

She couldn't escape her perfect sister.  
He couldn't resist the perfect crime.



one  
small  
mistake

**DANDY SMITH**

# ONE SMALL MISTAKE

**Dandy Smith**





*For Mum and Dad, who always told me I could.*

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**Before**

# Chapter One

## 31 Days Before

### **Elodie Fray**

He's back. I'm certain he's following me. He was outside the library late Monday night, then in the park across from my house yesterday morning, and it's the fourth time he's come into Mugs coffee shop this week.

'Jesus, Elodie,' snaps Hannah.

I look down and realise I've overpoured the milk. It pools onto the wooden counter.

'Shit.' Dumping the carton on the side, I grab a towel to clean up the mess, and while I do, I look at this stranger who's become a regular eyesore. Whenever I've seen him in the street, it's been a hurried glance before clutching my bag tight to my side and picking up my pace. Now though, safely separated by a counter and a line of customers, I take my time. He's in his late thirties, broad and solid with close-cut dark hair and black, round-rimmed glasses that make me think of a serial killer. I imagine him standing over a woman's lifeless body, calmly wiping blood splatter from the lenses.

He stares up at the boards above the counter, scanning the menu, pretending to consider his options even though he always orders the same thing. Hannah's served him four black coffees this week and it's only Wednesday.

There's something *off* about him. He's so ... still. He doesn't bring in a newspaper or a book or scroll through his phone like most people who come in alone; he usually takes the table in the corner with the best view of the coffee shop, and stares. Mostly at me. I always thought of a gaze as hot, two cigarette ends burning into your skin, but his is icy, the tips of two knife-sharp blades pressing against my spine.

Looking up now, our eyes meet, just a flash, but it chills me. I turn away from him, wiping the counter even though there isn't a drop of milk left to clean.

'Elodie,' calls Hannah briskly, 'little help.'

It only takes a couple of minutes to place the fresh order beside the till, but Hannah sighs as though I've gone out of my way to be exceptionally slow.

I glance up and he's *still* staring at me like I'm something he can sink his teeth into. Maybe I'm being paranoid ... but what if I'm not?

Before Hannah can stop me, I slip into the back and grab a carton of semi-skimmed from the fridge in case she comes looking for me. She wasn't very sympathetic when I mentioned my potential stalker last week. She said, 'Yep, customers only come to catch a glimpse of Elodie Fray, Queen of Hearts, because men just fold before you like undeserving kings.'

The storage cupboard smells of rich, bitter coffee and even though I don't love the taste, I do love the smell; it reminds me of cosy winter mornings in the Wisteria Cottage kitchen during the Christmas holidays, where a fresh pot was always waiting to chase away the cold after a walk along the windy seafront.

I pull my phone from my apron and type out a message to my best friend, Jack.

*15.26 Elodie: That creepy guy is here. Again. I'm going to end up on one of those tragic news stories where I go missing and months later my body is dredged up from the bottom of a lake.*

My thumb hovers over the 'send' button. The moment Jack reads it, he'll drop whatever he should be doing and rush over here. *Tempting* ... but, really, other than giving me the heebie-jeebies, this guy hasn't done anything wrong. It's not a crime to stand outside a library or sit on a park bench; it's not a crime to be a caffeine addict either. Crosshaven is a small town; not so small you know everyone, but small enough that you often see the same faces.

I delete the message but linger in the storage cupboard a little longer, sweat gathering in the hollow between my collarbones. It's mid-July and so

hot in Somerset you could fry an egg on the pavement.

Briefly, I close my eyes and imagine wading into the Cornish sea, feeling the cool water lapping against my skin, and that familiar longing for Wisteria rolls over me. It's been years since we visited – Jack talks about going back to his family's holiday home but there are always other things to do, other things to pay for. After giving up my marketing career for writing, my disposable income is at an all-time low. There's precious little of my ACH Marketing savings – all spent on rent and bills.

It's only been ten minutes since I last looked, but I check my email again to see if I have anything from my agent, Lara. There's a flare of hope that maybe, just maybe, today is the day – but my inbox is empty. Disappointment stirs.

I wait for an email that holds a glittering, life-affirming 'yes' from a publisher. One specific editor – Darcy Wilmot from Harriers. She's the only one who hasn't turned my manuscript down, making her my last shot at publication. She's sent Lara several gushing emails about how much she loves the book, but she hasn't offered a deal yet.

Gripping the carton, I force myself to concentrate on the mundane day job. But the second I step out of the storage room, the tension returns. What if *he's* still out here, staring at me through those round-rimmed serial-killer glasses?

Oblivious to my panic, Hannah glares over her shoulder at me. I hold up the semi-skimmed like a white flag then shove it on the top shelf of the fridge.

My heart thrums as I turn to look for him.

*Please be gone.*

I scan the room.

*Please, please be gone.*

Relief washes through me like sunlight; he isn't here.

'If you're going to disappear, you could at least give me a heads-up first,' says Hannah with barely contained hostility. 'It's been really busy out here.'

It hasn't. It never is during the strange limbo that falls between the weekday lunch rush and closing time. There are only a few occupied tables: an older gentleman, George, who always sits by the window doing the crossword; a gaggle of mothers bouncing babies on their knees and

gossiping over skinny lattes; a college student plugged into her laptop, fingers flying across her keyboard.

‘Yeah,’ I say, making a show of scanning the mostly empty coffee shop. ‘Manic.’

The bell above the door rings. It’s Richard. Great. I busy myself, cleaning out the coffee grinder. He makes his way around the counter and, as usual, he stands too close – I can smell his cheap aftershave – but he’s my boss so it’s awkward to remind him of personal space. I glance up. ‘Everything okay, Richard?’

‘You’re switching shifts with Hannah tomorrow. You’re on an early.’

‘But I’m on a late tonight, and I’ve opened and closed every day this week.’

He shrugs. ‘Hannah needs to study for an exam.’

I glance at Hannah who is de-crumbing the muffin display and pretending not to eavesdrop on this exchange. ‘It’s summer. She doesn’t have any exams.’

As he helps himself to a lemonade from the fridge, I catch a glimpse of the sweat patches around his armpits. ‘Well, she’s got studying to do and she asked very nicely.’

I bet she did. Studying? It’s student night at Fleets and I’d put this week’s wages on her wanting to come in late tomorrow so she can go out and drink her body weight in tequila tonight. If Richard realises, he doesn’t care.

‘Fine,’ I say because I’m not going to win this – not unless I’m willing to flirt for it, but one look at his lip sweat and I know I can’t.

The gaggle of mothers depart and I clear their table. God, working here is like being stuck in an unrelenting Groundhog Day of serving coffee, wiping down tables, and loading the dishwasher. If Darcy offers a book deal, it’ll have been worth it.

As I pass Richard, he says, ‘You’re a stunner, Elodie, you should smile more often.’

I bite back the ‘I do, just not at you’ and beam because that’s what nice girls who want to keep their jobs have to do.

He and Hannah flirt back and forth for the next half an hour and only a few minutes after Richard slopes off, Hannah says, ‘I’m going on a break.’

When I'm sure she's gone, I sneak a biscotti from the display and wander over to George. He's nursing a cup of coffee and working on his crossword. Before he retired, he was a cobbler, but now he spends his afternoons at the same window table, pencil in hand. Deftly, I slide the liberated biscotti beside his mug. He looks up, blue eyes twinkling. 'You'll get in trouble,' he warns.

I grin. 'Only if you tell.'

George is our kindest, most loyal customer, and, despite being a pensioner fast approaching eighty, he always leaves a tip. He glances down at his puzzle. 'Do you know a ten-letter word for a sense of impending misfortune?'

I pause, seeing the letters take shape in my mind. 'Foreboding.'

He nods slowly, exchanging his pencil for his biro and carefully writing the letters in his shaky script.

'George,' I coo, 'you're being bold – you know you can't erase biro.'

He smiles, unwrapping the biscotti and breaking it in half. 'You're my partner in crime.' He hands me a piece. 'I trust you implicitly.'

I lock up by myself. It's still light out, but I do it quickly anyway, wanting to go for a run around the park before dark. As I turn to leave, I get the feeling I'm being watched; despite the heat, icy prickles drip down my spine. When I turn around, my stomach drops. It's *him*. He's barely fifty yards away, wearing the same dark jacket and jeans. The sun reflects off his glasses, making him look inhuman.

We're the last coffee shop to close and the street is empty. My heart hammers. He starts walking towards me and for a second, I'm frozen, rooted to the pavement as though I were built into it. His stride is determined, purposeful, and the reality that I'm alone with a man who weighs twice as much as me propels me into action. I start walking in the opposite direction, glad I changed into my trainers before leaving.

I live a fifteen-minute walk from town. Usually I cut through Memorial Gardens, but I veer off, taking the long way back across residential streets. He's still behind me. I can feel it.

Up ahead, a group of people wander slowly down the street on the opposite side. I cross the road, hoping if I stay close to other pedestrians, he'll back off. Once I'm through the group, I do a quick check over my

shoulder and it's worked – he's dropped back a little. I dig around in my bag and pull out my phone and house keys. Pinching my key between two fingers, I'm poised to use it as a weapon if needed. My phone is gripped tightly in my other hand. Maybe I should call someone. Like Jack. Or the police. But what would I say? This man hasn't hurt me. Can I get in trouble for wasting police time? I won't call. Once I get home, once I reach my front door, I'll be fine.

I'll be fine.

I falter; maybe leading him right to my front door is a mistake. But then, he probably already knows where I live; several times, I've seen him in the park across from my house. I could turn around, go to a public place, a bar, ask Jack to meet me there. As soon as he sets eyes on me, he'll know something is wrong and then I'll either have to explain or lie. Besides, I'm closer to home now than I am to town.

I look back, just a flash – the man's still behind me. He's speeding up now. Not quite jogging but too fast to call it a walk. I rush out to cross the road, not wanting to stop in case he catches up. A car blares its horn as it swerves to avoid me. My pulse kicks and blood rushes through my ears. I stumble onto the pavement and round the corner into my street. I'll be safer inside than I will out here, pounding the pavement. So, I jog up the stone steps, unlock the door with shaking hands and slam it shut behind me, pressing my back against the sun-warmed wood.

Safe.

# Chapter Two

## 28 Days Before

### **Elodie Fray**

My sister lives in a two-storey Georgian house with feature fireplaces, detailed cornicing and eggshell-painted shutters. It's beautiful, there's no denying that. It reeks of grandeur and money. Ada's home is in a part of town that beguiled us as children. We used to walk slowly down Peach Avenue after school, watching girls our age step out of expensive cars in their private school uniforms, their slick ponytails swishing as they glided down the winding drive and into their big houses, followed by parents dressed in diamonds and pearls and thick, gold watches. Ada would point to the men with their crisp shirts and polished shoes and broad, white smiles and say, '*That's* the kind of guy I'm going to marry when I grow up.' And she did. For my sister, her accountant husband, Ethan, has a bank balance big enough that it's a better lubricant than anything Durex could ever make.

Weaving between the many cars parked on the driveway, I hear laughter and music and taste the smokiness of the BBQ drifting over the fence. I didn't bring anything to Ada's last gathering and she made a snide comment about party etiquette, so I stayed up last night to make a summer fruit crumble. Balancing the glass dish on my hip, I use the big brass knocker. Nervously, I wait. It's silly, there's not going to be anyone here I don't already know, but seeing my family is painful. My parents don't agree with my decision to give up a marketing career. They think chasing my dream of being a writer is irresponsible folly. They don't understand that securing an agent, especially one as talented as Lara, is like taming a mystical beast.

The front door opens, and Ethan greets me, a glass of red in one hand. 'Elodie,' he says brightly. 'Come in, come in. Join the party.'

My sister's husband is loved by the entire family and though we get along, I feel that where he is a dog person, I am like a cat being shoved in his lap.

He leads me through to the garden. For a moment I stand motionless, taking it all in. My sister doesn't do anything by halves. There are two large silk-white tepees, adorned with bunting and fairy lights, and above them, pastel paper decorations hang from tree branches, dancing slightly in the summer breeze; to my left is a bank of wooden tables where cheese boards and colourful bowls of salads and desserts jostle for room; to my right is the sizzling BBQ. As I carry my dessert over to the artfully displayed pavlovas and Victoria sponges, I notice the fences have been repainted in navy, and the summer house in a dusky pink. This party is Pinterest-perfect. Beautiful, expensive people wearing beautiful, expensive things.

I grab a drink and spot my parents sitting together on the swing seat across the lawn. There's an intimacy in the way they look at each other which is special after thirty-five years. Dad has his arm slung casually around Mum's shoulders, a bottle of cider dangling between his fingers. She relaxes against him and sips her wine. He whispers something to her, his eyes crinkling at their corners. She blushes and gently slaps his leg in mock reproach. As a teenager, I'd have gagged, but as a twenty-eight-year-old woman, I feel a sliver of envy. I want what they have, that easy, long-lasting love. Maybe I've already had it. For the first time in days, I think about Noah. Him sliding between my legs, whispering he loved me beneath the sheets of a hotel bedroom in Copenhagen where he'd whisked me away for a surprise weekend; him lying too still in a hospital bed, tubes and wires snaking in and out of his skin, shallow breathing through broken ribs.

Pushing the memory of him to the bottom of myself, I look over at my parents again; Mum's eyes light up, so do Dad's, but they don't see me – Ada is the focus of their pride. My sister is standing with a group of women who could all be clones of one another: floral maxi dresses, chunky heels, hair sweeping just above their collarbones in 'effortless' beachy waves that probably took an hour to perfect. Ada throws her head back and laughs. Forever the Queen Bee.

Everyone says it's obvious we're sisters; even Mum gets confused when she looks at old baby photos. We have the same high cheekbones, square chin and long lashes, but my lips are bee-stung, fuller than hers, my eyes green instead of grey, and where my hair is honey, hers is caramel. She's older than me by four years and taller than me by three inches. And though

she didn't finish her A-levels, much less go to university, she married rich, and her reward is the beautiful house, the shiny car and the picture-perfect husband. My parents laid out two paths for me: one with university, a career and an exciting life in the city; another with marriage, a mortgage and babies. Since straying from the path I'd started on, I'm nothing to them but a situation to be fixed. So while my sister's ability to bag the right man is celebrated, my achievements are ignored like cracked brooches at the bottom of a bargain bin. But if I could just get my name onto the front cover of a book, maybe Mum and Dad would look at me the way they look at her.

I get myself another drink. Mum appears at my side. 'Darling, I didn't know you'd arrived.'

I fix a bright smile before turning to face her. 'I've barely been here two minutes. You look great,' I say, taking in the navy Marks & Spencer playsuit she bought in the sale last summer. She's lost weight, only a few pounds, but she was already slim to begin with.

She beams at me. 'I've been going to hot yoga with Ada.'

'You used the vouchers I got for your birthday?'

She brightens. 'Oh, it was you who gave them to me! You know, I honestly couldn't remember.'

'You should've told me you were going, I'd have come too,' I say, trying to keep the hurt from my voice.

She sips her drink. 'It gets harder to keep the weight off the older you get. I used to have a figure like yours, once upon a time. I'm telling you, Elodie, men age like fine wine; women rot like meat. Come on,' she says, 'let's go see your father.'

They fill me in on the latest. When we've exhausted the gossip, we lapse into comfortable silence. I'm on my second glass of Merlot since I arrived and it's making my head spin. If Ada knows I'm here, she hasn't come over to say hello, which must be some sort of violation of whatever Stepford wife etiquette she subscribes to. I catch a glimpse of her pale blue dress as she glides across the lawn, smiling demurely at her other guests, and I can't help but wonder, for the millionth time, how we're so different, how things between us became so frosty.

Mum looks adoringly around the garden. 'It is beautiful, isn't it, Martin? Ada's done a wonderful job of it. We should think about repainting our

fences.'

Dad nods, and I try not to roll my eyes because Ada did *not* paint the fences herself. She's just as likely to be caught with a roller in one hand and a pot of 'Sapphire Salute' in the other as she is in Crocs and woolly socks. Dad turns to me. 'Did you get that outside security light fixed at your place?'

I shake my head. 'I emailed the landlord, but he takes a week to get back to me about anything.'

'Useless,' mutters Dad. 'I told you I'll come over and do it.'

'Thanks, but, like I said, if you mess with it and something goes wrong, I'm liable. I could lose my deposit.'

'Bloody ridiculous, standing outside in the dark.'

I imagine the man with the serial-killer glasses following me home at night, then creeping up the steps behind, watching me fumble for my key beneath the broken security light, his moist breath on the back of my neck.

'You okay, love?' asks Mum. 'You're awfully twitchy.'

I nod. I haven't told my parents about the man I think is following me. I don't want to worry them, especially not at Ada's party.

'You wouldn't have these issues if you owned instead of rented,' says Mum with the air of a schoolteacher addressing a wayward child. 'It's a waste of money.'

Briefly, I close my eyes, already weary. We have this conversation at least once a month. She and Dad bought their first house in 1984 for £34,000 and they don't seem to grasp the fact that, thanks to an inflated house market and wages failing to keep up, deposits are extortionate. Anyone I know who's my age and owns a house only managed it because a family member copped it and they got a healthy inheritance to ease their mourning. Or, like Ada, married rich.

Sensing my reluctance to cover old ground, she changes the subject. 'So, are you seeing anyone?'

Out of the frying pan and into the inferno. I'm going to need another drink to get through this conversation.

Dad excuses himself to join Ethan, and a small band of men gather around the BBQ. Ethan chucks a piece of meat onto it. Flames shoot up from the

grill, hissing and spitting, and the men look on with childish delight.

‘Not right now ...’ I trail off. Mum’s brow creases in dismay. I haven’t dated anyone since Noah. My parents adored him; he was easy-going and funny and always bought flowers for Mum and cider for Dad when we visited from London. They loved him almost as much as they love Jack. I feel guilty for not putting myself back out there; it means a lot to my parents to see me happy and settled but, even though it’s been nearly a year since Noah, it’s still too soon. ‘I mean, I’m focusing on my book,’ I offer by way of distraction. ‘I spent all morning at the library, coming up with new ideas for my agent.’

Mum’s frown deepens and I’m hurt. I didn’t realise how desperately I wanted her to smile warmly and ask questions the way she does when Ada announces another unnecessary renovation. I remember how proud my parents were the day I graduated. Mum wore her best heels, the satin ones with the little bow detail reserved only for extra-special occasions; Dad teared up as I stood in front of that mottled blue backdrop, holding the plastic scroll used as a prop for photographs. I was the first in the family to go to university, but that achievement has paled against the glittering glory of Ada’s grand wedding on the Amalfi Coast and her grand house and her grand car and her grand husband. Ever since I decided to try for publication, there’s been a wall between us.

‘It’s going really well,’ I lie, even though Mum didn’t ask. This lie adds another layer of bricks to the wall. ‘Lara’s had *loads* of interest. Loads. She’s expecting big things.’

Mum frowns. ‘Lara?’

‘My literary agent ...’

‘Agent?’

‘Lara from Beckworth & Gold.’

‘Yes, yes, that’s right.’

We’ve lapsed into silence again. Mum’s the first to break it. ‘Have you heard any more from Arabella?’

Arabella was the founder and CEO of ACH Marketing. The last time I saw her was when I handed in my notice. Nine months later, Arabella started another company with a huge investor and asked if I wanted to join – by that point though, I had an agent and I couldn’t fully commit to my

career *and* writing. So I turned her down. My parents knew I always loved to write but I don't think they believed I'd ever quit my job to do it. The truth is, I only took a job at a fancy marketing company to please them, but after Noah died, my happiness was more important than a job my parents could tell their friends about. 'No,' I say, honestly. 'Not for a while now.'

Mum swirls Merlot around her glass, not meeting my eye. 'Well, darling, maybe you could give her a call, see if she still needs your help.'

There's a pang of pain, sharp and hot, like she's accidentally knocked a pot of scalding tea into my lap. She really doesn't understand or, more to the point, doesn't *want* to understand. Some people write for years without ever getting this far.

