

LENNON

PROLOGUE

It was raining bullets and bibles the day Dogwood was ablaze. I wondered which was the lesser of the two evils as I watched the orange glow widen, leaping skywards, reminding me of the dancing that used to take place in the gospel halls, worshippers looking up to heaven, and reaching for a God they would come to distrust. I could hear hymns in the background and imagined all the martyrs sitting cross-legged on the stage in the chapel, dying for their cause. But not me – I happily watched hell burn through the metal fencing, my dry heart quelling any gladness. I was still relieved to be on the other side, my freedom drowning any lingering guilt I might have. But behind that petrol-soaked rag that ignited it all, a story lies.

Before we arrived there, Ruth told anyone who would listen that she'd been visited by the Holy Spirit, that she'd seen the light, and had become the Chosen One. Not sentences well received in Brutalist Britain – everyone thought she was a nutter. She needed to find somewhere that would suit her narrative. She claimed a 'come to Jesus' moment led her to Dogwood, but the way I remember it, the night we left, there was a telephone call sometime in the small hours, delivering news of a death. We were tipped from our mattresses, told to gather our things, and to hurry on out the front. An hour later, we were in the campervan driving into the approaching light, listening to *The Beach Boys* on a loop, Ruth and Jon-Jay singing along way too enthusiastically for the circumstances. I felt broke up and wanted to go home too, and during the many hours we travelled, those words tumbled around in my head like rats in a sack. We bought cigarettes, and snacks at a service station where people spoke

wonky. Jon-Jay filled up with fuel, and I could smell the salty humid air before I even knew we were near the coast.

Sometime later, on the side of a dusty road, a sheer drop overlooking an ocean I didn't have a name for, the three of us huddled together, eating dry crackers, shivering in the early morning breeze. Ruth paced, her hands tucked inside her dungarees, resting on the swollen belly stretched over Lennon's growing form. The child Ruth would come to despise, although, she didn't yet know it. Jon-Jay leant against the van smoking while Ruth told us about Paradise, of The Second Coming, and the Apocalypse, and how Dogwood was for all eternity. Jon-Jay didn't say a word, he followed her, like he always did, trusting her judgement, with little regard for any of us. She continued to tell the small, impressionable congregation that Jesus had brought us a miracle, how she was the Holy Trinity, and we had all been reborn. Joel and Vinnie were wide-eyed with awe, and I appeared to be the only one doubting her words.

At the young age of seven, I knew I should have taken a running jump off that precipice, but I didn't. We were all so trusting, beyond doomed, we were totally fucked.

That night, I leant against Joel's chest, my thumb stuffed in my mouth, patiently waiting for my brother's story to carry me to a sweet, sweet slumber I would come to crave, and I felt the regular thud, thud, thudding of his heart in time with the words. I know what I heard that night and I decided then that Ruth was a fucking liar.

CHAPTER ONE

We blew in with the rain behind us that late summer's day. The campervan had coughed it's last and passed out about fifty yards from the entrance with a sign that read, *Dogwood*. To me, the house looked like a pile of old bricks that had landed on its arse from a great height. It seemed to have shrugged, sighed and given up. The whiteness of the door shone through the dim light, and I would learn later why it was repainted every year. The rain had cooled the hot earth, and a mist hovered through the trees, giving it all the mystical air Ruth wanted us to see.

A higher power brought us to Larry's door, is what Ruth told us. I truly believed that there was something beyond our understanding at work. There were few words Ruth uttered that I hung on to, but this phrase was one of them. We might not have agreed that the Lord Jesus Christ, our saviour worked his magic, but whatever had brought them together was some kind of divine timing, and not just for her, but for all of us. Ruth liked to tell everyone that Larry needed her. That *she* was Dogwood's saviour. I had no idea who Larry was until much later, that Ruth was pretending we'd knocked on an unknown door. I don't even think Jon-Jay knew right away. She always managed to replace the convolution with a divine sorcery, I liked to call bullshit.

Ruth had agreed with Jon-Jay that she should fetch help with us in tow. A weirdo was less likely to hurt a woman with four children. It was times like this I questioned Ruth's so-called gullibility. She was the queen of manipulation, but she couldn't hide the inflection I heard in her voice. Not from me, anyway. Jon-Jay could be just as bad. He always dressed shit up to make it sound like he was doing what was best for us, when all he wanted was to smoke his way to a peaceful kip.

