had decided to retire and move to France. He was leaving for the ferry early the following morning and Kristen wanted to say goodbye and wish him luck. She wouldn't usually leave the children unattended, even though the pub was only next door.

Kristen had begun by insisting on orange juice – she had a lot of work in the coming weeks to prepare for – but somehow one

of her friends had managed to spike her drink with some vodka, and she suddenly felt quite drunk. At one point she'd tried to leave, telling everyone that she'd left Raymond with Cara in a tent in the back garden. Jody, a regular babysitter of the children, was just then leaving the pub, and she'd offered to check in on them on her way home and text Kristen to let her know everything was okay. Kristen had refused to begin with, but everyone continued to persuade her, full of the bank holiday spirit. Light and warm from the vodka, Kristen had given in, with a firm promise from Jody that she would definitely send her a message when she left the kids in their tent. Kristen had considered asking her to babysit, as she usually did, but she wasn't going to stay long – it didn't seem worth it. Twenty minutes later, as promised, Jody had texted her, telling her everything was fine.

It was 11.30 p.m. when Kristen returned home, and she heard the children before she saw them. Relief flooded her. She'd felt guilty for leaving them, especially when one of the children didn't belong to her.

‘Having fun?’ They were engrossed in a game of swing ball, illuminated by the garden lights.

‘Oh, Mum, can we have some chips please?’ Raymond shouted, unable to pull his eyes away from the competitive game he was having with Cara.

They always wanted chips when they stayed in the tent, with lots of ketchup and buttered bread. Raymond’s friends said they never got chips like that at home. They were only frozen ones that Kristen threw in the deep-fat fryer, nothing special. And she didn’t mind – all the carbs meant they’d be asleep within an hour and she could do with some food herself, to soak up the alcohol.

‘Sure, if you promise you’ll be in that tent and quiet as church mice by midnight.’

Neither of them answered; Raymond and Cara were still intensely batting the ball backwards and forwards.

Cara dropped her bat and came in through the patio doors a couple of minutes later. Raymond continued playing without her. ‘Can I go home?’

Kristen rubbed her already banging forehead and ran the cold tap for some water.

‘Afraid not, your mum’s out tonight. What’s up?’ Cara shrugged, and for the first time, Kristen noticed the dark circles around the girl’s eyes. ‘You been training too hard?’

‘No, I’ve just been doing some extra sessions, that’s all,’ Cara said, her tone immediately defensive.

‘You’re still at the gym in town?’

Cara looked up at Kristen but didn’t answer her. She knew that look – she’d seen it many times before and had once been like that herself. Kristen walked around the kitchen island and sat down at the table, signalling for Cara to do the same.

‘You know there’s plenty of people you can talk to. I hear you’ve been going to Adrian’s private gym.’

Cara shrugged again, and Kristen knew she wouldn’t get anything out of her. She’d speak to Rachel when she dropped her off in the morning.

‘Do you want to sleep in one of the beds upstairs? You know Raymond will sneak in when he thinks no one’s looking. It’ll save

you having to smell his farts in that tent.’ Kristen squeezed Cara’s knee, and thought she saw the glimmer of a smile lift the corners of her mouth. She’d noticed a change in the girl the last few weeks. Cara was Raymond’s best friend – they’d been inseparable since they started going to gymnastics together – but when Kristen had asked Raymond what was going on with Cara, he hadn’t had a clue what she was talking about, so she’d decided she was probably worrying over nothing.

‘I do not fart!’ Raymond said, running in and skidding across the kitchen floor.

Kristen blew a raspberry, which sent them all into fits of giggles, so she kept at it, continuing around the kitchen and into the sitting room. Somehow it turned into an impression of a chicken. The three of them laughed so hard that one of them did actually fart, causing an uncontrollable amount of howling. It was blamed on Raymond and, always the joker, he continued to blow raspberries until he was ambushed by Cara.

‘Right, that’s enough,’ Kristen said, clapping her hands. ‘Pajamas, please, and then you can have some chips, chop chop.’

‘Cara.’ Kristen stopped her midway out of the kitchen. ‘Do you want me to have a word with your mum for you?’

‘What will you say to her?’ Cara said, a look of anguish on her face. She was a pretty girl, blonde and brown-eyed, hair always in a perfect bun on top of her head, as if she was constantly prepared for some impromptu tumbling. Something she and Raymond were always messing about on the grass doing. They’d both been talent spotted by one of Adrian Player’s coaches, but Kristen had been adamant that her son was never to go to the private gymnasium contained in the grounds of his house. However, she had permitted him to join the one in the town because it was heavily staffed; it was one of many in a chain that Adrian owned but had little to do with.

She had her own personal reasons for her decision that she didn’t want to share. It’s why she’d been involved with Lorna Devlin, who’d accused Adrian Player of sexually assaulting her as a child. As was always the case with *Sir* Adrian Player, the case was dropped due to insufficient evidence.