When I don't respond, Mum looks at me, a hardness in her gaze. 'You're only twenty-eight now, Elodie, but you have to be careful; you don't want to get to thirty-something and realise you've made a mistake you can't fix. You don't want to get to that age and realise you've got nothing to show for it. No house, no husband, no career, no children. What's the point in all that debt from university if you're just going to work in a coffee shop?' The Merlot has made her bold and more honest than she's ever been with me before. I am exposed. She reaches out, gripping my hand tightly. 'You were always the academic one; we really thought it would be *you* to have all these wonderful things. We worry about you, love. We want you to be as happy as your sister. We don't want you to go without.'

The comparison to Ada adds two more layers of bricks to the wall. Her use of 'we' makes it clear she and Dad have talked; they agree I'm going to fail. These are worries I've had myself, they scurry, bug-like, around my brain at night, keeping me awake. Now that she's saying them aloud, panic swells in my chest, expanding inside me until it's difficult to breathe.

'I know you want a book deal, but it's a bit like wanting to win the lottery – there's no guarantee, is there?' She's looking at me hopefully, like she wants me to tell her she's wrong, that getting published is a piece of cake. But I can't. 'If there was a guarantee ... well, we wouldn't be so worried. We don't want to upset you, Elodie. You do understand, don't you?'

'Yes.' My voice sounds like it's coming from a distance. Mum doesn't look convinced. I try again. 'I get it.' Swallowing my hurt, I add, 'Thanks, Mum.'

And I *hate* that at twenty-eight, I am still craving my parents' approval.

It's impossible to enjoy myself with Mum's words swilling around my head. I consider leaving, but Mum will be upset and I don't want to spoil her evening too, so I mill around, making polite small talk with second cousins I only ever see at family gatherings, and girls I recognise from school but were in Ada's year. They're all engaged or pregnant or married with kids. Ada and Ethan are trying for a baby. Ethan let it slip on Christmas Day. Mum was over the moon; rushing out to buy a copy of *Mother & Baby* the next morning. Maybe having a little niece or nephew would bring me and Ada closer together. I look over at my sister, she's with her husband, they're laughing and drinking champagne. They look like one of those couples off an advert for luxury yachts.

I stand on the patio with Uncle Gregory and he's telling me how Ruby and Tom have just bought a convertible as a pre-baby treat. I nod and smile, and I'm surprised when he asks about my book.

'Yeah,' I say, pleased he's taken an interest. 'It's out with editors at the moment. Harriers are reading it now; I actually have a meeting with my agent about it on Monday.'

'In swanky London?'

I nod, inwardly cringing that he always refers to London as 'swanky'.

'Fingers crossed.' He raises his glass. 'Never know, you might be the next J.K. Rowling.'

I smile politely like I haven't heard that a million times.

Ada and Ruby appear at my side.

'Elodie,' my sister says coolly. Then she leans forward and air-kisses both cheeks, like we're acquaintances, like we didn't share bathwater as kids, like I didn't catch her sticking her fingers down her throat on her fifteenth birthday because Katrina Harrison called her fat, like she didn't ugly cry the night Adam Litchfield dumped her.

Ruby follows Ada's lead, and another round of air-kissing ensues. Ruby is a year older than Ada and an only child, though she's always considered Ada a sister and me an irritant.

'The party's great,' I say to Ada.

‘Thank you, it was a lot of stress and hard work,’ she says. ‘We had a nightmare with the company setting up the tepees, but we got it sorted in the end. It’s worth it; it’s lovely to have the family all together.’

‘Elodie’s just been telling me about her book,’ says Uncle Gregory.

‘Going well?’ asks Ada.

I hesitate, trying to work out if her interest is genuine. She holds my gaze and her intrigue doesn’t falter, so I answer as truthfully as I can without telling them it’s been turned down by nine publishers. ‘I have a meeting with my agent in London on Monday.’

‘Swanky London,’ Gregory says again. ‘Bright girl, your sister.’

Ada nods and sips her champagne.

‘And how’s the coffee shop?’ asks Ruby with just a hint of bitch.

Uncle Gregory frowns. ‘Coffee shop?’

‘Yeah, Elodie works at Mugs in town,’ she offers brightly. ‘Didn’t Auntie Meredith tell you?’

‘I thought you worked at some fancy marketing company?’ His tone is accusatory, and my cheeks colour under his scrutiny.

‘I am, I mean, I was. I’m taking a break from it to focus on my writing. Juggling a career and deadlines for my book was too much so ...’ I trail off, but they’re all silent, waiting for further explanation. Then I’m pitching myself to them just as I’ve pitched campaign ideas to clients a hundred times before. ‘University was challenging. I didn’t have a gap year like most of my friends – I just launched head-first into a career and did the whole London thing for a few years, which was frantic.’ After the conversation with Mum, it feels good to talk myself up. Uncle Gregory looks impressed, Ruby’s smirk falters but still, Ada’s expression is completely unreadable. ‘Now I just need some time to really focus on my passion project.’ I take a sip of my drink, proud of this last line. Then I give a half-shrug. ‘Working at the coffee shop is temporary.’

Ruby raises her eyebrows in mock-innocence. ‘But haven’t you been working there for over a year now?’

I open my mouth to answer, but Uncle Gregory beats me to it. ‘Don’t worry, Elodie, you’re a smart cookie, you’ll get back on your feet.’ He squeezes my arm in a way that isn’t meant to be patronising.

In my peripheral vision, Ruby grins. Uncle Gregory excuses himself, leaving the three of us alone. We sip our drinks and I try to think of something to say. It would be easier if Ada and I were alone; it's awkward with Ruby standing there because three's a crowd and even though Ada is *my* sister, *I* feel like the third wheel.

'The house is gorgeous,' I say to Ada. She has an eye for creating breathtaking spaces. 'You should've gone into interior design.' Even though my words are intended as a compliment, her mouth tightens; she's taken it as a dig.

I draw breath to explain, but Ruby swoops in, 'Yes, Adaline, you should've gone and got a degree so you could work in Mugs with Elodie.'

Out of the corner of my eye, I see Ada biting her lip to stop herself laughing, and I flush with humiliation. Rather than stand here sniping at one another, I turn first to my sister. 'Anyway, wonderful party, Ada.' Then to my cousin. 'Congratulations on the baby and the convertible, Ruby – great news.' Before either of them can respond, I exit stage right.

Countless glasses of wine later and not enough BBQ food to soak up the alcohol, I am swaying gently next to the chocolate fountain. I check my phone. Jack isn't here and he still hasn't messaged back.

I am alone.

I am drunker than is appropriate.

And I am feeling sick. Really sick.

Inside, I make a beeline for the upstairs bathroom, not trusting myself to hold it together in the queue for the downstairs toilet. I grip the rim, my knees cushioned by the thick, grey bathmat. Jesus, it's actually a really nice bathmat. Plusher than my supermarket-bought duvet covers. It's so desperately sad that my sister's bathmat is nicer than my bedding.

My mouth keeps doing that watery thing but, after five minutes, I still haven't been sick. It's time to go home; I want to take off my heels and bra and climb into bed.

But when I leave the bathroom, I hear Ada's voice and stop outside her dressing room. 'How about this?'

Maybe if I linger, I'll catch her by herself so I can explain what I meant by my interior design comment. Even though she appears happy, I sometimes look at her and I can tell she isn't. The thing about Ada is she's a

perfectionist. If she isn't *certain* she can succeed right away, she steps back so she can't fail. But Ada loves interiors and she's so talented, she'd be amazing. Maybe she just needs encouragement, maybe—

'Pretty, but purple isn't my colour.' It's Ruby; any hope I had of talking to my sister alone withers. 'I can't believe I spilled wine on my dress. *Red* wine. Thanks for letting me borrow something.'

I lean against the wall, slip my phone from my bag and start typing out a message to Jack to tell him I'm leaving. He was supposed to be my ride home, but I'll get a taxi.

'Honestly, it's not a problem.'

Then I remember how much a taxi costs from here to mine and decide I'll walk instead; it's a nice night and maybe it'll sober me up.

'Eurgh, I'm so clumsy. I swear, Adaline, it's just about the only thing I have in common with your self-righteous little sister.'

I stiffen, thumb hovering over the 'send' button. Ada giggles, and I'm not sure what hurts more, my cousin slagging me off or my sister laughing about it. There's the clang of a hanger then, 'This one?'

'I'll try it but I'm so bloody pregnant it might not fit.' I hear a zipper, then the rustle of fabric and think maybe the bitching session is over, but Ruby's clearly on a roll. 'Elodie thinks she's so special because she went to university, like that makes her better than everyone else. Better than us.' She scoffs. 'Did you hear her out there? "University was challenging" and "I just need some time for me" like, she works in a fucking coffee shop.'

They both laugh and heat creeps up my neck and spreads across my cheeks. I cringe, hating how pretentious I sounded. My conversation with Mum made me feel so inferior that I overcompensated with Uncle Gregory, Ruby and Ada. 'You know your mum is going around telling everyone Elodie is still in marketing, working from home, right?'

I frown, sure this is a lie – Mum knows I'm not.

'I heard her talking to Ethan's parents earlier. Obviously, she's embarrassed. Look at you, Adaline, at what you have, but Elodie? She's one step away from stacking shelves in Asda.'

Ruby's words drip coldly down inside me. Mum is concerned, and disappointed, but it hurts to know she's so ashamed she'd lie to people.

‘When Auntie Meredith said Elodie had an agent, I googled it and the odds are seriously stacked against her.’ The glee in Ruby’s voice is so thick, I could spoon it like soup. ‘She’s never going to get a publishing deal.’

‘Really?’

Maybe I’m wrong, but did Ada just sound a little disappointed?

‘Really. And I’m glad. You should be too. She’s so stuck-up, no wonder her last boyfriend threw himself in front of a car.’

I inhale sharply like I’ve been struck. On the back of the shock comes outrage. How dare she bring Noah into this? How fucking *dare* she?

‘Ruby ...’ Ada’s tone is reproachful and beneath my anger, there’s a smudge of respect for my sister.

‘What?’ she asks, all innocence. ‘He did though.’

‘It was a hit and run.’

‘Did they ever find the driver?’

‘No.’

I wish my big sister would turn around and slap Ruby instead of handing her dresses. Ada was there after the accident; she came over the day I got the call from Noah’s mum to tell me he’d died. She was there the days that followed too, ones that passed by in a dark blur of sympathy and hushed voices, in tears and the black burn of too many bourbons to get me to sleep at night. And on the day of the funeral, she helped me off my bedroom floor and into the shower where she washed my hair and cleaned my skin. She fed me lasagne from Tupperware and dressed me too – fresh underwear, thick tights, a black velvet number she must’ve bought because she lifted it from tissue paper in a glossy box on the end of the bed. There was something soothing about her soft hands on my skin, putting me back together, taking care of me in the same, precise way she did with her dolls when we were children. She slept in my bed every night for a week after the funeral, and one morning, when the haze of grief was lifting enough that I could wash and dress myself, I woke up and she was gone, and that cool detachment with which we treated one another returned. I didn’t understand but the chasm of distance between us meant I never felt I could ask.

Hurt by Mum’s lies, Ruby’s attack and Ada’s complicity, I turn and hurry down the stairs. When I get to the front door, I yank it open. And there’s Jack, all tall and broad-shouldered, his hand raised, ready to knock. We

stare at each other, both surprised, but the second Jack sees my tears, his eyes darken and he steps inside. ‘What’s happened?’ He dumps his champagne offering on the side table by the door and pulls me into a hug. I breathe him in – sandalwood and leather – and some of the hurt and humiliation eases.

He leans back so he can see my face. There’s a line of concern creasing his brow. He wipes away my tears with his thumb. ‘Tell me what happened.’

Laughter glitters down the hallway, drifting in from the party in the garden. He glances up in the direction of the noise and scowls, then takes my hand and pulls me into the dining room. When the door closes behind him, it’s just the two of us. For a while, I can’t speak, too afraid that if I do, I’ll cry again. Jack sits opposite me, leaning forward, eager to help, but not knowing how.

After a few deep breaths, I tell him everything. He listens, face carefully blank, but his eyes betray him. They’re blue and remind me of Icelandic oceans, and right now, anger swirls in their depths. Jack is nothing if not fiercely protective. He thrusts his fingers back through his hair. ‘What the fuck do they know? Jesus Christ, at least you’re trying for something. Getting published isn’t as easy as marrying rich.’

‘I shouldn’t have told you,’ I say, feeling guilty for riling him.

‘They’re just jealous.’

‘That’s what people tell themselves to feel better. What do Ruby or Ada have to be jealous of?’

‘You’re talented, and brave, and ambitious. You’re everything they’re not —’

‘Jack ...’

‘I’m serious.’ He takes my hands in his; his skin is warm, and his long fingers make me think of tree roots in earth. They were hands which held my hair back after too many tequilas, broke Chris Flynn’s nose when he called me ‘frigid’ because I wouldn’t put out, and built my bookshelf after I moved back to Crosshaven and into my little one-bedroom house. ‘Ruby’s a cheap copy of Ada, and the only thing going on in her life is pregnancy. She’s going to spend the next few months swelling up like a balloon and complaining about her fat ankles until Tim—’

‘Tom,’ I correct.

‘Tom, gets bored of it and starts fucking his PA.’

‘Jack,’ I scold, secretly delighted.

He smiles. ‘And Ada’s jealous because she left school at sixteen, bounced from one pointless job to another until she stumbled into the right place at the right time and met a guy with the right amount of cash in his account. And now what? She spends her days lunching with the girls, doing yoga and rearranging furniture.’

‘Sounds great.’

‘Sounds directionless.’

‘Well, at least we have that in common.’

He squeezes my hands. ‘You are not directionless. You know what you want and you’re going after it and fuck them if they can’t respect that. As for your parents ... I love Martin and Meredith, but their whole lives have followed a traditional trajectory: job, house, marriage, kids. Boring if you ask me. Not you, though – you’re doing things *your* way and they don’t like it, but that’ll change when they walk into that bookshop and see your name on the shelf.’

I love the way he sees me: talented, ambitious and brave. Like I can do anything. Like I *should* do anything. Sometimes I think Ada needs a Jack in her life.

‘Thanks,’ I whisper.

‘It’s true,’ he states matter-of-factly, like it’s the most obvious thing in the world. I smile because he’s always been so sure of himself.

‘It’s been a long day,’ I say, exhausted. ‘I just want my bed.’

‘Sure. Let me drop the champagne with your sister and we can go.’

‘No, stay. I’ll get a taxi,’ I lie, not wanting him to know I plan on walking home because then he’ll feel obligated to give me a lift.

‘Nah, I’m not in the party mood anyway. Come on.’ He gets to his feet and holds out his hand. I take it.

‘Where’s your mum – I thought she was coming?’

‘Not tonight.’

‘Mum will be disappointed.’ She and Kathryn have been best friends since they were children. They’re so close, it’s hard to believe Kathryn’s husband

Jeffrey ever convinced her to move to America for all those years, just before Jack was born.

‘She isn’t well. Migraine. I was late because we couldn’t find her pills.’

She’s been getting migraines for thirteen years, ever since Jeffrey died. I shiver the way I always do when I think of Jack’s father, of the smell that hit us like a concrete block as we walked into their house on our return from Wisteria, carrying lilos and beach bags, sand still between our toes.

‘Just give me five minutes and I’ll take you back,’ says Jack.

‘Can I wait in the car?’

He gives me a look. ‘Don’t be a coward. Go say goodbye to them.’

I open my mouth to protest but he’s already dragging me out the door. Without breaking stride, he scoops the champagne from the side table in the hallway.

In the garden, Jack stops and chats to guests while I stand beside him, hoping no one can tell I’ve been crying. He vows everyone he speaks to. And, in the dusky half-light, he is gorgeous with his cheekbones and strong jaw and all the rest. I think of all the girls he’s bedded and wonder why he doesn’t keep any of them around longer than a night. If he really wanted to, he could make someone very happy. Maybe he’d even have everything Ada does now: the home, the grand garden party, the picture-perfect happiness.

I know the second Jack spots my sister because his hand briefly tightens around mine. My heart starts to thunder as I see the hardness in his face; he’s going to say something.

‘Jack,’ I warn, voice low. ‘Jack, please don’t—’

‘Ada!’ he calls, drowning me out. She looks up, eyes searching, then sees us and pastes on her hostess-smile. Jack and Ada don’t get on. Jack finds Ada showy and shallow, and she finds Jack arrogant and challenging. He lets go of my hand and strides towards her. I hurry after him. ‘Sorry I’m late.’ He kisses her cheeks. ‘Mum isn’t well. She sends her apologies.’

‘Poor thing,’ coos Ada. ‘And Charlie?’

‘Big brother’s at the West End. Husband duties – it’s Tobin’s opening night. Anyway, this is for you.’ He hands her the champagne. ‘From all of us.’

Her eyes widen. ‘Dom Pérignon. You shouldn’t have.’

‘It’s almost a year to the day since you moved into this beautiful house. We wanted to mark the occasion.’

I don’t know anything about champagne, but from the look on her face, I can tell the bottle is expensive. Unlike my sister, Jack didn’t marry into money; he was born into it. ‘Thank you. Ethan will love it. We adore Dom Pérignon.’

I linger awkwardly as they talk about vineyards in France, but I’m relieved, sure Jack isn’t going to say something.

‘This place really is spectacular,’ he remarks.

She lifts her chin, proud. ‘Thank you.’

‘You’ve done so well. Thank fuck for Ethan, right?’ His smile is so broad and charming, it takes a beat for his words to fall around my sister and when they do, I see how they burn. ‘Anyway, enjoy the champagne.’

My mouth is still open when Jack takes my hand and leads me away. I stumble alongside him, and when I glance back at Ada, I see she is furious. The scowl scrunches her forehead and twists her lips and just then, my beautiful, perfect sister looks really and truly ugly.

Jack riffles through the coats as I fume beside him. Out on the street, I snap, ‘Why would you do that?’

He’s unfazed by my anger. ‘Did you really think I’d let her get away with treating you the way she did tonight?’

‘I can handle Ada.’

He shrugs. ‘No need. I did it for you.’

‘I didn’t ask you to.’

‘You didn’t have to.’ He takes a step closer and I think about taking a step back, just to show him that I really am angry he interfered, but I don’t want to be petty. ‘I got you something.’ He holds up a set of car keys.

Maybe I’m still drunk because I am silent and confused.

‘Heard Ruby has a new convertible,’ says Jack.

Horror crawls along my spine and out through my mouth. ‘You stole her keys?’ I think about Jack at the coat rack even though he didn’t come with a jacket.

‘It’s not Jeffrey’s Cadillac, but it’ll do.’

Only two days after I passed my driving test, we took Jeffrey's vintage Cadillac for a joyride. My heart starts to canter at the memory of Jack's hands covering my eyes as we flew down an open stretch, then breaks into a gallop as I realise what he's asking. 'You want to steal Ruby's car?'

'We'll bring it straight back.'

'No.'

'She'll never know.'

'No.'

'Why do you always let people get away with treating you badly?'

I glance away, hating that he is right.

'It doesn't exactly strike me as fair to put Ada in her place while Ruby gets off scot-free. Where's your sense of equilibrium, Elodie?' He practically purrs my name. When I don't look up, he moves so close, I can feel the heat coming off his body. 'How far will you go?'

This is our childhood mantra, born the day we met outside Wisteria Cottage when he was nine and I was six. We knew each other instantly. Jack took my hand and we raced away from our parents, their warning to stay out of the sea ringing in our ears. On the little beach, Jack challenged me to take off my shoes and venture into the water, asking how far I'd go. Into the sea or to impress him, I wasn't sure, but I waded in waist-deep with him by my side. This act of defiance was ours. Was us.

It's the mantra which, in the summer before I went to university, saw us take a spontaneous trip to Amsterdam where we spent several days bar-hopping and eating hash brownies. And four years after that, on Jack's twenty-fourth birthday, would have us crashing a wedding my best friend Margot was managing where, to her horror, Jack would give a speech at the happy couple's reception so confidently no one would question whether he'd ever met them. It's the glue that holds us together.

I think of the poison that dripped from Ruby's mouth. Her words, her opinions, trickle into me and I am furious and humiliated all over again. Ada may have been complicit but, as always, it was Ruby who gathered the arsenic. Decision made, I raise my gaze to Jack's. It's impossible not to answer the way we always do. 'How far *won't* I go?'

