



**They've all killed  
someone.**

**They all have their  
reasons.**

# **THE KILLER STORIES GET AWAY**

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**EXCLUSIVE BONUS CHAPTERS FOR E-NEWSLETTER SUBSCRIBERS**

## BRADY

‘**T**onight, we become gods,’ Brady said.

There was a roar from across the backyard. It made the hairs on the back of his neck stand on end.

‘But first, you gotta go through hell,’ he said.

Laughter erupted from the sworn brothers. There was nervous shifting among the assembled pledges.

‘Bring in the buckets.’

The laughter doubled, reverberating off the grand Roman-style campus buildings that surrounded them. It was past midnight, cold enough that there was frost on the ground, but Brady felt warm. His blood was humming.

This was it, right here. There were thirty of them in attendance tonight, but the shadows of hundreds of their forebears swelled the ranks. Without the rites themselves, membership to the Rites meant nothing.

In every corner of power and influence, tonight mattered. If you walked the halls of the White House and listened at a closed door, you’d hear what happened on the night of initiation in 1974 or 1982.

Power. That was what happened tonight. Separating the weak from the strong, the boys from the gods.

The first bucketful of water caught Brady's shoulder, soaking one arm of his Attley sweatshirt. He eyed his society brother, like, are you fucking kidding me? Then he grinned and punched his arm, hard enough that it had to hurt.

'I look like a pledge to you?' he said, and the guy gave a sullen shrug.

Brady swiped the other bucket the man was carrying and moved along the line. Rory had already been dowsed, red hair plastered to his head. His shoulders flinched inward when he spotted Brady.

'Having a good time?' Brady's voice was magnanimous.

Rory opened his mouth, but whether he was going to say yes or no, Brady would never know. He tossed water over his head and Rory choked.

Brady had been sick for a week after his own initiation. Hungover and sniffing with a cold, but he hadn't cared. He'd been beaten down and he'd gotten back up. He and his brothers were bonded for all time. Who would ever trade being a god for a return to mortality?

The pledges, soaked and shivering, began doing burpees, hitting the ground with a thump each time. Brady toed Rory with the tip of his sneaker, unbalancing him in his push-up. Rory muttered, 'Fuck off.'

'What did you say to me?' Brady's fist flexed.

'Nothing.' Rory jumped up.

The dull thud of a bassline scored the moment. They were on the grounds of a historical house at the edge of campus, neoclassical, washed white in the moonlight. It had been bequeathed to the society by an alum, but no one outside the brotherhood knew what went on here. You kept the secrets of the Rites, under pain of death.

‘Shot!’ someone yelled. It was Andrew, with his Caesar haircut and wincing smile. A year ago, Andy had thrown water over Brady, cackling like a maniac. Now the two of them were brothers. And it was Brady’s turn to uphold the sanctity of the Rites.

Andrew ran down the line, sloshing whiskey into red Solo cups. The stench of it mixed with sweat in the air. Brady seized the bottle, doubled Rory’s shot.

‘Getting you closer to Heaven, my guy.’

Rory stared him down, gulped the whiskey.

‘Something to say, pledge?’ Brady asked.

‘Nope.’

‘You look like you got something to say.’

‘Nope.’

Brady laughed. ‘Time for the grave!’ he yelled.

\*

People didn’t say no to Brady Calloway.

If you accepted a ‘no’, you weren’t working hard enough. A ‘no’ could be beaten down by a teasing smile, a burst of laughter, a look, a joke, a drink, a drop more pressure. Thumb to the scale, pressing harder, harder, harder, until you got a yes.

‘Having a good time?’

Jessica had caught his eye because she was beautiful – dark hair, pale skin, blue eyes – but also because she was at a party with a textbook open in front of her.

She was tucked into a window seat, sandals hanging off the tips of her toes. He sat down beside her, ostensibly to hear her response. The party was raucous, the house filled with white dudes gyrating to hip hop. It wasn’t officially a Rites party, but most of the men were brothers. If you were a pretty girl, you got in the door. Tonight, the ‘secret’ part of their secret

society was becoming less and less so, as the guys in the room tried hard to impress the ladies.

‘Ugh, I have a test.’ She wrinkled up her nose, smiling. ‘Shouldn’t have come out. My friend dragged me.’

The air was strong with Axe body spray, but when he leaned close to Jessica, he caught a sweetness, like a thumb in a jam pot.

Brady looked at the cover of the textbook. ‘Biology?’

When he grabbed it out of her lap, she said, ‘Hey!’

‘You and me, baby, we ain’t nothin’ but mammals,’ he said.

She laughed nervously, tugging the textbook by its corner.

He asked if he could help her study. (No.) He asked if she wanted a drink. (No.) He asked if he could drive her home. (No.)

She really was exquisite. He loved the soft way her lips would swell around the word no.

She excused herself to go to the bathroom and he stole her textbook. He went home with someone else that night, but he kept the textbook. On the inside cover was written Jessica Brett.

It wasn’t hard to find out where she lived. The next day, he delivered the textbook to her door.

Her blue eyes widened. ‘Oh my God, I thought I lost it.’