Then Raymond had come home after gymnastics one night and said that Adrian had visited the gym and chosen him and Cara for one of his try-outs at his private club, and Raymond had badgered Kristen for ages because Cara's mum had said she could go. Kristen had tried speaking to Rachel about it, but as happened with most people under Adrian's spell, she was sold on the idea of fame. Mother and daughter seemed to be so caught up in the bright beam of light that Adrian Player had shone on them, they didn't appear to care what he'd been accused of. That was how he reeled them in, using his celebrity status.

'Let's talk about it tomorrow, hey?' Kristen said. 'Promise me you won't go home in the middle of the night? I don't know what time your mum's back, and you shouldn't be on your own in the house.'

'Okay,' Cara said.

Later, once the chips had been served, Raymond and Cara quietened down in the tent. Kristen went upstairs and turned down the single bed where Cara usually slept. They'd be back indoors by 2 a.m.; they always were when they camped. The

aftereffects of all the food and excitement, and they'd be complaining they were cold, and the ground was too hard.

Even so, back downstairs, Kristen pushed the patio doors wide open, got herself comfortable on the large sofa so she could keep an eye on them, and switched the TV on. She flicked through the channels, laughing to herself at the drunken chatter she could hear coming from the pub garden next door. There'd be tears from someone soon enough. She abruptly stopped channel hopping – and a shock ran through her – when she saw an old interview of Adrian Player from *The Lester Barvlay Show*. She listened to him talking about his early career in commentating and how he'd become an entrepreneur. It made her feel sick.

Moments later she was jolted from her fixation when she heard a noise. She lowered the volume on the television. The gate was locked with a key, but she got up to check anyway. She decided against poking her head out – someone would spot her and try to lure her back to the pub – so she put the key in and made sure it was definitely locked. On her way back indoors, she crouched down to look into the tent. Cara was still eating chips,

but Raymond was holding a torch up to his face and was engrossed in telling her a ghost story. Kristen laughed to herself, and Cara turned to look at her, a small smile on her lips. Still, there was something wrong with her; Kristen just couldn't quite put her finger on it.

Kristen made herself a cup of tea and sat down to the muted television, mesmerised once more by the interview with Adrian Player. It had been filmed shortly after he'd been awarded an OBE.

She watched in disgust. She was totally convinced that Lorna Devlin had taken her own life because he'd been awarded such an accolade. It had just been too much. If Kristen could get permission and be exempt from legal action, she'd broadcast the recorded interviews of Lorna telling her about the abuse she'd suffered at Adrian's hands.

CHAPTER SIX

Emma's drunken tirade in the restaurant continued; everyone was fixated, including the staff. Somebody actually stood up and held a phone outstretched in their hand, filming the drama that was unfolding.

This was the position Gloria always found herself in but could never get used to. Their business was no longer their own and hadn't been for some time, not since Adrian had become so well known. Following his sport commentating career, he'd become heavily involved in public charity work – which had led to him being offered a job presenting a new Saturday-night game show on TV during the nineties. Everyone had begun to look at him with a fresh eye; and, as he liked to remind Gloria, he'd been reborn.

But with all the fame came a sense of entitlement from the public. People felt that they had an opinion about them and were owed a complete view of their lives, down to every tiny detail.

They were like small figures in a doll's house where anyone could peer in. People had no scruples when they saw them out and about; they seemed to imagine there was still a glass screen between them and felt it was quite within their rights to interrupt whatever they happened to be doing. It was as awkward as it was fascinating, and Gloria knew if she were on the other side of that screen she'd probably be staring and gossiping too, even though she hated to admit it.

Instead of leaving the restaurant, as Gloria would have preferred to do, Adrian behaved as he always did when anything was uncomfortable: he pretended it was all a joke, in the hope any bad behavior would be overlooked. Unfortunately, Emma seemed to have pre-empted this scenario, and she continued with her diatribe, talking over the top of Adrian, repeating his name in a loud voice until he had no choice but to quieten down.

'Why don't we talk about what really happens in your clubs, Adrian? Your children's clubs.' Emma stood up, waving around a bottle of champagne she'd picked up from the table. 'Or, I know, why don't we talk about Lorna Devlin?'

Everyone around the table was silent, staring at their plates or at one another, having given up trying to quieten Emma down. She was well away now, warming to her audience.

At the mention of Lorna Devlin, Adrian's attitude changed. 'Get that piece of trash out of here,' he hissed at Gloria, but she was frozen to the spot, absolutely rigid with humiliation and embarrassment.

'No, no, I'm not leaving. I want to know what everyone thinks about Lorna Devlin. There must be a reason why she killed herself. You don't just slit your wrists for no reason. Who's next on the list, *Dad*?' Emma turned and faced him directly, but he was staring at the staff, trying to get them to remove her, and Gloria felt helpless. 'Raymond Hammond? He's your latest little prodigy, isn't he?' Emma stumbled backwards, almost giving the woman behind her an injury with the heavy champagne bottle she was still waving about.