Then we are in the car, speeding down twisting countryside lanes. This time, it is my hands that cover Jack's eyes.

## Chapter Three

### 26 Days Before

#### **Elodie Fray**

This morning, I'm catching a train to London to meet my agent. As I stand on the platform, I see two strangers darting these little looks at one another. Whenever their eyes meet, something passes between them and I think, this will either be the beginning of their story or just a footnote.

Noah and I started off as two strangers in a coffee shop on the South Bank. Because the longing, the *need* to write, had become too intense to ignore, I'd booked a few days off from my marketing job. Telling stories is my first, most long-lasting love. The best kind because the paper will never reject my pen. It is a lover I can't quit and when I let it wrap its arms around me, it feels so good, I wonder why I've stayed away so long.

I was tapping away at my laptop when the waitress came over with a coffee I hadn't ordered.

'It's from him.' She nodded towards a man sitting in the corner. He was attractive, I'd guess slightly older than me, with dark hair and a wide mouth, the kind you know could produce a devastating smile.

My train pulls in. Around me, people rush to get on. I find my seat in the last carriage, pleased to see it's almost empty. I should be going over my notes for the meeting but I'm still remembering.

He came to my table and introduced himself. 'Noah Pine, like the tree.'

There was paint on his hands. Clay. 'I've seen you in here every day for nearly a week,' he said. His voice was deep and rich, the kind that led you through a sleep meditation. 'You sit at this table, order a hot drink and you write.'

'So, you've been watching me?'

‘Well, that sounds terrible. I’ve just ... noticed you.’ And the way he looked at me, with heat and intrigue, sent a thrill through my body and colour across my cheeks. ‘The other day, this man comes in here with his dog off the lead. The thing shoots off, knocks some poor waitress over. It was a disaster. Coffee and cutlery everywhere. You didn’t even glance up. Just kept on writing and I thought, I *have* to know this woman. Read whatever she’s working on.’

I was right about his smile. It was devastating.

We sat and talked until closing. The easy conversation you only find between lifelong friends.

On our first official date, we went hiking up the Surrey Hills. At the top, we drank Prosecco and watched the sun set. When it grew dark, Noah built a little fire, and pulled marshmallows from his backpack. We roasted them on an open flame and the conversation flowed like warm water. He asked endless questions about my life and hung off my every word. He was attractive and kind and insightful and creative. I remember thinking the entire day was like something from a movie or the pages of a book, and I felt so lucky. With the embers smouldering before us and the night sky stretching above and the summer evening warming our skin, we kissed.

The first time Noah told me to quit my job, we were at a flea market. ‘You’re so *alive* when we talk about your book.’

‘I can’t just leave my career.’

‘Why not? I did. I walked out of the bank, took a pottery course, fell in love and started teaching at the college. Best decision I ever made. Besides sending that coffee to your table.’ We stopped at a stall selling second-hand books. ‘You’re born to write, Elodie. This marketing job is slowly killing you. You want to die having never done what you love?’ He picked up a book from the stall and said to the little old man behind it, ‘One day, you’ll be selling my girlfriend’s book.’

‘Noah!’ Laughing, I grabbed his hand and pulled him away.

He kissed me and said, ‘If you’re not going to do it for yourself, do it for me.’

I lean my head against the train window as I remember cleaning out our apartment after the hit and run, boxing up our lives together. He died a few days before my twenty-eighth birthday; I found my present a month after he

was gone, wrapped in white and yellow paper. Inside was a dark green ceramic vase. I turned it over in my hands. On the bottom, carved into the clay in Noah's script was, 'Elodie Fray, author.'

*You want to die having never done what you love?*

That day, I took my phone from my pocket and typed out an email to ACH Marketing.

*If you're not going to do it for yourself, do it for me.*

And handed in my resignation.

I arrive at Paddington just before eleven thirty and blow the memories of Noah from my mind like dandelion clocks.

It's jarring to come from the quaint, Georgian charm of Crosshaven where the West Country accent is smooth like butter sliding down hot toast, to the brash, bustling grey of London where it's so loud, you can't pick one accent out from another.

Commuter crowds move like a swarm of ants across the platform. I haven't been to the city since Christmas, and it takes me a moment to gather my bearings. I lived in a four-bedroom house-share in Catford for almost four years before I moved into Noah's flat in Acton. I used to bitch about the forty-minute commute to work, crammed in like sardines, pressed up against strangers with bagel breath and barely having enough room to turn my head, and although my fifteen-minute walk from my front door to Mugs is less hassle, it's not as exciting.

After I quit my job, I used all my savings to move back to Crosshaven, exchanging the fancy office with its floor-to-ceiling windows and park view for the pokey little staff room above Mugs, with its ripped upholstered chairs and mini-fridge that hasn't worked in the year I've been there. All to write this book. For me. For him. Once this meeting with my agent is done, I'll know if that decision was the right one.

Lara asked me to come prepared with more pitches for a second novel, which I think is a great sign. If Harriers has offered us a deal, maybe they want more than one book, and Lara wants to tell me in person so we can sign the contract and celebrate with champagne. I shouldn't get carried away, but I have a *really* good feeling, and I can't help but imagine my book launches. I'd have two: one at Tippies, my favourite bookshop in Crosshaven, and one in the Piccadilly Waterstones. I'll serve cocktails and

little cupcakes with my cover art printed on them. I'll do a speech and thank Jack and Margot and Lara. Mum will cry, and Dad will beam at me like he does every time my sister pulls up in her new Audi.

By the time I reach the underground, that London buzz is back in my blood, but by the time I near the Botanical Café where I'm meeting Lara, my mum's disappointed voice and the resulting crush of panic has returned. I feel it pressing on me from all directions, squeezing the breath out of me.

I stop and call Jack. 'I'm so nervous I might actually vomit,' I tell him as soon as he answers.

'Not the best perfume for an important meeting.'

'I don't think I can go in there. I—'

'Got your pitches ready?'

'Yes, but—'

'Then you're prepared. Great. And I'll tell you again, Elodie Fray, you are talented, and ambitious, and brave.'

I cling to this. I want to be that girl, so I push the panic down, down into my gut, until all that's left is a fluttery nervousness.

'What time are you back in Crosshaven?' he asks. 'I'll pick you up from the station.'

'It's, like, a ten-minute walk from my house. No point in you driving across town to come get me.'

'What if that guy is still lurking? Jesus, Fray, he followed you home.'

'I don't *know* that he followed me home. Like I said, maybe it's all in my head.' Even as I say it, I know it's not true, but I haven't seen him in days. Until now, I've managed to stop dwelling; out of sight, out of mind. But Jack's pulled him to the forefront again. Not helpful when I have a meeting in five minutes.

'I don't want to end up on one of those Channel 4 documentaries about your untimely kidnap and murder. Though, if you escape, I guess you could write about it. Sell millions of copies.'

I laugh.

'What will I tell people?' he says. 'Oh yeah, Elodie mentioned she was being stalked but we decided to risk the late walk back from the station on

the off chance he wasn't a psychopath. You know what they say, better to be sorry than safe ...'

'You've already done enough.' I stayed at Jack's for two nights after I was followed home, too scared to stay all alone in my house.

He sighs. 'Do we really have to pretend you have a choice? What time does your train get in?'

'Nine o'clock – I'm meeting Margot for drinks after the meeting.'

'I'll be there.' There's rustling down the line, like he's switching hands. 'Elodie, you're going to kill it. I know how much this means to you and if that editor hasn't picked up your book, she's a fucking moron.'

My face splits into a smile.

'Call me after,' he says.

His confidence is catching like a summer cold. 'I will.'

'See you in a better world, Fray.'

I ring off, take a breath, and go inside.

I've never been here before. There are bamboo chairs, huge windows, exposed brickwork. Everywhere there are plants, hanging in baskets from the high ceiling, shades of olive and sage and emerald, sitting in gold pots in the middle of glass tables, standing in mid-century planters in every corner of the space, their leaves glossy and thick. This *is* a good sign. If Lara was going to give me bad news, why do it over a meal in a gorgeous café? Why not just sit me down outside a sandwich shop so I can cry into a baguette?

Lara is at a table for two, wearing a dress that looks like it cost the same as a weekend away, but it probably doesn't because she's forever telling me there's no money in publishing. She once said she gets most of her clothes from vintage shops and even sent me a list of all the best places in London, but whenever I've been, all I've found are moth-eaten nightgowns and granny jumpers that smell like dusty retirement homes.

I make my way over. She stands when she sees me, smiling wide. I never know whether to go in for a handshake, a hug or an air kiss. Is it one kiss or two? I worry that one day I'll turn the wrong way and accidentally catch her mouth instead. She opens her arms and draws me in, air-kissing first one cheek and then the other.

‘You look wonderful,’ she says.

When the waiter comes over, I’m so nervous, I point to the first thing on the menu without really paying attention. We venture into small talk. I nod and smile and say, ‘Yes, really warm for July,’ and ‘the journey here was fine, thanks,’ and ‘no wine for me, or coffee. Water’s fine. Yes, I’m sure. Thanks. Thank you,’ until I’m about to explode because all I want to know is whether Harriers is going to take my manuscript. Lara talks about her holiday in Tuscany and how her three-year-old daughter, India, made friends with a local Italian boy and they’ll simply have to go back next year.

‘So, how’re you?’ she asks. ‘What’s new?’

I scramble for something to say and blurt out, ‘Nothing, still working in Mugs and wondering if my parents are right and I made a *huge* mistake giving up my career.’

‘Oh, right.’ She shuffles uncomfortably.

Trying to lighten the mood, I force a laugh. I forget when people ask how you are, they don’t really want a truthful answer. Even though I’m worried I’ve thrown the entire conversation off balance with my belch of honest misery, I feel I have to explain myself. ‘I mean, it’s just that even my mum has taken to lying to her friends about what I do for work. She acts as though serving coffee is worse than prostitution. Maybe she has a point; I mean, at least as a sex worker the tips are better, and you get to work from home.’ This time, my laughter is paper-thin. I swallow and reach for my water.

‘Oh, goodness,’ she says after a pause. ‘Well, there’s got to be a good story in there somewhere.’

I want to slam my head against the table for being so awkward. Sometimes, even as my brain is screaming for me to stop, my mouth just keeps on going.

The waiter delivers our food and I’m pleasantly surprised by my random pick. The chicken salad is so pretty with its edible flowers, I want to take a photograph but I’m not sure that’s the done thing at business meetings. I can’t tell if it’s as delicious as it looks; I’m so nervous, I chew and swallow without tasting.

She clears her throat and pours herself a glass of wine. ‘Right, Elodie, let’s talk about *The Kissing Rock*. We’ve had a reply from Harriers.’

My heart thunders in my chest. This is it. The moment I've been waiting for. I wish I could press 'pause' and take a minute to compose myself. My hands are shaking so I thrust them under the table and clasp them tightly in my lap. *Validate me*, I silently pray. *Please validate my life choices. Please.* The air is heavy with anticipation, too thick to breathe. Everything I have ever wanted lies between us, so close I can taste it.

'Would you like me to read the email from them?'

I nod. I have never, ever wanted something as much as I want this book deal. I want it for myself. For Noah.

Lara pulls out her phone and starts scrolling through her emails. My heart beats so hard, I feel it in my fingertips.

'So,' she begins, and I sit up straighter. 'Darcy said, "Terribly sorry for the delay in getting back to you. I loved so much about Elodie's book – I thought she established the characters very deftly, her description is fantastic, really sexy and smart and her writing is extremely accomplished."'

A smile tugs at my mouth. This is good, this is *really* good. I get that feeling in my stomach, like I'm being lifted. I'm a kite being swept into the sky, tethered only by a flimsy thread; I float higher and higher until my panic and fear are so far below me, they're specks on the map.

"'But,'" she continues, "'I don't think this is for us – there are too many parallels with another of our titles, *Behind Her Eyes*, but more generally, Elodie's book doesn't have the hook we're looking for right now. The demand is for stories based on true events, something darker and grittier, and so with quite a lot of light-hearted romances already on our list, we don't feel this is for us. If Elodie comes up with something else, we'd absolutely love to see it.'"

And just like that, I plummet back down to Earth with a crash so hard, my teeth knock together.

Lara slips her phone back into her bag then examines my face. I don't want to seem weak, I want to stay together and professional, so I put all my energy into keeping emotion out of my expression whilst digging my nails into my palms beneath the table hard enough that they'll leave little half-moon imprints in my skin.

‘I’m so sorry, Elodie,’ she says, voice creamy with sympathy. ‘These rejections are tough, but all the editors have been so positive and encouraging. Sometimes I just get a one-liner which says nothing more than “not for us, thank you” so, although a rejection isn’t what we want, the feedback is useful.’

I nod and nod and nod. There’s something heavy pressing down on my chest. I think it’s devastation. Lara is staring at me, waiting for me to react but on the back of the devastation is shock. Ridiculous really because I knew there was a *very* real possibility I’d fail like everyone said I would. I knew that, but surely this can’t be the end of the road? It can’t. I take another sip of water. ‘So,’ I manage, and swallow thickly around the hard lump in my throat. ‘So, what happens next?’

There’s relief in Lara’s smile. I get the impression she’s dealt with a few crushed artists dissolving into tears and I’m pleased that I’m not one of them. ‘Well, the reason I asked you to come up with some new ideas is because Darcy is giving us a second chance.’

I take another sip of water, and take a second to organise my thoughts before asking, ‘Does this mean there’s no hope for *The Kissing Rock*?’

I wait.

Lara takes a sip of her drink and I can see she’s mentally sprinkling sugar on what she’s about to say. ‘I think it’s best we concentrate on a new project.’

But it still leaves a bitter aftertaste because the answer is no, there’s no hope for the manuscript I devoted over a year of my life to. It’s been thrown out like a carton of old milk. I’m afraid I might let us both down and cry. Lara has put so many hours into my manuscript; I’ve not just failed myself, I’ve failed her too. I give this crushing realisation the moment of silence it deserves.

She leans forward. ‘So, let’s hear these new pitches.’

I blink, surprised we’re moving on so quickly when I still feel raw, like I’m in mourning, but apparently, we’re not giving my book a proper burial; we’re just tossing its tattered corpse into a hole and skipping the wake altogether.

‘Sure, yeah, okay.’ With trembling fingers, I pull my phone from my bag and scroll through to my notes. I take a breath, hoping my voice will stay

even. ‘Well, I had an idea about childhood sweethearts in the wild moors of Scotland who are torn apart when their families move away, and they spend the next decade trying to get back to each other, their paths always *almost* crossing.’ I glance up, trying to gauge her thoughts but she isn’t giving much away, so I go on. ‘I wanted to play with the idea of fate and soulmates. Something timeless, classic.’

Lara nods encouragingly but her smile is fixed. Fake. ‘That’s a great idea,’ she galvanises. I wait. The ‘but’ is coming. ‘The thing is, Elodie, it’s got quite similar themes to *The Kissing Rock*. Do you have anything grittier, as Darcy suggested?’

‘Well ...’ I’m staring at my screen, not able to read a single word thanks to the rising dread. ‘Urm ...’ I bite my lip and scroll pointlessly up and down through my notes because I *know* I don’t have anything resembling gritty.

‘It’s not the first time an editor has come back to me recently and expressed that true crime is selling right now,’ she starts. ‘I wouldn’t usually suggest assessing the market and writing for it because by the time you’ve jumped on a trend, the next one has come along, but true crime has been around for years. There’s always a place for it.’ She’s looking at me expectantly, but my mind is blank.

I can’t even bullshit my way through this. ‘Look,’ I say flatly. ‘I don’t have anything like that. At least, not right now. Or maybe ...’ My pulse quickens. ‘Something about a stalker? A woman being followed or ...’

‘We’d need a new spin on it.’

She waits. I lick my dry lips and, just for a second, consider offering up Noah’s story but it’s too real, too raw. I can’t.

‘Why don’t you go home, have a think, come up with a few ideas and send them over to me? Then we can schedule a call to discuss them. Sorry to dash but I’ve got another meeting in half an hour.’

‘No problem.’

She insists on paying even though the book hasn’t sold, and I feel even guiltier. Still, there’s a glimmer of hope, isn’t there? I mean, Darcy wants me to pitch more ideas. She likes my writing. I haven’t completely failed. Not yet. It will take me another six months to write a new manuscript ... after editing and submitting, it could be another year or more before I have

an offer. *If* I have an offer. How long do I spend working in a coffee shop, earning minimum wage, with nothing to show for it, before I accept my parents are right and throw in the towel?

When we step out of the cool, air-conditioned café and into the burning sun, Lara turns to me. ‘I’m glad we had this chat.’

‘Me too. I’m looking forward to starting something new.’

‘Good, perfect. Obviously, I want us to continue to work together but it *must* be on the right project, you understand?’

I nod, even as her ultimatum creates a fog of dread in my chest, cold, dark and spreading: come up with a winning pitch or she’ll drop me.

I met Margot in the first year of university when I went to my lecturer’s office to discuss my ‘Introduction to Media Law and Regulation’ paper and there she was, fucking Anthony Roberts on his desk. After that, I’d sit in his seminars, listening to him talk about the difference in regulatory guidelines between print and broadcast media, all the while knowing he bites his lip just before he comes. Weeks later, I found Margot crying in the self-help section of the library. We went to a bar where she lamented about how she was madly in love with Dr Roberts, but he was banging at least two other girls on campus. Margot swiped a bottle of tequila from behind the bar and we drank it on the way home, shouting ‘Olé!’ at one another and bursting into shrieks of laughter. We’ve been friends ever since.

I’m supposed to be meeting her in forty-five minutes but knowing my book has failed and having Lara’s ultimatum sitting inside my mind like a spring-loaded trap, I’m low. Really low. I’m not sure which is more selfish: cancelling on Margot because my pity-party is single occupancy only or meeting Margot knowing I’m going to be miserable company. Jack would tell me to pull myself together, meet her and put everything else to one side, even just for a few hours. So, that’s what I do.

The heat is so close that by the time I reach the restaurant, I’m sweaty and exhausted, but it’s worth it because the rooftop bar has a breathtaking view of the London skyline. Glass skyscrapers glitter against the horizon and to my right is the Thames, which from all the way up here, looks good enough to bathe in. If I can get through the next few hours without a dark cloud of misery creeping in, I’ll have won.

Margot is sitting in the corner, sipping a cocktail. She's wearing an icing-sugar-white dress which brings out her natural tan.

I weave between tables, making my way across the roof to her, telling myself to smile, to be positive, and not to focus on the very real possibility I have tossed away a career and moved back to my hometown for nothing. When she sees me, she gives me her movie-star smile, and I feel a rush of love for her. Margot pulls me into a hug; I breathe her in – English pears and freesia, her favourite scent from Jo Malone.

'I ordered you a drink,' she says as I slide into my seat.

'Thanks.'

'I almost had to cancel. I'm dealing with the bitchiest bridezilla. She has zero respect for my office hours and just calls me in the middle of the night with stupid questions about imported silk. I've seriously considered slipping Xanax into her tea. She wanted me to drop *everything* and drive down to Newquay tonight to look at some candlesticks.'

'I bet her fiancé's happy he put a ring on it.'

Margot laughs. Even though she complains, she loves her job; she's always wanted to be a wedding planner. Her mother told me when Margot was little, she used to sit and watch her parents' wedding video over and over. Just like a Disney film. 'How was your meeting? I'm dying to know!'

I absolutely do *not* want to talk about the car crash meeting I just came from. 'We'll get to that in a minute.' I give her a huge grin so she doesn't zero in on my misery like a scab and pick at it. 'First, I have to tell you about my stalker.'

The distraction goes down as smoothly as melted chocolate, as all thoughts of my book immediately disappear as Margot tries to grapple with what I've said. 'What?'

'It's this guy who lurks outside the library late at night or sits in the park watching me run laps in the morning.'

Her expression is a mixture of horror and delight. 'Seriously?'