Her apartment had a run-down look to it, peeling paint on the door, porch floorboards that creaked. She didn’t step aside to let him inside. From somewhere behind her, there was a clunk and rattle.

‘Found it under the couch,’ he said. ‘You musta been drunk.’

She laughed, hugging the textbook. ‘I wasn’t.’



‘Lemme buy you a drink now.’

Her smile dimmed. ‘Oh, I would, but... my test is in two hours.’ Her fingers curled around the door, pushing it closed an inch.

‘Another time.’

A guy came mooching toward her down the corridor, distracting Jessica’s attention away from Brady. Shit. The boyfriend. He was a scrawny fucker, red haired, his face infested with freckles. She leaned up to kiss him.

‘Thanks again,’ she said to Brady.

He creaked backward, not taking his eyes off her. ‘Hold you to that drink,’ he said as he walked away.

Oh no, he wasn’t taking no for an answer.

\*

Years later, in couples’ therapy, Jessica said, ‘You never loved me. You just loved the chase.’

‘And you’re still fucking running away,’ Brady said.

‘Let’s take the aggression level down two notches,’ the therapist said and tapped her pen.

\*

The backyard had turned muddy, coating Brady’s white sneakers. The ground was hard when the pledges began to dig, but that was the point. It was hard work, becoming a god.

When the pit was big enough, Andrew tottered to its edge. ‘Now, who wants to be buried alive?’ Slurring, his words ran together. ‘It’s a great honour.’

Music rolled through the open doors from the party inside, but the pledges had fallen silent.

No one volunteered. No one ever did.

Brady poked Rory in the ribs. ‘Come on, you pussy.’

‘No,’ he muttered.

Brady thrust his arm into the air. ‘We got a volunteer here!’

His ‘no’ was blotted out by a drunken cheer.

‘Excellent,’ Andrew said. ‘Climb down, Pledge.’

When Brady pushed him forward, Rory glanced around the crowd, his eyes murky and resentful.

He didn’t put up a fight. That was what the brothers said to each other, in the months that followed. He didn’t put up a fight. It became a mantra. It became the truth.

He wanted to do it. It was his choice.

‘All right, you fuckers,’ Rory said from the hole, sarcasm stinging in his voice. ‘What d’you want me to do, lie down?’

(That was another thing they all pointed to, in the weeks that followed. Rory had volunteered to lie down.)

‘Yeah, lie down,’ Brady said.

Andrew glanced sidelong at him, but he didn’t contradict Brady. A year ago, it had been three guys (not including Brady) in the hole. Andrew and the rest had made them sweat for a few minutes, brandishing shovels. Drunkenly, they all sang the Rites anthem. Then the three were hauled out, and there was much shaking of hands and bear-hugging. ‘You passed.’ It was a test: a trust exercise.

Tonight, it was Rory alone in the hole. He lay down, crossing his arms across his chest. ‘You’re not scaring me,’ he called, but his laugh was rasping and low.

Brady picked up a shovel. ‘Fill ’er up, boys.’

\*

Following the party, Brady sent Jessica flowers every day for a month. It cost a fortune, but she was worth it. She was one in a million.

‘Leave her alone.’ The redheaded bastard actually confronted him. Hilarious. He was a foot shorter than Brady, but he squared up like he was going to hit him. ‘She’s not interested.’

Boyfriend? Emphasis on the word *boy*. Jessica needed a man.

Brady stuck out his hand, genial. ‘Hey, let the best man win.’

The boyfriend didn’t shake his hand.

It wasn’t until the end of the month that Brady found out his name. Rory Palmer. He wanted to join the Rites. His freckled face peered out from a jungle of big strong dudes.

‘Here’s our new cohort of pledges,’ Andrew said.

Brady snorted. Rory wasn’t going to make it. Anyone could see that.

\*

What a waste of space. What a walking, talking absence of anything at all. What did Jessica see in this guy?

Brady dug in, tossing a shovelful of dirt into the hole. He was sweating, despite the cold, but it felt good. He’d grown up with hard work, earned his muscles digging foundations for fence posts on the ranch. Every time his daddy beat him, he’d kept his mettle. He didn’t cry.

‘Come on!’ he roared.

If you couldn’t handle it, what were you doing here? They were men, turning into gods. They weren’t little boys.

Andrew swayed on the spot, his expression slack, but the pledges grabbed their shovels. They were probably glad they weren’t the ones in the hole.

A lot of the brothers had grown bored of the initiation, retreating into the warm, grabbing fresh drinks and microwaving snacks. They were waiting for the big chorus of the Rites anthem, which was their cue to storm outside to congratulate the new class.



Earth rained down into the grave, the stench of mud thick in the air. Brady kept shovelling dirt, heckling the others when they slowed their pace. He wanted to see Rory's snivelling, pussy face pop up, crying about what meanies they all were.

From down below, Brady heard him retch, but he wanted more. He wanted him to beg.

Andy stumbled over to Brady, land a hand on his arm. 'All right, that's enough.'

He shrugged him off. 'Fill 'er up!'

Everyone kept shovelling.

How long passed? A minute? Ten minutes?

It was long enough that Andrew went to get another drink. He returned, wobbling. 'OK, dig him out.'