By the time we reached the front door, Ruth's dress was clinging to all the right places on her frame. The white haired, bearded man who answered the door holding a knife and an apple, didn't appear to notice.

'Can't you read?' he said to Ruth. 'The sign says private property.'

'That's quite the welcome,' she said, smiling and soaking him in her sweet voice. 'Do you have a telephone we can use? We broke down just along the road here.'

'You won't get anyone this time of night, not on the sabbath.'

'Could you help us out?'

I had no idea what she expected him to do, but he stepped aside to let us in. The house smelt of turps and coffee. There was a copy of *The Thorn Birds* laying open and face down on the table in a kitchen so cluttered, it was only identifiable by the stove.

Within a few minutes Ruth had managed to secure a blanket around her shoulders and a cup of hot tea. The three of us squeezed onto a small wooden bench covered in faded green velvet, trying not to fidget or speak.

Patches of wall were made up of bottle bases and putty, the windows cracked but shuttered, somehow familiar to me, but I was too tired to fit the piece into the puzzle. Sometime later, we were quickly shuffled into another room, each carrying a bowl of broth Larry had ladled from a pot on the stove. The room was dimly lit by a small black and white television with a wire coat hanger for an aerial. A girl who appeared to be the same age as Joel, and who

we would come to know as Jennifer was curled up in one of the sagging armchairs watching the silent screen intently.

‘She’s deaf,’ Larry said, ‘but she can lip read.’ Jennifer looked at us all without expression and turned back to the TV. I watched her brown eyes move from side-to-side as she read the subtitles.

We sat down awkwardly on the sofa, with our bowls. The smell was making my stomach reach out to my mouth. We had been eating dry crackers and sweaty cheese for two days, and the coolness of the rain was making my belly yearn for something warm.

Not long after I’d laid the spoon down, I fell asleep resting on Joel, mesmerised by a film I didn’t understand. When I woke up, I reached out to the empty space where he had been sitting. The notion of his physical form evaporated. I could hear music and voices coming from another room. I recognised Ruth’s singing and Jon-Jay’s laughter. A guitar played in the background. The snake-charmers were at it again.

Later, when the music had stopped, I crept into the hall and stood outside the door listening to their conversation. A sombre tone had lowered voices. It was one of those stories that sucked the colour out of everything. I heard and couldn’t unhear it, the familiar tale dancing around in my head where I knew it would jump out on me whenever I was alone and in the dark. The words stuck to my susceptible brain like burrs. Now I understood why we were here. I stood still in the hallway, the house’s warmth and welcome evaporating now that I knew all that had happened there. I badly needed to use the bathroom but there was no way I was going in there now that I knew where we were.

Curiosity got the better of me, though, and I made it halfway up the staircase, thrilled and terrified at the same time, but I couldn’t hold my nerve. With my back to the curling paint on the walls, I slid back down the worn staircase, my eyes on the frosted glass of the bathroom door. However badly I wanted the toilet, I couldn’t bring myself to move towards it. People

caught their death in this house. Little matches that would spark and alight in my head whenever my mind saw fit to strike them. The shock, the burn, the fade, the dark.

At the bottom of the staircase I headed for the front door, the need to pee too urgent for me to process the new information. I paused to look over my shoulder where I could see Jon-Jay through the kitchen door, Ruth's tanned legs hanging across his lap, mud spatter across her feet from when we had walked up the track in the rain. The conversation appeared to have moved on. I looked down at the mosaic tiled floor, pieces missing, most cracked and broken. There was an inlaid rug with a stain that my mind convinced me was blood. It was everywhere I looked, and I was beginning to panic, soft mist lay on my skin. I turned the tarnished brass handle and ran outside, my bare feet pricked by stones, and then quickly soothed by soft wet grass. I braced myself for a grown-up to grab me or at least start shouting, but no one came. All I could hear was the sea close by, like it might rush over my feet at any moment. The sound reached my bladder, and I became even more desperate. I looked around at the trees visible by the light from the house, and I could just make out what looked like an old log store. I ran behind it, and squatted down, trying not to piss on my feet, the panic gushing out of me.

When I finished, I turned to look behind me, to the darkness, and the glow from the moon's partly shaded face in the distance. I could have been two steps away from the cliff edge and I wouldn't have known.