'He comes into the coffee shop at least four times a week. He's so still it's eerie and he has these black, round-rimmed glasses that make me think of serial killers.' I lean forward; I am spinning with the thrill of telling a story; it's the same rush I get when I sit down at my laptop to write, and though this tale is true, it *feels* like it happened to someone else. 'He always wears

dark clothes and combat boots and when he's near, I *feel* him, you know? He has this stare, like he wants something from me.'

'Elodie ...'

'The other night, he followed me home.'

She pales. 'He knows where you live? He's been to your house?'

My delight at having derailed the previous conversation starts seeping away at the concern that thickens her voice.

'Elodie, have you called the police?'

And just like that, the thrill is whipped from beneath my feet. I expected her to laugh it off, tell me this guy was odd, but it was nothing to dwell on; instead, she's reacting with the same worry as Jack.

'I mean, calling the police seems dramatic. He hasn't actually hurt me, has he? He hasn't even tried to talk to me.'

'You still need to call them.'

I roll my eyes like it's no big deal. 'He probably just has a crush.'

'Crushes slip love letters in your bag or buy you a coffee – they don't follow you home. That isn't normal.'

'Love letters in your bag?' I try to lighten the mood. 'I didn't realise we'd fallen through a crack in time and landed in the 1930s.'

'I'm worried.'

'I'm not,' I quickly lie because Margot's reaction has brought all my fears rushing up to the surface, like dirt dredged up from the bottom of a pond.

'You live alone.'

'Thanks?'

She sighs impatiently. 'I mean, you're vulnerable because you live by yourself. What if he breaks in?'

I sip my drink, playing for time. This is a thought that keeps me up at night, wide-eyed and jumping at every little noise in the house; pipes creak overhead and it's him scuttling around the attic; the window rattles in its frame and it's him trying to shake it open; the fridge drones and it's him humming as he climbs the stairs. 'That's ridiculous. Besides, I'm not alone. Jack comes over most nights.'

'Does he know about the stalker?'

I nod. 'He basically let me move in for a while after I was followed home. He wanted me to stay longer but I really don't think I'm in danger.'

This seems to ease her worry. 'Jack will take care of you.'

'He always does.'

'Jack,' she says, rolling his name around on her tongue like a sugared cherry. 'And how is Jack?'

I smile, relieved we've moved on. 'Fine.'

'I *still* can't believe you two have never done it.'

'I've told you before, he's like a brother and even if he wasn't, he doesn't do relationships. I don't want to be another notch on his bedpost.' Not wanting to encourage her, I've never admitted that as a teenager I was completely in love with him, but after one kiss which ended horribly, I was forced to adopt a different kind of love. 'I don't want sex to ruin our friendship.'

'If sex ruins a situation, you're doing it wrong.'

I laugh.

'I just think you need more time,' she offers, referring to Noah.

Desperate not to talk about him and sink into a misery hole, I look away. She takes the hint.

'Anyway,' she says, brightening, 'if you don't want Jack, can I play with him?'

'Absolutely not.'

She smiles. 'Fine, keep him. You've ruined him for the rest of us anyway.'

'Aren't you monogamous now?'

Her dark eyes glitter. 'Monogamous, not dead.'

The waiter comes over and we order another round of drinks. Margot reads through the menu, trying to decide. She looks happy. Like there's a light beneath her skin, giving her an ethereal glow. I'm about to ask what her new skincare regime is but then I remember the answer is probably just: 'I'm in love and living with my boyfriend and having tons of hot, sweaty orgasms.' And no matter how much money is in your account, you can't buy that and rub it on your face. Not even from Space NK.

'How's Gabriel?' I ask.

Her smile is wide, the way it always is when he's mentioned. 'He's back from Paris tonight. I've missed him. I've missed him so much.'

I smile back, happy she's happy. February last year, with the champagne gold of the winter sun spiralling in through the high arched windows of her apartment, she said, 'Elodie, I've fallen for him. I think I'm in love.' She stressed the word like it was woven by magic, but I'd heard it a thousand times before; Margot changed her lovers as often as she changed her underwear. Give it a few more weeks and she'd be over him and under someone else.

That was almost sixteen months ago.

'Sure you don't want to exchange him for Jack?' I tease.

'We'll see.'

The waiter returns with our drinks order. When he's gone, she says, 'I actually have some news.'

I'm at the age now where this statement usually means one of two things. I glance down at her left hand but there's no shiny engagement ring there. Then my eyes flicker to her stomach and I wonder if she's pregnant.

'I've got a book deal!'

## Chapter Four

### 26 Days Before

#### **Elodie Fray**

I blink. What the *actual* fuck? I stare at Margot, trying to work out if this is a joke. Or a nightmare. Around us, conversations rise and fall, a couple nearby clink their glasses and a woman on the table next to us is laughing, squealing like a pig. ‘But you’re a wedding planner.’

Margot laughs. ‘Astute.’ Her smile is wide and bright and brilliant. ‘Aren’t you supposed to congratulate me?’

It takes me a beat. ‘Yes!’ I say. ‘Oh my god, of course. Congratulations!’ And even though I’m still confused and shocked and feeling like I just stepped off a merry-go-round, I leap up and hug her, banging my knees against the table. Margot calls the waiter over and orders a bottle of champagne to celebrate and I can’t believe it. I can’t. I just *can’t*. ‘I didn’t know you were writing a book,’ I manage, trying not to make it sound like the accusation it is. ‘How did this happen?’

‘Well, it’s not really *my* book, it’s my mother’s. I don’t know if her publicist contacted the publishers or if it was the other way around, but, basically, Mother’s been commissioned to write about her life, her international career as the first Filipino model to walk for Chanel and how she paved the way for other Filipino models just like her.’ She takes a breath. ‘I wanted to tell you the second we got the offer but thought I should wait until we signed the contracts this morning. The publishers want to release the book next year, in time for the thirtieth anniversary of Mother’s Chanel runway.’

She’s still talking but I can’t hear her over the sound of blood pounding in my ears. I smile. I smile so widely I imagine the skin at the corners of my mouth tearing like wet tissue paper, but I can’t stop because I’m her friend and it’s my job to be happy for her. ‘But how do you fit in?’

The waiter returns with the champagne and pours us two glasses. Margot raises hers. 'Shall we?'

And even though I'm still not sure what's going on, we clink glasses and exclaim 'Cheers!' but my impatience is growing. 'So how do you come into all this?' I ask again, casually, like I'm enquiring after the weather and not at all like I want to scream, 'ARE YOU FUCKING SERIOUS? HOW. THE. ACTUAL. *FUCK?*'

'Well ...' She tucks a strand of inky hair behind her ear and sits up a little straighter. 'My bits are about what it was like growing up with an international model for a mother and why I left modelling to go to university. At first, I was like, no way, I can't write a book, you know? But then I read Mother's chapters and they're just so good. I actually got goosebumps reading about her being robbed at gunpoint in Berlin, even though I've heard the story a thousand times. You know, the police never did recover all the stolen jewellery. It's weird to think someone could be walking around out there wearing my mother's original engagement ring.'

No wonder she's glowing; it's not orgasms, it's success. It's a book deal. It's everything I've ever wanted.

'Isn't this exciting?' she squeals.

I nod. Why do I feel like she's stolen something from me? Why can't I just be happy for her without the dizzying jealousy? Why do I have the overwhelming urge to push my chair back and scream until my throat is raw?

'What changed your mind about co-writing the book?' I laugh, hoping it doesn't sound as bitter as I feel.

She pours us both a second glass and orders a round of martinis from a passing waitress. 'Harriers said they'll give me an aid, you know, like a ghostwriter.'

Colour drains from my face. 'Harriers?' I whisper, too stunned to create any real volume. Harriers, who sent gushing emails about my manuscript, who led me on for months only to crush me underfoot.

'It's incredible,' she says. 'They're huge, right?'

'The hugest.'

'Apparently, stories based on true events are the *in* thing.'

The waitress returns, placing our martinis on the table. ‘Yeah, I know – Lara said.’

‘Oh god, yes! You didn’t tell me how your meeting went.’ She leans forward, eager. ‘So?’

I stare down at my martini; lemon peel floats in the glass like a yellow scab. I don’t know if I can bring myself to tell her the truth after hearing she’s just been handed something I’ve worked for, which feels so far out of my reach it may as well be on the fucking moon.

I take a sip of my martini and the yellow scab brushes against my lips. ‘It went fantastically,’ I hear myself lie. But then, a pretty lie is always better than an ugly truth.

‘You got a deal?’ Her voice is breathy with excitement.

I force a smile. ‘Well ...’

Margot squeals so loudly, the couple next to us jump and the woman shoots us a dirty look. ‘Ohmygod, ohmygod, ohmygod. This is perfect. *Perfect!* We can have a joint party to celebrate. Don’t worry, I’ll plan everything. To be honest, I’ve been planning your book party ever since you told me you were writing one. I even found the perfect present.’ She is beaming at me, a smile filled with so much warmth it’s like sunlight, but I’ve never felt so cold. ‘*Why* didn’t you say so earlier?’

I swallow. And breathe. And swallow again. The stab of regret and guilt is instant. Margot is genuinely ecstatic for me and my non-existent success. I don’t deserve her. ‘We haven’t signed contracts,’ I hedge. ‘It can all fall through until the contract is signed.’ This is what I’ll tell her when I’m feeling stronger. I’ll just say there is no book deal because Harriers pulled out. Yes, that’s what I’ll tell her because I’m already the biggest asshole I know, and lying to get out of another lie has to be better than humiliating myself with the truth. Until then, I’ll find a way to be happy for Margot. Even if it’s the last thing I do.

## Chapter Five

### 25 Days Before

#### **Elodie Fray**

Champagne hangovers are the worst. I wake up on Tuesday morning with a pneumatic drill in my head and sawdust in my mouth. Sunlight streams through the window in a blinding assault. Seefer leaps onto my bed, making me jump. I don't remember letting her in last night. My landlord is dead set against pets but, last year, as I teetered to my front door, juggling shopping bags full of Christmas gifts, a little tortoiseshell cat started figure-of-eighting around my feet. She was so tiny, and it was raining so hard, I brought her inside and fed her ham from a packet in the fridge. Pretty sure she was a stray, I gave her a name and started adding a few cans of cat food to my weekly shop. I worry my landlord might make a surprise visit and kick me out for breach of contract but still, I can't *not* let her in when she comes to my door.

Eyes closed, I curl into a ball on my side; everything aches, like I fell down a flight of stairs. Maybe I did. I reach for the memory of arriving home but there's nothing except a black hole.

Seefer bumps my hand so I stroke her, running my palm over the little rust-coloured heart shape on her flank which I love, and her purring quiets my mind. She meows, wanting food. I sit up. And frown. The dress I wore last night is neatly folded on my stool, and my heels are carefully lined up by the door. Drunk me would never have achieved that. Drunk me staggers into her room, kicks off her heels and passes out face down on the bed. It's only when I see the water and pills on the side with little Post-it notes reading 'Drink Me' and 'Swallow Me' that I realise who's behind this. Just on cue, I hear a key in my front door.

A few seconds later, Jack strides into the bedroom carrying a brown paper bag and says, 'Welcome back to the living.'

‘If this is what living feels like, I’d rather be dead.’ I flop back down onto my pillow. ‘Why do the most terrible hangovers happen on the sunniest days?’

‘How’re you feeling?’

‘Peachy.’

Jack raises one disbelieving brow. ‘Really?’

‘Well ... I feel like a peach. You know, one that’s been flung off the top of a fifty-storey building and splattered on the hot tarmac in a mess of insides and fluids.’

He nods solemnly and the bed dips as he sits down on the end of it. ‘And that peach – are most of its fluids gin?’

‘Nope. Tequila and champagne.’

He winces. ‘That’ll do it.’ He reaches into the paper bag. ‘Here,’ he says, handing me a croissant wrapped in a napkin.

Even though I’m starving, the thought of eating sends another violent surf of nausea through me. I put it down beside me on the bed. ‘Later. Thanks though – you didn’t have to get breakfast.’

‘What happened last night? You weren’t making a lick of sense.’ There’s the slightest American twang when he speaks, left over from the years he spent in New York as a child. I love the American accent, it makes me feel as though everything is going to turn out happy, like in the movies; the guy gets the girl, the villain is defeated, and she was always a hooker with a heart of gold. ‘When I picked you up from the station, you were rambling about Margot’s book?’

Oh god.

Last night ricochets back and I taste the lie on my tongue. *Why* did I have to let Margot think I have an offer too? The throbbing in my skull intensifies. ‘Yeah,’ I say without looking at him. ‘Yeah, Margot has a book deal.’

‘I thought she was a wedding planner ...’

‘She is ... but you know, her mum’s a famous model – retired now – and, well, Harriers has commissioned Reyna to write about her life. Margot’s contributing, writing her own chapters.’ I’m surprised by how level-headed

and calm I sound, like I'm simply recounting how many drinks we ordered at the bar.

'How did *your* meeting go?' he asks. 'Did Harriers make an offer?'

The grief is instant.

'No,' I say – I can't lie to Jack too. 'No. They didn't.'

He is silent. I wait, but he doesn't speak, so I glance up and see the anger in the tenseness of his jaw, the flash of his eyes. 'They're idiots.'

'Except they're not. They're professionals. They know the difference between good books and bad ones.'

'It is good. Why don't they want it?'

'Romances aren't selling right now. Stories based on real life events are. They want something grittier.'

'Okay,' he says slowly. 'Write that.'

'Sure, I can write about how I dropped a career in marketing to pursue something I'm clearly not cut out for.' My laughter is mirthless. 'Everyone likes a tragedy, right?'

He gives me a look. 'This one-woman woe-is-me gig is going to get old. Fast. You're better than this, Fray. You're talented and ambitious and—'

'Full of woe.' I hold his stare. 'I'm twenty-eight, I turn twenty-nine in less than two months, I don't have a house or a husband or a career—'

'That's your mother talking.'

'Well, maybe she's right. Maybe I *have* made a huge mistake.' Jack wants me to be happy, but I'm hungover, and I don't have the energy to fake it. 'The longer I go without a book deal, the harder it is to justify putting my career on hold. What will Mum say when she finds out the dream I've been chasing has been handed to Margot like it's a bag of pick 'n' mix?' My parents want me to strive for more. Like Ada and all she has. Like Ruby. Like all their friends' children. I'm in a race I didn't want to enter. Along the track, others are snatching things up from the side: careers, marriage, children, houses, book deals. But anything I manage to grasp slips from my fingers a few strides later. Now, I'm so far behind everyone else, I'm terrified I'll never catch up. 'Maybe I should just go back to marketing.'

'Will that make *you* happy?' he asks. 'Or would you be giving up writing and going back to marketing to make *other people* happy?'

‘I don’t know.’

‘Can you do both – can you write and work in marketing?’

‘Not really. My career was all-consuming. There just aren’t enough hours in the day. Besides, that job was slowly killing me.’ I glance at the green vase on my chest of drawers. ‘I don’t want to die having never done something I love. And being an author is one of the very few careers where you’re essentially leaving a part of yourself behind even after you’ve gone.’

‘Then you need to pick. Life is too—’

‘Short,’ I finish for him. ‘Yeah, I know, life is too short to be unhappy.’

He smiles. ‘Actually, I was going to say life is too *long* to be unhappy.’

‘Too long?’

‘Yeah, if someone told me I had to be unhappy for a year and then it would all be over, I could handle that. But if someone told me I had to be unhappy for the next fifty years, I’d have to make a change.’

‘Only you would see it that way.’ Sometimes I think his mind operates on a different plane to the rest of us mere mortals.

‘Am I wrong?’

I smile. ‘No.’

‘Okay, so choose to do what makes *you* happy. Not anyone else.’

‘I love writing but the rejections are so soul-crushing. You don’t get it. You’ve never wanted something so much it’s a physical need.’

For a beat, he doesn’t answer. But he leans into me, lowering his head so I’m caught in the blue of his eyes. ‘Haven’t I?’

And with those words, and the intensity in which his gaze is fixed unwaveringly on me, the air crackles. I feel myself tilting my head up, my mouth only a breath from his. Then Seefer meows loudly and jumps from the bed. I turn away from Jack to watch her pad towards the door. She isn’t keen on Jack and doesn’t stick around long when he’s here.

When I lift my gaze to his, that unnameable electricity is dispelled. The moment, whatever it was, is gone.

‘Anyway,’ I say, trying to keep my voice light. ‘You have everything you want. You wanted to own your own house before you were thirty, and you did. You wanted to be an architect, and now you are. You want sex, you stroll into a bar.’

He raises an eyebrow. 'Thinking about me having sex, Fray?'

I blush like a schoolgirl. 'No. Don't be an idiot. I mean, if you let a girl stay long enough to have a coffee in the morning, you might have something meaningful.'

'If that's what I wanted, yeah, probably.' He shrugs, then takes a second croissant from the paper bag. 'You're taking these rejections so personally – it's a rejection of the idea, not of your writing. Not of you.'

'But it *feels* like a rejection of me.'

'Why?'

'Because a manuscript is a piece of you. It's every experience you've ever had that makes your voice yours.'

'You need to think about *why* you're doing it. About *why* you started writing in the first place. If it still means something to you then you shouldn't give up yet. If it doesn't then you have your answer.'

And even though it isn't a question, he waits patiently for me to offer an answer. 'But it's stupid.'

'It won't be. Come on, Elodie.' He nudges my leg with his elbow. 'Why do you write?'

I think of Noah and glance at the vase again. Since he died, the only thing that's made me feel even a flicker of happiness is writing, and *maybe* if an editor takes my manuscript and turns it into a book with binding and pages and that paperback smell, my happiness will no longer be a flicker from one of those cheap flimsy lighters, but a roaring bonfire instead. Chasing this dream makes me feel close to Noah. But it isn't wise to admit this to Jack.

'My dad,' I say. 'I mean, he's not the easiest guy to talk to. He doesn't say much. But he used to laugh a lot with Ada. They were both into trains. He used to take her to steam fairs and showcases.'

'Trains? Ada was into trains?'

I nod. 'Oh yeah. I tried to be interested too but I think he knew it wasn't genuine. Then, in primary school, I won my first writing competition. It was a story about a cherry tree that devoured small children. I told my parents, but they didn't seem that interested so I just left it on the dining table. But when I came down in the morning, the margin of my story was littered with handwritten notes.'

‘Your dad?’

‘Yeah. There was something really special about him reading what I’d written. He’d taken out his dusty work pen and jotted down praise and musings, and that was it, I’d found something for us to bond over, to *connect* – something that was just ours. Every week after that, I’d write a story, leave it on the dining table and, as if by magic, the next morning Dad had written all over it.’

I see a flash of something in his eyes, but he looks away quickly and I worry I’ve upset him. Fathers are a touchy subject. Despite Kathryn trying to nurture a good relationship between Jack and Jeffrey, organising for the two of them to spend quality time together at Wisteria every Easter, their relationship remained hostile right up until the day he killed himself. Jeffrey often hit Jack, and Jack acted out in return. All for his father’s attention. Hoping it wouldn’t lead to the violent end it always did, but to a conversation, a connection. Jack was eighteen when we found Jeffrey’s body, and although it was an awful time, Jack pulled himself together, turned over a new leaf. It’s not easy to admit, but with his dad gone, Jack was a better person.

Every summer since I was six, our families spent two weeks in Cornwall at Wisteria Cottage, a five-bedroom sandstone home with a wraparound porch and a view of the sea on two sides, plumes of lilac wisteria weaving up its walls. We usually piled into two cars and drove across in convoy. That year though, Kathryn and Jack’s older brother, Charlie, went across early, stopping in Taunton for a couple of nights to visit Kathryn’s sister. Jeffrey and Jack were going to travel up with us but, the day before we were due to leave, my parents received an email from Jeffrey explaining he couldn’t make it to Wisteria due to work commitments, and could we please take Jack with us. We didn’t know then it was a part of Jeffrey’s plan, that he kept a gun in his study, that he was preparing to take his own life as soon as we drove away.