He sounded annoyed more than concerned; clearly, he felt usurped. Brady was only a junior, but a few people had told him they'd back him for society president.

The dirt was cleared and a couple of pledges climbed down into the hole and hauled Rory to his feet. He was floppy, his feet dragging. Two more people stepped in, heaving him out of the grave.

Rory's face was caked in mud. He wasn't saying anything.

Was he pulling a prank?

Someone threw a bucket of water over him, which probably made things worse, although it did wash off some of the dirt. He slipped from the grasp of his fellow pledges, thudding to the ground. Someone started doing CPR, badly.

All eyes looked to Brady for what to do.

'Wake up, you pussy.' He kicked Rory in the stomach.

No response.

\*

‘Andy...’ Brady shook his shoulder. He was passed out on the couch, reeking of whiskey and piss. ‘Andy, wake up, you idiot, we gotta go.’

‘What?’

A week had gone by and Andrew had been drunk the entire time. The weakness of it made Brady sick. This was their society president? This was who they were supposed to look up to?

‘It’s time.’

Andrew flailed his arms – he really did reek – and Brady stepped clear, his lip curling. He smoothed his black suit jacket, picking clean a curl of fluff. He looked good, anyone would say so. He’d got a haircut and everything. It was an important day.

‘What?’ Andrew said again.

‘The funeral.’

‘I’m not... I can’t.’ His face crumpled up and he actually started crying.

Brady slapped him. ‘You can.’

For appearances, it was important they attend Rory’s funeral. There were lawyers involved, Attley College was doing an investigation, it had been reported in the newspapers – but, as far as anyone was concerned, Rory had been their friend and they were grieving.

\*

At the church, Andrew leaned against a brick wall, breathing heavily and looking like he was about to puke. Brady shouldered away from him. It had begun to rain, the barest speckle of raindrops.

Jessica’s black dress fluttered in the wind. She looked pale, lost. Her eyes were bluer than ever because she’d been crying.

He thrust out a golf umbrella and strode over to her. ‘You’ll catch your death.’

She gulped down a sob, hunkering under the umbrella as the rain intensified. ‘Thank you,’ she said at last.

\*

A decade later, Brady came home from work to find Jessica holed up in a corner of their walk-in closet. There was a shoebox at her feet. Her hands were pawing through photographs. She was crying.

God, not again. Not again, not again! Her therapist, tapping her pen, said it was normal, but it didn’t seem normal to Brady. One of these days, he’d stick that pen through the therapist’s throat.

He grabbed one of the pictures of Rory, tried to tear it up but only succeeded in warping the boy’s face.

Jessica pushed balled-up fists into her eye sockets. When she spoke, her voice was low. He had to strain to catch it.

‘I wish you’d died instead of him.’

## FIZZY

‘Please...’

Fizzy fumbled to open the car door. It was locked. She jammed the button to lower the window instead.

‘Please help me,’ she said, craning her neck.

The solitary figure on the gas station forecourt looked at her impassively. He had a broad, bearded face, and his large frame was draped in blue and yellow polyester. It was a uniform, fast food, with a cartoon chicken logo. Off-brand KFC. He was pumping gas, ten feet away, but he’d heard her, she knew he had.

Wind gusted in through the window, raising goosebumps on her skin. She was dressed for dinner, in a chic midnight blue dress, but dinner had never happened. Her bladder ached, but he wouldn’t let her out to pee.

They’d been driving for such a long time.

She raised her voice. ‘I’m going to die.’

The man with the chicken logo frowned. He opened his mouth to say something, but he was distracted by heavy footsteps.

Exiting the neon-lit cube, Grant strode toward the car. Handsome as ever, his hair plugs and steroid muscles cut a commanding presence. He nodded at the chicken man, a polite fuck-you-and-leave-us-alone.

*Bleep-bleep.* The car unlocked automatically as Grant aimed the key fob at her head, like someone squaring a rifle sight. In those few seconds the car was unlocked, Fizzy realised too late that she could have scrambled out of the driver's side, she could have thrown herself at the feet of the chicken man. *Please... please!*

She was too slow.

Grant slid into the car, leather seat squeaking. *Click.* The door locked behind him.

'It's freezing, baby,' he said, half taunting, half fawning; playing the doting boyfriend, his annoyance lightly jesting.

As he thrust the car into drive, his final words pushed out from behind clenched teeth. 'Shut the window, you stupid bitch.'

Her window rose with a mechanical whirl. In the rear view mirror, the gas station disappeared into darkness.

\*

'Please...'

Light spilled out of Kip's villa through the open front door. Fizzy stumbled forward, tripping over the hem of her maxidress. In the moonlight, the blood stains merged with the floral pattern. She could still smell the metallic ooze.

Kip's eyes widened. He reached out a hand to steady her.

'Please help me,' she said.

'Darling girl, what's wrong?'

Overhead, a palm tree creaked in the breeze.

'He's dead.'

\*

A wave engulfed the side of the boat, causing it to rock. For a second, Fizzy thought they were going to capsize. Kip, at the tiller, muttered a curse. She shuddered, slipping, fingers grasping for purchase.

The boat settled. With a whine of the engine, pumping fumes, they continued onward into the darkness.