'We have a fully functioning bathroom.' A gravelly voice floated towards me.

Shaking, I stepped from behind the log store.

'Two, actually,' Larry said, lighting a cigarette.

I nodded, but didn't look at him, my cheeks flushed. A rabbit trapped in my chest. I knew what I'd get from Ruth if she found out I'd taken a piss outside.

I felt my fingertips pressing into my bony chest, stopping myself stepping forward and going back inside.

‘You like bats?’

‘Excuse me, Sir?’

He came towards me and gently turned me around, the glow of the cigar in his mouth was mesmerising. He pointed into the air, and when my eyes adjusted, I could see these small creatures, that I would become obsessed with, swooping and dipping in the blackness.

‘They’re blind,’ he said. ‘They use their ears to navigate, that’s why they’re so erratic.’

‘Where are they going?’ I heard myself ask, surprised by my own bravery.

‘Nowhere, right now. They’re picking up bugs to eat, but when they get tired, they’ll head into the rafters in the barn just over there.’

I could make out the corner of a roof the moon had caught with its torch.

‘Their daytime is our nighttime.’

‘Nocturnal?’

‘That’s right,’ he said, smiling. It was the first time I had looked him in the eye. White hair spread to a short beard, and nestled in his kind lined face were two soft brown eyes. There was something about him that scared me, the way tragedy penetrates a person’s skin. A hero you never want to meet.

‘Sleep downstairs with Jennifer if you feel safer. She likes to be near the door.’

I didn’t ask why. I wasn’t sure I wanted to know the answer, so I just nodded and followed him back to the sitting room where Jennifer was now fast asleep, the sofa having been pulled out to a bed. The light cast across her face, and she stirred, looking up at us. Larry made shapes with his hands, and she nodded, signing back. She turned to me with a kind face and a warm smile before her eyelids closed. Larry walked across the room and opened a door, switching the light on to reveal a toilet and a basin.

‘Where are the others?’ I asked him, quietly.

‘Upstairs. In the room just above this one.’

I considered my options while I took in my surroundings – the shelves laden with books, cabinets with glass lids containing items I would look at in the light of day, peacock feathers in tall vases, large plants so big they were stretching across the ceiling. I liked the comfort of the dark paint on the walls, the patterned rugs overlapping one another, and the light from the television screen that warmed the bed. I climbed in, as far away from Jennifer as I could possibly get, and within minutes I heard the familiar sharp sound of my brain beginning to tune out and I fell asleep.

Just as the light was getting the better of the dark, I woke up to Larry in a worn green recliner reading under a softly lit lamp. Sleep sang me a lullaby, and I floated away for several hours more, safer than I'd ever felt in my short life.

CHAPTER TWO

IT WAS MRS TAMWORTH who called the papers. She saw Lennon levitating through the window. A photographer and a reporter called through the letterbox, asking for an interview. I recognised one of the voices. Ruth told them to fuck off without opening the door, her fingers worrying the beads around her neck.

'Don't be hasty, now,' Jon Jay said, tapping a wooden spoon on the side of a pan on the hob top. There was cash to be had.

The News of the World, they said. We knew Ray, but Judith Beauchamp was a stranger to us. Us kids sat side by side on the settee. Jon Jay on the only armchair we owned, pulling a dishtowel through his thick hands. Ruth perched on the arm next to him, smoking suspicion into the room. These days, she was all floaty clothes and head scarves, her noisy jewellery a warning sound signalling her location in the house. She was a colourful contrast against Jon

Jay's trademark vest and jeans, topped with a flat cap. I could see Eunice leant against the chipped door frame, but I didn't look directly at her. It was never a good idea.

'Something smells good,' Ray said, winking at me.

'Coq au vin,' Jon Jay replied, emphasising all the letters he shouldn't. For someone who was such an arsehole, he could make you feel like you were dining in a five-star restaurant, his food was so good.

'They finally sack you from *The Daily Liar*?' Ruth asked Ray.

'Same group.' He smiled patiently. 'Bit of a step up. What do you think about that?'

'Not much,' Ruth said, clearly unimpressed.

Ray had camped out at Dogwood with us many times, hoping to catch something on film. We were used to this kind of thing. I liked him. He was the kind of normality we needed, and Ruth hated.