Two weeks later, it was Jack and I who found him. Sometimes I swear I can still smell Jeffrey Westwood; like that thick, hot stench of rotting flesh that clung to the back of my throat for months after we buried him has never really left. It was the height of summer and thanks to the heat, he decomposed quickly. So quickly, it was almost impossible for forensics to

determine how long he'd been dead. The cause of death wasn't a mystery though; there was a letter on his computer and a gun in his hand. It didn't take a genius. I'm shocked by the way he chose to do it. It seems so loud, so *violent*. All blood and brains and blistering heat. I don't know what exactly was in his suicide note, but Jack hinted that his father had a history of mental illness. That the sudden heart attack which killed Jeffrey's older brother just months before Jeffrey's suicide may have played a part in it.

'You can't stop writing, Elodie. I won't let you,' says Jack. 'Look, I need to send some emails. I'm going to go downstairs and work. You stay up here and write some new pitches.'

'I'm supposed to be at Mugs in an hour ...' I trail off, picturing an afternoon spent in a hot, sweaty café, and I cannot breathe for the claustrophobia of it.

'Call in sick.'

I hesitate because I've never pulled a sick day.

'You need to write,' he tells me, then gestures to the pastry. 'Eat that.' He hands me the water. 'Drink this.' He scoops the pills from the bedside table and folds them into my palm. 'And swallow these.'

I pop the pills into my mouth and salute him. 'Yes, sir.'

He turns to go, but pauses at the door and says, 'We'll get you published. I promise.'

'Even if it kills you?'

He smiles. 'Even if it kills us both.'

My trainers slap against the pavement as I jog across the road towards the park. I'm running to distract myself because one hour and twenty-eight minutes ago, I sent three *grittier* pitches to Lara for approval from Harriers. Instead of repeatedly refreshing and deliriously hoping, I decided to run.

I've come to the park opposite my house. My preferred route. It's flatter than other areas of town, prettier too. There are benches nestled among wildflowers, a blur of red and purple and buttercup yellow as I pass. On the inside is an expanse of grass where people throw balls for bounding dogs, and couples share picnics on sunny afternoons.

Then I see us, Noah and I sitting on a duck egg blue blanket after dark, dozens of flickering tealights all around. We were visiting my parents for

the weekend. In the middle of the night, he woke and led me from my childhood bedroom and out into the night. I felt giddy, like a teenager high on rebellion as we snuck into the park.

‘A midnight picnic,’ he said. ‘Just the two of us.’

‘This is like a scene from a film,’ I whispered.

‘Not a film. A book. *Your* book.’

I stared at him in the half-light. ‘You read it?’

‘It’s brilliant. Don’t you dare give up trying to get that book published.’

There are some moments in life you want to keep, to dip into over and over. This was one of them. I can still feel his strong hands resting in the violin curve of my waist and the reassuring weight of his chin on my shoulder as we talked and talked and talked.

A wave of longing breaks over me; I push the memory away and start marking off landmarks as I pass them. It takes me a few minutes to find my rhythm again but when I do, it’s glorious.

Right foot forward.

Breathe in.

Left foot forward.

Breathe out.

When I spot the gazebo, I remember the night sky cracking open and rain pouring out in a blinding torrent. We abandoned our picnic and ran for cover, laughing as icy water streamed down our jackets. On the decking, we huddled together, soaked and shivering. Noah’s breath was hot against my neck as he pulled me closer.

I smile now, remembering him making a heroic dash across the sodden grass to save my phone which was lying in a puddle on the blanket.

The sun is blinding as I emerge from the shadow of the trees, the heat from it pressing down on me like a hand. I’m on my third lap and starting to slow, the hangover catching up with me. I turn my music up and keep going, breathing through the stitch forming in my side.

I’m still lost in the memory of that night with Noah, and how we had sex on the gazebo ledge, the sweet hum of the moon above our heads and the taste of chocolate strawberries on our lips.

Then I'm ripped away as I swing around a corner and collide with someone.

'Sorry,' I say, yanking my headphones out.

I look up.

My blood runs cold.

It's him. The man with the serial-killer glasses.

My heart leaps about like a rabbit caught in a snare.

Frozen, I wait for him to speak or lunge for me. He does neither. He stares.

'Sorry,' I say again, taking a cautious step back.

Then I turn and run.

The jog home is less of a jog and more of a sprint. I check over my shoulder a thousand times, but he doesn't follow. Did I see him on my way to the park? Was he standing outside my house, waiting for me to leave? Or maybe I'm seeing this guy around more because I'm constantly on the lookout. I should confront him, ask if he's tailing me. Even as I think it, I know I won't do it.

By the time I reach my front door, I am sweating.

I stop.

And stare.

My fear gives way to confusion; on my step is the biggest bouquet of flowers I have ever seen. A pastel rainbow adorned with a cream sash that reads, 'Congratulations on your book deal, El!' in looped rose gold script.

I rush forward and scoop them up before anyone can see them. They're heavier than they look. I fumble with my key and stagger inside on legs made of marshmallow. Seefer dashes inside, almost tripping me up. I set the flowers down on my kitchen counter and pluck the thick cream card from between the stems of two roses even though I already know who they're from.

'So proud of you, Elodie. Love you always, Margot XOXO'

I'm breathing hard, not just from the sprint back here, but from the guilt. I don't deserve her. This is all my fault. I should *never* have let Margot think I have a book deal.

I get a bowl from the cupboard and pour a generous helping of stinky cat food into it for Seefer. Then I log on to my laptop and order Margot an even bigger bouquet, throwing in a bottle of champagne and chocolates too. Maybe I should care more that it drains what little savings I had left, but, of the two of us, Margot's the one who deserves gifts and praise.

Later, I rip the sash from my own bouquet and throw it into the bin along with the card.

## Chapter Six

### 24 Days Before

#### **Elodie Fray**

I'm sitting in Jack's living room on the dreamiest forest green sofa that I helped pick out last year. The rest of the furniture is a little industrial, all distressed oak and steel. His house is immaculate. Everything is pressed and folded and polished and so clean, it's as though he's been around the entire place with a toothbrush and a bottle of Dettol. Maybe he has; he always carries hand sanitiser and one of those little travel toothbrush sets. As well as being a glittering beacon of cleanliness, his house is also a piece of architectural art, with floor-to-ceiling windows and a balcony leading off the main bedroom. Jack designed it himself and used the inheritance from his father's passing to build it.

'Sure you don't want wine?' Jack calls from the kitchen.

'No thanks, elderflower's great.'

Today, I am together Elodie. I am out of my pyjamas and in a blue summer dress. I'm wearing light-reflecting undereye concealer and a petal pink lip tint. I am the-world-is-still-my-oyster Elodie. The Elodie who walked into this house is bright-eyed and hopeful. She is drinking only soft drinks so she doesn't spend her night crying and vomiting. And yesterday, after her run, she got an email from her agent telling her Harriers was reading the new, grittier pitches she'd sent. Everything is possible and as long as she keeps saying this to herself, she can get out of bed each day.

The smell of garlic, tomato and chopped basil makes my mouth water. 'Want a hand?'

He pops his head around the archway between the kitchen and living room. 'If I need something burning, I'll give you a shout.'

‘One time. I burned noodles *one* time. How was I supposed to know you had to add water?’

He gives me a look. ‘The packet, Fray. You read the damn packet.’

We eat homemade pizza while I flick through our true-crime documentary options on Netflix. ‘We’ve seen most of these – Jaycee Lee Dugard, Elizabeth Smart, Natascha Kampusch ...’

‘Kampusch? Who’s that?’ asks Jack. ‘I haven’t seen that one.’

‘She’s the Austrian girl who went missing when she was ten and escaped eight years later. She was kept in a tiny cellar by some creepy middle-aged loner with a monobrow and OCD. Wolfgang ... something.’

‘Wolfgang?’ He scoffs. ‘Are you making this up?’

‘It’s an Austrian name, I think.’

‘How’d she escape?’

‘He used her as a slave, cooking and cleaning for him. One day she was Hoovering his car, and he got a call. He moved away from her to answer it because of the vacuum noise and when his back was turned, she ran.’

‘Jesus.’

‘I know. It’s awful.’

‘Why did he let her outside? I wouldn’t have let her out,’ says Jack.

‘I suppose he grew to trust her not to run. Eight years is a long time. Some people think she has Stockholm syndrome because she cried when he killed himself. But she doesn’t think she has it. She wrote a book about it – it was *huge*. I think it’s a film too.’

Jack is googling her. He scrolls through his phone, clicking on link after link. ‘Jaycee Lee Dugard, Elizabeth Smart and Natascha Kampusch,’ he repeats. ‘Know what they all have in common?’

‘Horrific kidnapping stories?’

‘Pretty, blonde and book deals. Every single one of them.’

I shrug. ‘Guess so.’

‘Film deals too.’ He looks up. ‘This could be you.’

‘What?’

‘Yeah, your ticket to a book deal – get kidnapped, escape and write about it. Then you won’t just have Harriers falling at your feet. Didn’t your agent say true crime was selling right now? Looks like it always does.’

I stare at him, trying to figure out if this is a joke but his face gives nothing away. He's right though. They do all have books. I've read them. Every single one. They're unputdownable. A guaranteed bestseller. 'You can't be serious ...'

Jack is watching me closely; that intensity is back in his gaze and my heart races in response. I feel the way I do right before a thunderstorm, caught in the crackling, singing tension that fills the air as you wait for something to happen, something electric and terrifying. Then he laughs and just like that, the perfect, terrifying thunderstorm moment passes. Jack takes a piece of garlic bread from the plate. 'Want some?'

I shake my head, my heart still beating too fast.

'You've lost weight,' he comments.

'Only a little.' I pout, then whine, 'Feed me. I'm poor.' Jack is unmoved by my attempt at cuteness. I shrug. 'I've been stressed. I don't know how anyone can eat when they're stressed.' That, and I'm living off a student diet of beans and pasta again because it's cheap. How is it I graduated seven years ago and I'm no better off?

'Of course you're stressed – some weirdo is following you around everywhere. You should stay here tonight. You can stay as long as you need. Move in if you have to.'

His sincerity and generosity are so overwhelming, I look away. The truth is, I can't move into his spare room, with only bricks between us, and listen to him with a different woman every weekend. Besides, moving in with Jack would mean explaining to my parents and my perfect sister that I have failed and needed rescuing. 'Thanks, Jack, but can we please not talk about my stalker?'

'Stalker,' he repeats, and I wince, wishing I'd marshalled my words. Labelling that man a 'stalker' has put Jack on high alert. He's protective, which makes me feel loved and special, but it comes with a side of guilt because I don't like that he gets riled up on my behalf. I don't like that I am forever dragging him into the murky waters of my life. 'If I see him, I'll kill him.' My pulse kicks because, just for a second, I see a flash of something dangerous in Jack's eyes. Then he grins and it's gone. 'Sure you don't want that wine?'

## Chapter Seven

### 23 Days Before

#### **Elodie Fray**

‘What do you mean, I’m fired?’ I am standing behind the Mugs counter staring at a smug-faced Richard.

‘*I mean* you called in sick two days ago and a couple of hours later, Hannah saw you jogging merrily around Victoria Park.’

My attention flickers in her direction. She’s currently thrusting change at a customer and dramatically wiping her forehead with the back of her hand to make sure we know what an overworked little bee she is.

‘In the year I’ve worked here, I’ve never had a sick day. Not one. I’ve never missed a shift. I just needed the afternoon off; I was feeling hideous in the morning and went for a run when I was feeling better.’ Which is all true, but Richard doesn’t care; he turns his back on me, pouring himself an espresso. ‘I have rent to pay,’ I say, trying to appeal to his better side which might’ve worked ... if he had one.

‘Not my problem.’

‘Hannah’s had a day off pretty much every other week since she started.’ This is a childish move, but I make it anyway.

Richard holds up his hand as though he’s stopping traffic, then glances at the customer who’s pretending to read the menu above the counter but is obviously listening to our spat. Richard turns and motions for me to follow him. As I pass Hannah, she mutters ‘bitch’ under her breath.

Richard’s office is a small kingdom with an Argos desk and a beaten-up filing cabinet I don’t think he even has the key to. Still, he sits back in his blue polyester spin chair like it’s a gilded throne. I take a seat, pauper’s side, on the folding metal chair opposite. I know I should look cowed, repentant, should flutter my lashes like Hannah does, win him round with

the suggestion I might let him fuck me if I can just keep my job. But I can't. It's not even that he has a receding hairline or that he wears check shirts in pastels or that his too-long toenails stab through the woollen socks he insists on pairing with sliders. It's that he isn't a nice man; he's rude to customers he believes don't have much money, he takes fistfuls of change from the tip jar, and I've caught him staring down my top when he thinks I'm not looking.

He lounges in his chair now, hands clasped behind his head, so I get a perfect view of his sweat-stained pits. 'Elodie, I'm afraid my hands are tied.' He shrugs in a I-don't-make-the-rules-I-just-think-them-up-and-write-them-down way that sets my teeth on edge.

'But you're my manager.' If I reason with him, maybe he'll show willing. 'Look, I have rent to pay. I live alone. This job is my only source of income right now. I really wasn't well the morning I called in sick. I was vomiting and I had a headache.' Though this is all true, I don't tell him it was self-induced. 'I *need* this job.' As I say it out loud, the weight of the situation presses down on my chest like a breeze-block because I *do* need this job. Rent is due and I rely on my wages from this place to pay it. What the hell will I do if I don't have a job?

He studies me.

'Richard, please,' I start because I'm not above begging. 'I'm serious. This is my income.'

The only thing I have going for me is my independence. If I can't pay my rent, I have nothing. I can't add 'homeless' to my list of failings.

'Maybe you should've thought about that before you called in sick.' His tone is all condescending middle-management. 'Now, if you want the money from today's shift, I suggest you leave my office and get to work.'

I do as he says because I need each precious penny from each pitiful minute I work here. Defeat hangs from my body like an ill-fitting dress. Strange, it should be snug now, I am so used to its company. For once, Hannah gives me a wide berth. I serve coffee and clean the machines and cut slices of carrot cake.

When Hannah goes on her break, I stuff a handful of biscotti into my apron pocket.

George looks up from his crossword as I approach. ‘Nine-letter word meaning risky or indecent.’

‘Starting letter?’

‘S.’

I think a moment, arranging and rearranging the letters in my mind until they take on a definite shape. ‘Salacious?’

George glances at the page, then nods. ‘Spot on, young lady. Spot on.’

As he takes his biro and fills in the spaces, I notice the network of individual veins running beneath his skin, like tiny inky rivers.

I slide one of the biscotti from my apron pocket and lay it beside his mug. George shakes his head. When he grins up at me, I think he was probably a bit of a heartthrob when he was young. ‘I really shouldn’t.’

‘Two can keep a secret.’

He unwraps it, snaps it in half and hands me a piece. I know I should go back to work, but I can’t make my feet move in the direction of the counter.

‘Elodie, are you alright?’ George’s words are gentle. Kind. I want to crawl into his lap and weep.

‘I’ll be fine,’ I lie.

‘You know,’ he says, ‘there’s always someone worse off, that’s what my father used to say.’

I look down at the biscotti in my hand because I hate that saying. How is knowing there’s someone worse off supposed to make you feel better? As though it’s socially acceptable to take a little bit of comfort in the knowledge that there’s someone out there suffering more than you are right now.

George clears his throat. ‘But my father was a drunk. Most of what he said came out on the back of a whisky.’ He waves a dismissive hand. ‘Terrible advisor, my father.’

I manage a wan smile.

‘You’re a very intelligent girl, Elodie. Brighter than that oik you work for.’ His eyes glitter mischievously, and he rests a cool hand on mine. ‘Whatever’s happened, I know you’ll come up with a creative solution.’

Since I’m not going to be around anymore, I slip the handful of biscotti into his satchel when he isn’t looking. A parting gift.

On the way home, anxiety churning in my stomach, I call Arabella's office. After I left ACH, she reached out on more than one occasion to persuade me to come back. Maybe I could pick up some part-time work from her for a while.

I'm sick with nerves as I wait for the receptionist to put me through. I'm just cutting across the children's park through a group of shrieking kids when Arabella's familiar, coppery voice glitters down the line. 'Elodie, darling, this is a surprise. How are you?'

I can't tell her the tragedy my life has become; I don't want to guilt her into helping me. 'Fine,' I say, forcing myself to sound casual and light. 'How's ACH?'

'Busy, busy, you know, late nights, early mornings. I don't even remember what my husband looks like.' She laughs.

'Great,' I say, 'that's great.' I take a breath. My heart slams against my ribs. I'm nervous and desperate and lightheaded. 'So, I've had a think and I'd love some freelance work. I mean, if there is anything, I'd really like to get stuck in—'

'Elodie, darling,' she trills, cutting me off kindly. 'I'm afraid we don't have any freelance work. All our staff are inhouse now.'

My heart slides to my ankles. 'Okay,' I say, 'maybe I could come back full-time but work from home?' Obviously, I won't be able to write as much as I do now unless I get up super early and write before sunrise like some authors do. It could work. For a while. Working every hour of the day until I figure out a permanent solution is, well, it's my only option, isn't it? 'I know you don't usually do that but I'm good at my job and I'll—'

'Elodie, listen, you weren't just good at your job, you were amazing at it but ... we simply don't have any openings right now. We're working with a skeleton staff and it's not in the budget to hire more people.' Remorse is thick in her voice. 'If I want this company to thrive, costs have to be kept low ...' She pauses. 'I wish you'd called sooner.'

'Oh,' I say, the word rolling out of my mouth, fat with disappointment. I swallow. 'If something comes up, will you ...'

'You'll be the first person I call but, Elodie, I don't want you to hold your breath on this one. Unless someone leaves, I can't hire anyone else. But I can give you a glowing reference.'

When she rings off, I don't go home right away. I do a loop and end up back on the high street where I began. I'll apply for more marketing positions but how long will it take to get hired? There aren't any jobs like that around here and I don't have any money to relocate.

Beneath my panic is anger at myself for repeatedly shunning Arabella's job offers. The crest of my despair is my parents' inevitable mortification; their daughter, the bumbling graduate who owes £28,000 in student loans, can't even hold down a coffee shop job.

I don't have a book deal.

I don't have a job.

I don't even have a career to go back to.

I'm going to lose everything.

My chest is tight, and tears are streaming down my cheeks. I come to a sudden halt, someone crashes into the back of me and swears. I think I could be having a panic attack. I stagger towards a bench and sit, waiting to feel better. It's a cloudless day, the kind of summer afternoon people spend in parks or gardens with Pimm's and music and laughter, but I am bone-tired and sick. I want storm clouds and thunder and the kind of rain that pours like water from a bucket. I have this childish longing to curl up on the sofa with my mum and cry my heart out, but I can't because she warned me not to leave marketing and I did it anyway.

A feeling creeps over me, settling into my bones like concrete: loneliness. I have never felt more alone in my life than I do in this moment.

What am I going to do now?

# Chapter Eight

## 16 Days Before

### **Elodie Fray**

My phone vibrates angrily in the darkness of my bedroom. I roll over and snatch it from the bedside table. It's Mum. Again. I decline the call; I am drained and hopeless, and worried she knows I'm unemployed.

Seefer is curled up beside me. It rained last night, and I couldn't leave her outside. Today marks one week since I lost my job and none of the Crosshaven restaurant or retail positions I applied to have invited me to interview, which makes no sense because I know how to serve drinks and work a damn till; so, I rang around this morning only to be told that I'm *overqualified*. I've also applied to a dozen admin jobs and marketing roles, but I haven't heard back from a single one.

My phone buzzes again. I'm about to turn it off when I see the caller ID. Ada never rings. We aren't exactly chatty, not anymore. There's a hot lance of terror across my stomach – what if something's happened to Dad?

Seefer meows loudly, as though urging me to answer.

I sit up and jab at the green button, adrenaline spiking my blood. 'Ada?'

'You know how to answer your phone then.' She is somewhere loud and echoey and I immediately picture a hospital corridor.

'Is Dad okay?'

'Of course he is. Why would you even ask that?'

I wilt with relief.

'Mum's been calling you all week,' she says accusingly. 'Have you broken all your fingers?'

'No,' I say, equally as snippy. 'I have not.'

'Good, so you can still operate a phone.'

I press my lips together to hold in the ‘fuck off’ which is on the tip of my tongue. Seefer lets out another loud meow and presses her head into my free hand, wanting some fuss.

‘Have you let that fleabag into your house again?’ she asks.