Gloria wished they could all be engulfed in a giant tablecloth and the staff could lift the corners up and carry them all outside, shaking them off like crumbs, but no one was rushing to their

rescue, and the man with the phone was still filming them all, a small smile of satisfaction hovering on his face. The whole sordid scene would be all over the newspapers; the Players involved in yet another family scene.

In that moment, Gloria stood up and walked over to the man with the phone, unable to control her temper. She snatched the phone from his hand and hurled it across the restaurant, before smacking him hard across the face.

There was a three-page story about the assault and their family argument in every tabloid the following day.

CHAPTER SEVEN

THE LESTER BARCLAY SHOW

FIVE YEARS LATER

In less than four hours, Rita would be sitting in a television studio with the journalist Lester Barclay. It seemed a world away right now, while she was feeding her mother-in-law some breakfast, trying not to glance at the clock.

‘Where’s Rita? At work again, I suppose?’ Cynthia said, looking directly at her. It still baffled Rita how the woman could seem to focus so keenly on her but be completely unaware of who she was. The consultant had told them to work on staying in the present with her, so she could value her time with them. But it didn’t matter how hard Rita tried, Cynthia couldn’t concentrate for more than a few moments at a time.

Tears burnt the back of her eyes. She was so fond of her mother-in-law.

‘Probably, Mum.’ Rita didn’t argue with her; it just confused her. Instead, she handed Cynthia another small piece of toast. Marmalade and Marmite cut into nine squares – always the same, every day. Derek poked his head around the door. ‘More coffee?’

‘Better not, I’ll be jangling by the time I get there. His Grace ready for school?’

Derek rolled his eyes. ‘He’s in a particularly special mood today.’

Their son was in the middle of his A-level exams, and nothing they said was helping. They both agreed it could be worse – Joe had worked really hard, something that couldn’t be said of a lot of their friends’ children.

‘Later!’ Joe shouted, slamming the door before Rita or Derek had a chance to wish him good luck.

‘I’d better go as well.’ Derek came into the kitchen and kissed Rita, planting one on top of his mother’s head on the way out. ‘Hope it all goes okay.’

Rita shooed him out, not wanting to talk about it, placing her hand on her stomach, feeling it sway to and fro like unsettled water.

‘She’s a funny girl, that Rita.’ Her mother-in-law was talking to herself while she overturned all the squares of toast on her plate and pushed them together.

‘Daphne will be here soon, Mum. She’ll look after you today.’

‘She always looks after me.’ Cynthia frowned, while Rita tried to lift her fingers from the plate and wipe them. Daphne came every day for a few hours, the fifth carer they’d tried from this particular agency and the only one Cynthia got on well with. Daphne was good at dealing with her difficult moods and was capable of making her laugh, something the previous carers had never done. The others had always seemed like they were going through the motions, but Daphne was engaged and attentive.

‘Hey, I’m going to be on TV, Mum, what do you think about that?’

There seemed to be a shift, some clarity that drifted across her mother-in-law's face, like she was back in the room, and she looked at Rita as if seeing her for the first time that day.

'What TV show? You didn't tell me, love.' She smiled and Rita pursed her lips, remembering her therapy sessions and all the counselling she'd had since the case.

'The Lester Barclay Show, Mum. They're doing a two-day special.'

'Ooh, I like him.' Cynthia frowned. 'Is it about what happened with those children on Blue Green Square?'

'Yes, pretty much,' Rita said, sitting down, making the most of the lucid moment.

'You need to tell the truth about that Adrian Player,' Cynthia said, putting a mushed piece of toast into her mouth.

'*Sir* Adrian Player, Mum. If he's cleared, his knighthood will be reinstated.' Rita heard the key in the front door. Daphne had arrived. 'I'd better go, don't want to be late.'

‘Just nipping to the loo,’ Daphne shouted
from the hallway.

Her mother-in-law grabbed Rita’s arm before she could walk away. ‘I know what that man did to you, Rita, but he didn’t kill those children.’

‘Correct.’ Rita smiled sarcastically. ‘He got someone else to do it.’

‘You know that’s not right, my darling.’

‘How do you know that, Mum?’ Rita said, frowning. Any mention of Adrian Player and she was immediately defensive and irritated.

‘I just do. When have you ever known me to be wrong about this kind of thing?’

Cynthia was right. Over the many years Rita had known her, she’d often talked about big cases she was working on, and Cynthia had usually had some sort of sixth sense about the suspects.

Not that Rita had ever made any decisions on the back of it, but she'd always been surprised afterwards when she remembered her mother-in-law's words.

‘Well, there’s a first time for everything.’ Rita kissed her head a little harder than she’d intended and pulled her arm from Cynthia’s vice-like grip.