‘Further out now, little bit further out.’ Kip shot her a rubbery, unconvincing smile. It was meant to be comforting, she supposed.

It was hard to be comforted when there was a dead body at her feet.

Out of the corner of her eye, she caught a glimpse of Meredith, stone cold and pure white, illuminated by the beam of the boat’s light. Meredith...

Where was she? Somewhere beautiful, somewhere peaceful. Doing sun salutations, prayer beads around her wrist. Growing old gracefully.

Meredith was good at keeping secrets. Fizzy owed it to her to keep those secrets as well. She’d found out the truth by accident.

Years ago, she’d been deep-cleaning the office, getting rid of dozens of dusty box files packed with papers. On one of those sheets of paper, just one, there was a clue to the whereabouts of the late Mrs Clement. Meredith, usually so meticulous, had been sloppy in just one line of a spreadsheet. Of course Kip would never have bothered to read old paperwork, but Fizzy did. Fizzy knew. Meredith was alive.

Saltwater whipped Fizzy’s bare arms. Her fingers were clasped around the slick-sticky barrel of a flashlight.

Meredith would have understood. You did what you had to do, to survive.

At the other end of the boat, Kip was hunched against the wind, his foot tapping, his eyes on the horizon.

Fizzy's gaze turned to Moxham, or rather the thing that used to be Moxham. He was a lump wrapped in a tarp. Heavy. Heavy enough that Kip had winced and groaned to lift him.

He was a nuisance even in death.

She plucked at one edge of the waxed green fabric. Despite the roiling in her stomach, she wanted to look at him one last time. To know he couldn't hurt her anymore. He couldn't hurt Diara.

She raised her flashlight, even as Kip flicked her a glance. 'Don't.'

'It's OK.' Her voice came out strong, more than a match for the wind and waves.

The sight of him didn't horrify her the way she'd thought it might. His head wound was still seeping blood. That pale face, greasy hair and pointed chin, had a nightmarish cast. But that was how it should be. He was the bad guy. She was the survivor.

It was an ancient kind of justice, but it was justice all the same. He'd come to destroy her life – to take away her livelihood, her happiness – and she'd bested him. A peculiar feeling swelled in her chest.

This time, when a wave buffeted the hull, she didn't slip or slide.

The smell of gasoline from the boat's engine reminded her of a gas station forecourt and a man with a handsome face. Pathetic. She'd been pathetic then. Not anymore.

*Blink.*

It was dark enough that she must have imagined it. She arced the flashlight. The side of Moxham's face gleamed in the darkness.

*Blink, blink.*

No...

No, it couldn't be.

A seagull dived overhead, squawking, wings ghostly against the black sky.

In the boat, Moxham's eyelids fluttered.



\*

‘You’ll love the Catskills,’ Grant said as they drove. ‘My buddy’s cabin is some real rustic shit. Great outdoors. Fresh air.’

His gaze slid from the road to Fizzy. ‘You’ll love it.’ There was steel in his voice this time.

‘Yes, I’ll love it,’ she said robotically.

She nudged the volume up a notch on the car stereo. It was shitty rap music – Grant’s choice – but at least it meant they didn’t need to talk.

Grant had been telling her about love from the first night they met, in an upscale Manhattan bar. She’s been out with her grad school friends, dressed up on a Thursday night just for the hell of it. Flirting. Drinking. All of it a game. Grant was alone, full of restless energy, kicking the base of her stool as they talked.

‘Love,’ he’d said, blue eyes searing into hers. ‘Bam. You know it when you see it. Pulls you in.’

She was helpless under his gaze. Love. Love at first sight.

Later, a friend she’d been with, Cassidy, had said, ‘He was talking about his *dog*, Lizzy. The time he went to a breeder and found a husky pup.’

Was Cassidy right? Fizzy didn’t remember it that way.

As they rumbled onward on their journey, she gazed out the window, letting her eyes drift out of focus. They were driving through thick forest, but it was synthetic pine she could smell. The tree-shaped air freshener that dangled from the mirror jumped every time they hit a pothole.

Her relationship with Grant existed on shifting sands. Two things could be true at the same time. He was protective; he was controlling. He was passionate; he was an asshole. He loved her; he loved her too much.

She'd tried to leave so many times and he'd always wooed her back. That was romance, right? A man who didn't take no for an answer.

Earlier this evening, she'd been wooed yet again. He'd told her they'd drive to a restaurant outside the city, somewhere quiet, where they could talk awhile. Reluctantly, she'd agreed. She'd planned to be strong; she'd planned to tell him it was over, for real, forever.

Except he'd kept on driving, hours and hours unspooling along dark roads.

The great outdoors? When he reached their destination, he locked the cabin door and pocketed the key. It was rustic only in the sense that it was dirty, with a stained patchwork quilt on the bed, a dusty moose head eyeing her from the wall.

He raped her. When she tried to fight him off, he hit her so hard, it knocked her out. When she came to, he was raping her again.

Thanks to the chicken man, the police found her 24 hours later. Lucky – that's what they said. She was lucky.