‘Seefer doesn’t have fleas.’

‘Seefer,’ she repeats, not bothering to hide her disapproval.

‘Yes. Like C for cat.’

She snorts.

‘What can I do for you, Ada?’

‘Dinner at my house, Saturday night.’

I mentally run through a list of important dates; I’m sure I haven’t missed a birthday or anniversary. ‘What’s the occasion?’

‘Does there need to be one?’ she huffs. ‘I don’t have time for this, I’m shopping.’

‘Well, I can’t this Saturday, I’m busy,’ I lie.

‘Doing?’

‘Does it matter?’

She doesn’t respond but, in her silence, I feel her irritation rise like bubbles in boiling water.

‘I mean, it’s Thursday. It’s only two days’ notice.’

‘Does it matter?’ she bats back.

‘Can we do this some other time?’

‘The whole family is coming *this* Saturday. If you’re not there, Mum and Dad are going to be extremely upset. They’re getting older, Elodie; if you don’t make the most of spending time together as a family now, you’ll regret it later.’

‘They’re barely in their sixties.’

‘Fine. But you can call to tell them you’re not coming. I don’t want to be the one to disappoint them.’

Typical Ada. She is so manipulative. When she was thirteen and desperate for a mobile phone, Dad refused and they had a huge row; Ada packed a bag and flounced out. She was missing for hours. Dad was about to call the police when he spotted her hiding up in the oak tree in the back garden. She’d sat up there watching everything unfold. Watching us look for her.

Watching Dad practically tear his hair out with worry. And when she climbed down, she walked right up to Dad and said if she'd had a phone they could've called to find out where she was. Then, while he was still digesting this, she kissed him on the cheek and went up to her room because she'd got what she wanted: a guaranteed mobile phone and proof that if she ever disappeared, she'd be missed.

Knowing she won't stop guilt-tripping me, I say, 'What time do I need to be there?'

'Six. And, Elodie?'

'Yes.'

'Wear something nice.'

## Chapter Nine

### 14 Days Before

**Elodie Fray**

*From: Lara@BeckworthandGoldAgents.com*

*To: Elodie.Fray@gmail.com*

*Subject: Harriers*

*Hi Elodie,*

*How are you? I hope you're enjoying this glorious weather!*

*Harriers have come back to us and it's bad news, I'm afraid. They've rejected all three of the new, grittier pitches. I've forwarded their email feedback separately but, in summary, as much as they love your writing, they still don't feel your ideas are quite right for their list. They did say the story about you finding the body of your best friend's father was closer to what they want but they felt it was better served as a subplot to a bigger piece.*

*A couple of times now, you've expressed how unsettled you are in your decision to leave your career in the hopes of getting a book deal. Maybe now is a good time to take a break from writing and dip back into marketing. Perhaps you could give Arabella (?) a call and see what she can do. I don't want to make promises I can't keep and, although I think you're a good enough writer to succeed, the current market just isn't on our side. Right now, I don't feel I can be the best champion for your work. If you do decide to step back from writing, I can keep you on our list for a year or so or we can terminate your contract. That way you'll be free to reach out to other representatives if that's what you feel is best. Have a think and let me know.*

*Kind regards,*

## Lara

I read and reread the email over and over, standing on the stone steps of Ada's house, my hands shaking so hard, I can barely keep hold of my phone. She sent the email yesterday; late Friday night and I've only just seen it. I imagine her firing it off at the last possible second, hoping if she gives me the weekend to digest it, I'll be easier to deal with on Monday. For a moment, the world tilts on its axis and I am free-falling. That was it. My last shred of hope. Gone.

And it's my fault. I placed all my hopes and dreams and happiness into this one glittering, almost-impossible achievement. I've spent over a year trying to break into that exclusive club of published authors. I see them on Twitter, talking about copy-edits, book birthdays, cover reveals – and my desire, my *want*, to be a part of it is a physical need. It's so tangible, I could reach inside myself, pull it out and hold it in my hand. An emerald green rock of envy. As I read Lara's email again, the future I've wanted since I was a little girl writing stories for my father, shrivels up, and the voice that whispers I'm not good enough, that this incredible achievement isn't for me, it's for others, for people more worthy, is now screaming so loudly, my head pounds.

I stare at the sage green door of my sister's beautiful house; I can't go inside. I cannot sit at a dining table with my family when I feel this wrecked. As I turn to leave, the door opens and Ada is standing there, looking equal parts perplexed and gorgeous with her furrowed brow and floral midi dress which probably costs the same as a week's rent.

'Why are you dithering out here?' she asks, exasperated. 'Everyone's waiting.'

'I ...' My words wither on my tongue and all I can do is blink and stand.

Patience snapping, Ada reaches forward, snatches my wrist and drags me inside. I'm too numb to resist so I stumble alongside her.

*They've rejected all three pitches. We can terminate your contract.*

Lara's email runs through my mind like an electric current around a circuit without an off switch, buzzing and sparking.

Ada leads me down her hallway.

*They've rejected all three pitches.*

She squeezes my hand and glances over her shoulder, excited.

*We can terminate your contract.*

She pushes open the door to the formal dining room.

I cannot believe they have rejected all three pitches.

‘CONGRATULATIONS!’

I jump, startled by the bright burst of noise. By the roomful of people. I blink and blink and blink. Trying, and failing, to make sense of the situation, of the sea of faces and their champagne flutes raised in celebration.

Mum and Dad are standing together, glasses held high. I scan the room; I see Ruby and Uncle Gregory and Ethan. I see friends from university – Katie, Olivia and Ivy. Jack’s mum Kathryn is standing with her eldest son Charlie and his husband Tobin. And in the back, I spot Jack. Everyone is staring at me with huge, jubilant grins. Everyone except Jack who is mouthing, ‘What the fuck?’ at me. I feel as though I’ve just staggered on stage in the middle of a play without a script to follow.

Ada squeezes my arm. ‘Surprise!’ I tear my gaze away from Jack and look at my sister. Her smile is white and wide and radiant. ‘You didn’t have a clue, did you?’

I shake my head dumbly. ‘What ...’ I lick my dry lips. ‘What’s going on?’

‘You didn’t think you could keep it from us, did you, love?’ says Mum, rushing forward and pulling me into a hug. ‘We are so proud, Elodie. So proud.’

When she lets go, my hands are clammy, and I can’t catch my breath. What the *fuck* is going on? I glance around the room. There are flowers and food and congratulatory balloons and bunting.

Then I see it.

I see it and my heart stops.

A white banner strung high above our heads, personalised with gold embroidered thread reading: ‘Congratulations on your book deal, Elodie!’

# Chapter Ten

## 14 Days Before

### **Elodie Fray**

For several seconds, I just stand there in silence. They descend on me; I am hugged and congratulated and handed a glass of something pale and bubbly which I down in one. I'm half expecting a cameraman and a TV host to spring from a cupboard and shout, 'Gotcha!' because it's the only possible explanation. Why does everyone think I have a book deal? I glance at Ada, wondering if this is some cruel elaborate joke, but her smile is honest and joyful; there isn't a speck of malice in it.

Jack has not come forward to congratulate me on my non-existent success. He is watching this entire charade with a bewildered expression that would be comical if it wasn't happening to me. There's music playing and Ethan is encouraging everyone to help themselves to the food.

Ada takes my hand and leads me towards the table. 'Your face!' she squeals, then turns to Dad. 'I think she's in shock.'

I smile weakly; that's all I can manage because my words are lost in a swirling tempest of confusion.

'So,' says Dad. He is wearing his best shirt. 'When were you going to tell us?'

I swallow. 'How did you know? Who ...?'

Mum is by my side, holding a plate loaded with savoury canapés and sweet macaroons. 'The other week, Dad went round to yours to fix that security light,' she says with guileless delight. 'And—'

'Took the wrong bloody bulb though, didn't I?' he interrupts.

Mum shoots him a look of annoyance before continuing, '*And* while he was there, a delivery man turned up with a *huge* bouquet of flowers.'

Oh god.

Oh *fuck*.

The bouquet from Margot. The one I found on my doorstep after my run, with its cream sash congratulating me on my book deal in looped rose gold script. I didn't even wonder if the flowers had been signed for, I just scooped them up and took them inside so no one would see.

'Dad took a lovely photo,' she says. 'I called you all week to talk about it, then Ada suggested throwing a little get-together.' She pops a macaroon into her mouth. 'We invited Margot, but it was a bit last minute and she has a wedding in Gloucester tomorrow.'

I'm nodding but I'm not breathing. I can't. All I can do is stare at these people who have come together. For me. I'm in a room with my sister and for the first time in years, *I* am the one people are paying attention to, *I* am the one people are praising and celebrating. But this victory rests on a shaky foundation of deceit. On one throwaway lie. One small mistake.

'You've done us proud,' says Dad. His smile is soft and crinkles his eyes at their corners.

The bright red shame of what I've done soaks into my dress and skin before settling in my bones. This is awful. *I'm* awful. I look down so I don't have to see their pride. I notice Mum's shoes. Her best heels. The ones in blue satin with the little bow detail, which she wore to my graduation, reserved only for extra special occasions. It's this detail, my mum in her best heels, that sends guilt ripping through my chest. I can't be here. I need to get out, I need—

There's a strong hand on my elbow and Jack leans forward, all charm and confidence. 'Meredith, you look lovely tonight. Great shoes. Do you think I can steal your daughter for just a minute?'

Then he whisks me away. I'm grateful. He tugs me into the little alcove which is intended as a reading nook with its bookshelves and armchair and overhanging gold lamp. Neither of us sits down though. Jack's eyes are searching my face. 'What the fuck, Elodie?'

I swallow around the lump in my throat. 'I let Margot believe I have a book deal.'

His eyes widen. 'Why? Why would you do that?'

'Because!' I say, louder than intended. I glance over his shoulder at the party going on just a few feet away, then drag my gaze back to his furious

one, and lower my voice. ‘Because Margot has a book deal. She’s never even wanted to write. I was so humiliated and I ... I didn’t want her to see what a failure I am so I just ... I ...’

‘Lied,’ spits Jack.

I nod. God, it sounds ridiculous. That stab of regret is back, sharper this time. I should’ve corrected her. ‘I didn’t think it was going to get this far. I didn’t think—’

‘Well, it has.’ Jack is angry. ‘All these people. Your parents ...’

‘I know.’

He sighs softly. ‘You’re trembling.’

‘This is my fault. I need to fix it. I need to tell them the truth, I ...’ But my parents are so proud, so happy, how can I tell them it’s all a lie? How can I tell a roomful of people, everyone I love?

As though reading my thoughts, he shakes his head. ‘You can’t. We need to style this out.’

I blink, a mix of relief and guilt churning in my stomach, along with the glass of champagne I chugged.

He grips my shoulders. ‘What were you going to tell Margot when you couldn’t actually produce a book?’

Ashamed, I look down at my feet. ‘I was going to tell her the contract fell through.’

Silence. When he doesn’t respond, I look up and see his raised brow.

‘What?’ I say.

‘Just didn’t think you were that deceptive, Fray.’

I press my lips together. ‘Thanks.’

‘So we get through tonight, then, later, we tell them the contract folded.’

I nod.

‘You never know,’ he says kindly, ‘maybe Harriers will come back and want one of your pitches.’

A fresh wave of pain crashes over me. He doesn’t know all three have just been rejected. I open my mouth to tell him when Ada calls my name. Jack and I instinctively take a step back as she approaches.

‘You’re missing your party,’ she says. ‘Come join the fun.’

I spend the rest of the evening lying through my teeth. I haven't seen Katie, Olivia and Ivy in months. People say misery loves company, but I'm not convinced company loves misery. We met up once after Noah's death and it was too much for them.

'I mean, you never think you're actually going to get a book deal, but Lara's always said I was a good enough writer to succeed,' I tell them now, sprinkling my lie with a little truth.

They nod and smile, excited for me. They ask me endless questions: 'When will it be out?', 'Are you having a launch party?', 'How much did they offer? Go on, tell us, *please* tell us!', 'Do you get to pick the cover?', 'What will you do if you hate it?'

I lie and lie and lie. 'Oh, not sure, we don't have a concrete release date yet. Yes, of course I'll have a launch party. I know, it is *exciting*, isn't it? Oh no! I couldn't possibly say how much my advance is – you know me, I don't kiss and tell. No, I can't pick the cover but that's okay. It's okay. Everything's great.' I gesture madly as each gurgle of fiction leaves my mouth, as though I am a clown making balloon animals out of the deception I have weaved tonight.

Then Ruby is in front of me, a hand on her bump and a forced smile on her lips. 'Great news about the book. Big surprise! You must be so happy.'

'Thanks, Ruby,' I say and force a smile of my own.

Ada joins the group because apparently they come as a pair.

'Well,' coos Ruby, 'now you've got your little book deal, what's next?'

I bristle at the word 'little' even though my book deal is entirely fictional. Thing is, Ruby's like a shark; any sign of weakness, of blood in the water, and there will be a feeding frenzy. So I don't rise to it, I just shrug and say, 'Guess we'll just have to wait and see.'

'Absolutely.' Her eyes widen as if struck by a thought. 'A boyfriend maybe?' She's a terrible actress, no one could possibly buy this is a spontaneous pondering. 'It's been a while since your last relationship, hasn't it? You should put yourself out there.'

Unease ripples through the group. Eyes are on me, waiting for my reaction because everyone knows my last relationship was with Noah.

'It must be difficult not having anyone to come home to and celebrate with,' she continues, feigned sympathy dripping like acid from her mouth.

‘She has us,’ replies Ada coolly.

My head snaps around involuntarily; I am shocked by her defence. Ruby is too. Out of the corner of my eye, I see her straighten to her full height as indignation takes hold.

‘Well, Elodie’s nearly twenty-nine, and a book deal isn’t the same as a baby.’ Ruby has adopted the soothing tones of a wise Earth Mother as she rubs her blooming belly, but there’s a pinch to her mouth that spoils the illusion. ‘There’s just no love like it.’

There’s an awkward silence, and a sudden stiffness in Ada tells me while Ruby’s malice may have been aimed at me, it’s struck a nerve with her. At best, Ruby’s comment is insensitive, at worst, it’s downright nasty. Before I have time to think, I say, ‘I’m not convinced I want kids. I mean, I like my vagina the way it is. You know, separate from my anus.’

There’s stunned silence.

Ruby’s mouth sours as though she has bitten into the dimpled flesh of a lemon. Ada presses her lips together to stop herself from laughing, her eyes like two dinner plates. And if we’ve been on the opposite sides of a wall for years, maybe there is a chink, a brick being dismantled. Maybe now we can see each other.

Without another word, Ruby turns and slinks away, back to her husband’s side.

I half expect Ada to follow but she doesn’t. She stays with me, a mischievous grin on her face, but before she can say anything, Jack is by my side. ‘My mum wants you.’

Ada glances at him then back to me. ‘You better go see what she needs.’

When her gaze flits to Jack again, it’s steely. Jack may have changed after Jeffrey’s death, but Ada’s opinion of him hasn’t. No matter how much time passes, to her, he will always be the bad influence leading her sister astray. On the surface, they are polite and amicable, but occasionally that old current of tension rises up.

Jack takes my hand and leads me away. When I look back over my shoulder, Ada is watching me, her expression unreadable.

Kathryn Westwood is thin and elegant, dressed in a cream jumpsuit and pearls. Even though she’s smiling, it doesn’t touch her eyes. For thirteen years, she’s carried with her an air of sadness, of tragedy. Over time, her

husband's suicide became a mark of glamour, a talking point for those who view her from afar. But you only have to see the antidepressants in her bathroom cabinet or the little bottle of vodka she carries in her purse to know there is nothing glamorous about tragedy.

'Oh, darling, well done on your fabulous book deal. Such a triumph.' She kisses my cheek. Her hands are cold as they grasp my shoulders to pull me close. Jack has her long lashes and blonde hair and Cupid's bow; he looks more like his mother than his father, everyone says so.

Mum squeezes her arm. 'It's lovely to have everyone together again. Look at our kids, Kathryn, all grown up.'

Ada slides into the group and tops up Uncle Gregory's drink, pouring it from the bottle into a glass because Ada thinks bottles of beer look cheap.

'Thanks, love,' says Uncle Gregory to Ada. Then he grins at me and Jack. 'You'd make a cracking couple.'

I roll my eyes and Jack kisses my forehead, playing up to it like he always does.

'No, no,' says Kathryn. 'They're the best of friends. The best.' She says it casually, but she's holding her glass so tightly, I can see the whites of her knuckles. Kathryn and Jeffrey never thought I was good enough for their son; their family had money, ours didn't. Jeffrey made his feelings on the matter clear when he caught Jack and I kissing as teenagers. Our first and, thanks to Jeffrey's violent outburst, our last.

An arm is slung around my shoulders. 'And everyone knows my brother's a slut!' quips Charlie.

I laugh and lean into him. Charlie is tall and slim with dark hair and designer stubble. Where Jack is confidence and challenge and that last square of dark chocolate melting on your tongue, Charlie is warmth and bounce and that first sip of ice-cool water on a too-hot day.

'Well done, kiddo,' he says into my hair. 'Everyone's bursting with pride.'

They're all smiling at me. All of them but Jack, who sips his drink and doesn't speak. My own smile is so wide and so fake, it feels as though it's been carved onto my face.

Eventually, I escape to the kitchen for some quiet and wallow. I'm sad my life isn't what I thought it would be. Sad I am forever a disappointment to

my family. Sad I couldn't succeed, not even for Noah. I either have to tell everyone the truth, that there never was a deal, or lie again and claim the contract fell through. But how? Everyone has taken time out of their lives to be here tonight. The last time people came together to celebrate an achievement of mine was after graduation eight years ago. Jesus, eight years. How have I accomplished nothing else worthy of social celebration in eight years?

At my parents' house, most of the photographs are of Ada, moments of pride strung like pearls along Laura Ashley wallpaper in the lounge: Ada grinning beside the ice-blue Audi Ethan bought her for her thirtieth birthday; Ada and Ethan at their Amalfi Coast wedding; the newlyweds smiling and clutching the keys to the door of this house.

The kitchen door is shoved part-way open and I catch a furious snippet of conversation. '... just saying, you shouldn't be drinking wine tonight. The doctor said—'

'I know what the doctor said,' snaps Ada, cutting off her husband. The door opens further and then stops abruptly, as though someone is trying to pull it closed. 'What're you doing?'

'Don't just walk away,' implores Ethan. He sighs deeply. 'If we want to get pregnant, we need to follow his instructions.'

'We?' Ada's laugh is knife-sharp and stabbing.

'What?'

There's a terse silence. My heart pounds; I absolutely should not be privy to this conversation – maybe I should duck into the laundry room and hide.

'Go back to the guests,' says Ada firmly. 'It's rude to leave them so long.'

'Fine.'

Ethan's footsteps recede.

I hop off the stool and turn towards the utility room. But there's no time to hide because Ada strides inside. When she sees me, she jumps, hand on heart. 'Jesus, Elodie, what're you doing in here?'

'Getting some air.'

Her brows knit together. Ada is blessed with gorgeous brows, the kind you see in beauty adverts. She opens her mouth to ask more questions I don't

want to answer but I beat her to it. ‘What’re you doing in here – shouldn’t you be hosting?’

Her mouth closes and she glances briefly at the kitchen door, wondering how much I heard. ‘Elderflower,’ she says simply. ‘We’re out.’

I watch as she moves over to the fridge. She’s tense, I see it in her neck and shoulders. I’ve never heard her and Ethan have a cross word or even a friendly little bicker, and I think I’ve just seen a crack in their shiny veneer. Then I notice her trembling hands. ‘Ada, are you okay?’

My pulse kicks again as I wait for her to reply. She busies herself in the fridge longer than necessary, like she’s trying to avoid the question. I wonder how often people bother to ask Ada if she’s okay; she’s always so perfectly put together that the question seems irrelevant. When she turns to me, she looks weary. I’m not sure if it’s Ruby’s comments or the tension between her and Ethan. Maybe this is our moment to reconnect, to fix whatever was damaged. I look at my sister and I’m sure she’s thinking the same thing. ‘Yes,’ she says with forced lightness. ‘Everything’s great. Hosting is busy work, but I love it.’