'Someone reported seeing one of the children through one of the upstairs windows,' Judith said, smiling at us. Vinnie flicked her head back to shift the long fringe out of her eyes, and I could see she was uncomfortable by the way she rubbed the palm of her hand with her thumb like she was moulding something. 'A Mrs Tamworth from number seventy-two?'

'Breaking news, boy seen through window,' Ruth said, sighing and stubbing her cigarette out in the ashtray next to her. 'Is this your way of getting a story out of me?'

'I didn't mention gender,' Judith said, smiling smugly at my mother.

Caught out, Ruth bristled. 'There's nothing to see here. All that finished a long time ago.'

'Levitating?' Judith said, ignoring Ruth and glancing at her notes. 'Nothing like that has been seen since The Battersea Poltergeist. This could be breaking news with your background.'

'What do you want?' Ruth asked.

‘Just a chat, nothing formal,’ Ray said, smiling warmly, one of the many things she despised him for, and I knew then that was why he’d brought Judith Beauchamp with him, because alone, he had zero chance of getting anything from my mother. Or Jon Jay, for that matter, unless there was money involved.

‘So you can twist everything? Spread vicious rumours about matters that don’t concern you?’ Ruth said. ‘I don’t bloody think so.’

‘That was a different tabloid,’ Judith said, pushing her large glasses up her nose. ‘And nothing to do with us.’

‘You all conspired to ruin me, and he was the common denominator,’ Ruth jabbed a finger at Ray as Jon Jay lit the cigarette hanging from her mouth. Still the double-act.

Ray smiled. ‘It wasn’t me, Ruth.’ He smoothed his tie from the pin down, a mannerism I knew so well. I had missed his calming voice, the slight crackle in the tone, freshly lit kindling.

Ruth scowled. ‘I see you’ve got a new piece of kit.’

‘An upgrade,’ Ray smiled. ‘All thanks to you, actually.’

The last time I had seen him, he had chased Ruth out of the house attempting to save his camera before it took one bounce off the thick grass at the bottom of the garden and disappeared over the cliff.

‘Bought it on the back of all the cash you made out of us?’

‘If there’s a story here, we are happy to negotiate,’ Judith said to Jon Jay.

‘It was me she saw through the window,’ I blurted. ‘Mrs Tamworth. She saw me, not Lennon.’

I felt the heat from the adults, while Vinnie and Joel stared into their laps, knowing better. We knew exactly what Mrs Tamworth had seen.

‘Nosy old bitch,’ Ruth said, eventually. ‘I told you we should have left the nets up.’

There was a familiar thud from the room above and everyone glanced up at the ceiling. I looked across at the doorway and noticed Eunice had left the room.

‘Don’t you want people to know the truth?’ Ray said, directing the question to Ruth but looking at me and my siblings. ‘I mean, everyone is accounted for, unless you’ve taken in a lodger.’

Jon Jay pressed his finger to his lips. We focused on him like dogs taking commands.

‘You’re the one stirring up the past,’ Ruth said.

Thud. Thud.

No one spoke, and the sound of Judith laying her pen on her notebook was magnified.

‘Is this you lot?’ Ruth seethed at us. ‘Have you been messing about again?’

Joel shook his head but none of us spoke. The consequences of lying were too severe, but we did it anyway. And the truth was, we had been messing about.

There’s a photo of Lennon being thrown across the kitchen. It was all over the papers. Ray had camped out with us for weeks, and finally, he’d caught something more significant than anything else. But that was all in the past, now that everyone was calling it a hoax. Ruth was now referring to herself as Cherry Carlton, like that fixed everything. She had her hands over her eyes, convinced no one could see her.

Joel was taking some flack at school about what had happened, so Vinnie and I had the idea to stage our own paranormal experience, but we needed help with it, and that involved a board and a candle. Ruth’s bad choices had labelled us all liars and we had something to prove.

There was the sound of laughter coming from upstairs. Ruth glared at us. ‘I think you lot should go to your rooms,’ Ruth said, quietly. You were in more trouble if Ruth wasn’t shouting.

We did as she asked. Halfway up the stairs I could hear Jon Jay setting out his terms and conditions.

‘I think what everyone really wants to know is what happened at Dogwood?’

‘That’s torn it,’ Eunice said from the top of the stairs.

It was clear to me now that we might have left Dogwood, but Dogwood would never leave us.