\*

One of Moxham's limbs twitched beneath the tarp. Fizzy shrank back. A phantom hand reached out and grabbed her ankle. She heard an echo of Grant's laughter as he held her down.

Kip, at the tiller, turned to look. Moxham's face remained uncovered. He let out a gurgle.

Fizzy balled her hands into fists. The wind tore through her, making her bracelets rattle.

No. This was a nightmare. Zombies and monsters and ghosts. She'd hit him and he'd gone down. He was dead.

Except he wasn't.

Kip tore at the tarp, revealing Moxham's torso, his baby-blue jacket. The dead man gurgled again. He was trying to say something.

'Shut up!' she screamed.

A wave sideswiped them. The boat rocked.

For once in his life, Kip seemed lost for words. *Now here's a wrinkle*, she wanted him to say, *but don't worry, I know how to deal with it*.

Instead, he remained silent. When she shone the flashlight in his direction, it illuminated a haggard face, lips bitten white. Kip looked like a very old man, death creeping into his expression.

He wasn't strong enough to take control of this situation. So it fell to her.

She grasped Moxham by the shoulders. 'Help me,' she said to Kip. No please this time.

Moxham jerked again, but that made it easier, to push him to the edge of the boat. Kip hesitated, but he stooped to lift Moxham's legs.

She gritted her teeth and pushed. Blood from his head wound smeared the inside of her arm.

A second later, he dropped into the water. Splash, and then gone. Like he never existed.

She and Kip sat there for a long moment. Neither needed to voice their concern, but they were both waiting for Moxham to resurface.

He did, at last, bobbing against the bow of the boat, but there was no life left in him.

'Nasty business,' Kip said, cutting his eyes away. 'Best forgotten.'

She sucked in a lungful of cold air. *Yes...* (she tried to speak and couldn't) *forget all about it.*

\*

There was a pink Post-it note on Fizzy's bedside table. She'd written on it: *a smile can change the world*. Now she crushed it in her fist.

Her throat was sore and her voice came out in a rasp. 'I can't think about anything else.'

Diara, straight-backed in the chair beside her bed, met her gaze. It felt strange that she was able to see Fizzy, that she still existed. When she'd taken those pills, hadn't she died? No. It happened before then. The moment she'd pushed Moxham into the water, hadn't she died then?

A shudder overcame Fizzy. She'd taken her last breath on that boat. Since then, she was nothing more than a corpse, a zombie roaming the island. She was a killer – just ask Tessa – and she'd never be anything else.

'You can make it right,' Diara said.

'Nothing will be right ever again.'

Silence swelled between them. Fizzy's apartment smelled like sage and, beneath it, the lingering scent of vomit. She pulled the covers up to her chin, face peeking out.

'You'll help me... please,' she said.

Diara turned her head away.

'Please...'

## M E R E D I T H

**T**he grey ridges of the Pyrenees formed a protective barrier around Meredith's chalet. Spring was almost here, yet snowfall remained on the ground, pines sticking out of the snow like grasping hands.

Usually, she spent her mornings in contented silence, sipping coffee, watching the view from her windows shift and settle. Today, it was the picture loading on her tablet that grabbed her attention, as loud as if it came with a siren.

The headline read: *Rampage on Billionaire's Island*

The photo on the news site had been artificially tinted with dripping blood, but she would recognise Hidden Cove anywhere. She knew every rock of that place. She still dreamed of it, the sound of surf loud in her ears as she awoke to a silent bedroom.

*Torture... murder... Christopher Clement...*

Her vision blurred, jumbling the words on the screen. Was he dead? Kip? Gone?

She knocked her mug in her haste to scroll. A few drops scalded her bare arm; the rest of the coffee drenched her cream-coloured trousers.

What was her world without Kip Clement?

It had been ten years since she'd seen him in the flesh, but he remained her husband in some fundamental, unbreakable sense. He was the centre point of her life. A man she hated. A man she...

Coffee leached through her trousers, turning her legs sticky. Shadow yipped, nosing close to her, batting his paw at an invisible combatant. Meredith forced herself to read the article slowly.

No, of course he wasn't dead. This wasn't an obituary. A man named Brady Calloway, a guest on Keeper Island, had kidnapped and tortured a woman in a bid to cover up his murderous past. At the end of the article, there was an offhand postscript: *Christopher Clement declined to comment.*

Regardless, the newspaper had included a photo of him. He was grinning, dressed in a tuxedo, and he looked young, mainly because it was an old photo. The picture had been taken more than a decade ago, at a party on Keeper Island for Kip's fiftieth birthday.

Pressed up against Kip in the photo, there was an arm – the remnant of someone else, cropped out of frame. An arm clad in red organza.

The arm belonged to Meredith Clement.

\*

'God, Mum, what did you think was going to happen?'

Though the video call muffled CJ's voice, his irritation was unmistakable. On the screen, her son stood in his shades-of-grey living room, swinging his own son back and forth. Little Chris bellowed (in misery? delight?) as he careened in and out of frame.

Meredith's voice stuck in her throat. She cradled her phone in her lap, staring at the tiny pale-faced replica of herself in the corner of the screen. CJ would frequently proclaim that he was nothing like his dad, but he sounded so much like Kip in this moment that she didn't know how to reply. CJ had hinted his disapproval in the past but never so candidly.