I nod, sad that she decided to lie but then, who am I to judge?

‘And you?’ she asks, coming closer. It’s the same soothing tone she used after Noah died. ‘Are you okay?’

I’m grateful she’s asked, and I can tell she’s genuinely interested in my answer, even though it means I have to lie too. Because if I tell the truth, it will be out there, hanging in the air between us and impossible to stuff back into my mouth. I’ll come to pieces and I’m not entirely sure I’ll be able to stick myself back together again. ‘Yes, I’m fine,’ I lie. ‘Great. Everything is just so great.’

‘That’s great!’ she enthuses and, for a second, I’m disappointed she’s fallen for it. ‘And, um ...’ There’s a shift in mood. She puts the elderflower on the kitchen island and drums her fingers on the countertop. ‘Ignore what Ruby said. You don’t need a baby to complete you.’

‘Yeah, sure. I don’t think she’ll be dishing out any life advice to me after tonight anyway ...’

Ada grins. ‘Her face when you told her you like your vagina separate from your anus!’

We laugh. We really laugh. Ada is cackling so hard, she’s turning pink.

She wipes tears from her eyes.

A thought pops into my head and then out of my mouth on my next breath. 'I don't know why anyone would choose to spend time with Ruby; she can be such an arsehole.'

'Can't everyone?' she counters. 'She can be a little insensitive sometimes, but she's there for me. We talk.'

I nod, even though I'm downcast we don't share that kind of closeness anymore.

'You know,' she says, 'it's admirable that you're out there, doing what you want to do, chasing what you want.'

I'm not sure what to say or how to react. This moment of warmth between us is rare; it's the first time since Noah's funeral that the frost between us has thawed a little, and she's felt more like a sister than an acquaintance. I want to ask her why she took off without a word that morning, but I don't want to spoil the moment so instead I say, 'Thank you.'

'I'm glad you got what you want, Ellie-Bee.'

The use of my old nickname jars. It's one I haven't heard in years. One that is just ours. Ada always said when I was little, I was annoying, like a bee, buzzing from one space to another but, without me, everything would wither away.

'You too – the husband, the house in the nice part of town.'

She hesitates. 'Yes, we're both lucky.'

I think of the terse conversation between her and Ethan. Everyone thinks the Archers are the happiest couple in the world, living the perfect life – I often think it too – but sometimes I look at my sister and I swear she's sad. Maybe this perfect home is actually the perfect gilded cage. 'Ada,' I say tentatively, worried I'm going to wreck the delicate truce we have between the Aga and the fridge. 'Is everything between you and Ethan okay?'

When her eyes find mine, I feel it all the way to my stomach.

Then the kitchen door swings open. It's Mum. 'Ada, Ethan needs you.'

I manage another five minutes of the party before it's all too much. I am guilty and sick. Without saying goodbye, I grab my coat and slip out into the night. Crunching across the gravelled drive, I concentrate only on

putting one foot in front of another. I make it onto the street. A shadow crosses my path and when I look up, I suck in a short, sharp breath.

*Him.*

He stops and stares. The amber light from the streetlamp reflects off his glasses. He's wearing a black jumper beneath a blue anorak even though it's still hot out. There's a flash of something across his face – surprise maybe, or triumph. Standing this close to the man I'm sure has been following me makes fear flood my veins. I start to back away, hands raised to fend him off; every step I take back, he takes forward.

'Leave me alone,' I hiss with a confidence I don't feel.

'I—'

I don't hear what he says because my heel catches. I tumble backwards over the low wall around my sister's front garden. I hit the ground hard, my wrist buckling beneath me, screaming as pain shoots through it. The man rushes forward, grabbing my injured wrist and I scream again. There's light, then footsteps thundering towards us. I'm cradling my wrist as a dark shape flies past. I look up. Jack swings for him. There's a dull crunch as his fist connects. The man falls onto his back, groaning into the hands that cup his nose. Blood seeps through the gaps between his fingers.

Jack takes me by the upper arm and guides me to my feet. 'You okay?'

I nod, my heart vibrating in my chest. The man is crying on the pavement. Jack turns on him. 'Stay the *fuck* away from her.' Jack marches towards him but I grab his arm and pain shoots up my wrist again.

A crowd has gathered at our backs. I hear my dad yelling, 'What's going on?' at the same time Mum shouts my name. Jack looks over his shoulder as his brother pushes through the crowd. The man staggers to his feet and starts to run. Jack lunges but this time, Charlie's there, dragging him back.

I look down the street; the man turns the corner, vanishing into the dark.

# Chapter Eleven

## 8 Days Before

### **Elodie Fray**

It's the anniversary of Jeffrey's death. Every year, a dinner is held between my family and Jack's to celebrate Jeffrey's life. The consensus is that it would be a little morbid to host it at Kathryn's, feet away from where Jeffrey killed himself, so we gather at my parents' house.

The evening is always the same: we talk about Jeffrey's charity work and his sense of humour, which was always too American for my father's taste; we talk about his raucous laugh and his love of whisky. We don't talk about his quick temper or the time he and my father threw punches on the Westwoods' front lawn over money owed on a horse race, we don't talk about how Jeffrey used to hit Jack, or that he took a gun and shot himself.

On the first anniversary of Jeffrey's passing, just before the celebratory dinner, Jack arrived early, took two glasses from the kitchen and led me out into the garden where he produced a bottle of whisky he'd liberated from his father's study. He said he liked the symmetry of just the two of us kicking off the celebration with a glass of his father's favourite, since we were the last ones to see him alive and the first to see him dead. It's become our tradition: every year we meet and share a drink before joining the others.

So, I'm outside his place now, a bottle of whisky in hand. It's the first time I've left the house since the party. My family wouldn't let me leave without calling the police, even though I begged them not to. Now, I have a crime number and a promise from the police they'll 'keep an eye out'.

I knock on Jack's door and wait. I'm an hour early because I've got some making up to do; I've ignored Jack's calls all week. He's the only person who knows I'm a fraud and facing him means facing the mess I've created.

But I can't hide for ever. Jack doesn't answer, so I use the spare key he gave me and let myself in, sliding off my shoes.

He calls my name. It comes from the first floor, so I head upstairs. Halfway up, I catch a flash of movement and turn towards it. I see them a split-second before I hear the woman moan. They're framed through the open door of Jack's room, tangled up in each other. Naked. He groans as he thrusts in and out of her. Her legs are wrapped around him, pale against the golden tan of his back.

I can't look away.

I'm stuck here on the stairs, watching.

He pins her wrists to the bed and slams into her. She screams, caught between pleasure and pain.

Then she turns her head. Our eyes meet. She squeals, shocked by seeing me.

Shit.

I turn and run down the stairs.

Jack shouts my name. Then I hear him coming after me. Barefoot, I pull the front door open, but Jack's palm comes down on my right and slams it shut. We are both breathing hard. I can smell her on him; sex and sweat and the sweetness of her floral perfume.

'Jesus, Elodie, what're you doing here?'

He's furious. I can't face him. I stare at the closed front door, the grey wood, feeling the heat of him seeping through my dress and into my skin. By way of explanation, I lift the bottle of whisky and shake it a little.

'Stay here,' he orders.

'Jack ...'

'Stay here.'

I feel him move away from me. When I glance over my shoulder, I see his naked back, the bedsheet hanging loosely around his hips as he pads up the stairs.

My insides are tight. This is so awkward. I mean, I know Jack sleeps around. It's no secret. But I've never *seen* it. Beneath the shock, there's something else, a feeling I don't want to inspect too closely. It tastes

alarmingly like jealousy. Which is ridiculous. I don't want Jack. He's like a brother.

I think of Noah, and my breath catches. I haven't been touched like that since he died. I am jealous of Jack. That is the feeling. I am jealous he has something I want, something I used to have.

I move towards the bottom of the stairs and hear the rise and fall of voices. Curious, I move up the steps and the words become clearer.

'Who is she?' says the woman with an Irish lilt. 'What's her name?'

'Doesn't matter.'

'But—'

'I told you to get out.'

I blink, taken aback by his hostile tone.

There's the whisper of fabric and I imagine her dressing. A drawer opens then slams shut. Jack's footfalls sound across the wooden floor. Then I hear the en-suite door opening and closing behind him. The woman mutters something I don't catch. When I hear Jack stepping back into the bedroom, I hurry downstairs and assume my position by the front door. Jack leans over the banister and calls down to me, 'You can wait in the living room.'

I do as he says, but choose the armchair angled towards the hallway so I can get a glimpse of the woman as she leaves. I don't know why I care, but I do.

A few seconds later, they appear. She's petite and blonde, but she's turned away from me so I can't see her face. She's wearing a short green slip dress, similar to one I have, and my eyes fall on the red marks circling her wrists. I imagine Jack's hands wrapped around them, pinning her to the bed.

What ridiculous imperfection has Jack attached to this woman that means she'll only ever be an interchangeable fuck and not someone he takes on long weekends away? On the heels of my curiosity is satisfaction. I hate myself for it. Hate that I get a little thrill from the fact he's asked her to leave and me to stay. I take this feeling and stuff it down until it's almost gone.

Jack impatiently opens the front door. He doesn't even look at her as she leaves. Doesn't say a word as he closes it behind her. Even though he's dressed in a crisp white dinner shirt and trousers, I can still see the bare skin of his tanned back and her legs wrapped around it. I blink away the image.

His hair is mussed, and I picture her running her fingers through it, grabbing fistfuls of it while he slams into her. Heat rushes to my cheeks.

‘Did you need to treat her like that?’ I ask. Even though I’m glad she’s gone, I don’t agree with the way he deals with women. They hold the same value to him as a cotton bud – once they’ve served their purpose, they’re tossed in the bin and forgotten about. And *that* is exactly why I’ve never gone there with Jack. Maybe Jeffrey’s opposition to us as a couple all those years ago did me a favour.

‘Should you be lecturing me on how to treat people?’ he retorts.

I frown. ‘I don’t know what you mean ...’

‘You ignore me for days, then stroll in here like nothing’s happened.’

Playing for time, I move over to the bar cart. I didn’t expect him to be this upset. I pour us both a drink, hand him one. ‘I needed time to myself.’

‘Not everything is about you, Elodie.’

I inhale, surprised by the venom in his voice. ‘Jack ...’

‘You just disappeared like I didn’t matter.’

And he is just a little boy again, branded with another split lip, another bruise, another mark of how unloved he is, longing to feel wanted. This isn’t about me. It’s about Jeffrey. The run-up to the anniversary is hard for him; he’s irritable and snappy – even with me. I understand, I wouldn’t want to spend an entire evening gushing about a man who treated me terribly, but it’s important to Kathryn, so Jack attends.

‘I’m sorry,’ I say. ‘I shouldn’t have shut you out like that.’

‘You’re right. You shouldn’t have.’

‘I’m sorry.’

‘You were attacked and then you vanished. I was worried about you.’

‘I’m really sorry.’

‘Drink your whisky and let’s go.’

The night unfurled as predicted. Even though Jack and I were sitting side by side at the dinner table, a chasm had opened between us. No one else seemed to notice. Jack delved seamlessly from one conversation to the next, all dimples and charm, and while everyone else blossomed beneath his attention, I wilted beside him.

Anxiety meant even the thought of food sent my stomach into a nauseating churn, but I kept shovelling it into my mouth to avoid answering questions about my book deal. At one point, the pressure and guilt of lying became too much, and I decided to tell the truth. Then, before I could explain, Jack stepped in, announcing to the group he'd been pleased to hear Lara on the phone, raving about the book and discussing a possible publishing date for next winter.

The drive back to my house is silent. I'm both relieved Jack has backed up my lie and terrified that now, if I tell the truth, everyone will know Jack covered for me and that certainly won't help the tension between him and Ada.

I get out of the car, surprised when he follows. 'Your security light's still broken; I'll see you inside.'

As I push open the front door, I see a large, thick envelope on the floor.

My stomach squeezes as I pull the pages from it and realise what it is.

'Your manuscript?' asks Jack.

'Partial,' I manage. Then I read the accompanying letter.

*Dear Elodie,*

*Congratulations on your book deal. Your mother reached out and invited me to the party they threw at your sister's house the other day, but I'm afraid I couldn't make it. Even so, I wanted to write and wish you well. I'm very proud of you.*

I don't need to skim to the bottom of the page to know Florence, Noah's mother, is the author of this letter. I recognise her handwriting from birthday and Christmas cards. It's the first time I've heard from her since the funeral. I am snapped back to that day in the cold, echoing church, an emptiness spreading through my chest like a wintry frost. I see the gathering of mourners, like a swell of ink. I see the carnations I knew he'd hate, the dark classic cars and the lacquered wooden box. And as I stare at it, I picture Noah rotting between its plush silk walls.

*Noah would be elated. More than anything, he wanted you to be published. I found your manuscript in his belongings. There are some notes in the margin. He had beautiful handwriting.*

Carefully, as though it might disintegrate if handled too roughly, I turn to the first page of the battered, coffee-stained manuscript. There is a note, scribed in Noah's hand. 'Elodie, Elodie, you're going to be a star.'

I flip through the pages, catching glimpses of his jokes, his thoughts, his scribbled musings. Shards of me snap off and disappear into a black void of grief. Florence and I are bound by a man we both loved. And even though pain is immeasurable, I am struck by the truth that no mother should ever have to bury her son or post a piece of who he was to a girl who shared him only briefly. Tomorrow, I will photocopy this and send the original back to her.

*I read your story and his notes – I hope you don't mind – and I very much look forward to buying a finished copy to see how it ends. Noah was right, you are a very talented writer.*

The first time I met Florence, we had lunch at a French restaurant in Trafalgar Square and I was so nervous I couldn't eat. Noah kept leaning in and whispering, 'She'll love you. How can she not love you?' I brought her flowers – peonies, her favourites – and she told me I had a keen mind.

*He would be so proud, Elodie. He knew you'd be published one day. This is the best way you could have honoured my son's memory. Perhaps you would consider dedicating the book to him?*

*Yours,  
Florence Pine*

And though she doesn't know it, her question, written with heart and sincerity, makes me feel sick to my stomach. The seed of my little white lie has grown into a spiky, tangled thicket.

Panic wraps its slim fingers around my throat and squeezes until I can't catch my breath. I clutch the wall for support.

A hand grips my shoulder, making me jump.

It's Jack.

'Take a breath,' he tells me. 'Breathe.'

But I can't. I can't. I ...

'Do you trust me?' he asks, taking my face in his.

I nod.

'Elodie, I'm going to make this right. I'm going to fix everything. I promise.'

## Chapter Twelve

### The Day Of

#### **Elodie Fray**

After the state I was in post-Florence's letter, Jack insisted I stay with him for a few nights, the equilibrium between us apparently restored.

Tonight though, Jack's in London with his family, watching his brother's husband, Tobin, in a West End show, so I'm back in my tiny house and it turns out it's not just the security light that's broken, the lock on my front door isn't working properly either. I worry about my stalker and push a dining-table chair against the door. It's a pathetic attempt to make myself feel safer but my landlord has ignored my panicked emails. If I don't hear from him by tomorrow morning, I'll call a locksmith myself. I haven't told Jack about the door; he'll only worry. I'm already missing Jack and his place. It's such a gorgeous space, nicer than anywhere I could ever afford to live. His offer for me to move in with him is tempting. If I can't find another job and my parents discover the book deal is a lie, he might just be my only option.

I'm just climbing into bed when Jack sends me a photograph of him and his brother in the theatre, waiting for the show to begin.

18.45 Jack: *You're missing out*

I send him a photograph of the laptop and tea balanced on my bed.

18.46 Elodie: *I'm partying hard here*

18.46 Jack: *Wild, Fray. Wild*

18.47 Elodie: *I need an early night – I'm having lunch with Ada and Mum tomorrow. If I show up with dark undereye circles, Ada will spend an hour trying to convince me to buy a luxurious eye cream she knows I can't afford ...*

18.49 Jack: *Is that guy still following you? You're being careful, right? You can sleep at mine tonight. I'm not back until tomorrow evening. Place is yours.*

18.52 Elodie: *Haven't seen him since the party. I'm fine, please don't worry. Enjoy your show! X*

The sound of creaking wakes me. It's dark, moonlight creeps between the gap in the curtains, though I could've sworn I'd fallen asleep with the lamp on. I lie still and listen, but I'm greeted only by silence. As though even the wind is too terrified to make a sound. But I'm not alone. I sense someone in the room with me. Close. Slowly, I turn my head. I see him a second before the damp cloth comes down hard over my nose and mouth. My body reacts before my mind can catch up; heart galloping, muscles tight, breath short and fast. When the fog of confusion clears, the fear is immediate. A scream rips its way up my throat, muffled by the cloth.

I thrash and flail, I kick and throw my weight to the left, rolling off the bed and landing hard on the floor. Air whooshes out of me and I'm on my back, struggling to breathe. I don't have time to move before the weight of him hits me. He's broad and strong. Wearing something over his face. I raise my arms to fight him off, but he knocks them away with bruising force and presses into me so hard, I think my ribs will crack. My mind races, but all I can think is *fight, run*. My cry for help is cut off again by the damp, tangy cloth he smashes into my mouth. I taste blood.

Desperate, I reach up and claw at his face. The mask he's wearing slips and he rears back. I scramble to my feet but I'm heavy and slow, the sting of the chemical-sodden cloth still clinging to the back of my throat.

I must get out.

Must get help.

I lurch forward. Everything around me shimmers and greys. A scream bubbles in my throat. He bulldozes into me and I crash into the wall-

mounted mirror by the door. It splinters; a crooked spider's web of broken glass across its face. Agony flares in my shoulder; there's a two-inch shard of glass stabbing into the meatiest part of my upper arm. It's alien and hot. Gritting my teeth against the pain, I stagger for the door. My hand curls around the cool metal handle just as arms clamp around me from behind.

I struggle but I'm weak and dizzy. Helpless. A newborn fawn.

'Please,' I beg. 'Stop.'

This time, when the cloth goes over my mouth, it doesn't come away.

Slowly, reluctantly, I sink into the dark.

# Chapter Thirteen

## 1 Day Missing

### **Elodie Fray**

I'm trapped in a car. Have been for hours. I woke alone on the backseat under a sheet. I haven't seen my abductor since I was taken; I'm terrified he'll return. Thankfully, my arms and legs are unbound so if he comes for me again, I can fight him off. Maybe this time I'll be successful.

There's a huge gash on my arm where I smashed into the mirror, and dried blood crusts on my skin and pyjamas. The wound has been haphazardly bandaged. The thought of him handling me in my sleep makes my stomach roil. I don't know what he wants with me, but if he wanted me dead, why patch me up first?

Ever since I woke, confused and nauseous, I've tried to escape. It's impossible. In my many attempts to smash the windows, I've bruised my elbows and bare feet. I remember reading an article about using the steel rods of a headrest to smash a car window in an emergency, but my attacker must've read the same one because he's removed them. He's disconnected the horn too, so no matter how many times I've slammed my fists into it, it doesn't so much as squeak. Even if the horn *did* work, I'm not sure there's anyone around to hear it.

I'm in the woods. For as far as I can see, there are trees. Trees and no sign of anyone else.

On the front seat is a bag of supplies: bottles of water, energy bars, a sick bag. I've thrown up twice, through fear or my body rejecting whatever drugs are in my system, I don't know. Despite sealing the bag, without being able to open a window, I'm breathing in the thick, acidic tang of vomit.

My attacker didn't show his face, but I'm sure it's the man who's been following me; he was just as broad and thickset. He knew where I lived;

would've seen the broken lock ... But why take me only to abandon me in a car? My stomach turns over again. Is he out there, in the woods, watching me? It's no use, but I scream for help again anyway. My throat is raw. I scream until all I can do is silently sob.

'Fuck!' I shout. I kick the back door; pain shoots up my shin. 'Fuck!'

Despite being confined to a car in the height of summer, I am shivering so hard, my teeth clang together. Exhausted, I rest my head against the window and fight to keep my eyes open. Eventually though, I lose that battle too.

I jolt awake at the sound of a fist on the car window. I whip around. I blink and blink again.

'Oh my god,' I breathe. Then louder, 'Jack! Jack!'