‘You thought you’d kill yourself and what—?’ CJ continued. ‘He’d be sorry? He’s a stone cold bastard. Never gonna change.’

Little Chris broke free of CJ’s grip and scampered away. Left alone in the centre of the screen, CJ raked a hand through his hair.

God, was he going grey? Her bonny young son, growing old.

‘I didn’t have a choice,’ she managed at last, but CJ didn’t seem to hear her.

There was a howl from nearby. It was in London, not Andorra, but at her feet, Shadow’s ears pricked up and he let out a growl.

‘Sorry, I have to go,’ CJ said. ‘You know, the kids.’

‘I know, love.’ Meredith’s voice cracked over the words. ‘See you soon.’

The screen was already blank.

\*

What did she think was going to happen?

It had started with a conversation, with an idle what-if.

‘Start over,’ Shirley had said. ‘Someplace new.’

Dust motes danced in the air as Shirley wrenched free the bed linens and let them drop to the floor. Meredith was perched on the edge of the white sofa in her bedroom. Her gaze wandered out to the veranda, to the rocks, to the Caribbean Sea beyond.

‘Kip would follow me there,’ Meredith said, ‘he’d make my life miserable.’

Shirley kissed her teeth, turned away, muttering something that might have been, ‘Well, shit.’

She stripped pillowcases with practiced ease, her footfalls heavy as she traipsed the room. Her textured black hair was scraped into a bun. Shirley never wore make-up to work; at fifty, she was content to inhabit every one of those years.



Shirley had worked on Keeper Island since the beginning, progressing from maid to Head of Housekeeping. Over the decades, Meredith had eked out details of Shirley's life – her husband's name (Eric), her daughter's occupation (financial services), even a tiny glimpse into her free time (a passion for bonsai trees) – but she knew better than to call her a friend.

Employer-employee, that was the line. Shirley's face would shut down if Meredith ever pulled her into a side-hug, ever suggested she stay for dinner. Despite the line between them, Meredith sought out Shirley's wisdom.

This morning, as Shirley had cleaned, resisting Meredith's clumsy attempts to help, Meredith had told her a version of the truth. She'd made herself sound like yet another bored middle-aged woman idly contemplating divorce.

'Don't be thinkin' you're stuck here.' Shirley shook out a clean sheet, and Meredith bobbed up to grab two corners.

'Feel like I am.'

'So maybe you don't tell him where you're going. Be like a ghost.'

The final word sliced through her. She already felt like a ghost. Invisible. For years, Meredith had accepted her fate as 'the woman behind the man'. She'd never craved glory the way that Kip did. Working behind the scenes, it had never mattered to her that she didn't have a formal role at Clement Hotels.

As she and Shirley made the bed, tucking in military corners, a sweat broke out across Meredith's brow. Kip liked the villa chilly, but she preferred the thickness of heat, the reminder that she was far from rainy old Cardiff where she'd grown up.

Sometimes the girl she'd been still felt within reach; that girl, with her scraggly-blond hair and her big dreams of art and music and life. While at uni in London, she'd got a job working the night shift at the Clement Mayfair, pulling in extra cash to fund her degree.

Kip was the boss, a night owl, prone to wandering past at 3 a.m., leaning his elbows on her desk, his grin wolfish. A year later, she was a university dropout, a married woman, pregnant with CJ.

Yes, it had been love, the type of love that obliterated everything else. But, yes, that was how he'd kept her under his thumb. Because she didn't have a business degree. Unlike him, she'd never signed on the dotted line for a multi-million pound deal. She was just the reception girl made good.

'I can't just leave.' Meredith sank onto the freshly-made bed, her bottom creasing the clean white sheets. 'I don't think he'd survive without me.'

Shirley snapped her tongue. 'Someday you'll start thinking about yourself.'

\*

Kip could never be bothered with paperwork, with the boring stuff. Over the years, he'd had a succession of pretty girls to type up his emails and reports and spreadsheets. The latest hire, Fizzy, was the best of the lot. She had a nervous laugh, bracelets tinkling as she fluttered a hand over her heart, but she was intelligent, putting in long hours in the office behind the pink door.

As Christmas on Keeper Island approached, Meredith missed her grown children with a persistent ache. Fizzy wasn't much like her own daughter, Lauren, who was travelling the world, staunch in her refusal to be tied down. But when Fizzy looked at Meredith with liquid eyes, it made her want to mother the girl.

Shirley's team cleaned Kip and Meredith's lighthouse villa every day, yet drifts of paper would still build up on random surfaces. These were things Kip was supposed to look at but couldn't be bothered with. Usually the papers ended up stacked in Kip's office, shoved into box files or spilling out of drawers.

Meredith passed the open door to the office one balmy December evening and sighed at the mess. She could have called in Fizzy to clear the chaos, but Meredith was feeling itchy, bored. When Kip returned from his business trip, she could present his cleared office to him like a Christmas gift.

She'd been working for an hour, sorting papers into piles, when she saw it. There was a line on a spreadsheet marked: Albert.

Why did it make her stop and look twice? Something about the single name, the categorisation under Miscellaneous Expenses.

Albert? It was an old man name.

She rifled through a few more spreadsheet printouts. Each month, a payment went to old man Albert. It was a lot of money. Over the next few hours, she hunted down every single payment to Albert. She even enlisted Fizzy's help.

'What's going on?' Fizzy asked, but Meredith demurred, forcing a smile. 'Just curious.'

Over the last twenty years, Kip had given Albert, a resident of neighbouring Virgin Gorda, more than two million dollars. Albert was not an old man but a strapping lad of twenty. Ever since his birth, Kip had been taking care of him.

\*

Virgin Gorda wasn't a big island. In the heat of the day, Meredith navigated on foot, waving off the honks of passing taxi drivers. The roads were a maze, winding up and down the peaks, houses more likely to be designated according to local landmarks than by conventional street addresses.

Her hat flopped over her eyes as she walked. It wasn't much of a disguise. Her white face, her designer sundress, made her stick out like a sore thumb here. Still, she needn't have worried about being seen. Albert, when she located his house, was oblivious to her presence.

He wore big headphones, nodding to the music as he stomped down the trail that led from his house to the beach.

From the back, he appeared unmemorable: young and gangly, his skin tawny-brown, his Afro cropped short. When he turned, though, Meredith caught a distinctive wolfish smile. She could see Kip in his features.

\*

There'd been affairs before. The first was a waitress in London, not long after Dylan's birth. The girl wrote Meredith a letter, apologising. Meredith, gasping for breath, didn't know what to do, so she called her mother.

'You let it out, my darling.' Mum's soft Welsh vowels were a blanket, wrapping itself around her. 'You let it out.'

Meredith was crouched on the kitchen floor (how had she ended up here?) and her wheezing had turned to tears. Over the phone, her mother said:

'Crying is good, you keep crying. Mark a calendar and cry for a week if you like. Then you open your heart to forgiveness.'

'No!' Meredith burst out.

One hand was wrapped around the cordless phone. The other was pressed against the Italian tile of the floor. Each square was sage-green and perfectly-imperfect; they'd been handmade and shipped over.

'Yes.' Mum's voice was steady. 'You said your vows and you made the commitment before God.'

'He broke the vows! He did.'

Her mother had the grace to sigh, to whisper *I know* before she said, 'He's a great man, Meredith. Great men need a strong woman to keep them on the right path.'

What did that mean? Meredith was to blame? She hadn't been strong enough to keep him from straying? And now she had no choice but to forgive?

Meredith threw the phone to the floor. She hoped it might split apart. She hoped the tile would crack. Instead, there was only a plasticky *tink*. Her mother's voice, far away, murmured, 'Hello? Hello?'

Two days later, Meredith moved out of the Belgravia house. With three small children in tow, she moved into a rented box where the tap water was either scalding hot or freezing cold. She talked to lawyers. She took off her wedding ring.

Kip went on the offensive. He called her at all hours of the day and night, begging and raging and crying. He sent her roses, chocolates, jewellery, stuffed bears with dazed expressions. He came to the flat, falling to his knees when she opened the door.

'I will never' – Kip banged both fists on the floor – 'never hurt you ever' – *bang* – 'ever again.'

Meredith sagged in the doorway. The fervour of his words made her dizzy.

CJ was asleep in bed, but from the other room, Dylan began to scream. Lauren toddled into the hallway. She pulled her thumb from her mouth with a pop. 'Daddy!'

God, she was tired. And Kip simply would not stop.

'We'll try,' Meredith said in an undertone. 'A trial.'

His holler was a war cry. He bounded to his feet, swept her into his arms. Lauren staggered closer, her baby arms clasping around his right leg. 'Daddy,' she whispered.

'I bought you something,' Kip said, a few weeks later, after Meredith had moved back into the Belgravia house.

They were in the kitchen, and the sage-green tiles cool were against her bare feet. He flourished a black velvet box in her direction.

She pushed it away. 'I don't want more jewellery, Kip.'

His grin was irrepressible. ‘Just look.’

Inside the ring box, there was a miniature photograph of a rock covered in green forest, surrounded by turquoise sea.

They’d stayed on Virgin Gorda a year ago, back when her belly was bursting with Dylan. Two luxuriant weeks they’d spent, paddling in the sea, talking about the future. In the distance, there was another island. ‘Imagine if we could buy it,’ she’d said, her voice dreamy as she’d raked her fingers through the sand.

Kip hadn’t replied. She’d assumed he hadn’t been listening.

‘It’ll be our place,’ he said now. ‘Just ours. A new start.’

\*

As far as the rest of the world was concerned, Meredith forgave Kip after his first transgression. No one knew that she hadn’t. Not really. She’d merely placed a black mark next to his name.

Once...

*I’ll let this go, once.*

\*

Albert’s mother was pretty. The mass of braids swept up onto her head made her slight frame appear unbalanced, tilting on coltish legs. Her smile tended to one side, but with it came a glow.

She had a husband, or a man who lived with her, and two other children, three and six, perhaps. She looked contented. Her house was nicer than her neighbours’; she clearly looked after her garden, which grew lush, exploding with red blooms.

The investigator’s file stated that she was 39. She must have met Kip when she was 18 or 19.

How had they met? Meredith’s mind buzzed with scenarios.

She'd worked on Keeper Island as a host or a housekeeper and she'd caught Kip's eye. She'd been volunteering for hurricane clean-up and had a chance encounter with Kip, who was puffed up with the pretence that he was a great philanthropist. Or maybe it was simpler than that. She'd been a pretty girl walking down the street on VG and he'd had to have her.

How could Kip resist? He was a great man. Great men got what they wanted.

\*

*Be like a ghost.*

Shirley's words to her were a vapour trail that followed Meredith around.

*Be like a ghost.*

When Kip had got home from his business trip on Christmas Eve, Meredith had been deliberately cool around him. The worst part was, he hadn't noticed.

Now he was stretched out in the hammock on their veranda, his eyes closed. 'Missed you, love...' he said.

'Did you?' her reply was caustic.

Kip didn't hear it. He was already asleep.

\*

Meredith knew she couldn't take a divorce. It would be in all the papers. The gossip would spread through her friend group. More than that, she couldn't endure the battle a divorce would entail.

Kip would go on the offensive, no holds barred. No matter where in the world Meredith went, Kip would show up. Begging, crying, lying. He'd chip away at her resolve.

It wouldn't be a punishment if Meredith tried to divorce him. He'd enjoy it. Kip loved a tough negotiation.



Over the weeks that followed, Christmas blooming into blue skies, Meredith craved Kip's sadness like a sickness. She was obsessed. She was prepared to die so that he would suffer.

Pills and a swim. It would be so easy. She'd slip beneath the waves and never surface. Meredith could become part of this island that she loved. She could be here forever, in peace.

'What's wrong?' CJ asked.

Her eldest son was here on a visit and Meredith was doing her best to act normal. The two of them were taking a circuit of the island, the breeze whipping at the sand as they rounded the headland to Windy Beach.

'Nothing, I'm fine,' she said.

'You sure?' CJ raised his voice to be heard over the wind.

'I'm fine.'

'He's done something, hasn't he?'

Meredith was crying without realising the tears had broken free. CJ wrapped her in his arms. He was strong like his father. Strong like his mother, too.

*Be like a ghost.*

Later, the four of them had a meeting, Meredith and her children. *It's not such a big deal, really*, she tried to explain. She'd still see them. They all had their own lives anyway, and they could come to Andorra to visit. But this part of her life, the Keeper Island part, was over. Was it so different to the 'your dad and I are getting divorced' talk that so many families endured?

'This is fucked up, Mum,' Lauren said, but the tiniest smile slipped out with the words. Her nose was sunburned pink and her hair, wet and curling as it dried, was scraggly-blonde.

Kip had disappointed all three of her children in different ways over the years. It wasn't like they didn't get it.

'Bastard deserves it,' Dylan said. His eyes were hooded. Since he'd buzzed his hair short, he'd begun to look more and more like his father, though she'd never tell him that.

'God,' CJ said, 'if you really want to... give him hell.'

\*

Meredith had never planned to stay dead forever.

CJ referred to it as her retirement. Truly, sometimes it felt that way. She took up watercolour painting. She got a dog. She began hiking, letting Shadow lead, scampering through the forests and along mountain paths. Her Alsatian, with his glossy black coat and sharp teeth, was chosen because he was a killer. Of course, he was also a big softie.

Hiking made her lean, fit enough that she looked younger than her age. Her friend Valeria, who knew her as Marie, was always telling her she should dye her hair, put on some make-up, find a man. But she was content with her feathery mane of grey hair and her scrubbed face. She was content to inhabit every one of her 58 years.

God willing, she still had a quarter of her life left to live. A final act left to play out.

What did she want to do with it?

It was easy living in Andorra. It was safe. But it was, in truth, a slow death.

\*

The phone call shook her.

'My question is,' the man said, 'does your husband know you're still alive?'

'I don't have a husband.'

'If he does, he's an even better liar than I thought. If he doesn't... well, that makes you a fascinating individual, Meredith.'

'Don't call me that.'

‘How much is it worth?’

After she made the first payment, Meredith was jittery for weeks. Blackmailers were never satisfied. He’d want more. He’d call again.

Except he never did. Whatever happened to the Australian man on the phone? The question receded in her mind. She stopped hearing his voice in her head. Instead, she recalled Shirley’s wisdom.

*Someday you’ll start thinking about yourself.*

All this time in Andorra, Meredith had thought she was punishing Kip, but she’d ended up punishing herself.

When she’d thought about divorce, she hadn’t fully considered the financial aspect of it. Fifty percent of Keeper Island belonged to Meredith. Fifty percent of Kip’s holding in Clement Hotels belonged to Meredith.

What if she didn’t want to live her life in the background any longer? What if she didn’t want to be an arm cropped out of a photo?

*Rampage on Billionaire’s Island*

Meredith swiped away from the news story. She checked flights on her tablet. She could be on a plane heading across the Atlantic by the end of the day. She could set foot on Keeper Island tomorrow.

Her thumb hovered over the screen. With a single jab, she pressed Book.

Meredith Clement was coming back to take what was hers.