The car door is pulled open and I scramble out. I'm shaking so hard my legs buckle beneath me. He pulls me close and I cling to him, hardly able to believe it.

'You're hurt,' he says, a bite of anger in his voice. 'Let me see.'

He takes my arm and gently peels the blood-soaked bandage away.

'We need to call the police.'

I'm sobbing, relief-wracked and sobbing.

He focuses on my injury. 'I need to clean this.'

'I can't believe you came. I can't believe ...' I trail off, relief slipping into confusion. 'Wait ... how did you find me?'

'Are you hurt anywhere else?'

He won't meet my gaze. 'How did you find me, Jack?'

He refuses to answer. Tears gone, I jerk away from him. My heart beats so hard I can feel it in my throat. 'Was it you? Did you—'

'No.' He moves towards me, but I shrink away because I'm confused and terrified and my entire world is spiralling. 'Jesus, Elodie. I'd *never* hurt you. Not ever. You think I'd do that?'

He's appalled I'd so much as consider it. I'm a little appalled myself because this is Jack. He's always been good to me. But I need to know. 'How did you find me, Jack?'

'He wasn't supposed to hurt you.'

Realisation slides icily down my spine. 'You arranged this.'

He doesn't deny it.

'Oh my god.' I spin away from him, pressing my palms against the car to steady myself.

'Elodie—'

'No,' I shriek, whirling on him. 'How could you do that to me? I was petrified. I thought he was going to kill me.'

'Don't be dramatic.'

'Dramatic?' I am incandescent. 'Someone broke into my fucking house and attacked me! Who was it, Jack?' I shove him in the chest as hard as I can. 'Who the fuck was he?'

'Does it matter?'

My palm itches to slap him.

'A friend,' he offers.

'My stalker?'

'Someone who owed me a favour. Elodie—'

'Take me home.'

'Listen—'

But I don't. I push past him and start marching barefoot through the woods. All the little stones and sharp twigs cut into my feet, but I keep going. I am too angry. Too fucking angry.

'Elodie!' He swings into my path. 'I did this for you. For all the reasons we talked about. You don't have a job, or money, you're going to lose your house and everyone you're close to when they find out you've lied. How're you going to tell Florence the book she wants you to dedicate to her dead son doesn't exist?'

Without an answer to his question, I ask him one of my own. 'How does *this* solve anything?'

'Harriers want true crime; give them true crime. Everyone thinks you've been abducted; you can hide out at Wisteria for a while.'

The absurdity of his proposal renders me speechless.

'It's empty. Remote. When you reappear, you'll have something to write about. Another pretty blonde with a story to tell. When we pull this off, you won't just have Harriers making an offer, *all* the big publishers will.'

I laugh because there's no way he means what he's saying.

‘Remember when we were kids, we found that shack in Marley Wood near Wisteria? When you’re ready to be found, you’ll move there; it’s close enough to the cottage that you can get there easily, but far enough away that it won’t raise suspicion.’

‘You’re not serious?’

‘After a night in the shack, you’ll head to the dual carriageway and wait for a passer-by to stop. You’ll tell the police you were kept there.’

‘You’re going to frame this *friend* who you paid to attack me?’

‘He wasn’t meant to hurt you.’ He sighs. ‘You’ll say you don’t know who took you. He wore a mask. You didn’t see his face. It’s just a few days. Let the media run your story, then make a reappearance and write the book. All your problems will be solved.’

He thinks he’s handing me a golden apple of opportunity, but it’s riddled with maggots. It’s rotten. I shake my head. ‘The police are going to figure out you’re behind this.’

‘Before you went missing, I left town and posted about it online. No one can connect me to your disappearance because I wasn’t even in the same postcode when it happened. Then today, I left London, hopped on a train back to Crosshaven, got off halfway and rented a car to come and get you.’

He’s thought of everything. Every detail. ‘You should’ve warned me.’

‘You’d never have agreed to it. You’ve always needed a push.’ He sighs. ‘I wanted you to have deniability. This way, you’re not necessarily lying to the police about being abducted; you’re just bending the truth about what happened between the abduction and being found.’

He’s so self-assured and measured, every word smooth and authoritative, as though his plan is already a success. His confidence, his belief this is the exact thing I should do, is catching. ‘You’re an incredible writer, Elodie, but that doesn’t matter because the market is all wrong. You think it’s bad now? Agents earn commission. You’re taking up a spot of someone who could be making Lara money. She’s going to drop you if you don’t write something she can sell. You’ve given up everything for this. You *need* a publishing contract to make it all worth it. This is how you get it.’ He takes me by the shoulders. ‘I believe in you. God, Elodie, you have no idea how far I’ll go to make sure you’re happy. How far will you go, Fray?’

He’s serious. He means every word.

‘We’re done with crazy stunts, Jack. We’re not teenagers anymore.’

‘No, we’re adults. But really, what’s the difference between your life at seventeen and your life now?’

Humiliation and anger bleed across my cheeks. ‘Fuck you, Jack.’ I shrug out of his hands and walk away.

He follows, his long legs easily keeping pace. ‘When your family find out you’ve lied, you’re going to lose them along with everything else. If you do what I’m suggesting, you have *everything* to gain.’

I slow. The woods seem to shrink around me. This wide-open space feels like a coffin. He’s right. I know he is. I stop. ‘And what about my parents?’

‘It’s a few days of misery for a lifetime career. It’s temporary. They’re not actually going to find your body in a lake.’

‘They’re going to go out of their minds. I can’t do that to them. I won’t.’

‘Your whole life, you’ve felt like the square peg being shoved into the round hole of your family. All they care about is Ada, her house, her husband – everything they can shove under their friends’ noses. They don’t give a shit about you or your ambition because they can’t parade it around.’

It hurts. Slices. He is speaking aloud every one of my deepest insecurities. I feel myself shrinking. Rather than admit he is right, rather than let him see how small and insignificant I am, I lash out, words leaving my mouth like venomous hiccups. ‘Jesus, Jack, not everyone has the same relationship with their family as you had with Jeffrey.’

And I regret it instantly; his confident exterior slips and beneath it is a little boy who has only ever wanted to be loved. But I can’t take back what I said. That’s the thing about words – once they’re out there, they’re no longer just yours. They hang in the quiet and are plucked like cherries from a tree then, bitter or sweet, they’re devoured.

He clears his throat. ‘I know you don’t want to hear this, Elodie, but your family don’t love you the way they love Ada. They just don’t.’ His gaze burns into mine, sad and angry and honest. ‘First born, most loved.’

And the truth bruises something deep inside me. Even so, I can’t do what he’s asking of me. ‘I have to go back.’

‘If you go back now, you’ll destroy your life. My life.’

I shake my head.

‘If you go back now, I’ll be arrested.’

‘No.’

‘False imprisonment, accessory to kidnap.’

‘No,’ I say again, even though I think he might be right.

‘You missed Sunday lunch with your family. They’ve already reported you missing. The police are searching for you. If you go back now and tell the truth, I’ve ruined my life for nothing.’

‘I didn’t ask for this.’

‘But it’s done. I’m trying to help. Trying to give you everything you’ve always wanted. If you go back to Crosshaven today, you’ll have to tell the police the truth and I’ll be arrested. If you reappear in a week or two, we can stick to the story – masked man, shack in the woods, escaped as soon as you could – and I won’t get arrested, and you’ll get a book deal; no one ever needs to know you didn’t have one in the first place, Elodie ...’ He looks pained, as though my name is glass-sharp in his throat. ‘Please.’

I feel myself softening. ‘Everyone thinks the deal is for my romance novel.’

‘Tell them your true-crime novel was more compelling than your first submission.’

His hands tremble. He’s scared. The decision I make now will affect him the most. I believe him when he said he did this for me. He thought he was helping, sweeping in and rescuing me the way he wished he’d been rescued.

‘I’m sorry.’ He rests his forehead against mine so all I can see is the blue of his eyes, and I know what I have to do.

**Missing**

## Chapter Fourteen

### 6 Days Missing

#### **Adaline Archer**

I haven't written a letter in years. Not since we were kids and Mum made us write to our Canadian cousins that summer, do you remember, Elodie? It's been a long time since I felt the weight of a pen in my hand, heard the scratch of it on paper. I'm writing without knowing what to say. Where to start ...

I went to your house again today and stood on the street opposite. It's a crime scene now; blue and white police tape strung up outside. Even though you've been missing for almost a week, and the trail of police and forensics has stopped, there's still a police officer stationed in the front garden. Your picture is all over the news – you'd hate the photograph the media chose. It was taken at my rehearsal dinner – do you remember? You're smiling but it's been snapped on your 'bad' side – your left – which you insist makes your forehead look weird even though it doesn't. I don't think it's possible for you to take a bad photograph.

Anyway, I don't know why I keep going to your house. I know what it looks like inside – the wrecked bedroom. When you didn't show up to lunch, Mum was disappointed, but she made excuses for you, that you were working on edits for your book or you had a shift at Mugs you'd forgotten about, but I was so angry. I thought, typical Elodie, always does what she wants.

I ordered me and Mum a chocolate orange torte for dessert – your favourite – and even though I'm cutting out sugar and I'd have to go for a run that evening to combat the calories, I ate every single morsel just to spite you. We drove to yours. Book or not, you don't leave people sitting in a restaurant for an hour – waiting.

Mum was the first to notice your front door was ajar. I'd already raised my fist to bang on it before she reached past and pushed it open. Just like in a horror film, the door slowly creaked open into darkness. We froze. Everything froze. As though the house was holding its breath. Then Mum called your name and went inside.

I knew you were gone.

We hadn't even got to your bedroom before I knew. There was none of *you* there – your energy, your bounce.

You could almost pretend the mussed bed and cracked vase and toppled glass were because you'd always been untidy. But that illusion shattered the second I saw the mirror – the blood, the shards on the floor. Mum saw it too. She started bleating, 'Elodie, Elodie, Elodie!' the way she did that day you wandered off in the supermarket aged six. You got scared and hid in the toilet roll aisle. It took us fifteen minutes to find you. And even after, Mum's bleating didn't stop; she pulled you to her, gripping you so tight her fingers left little red marks on your arms.

In your house, I rushed after Mum as she hurried along the hallway to your bathroom. 'Mum, stop,' I told her. 'We need to call the police!'

She pushed past me, flew downstairs and swung into the living room, then looked surprised when we didn't find you curled up on your sweetheart sofa with a book.

'Mum, *please* just—'

But she shoved me aside and ran for the kitchen.

I grabbed her wrist. 'It's a crime scene!' I snapped. 'We can't be in here.'

She paled – my words pinpricking her delusional bubble that you were playing a game of hide-and-seek in your tiny house.

I've gone back a few times since then, but today was the first occasion a police officer recognised me. I lifted my hand in a half-wave and she did the same. On the way home, I popped into Mum and Dad's.

For the past week, Dad's had this look in his eyes – a searching, a confusion – like he's lost his keys or his phone. And Mum, well, that delusional bubble is back. She keeps saying, 'Elodie's probably gone on holiday and forgot to mention it.' Even though she knows your passport and phone and debit cards are all still in your house where you left them. 'She'll

be back soon. She has her book coming out. Anyway, maybe she'll have a tan. She never tans, not like you, Ada.'

We sat in the living room, drinking sweet cups of tea in silence. At thirty-three, I thought I'd experienced every kind of silence: tense, angry, awkward. There isn't a word for the silence that lies in Mum and Dad's house now – it's heavy yet fragile. Does that make sense? I was only halfway through my tea when it became too much, and I put the TV on. We stared dutifully at it.

There was an advert for the RSPCA. A clip of a woman in uniform scooping a lurcher up from the floor of a squalid house. The camera zoomed in on the dog's woeful eyes and panned slowly over her body. Puckered, round burn marks where a lit cigarette had been stubbed out. A gash across her side where a blade had split her skin. An angry red mark around her neck where a rope had been pulled too tight.

This is what people do to animals.

This is what people do to other people.

Is this what is being done to you while we sit and drink tea?

I left pretty quickly after that and came home. I've just had a new chest of drawers delivered for the second reception room. You'd say you didn't like them just to save face but really, they're something you'd have in your home if you had the money. I've noticed how you try to disguise envy with indifference whenever you come here.

Anyway, I thought I had the perfect place for these drawers – in the little alcove by the door, but when I moved them there, they didn't look right. So I dragged them over by the fireplace, which just looked *odd*. Then I hauled them to that spot where the armchair used to be. Better. But not quite right. No matter how much I fiddled with them, they didn't look the way I pictured. Too far forward, too far back, too far left then too far *fucking* right. I was sweating and frustrated and then, as though my arms were independent from my body, I gripped the drawers tight and pitched them forward. They slammed into the hardwood floor with a bang that would leave an ugly dent.

~~Even before you vanished, I sometimes get the urge to smash up my whole house because this life doesn't feel like it belongs to me and~~

Ethan came hammering down the stairs and into the lounge, panicked. ‘What was that?’ He spotted the toppled drawers. ‘What the hell?’ I watched as he righted them. He glared at me. ‘What happened?’

‘I don’t know,’ I said lamely.

‘I thought someone was breaking in.’

‘Sorry.’

‘You’re shaking.’

I shoved my hands into the pockets of my yoga pants. ‘I’m fine.’

Silence.

‘Did you go back to her house again this morning?’

I didn’t answer. It’s none of his business.

He shook his head. ‘Maybe you should start those letters like the therapist suggested, yes? Get it all out so you don’t smash the whole house up.’

After your disappearance, we were assigned a family liaison officer who introduced us to a counsellor – Harriett. I’m not sure if I like her yet – she has good taste though; her dress was forest green and I recognised it instantly: Karen Millen. It’s the kind of shop you’d walk into, take one look at the price tag and walk right out again.

It was Harriett’s idea to write to you. It’s possible you’ll never see these letters since I have no idea where to post them. A squalid house like the one the lurcher was found in? A shallow grave in the woods? A river? You could be anywhere. With anyone. Doing anything or having anything done to you.

I don’t know what’s worse: knowing or not knowing.

Maybe I’ll never find out.

## Chapter Fifteen

### 7 Days Missing

#### **Adaline Archer**

I was called in for questioning again today. You've been gone seven days and the police have no idea where you are. No clue. They keep hauling your family and friends into the station and giving us watery cups of coffee or milky tea and asking us the same questions over and over. So I waited in that dingy little room with beige walls and a tiled nylon carpet floor, at a square table that was bolted down.

Detective Inspector Ritter returned with a lukewarm glass of tap water in one of those ugly plastic cups. I don't like him. He wears cheap suits and a smug smile and, much to your distaste, I'm sure, he calls the woman on reception 'love'. He doesn't like me either. I knew the second he laid eyes on me outside your house. He thinks I'm just a vapid housewife. Is that what you think of me too, sis?

'So, what can I do for you, Detective?' I asked as he took his seat opposite.

He frowned. He didn't like that *I* was the one asking questions, so he countered mine with one of his own. 'Sorry to drag you in here again. Hope we didn't disrupt your day too much. You're not missing a yoga class or something?'

There it was, the little dig, the housewife box he'd put me into. I didn't respond. I kept my expression neutral. Unlike you, I'm good at keeping my emotions under lock and key. You feel everything so deeply, Elodie. Even as a little girl. Do you remember when you were seven, or eight perhaps, and Nibbles, our hamster, died? You cried for days and wore only black for two weeks. You *insisted* Dad made her a little wooden coffin because you couldn't bear the thought of beloved Nibbles being dumped unceremoniously in a hole. Even as you got older, you loved as deeply as

you grieved. I realised this when I met Noah for the first time. Ethan and I visited you in London, and the four of us had dinner in a little French restaurant. It was December, there were Christmas lights outside and a bitter breeze. You and Noah couldn't stop touching each other, and when he spoke, you watched his mouth move with a look of pure adoration. You feel things deeper than anyone else I know. And so, if you feel love with a more intense bite, the same must go for fear.

~~I wonder if you are gripped by terror now, wherever you are.~~

Anyway, DI Ritter looked uncomfortable when I didn't rush to fill the quiet. I stared at him, embracing the awkward silence. 'So ...' He cleared his throat. 'I just wanted to go over a couple of things with you, Mrs Archer.'

*Archer.*

I've been married four years and Archer still doesn't sit right. You asked me once, a few weeks before the wedding, if I was going to take Ethan's name and when I said yes, I could tell from your face you thought I was a traitor to womankind.

'The night of ...' he checked his notes. 'Saturday 2nd August when your sister was accosted by a man outside of your house, you said you didn't get a good look at her assailant. Have you recalled any more details since we last spoke?'

'Like I said, I didn't get a good look at him before Jack punched him in the face. Perhaps you should have a word with him?'

Ritter did not appreciate me telling him how to do his job. 'Yes, Mr Westwood's been very helpful but, back to you, you're sure you haven't remembered anything else?'

I shook my head. 'I told you, close-cut dark hair, glasses.'

He nodded solemnly. 'Very well.' He shuffled the papers in front of him and peered at his notes again. 'And can you just tell me again where you were on August 16th – the night Elodie disappeared?'

They really don't have a clue. They're examining the entire family, as though we all had something to do with it – like this was *Murder on the Orient Express*. I had to read that for GCSE. It was a struggle; I was always more likely to have a bottle of tequila in my hand than a novel, but you

found it in my room and devoured it. Mum and Dad were proud. Not to be outdone, I forced myself to finish it too.

‘As I said before, I was out to dinner with Ethan, my cousin, Ruby, and her husband, Tom. The bill is included in the binder I gave you.’

His lips twitched. ‘Ah, yes, your binder.’

We’ve all handled your disappearance differently. Mum is in denial. Dad speaks even less than usual, and I’ve seen a couple of empty bottles of whisky in the recycling. And so I began organising; I compiled a list of all your friends along with any contact information I could find, I wrote down everything you told us after the attack that Saturday and a few ideas of people you’d contact if you were in trouble, and put it all in a binder. The sad truth is, it made me realise how little I know about your life, your friends. When I took it to the station, Ritter took it and seemed mildly amused.

‘Is that everything?’ I asked.

‘Actually, it isn’t. We have another inspector joining the case; he wanted to meet you and get caught up.’

Then the door opened, and you won’t believe who stepped in – Christopher Jones. I haven’t seen him in years. You remember him, don’t you? My first boyfriend. We took you to a theme park – it was his idea to bring you along – and you made us go on that huge rollercoaster. I can see you now, your head thrown back as we plummeted down, your hands up in the air while mine gripped the bar until they ached. I hate rides; being out of control doesn’t appeal to me, but you, you love them. You’d keep riding until you were sick.

‘Miss Fray,’ said Christopher formally.

I glanced at Ritter, then back to Christopher, thinking he couldn’t possibly have forgotten me. ~~I’ve never forgotten him.~~ Forgotten I used to go to his parents’ house when his mum was working late, and we’d get halfway naked, kissing until we were both raw and exhausted.

Ritter cleared his throat. ‘It’s *Mrs* Archer.’

‘Oh,’ said Christopher, glancing down at the ring on my left hand. Did I see disappointment? ‘Of course. Apologies. Nice to meet you.’

He held out his hand; I took it. His grip was firm and assured, just as I remembered. ‘Actually, we—’

‘I’m Inspector Jones,’ he said, glancing quickly at Ritter and giving my hand a little squeeze, urging me to play along.

‘Jones,’ I said, coolly. ‘Nice to meet you.’

His dark eyes crinkled up in a little smile. I couldn’t help having a good look at him; he’s taller than I remember, broader too. His wavy dark hair is short now and there’s a little crescent moon scar cutting through his left eyebrow where his piercing used to be. ~~Mum would say he’s aged like fine wine. And I’d agree.~~

‘Your binder was really helpful,’ he said without sarcasm. He opened up his notebook and scanned the pages. ‘You wrote that Elodie wasn’t fond of her manager, Richard Morris. Do you know of a particular reason for this?’

‘No.’

He jotted something down.

‘Is he a suspect?’ I asked. ‘Because, if anyone’s responsible, it’s the creep that’s been stalking her. Jack’s been up close to him – if you speak to him again, he’ll be able to—’

‘Yes, Mrs Archer,’ said Ritter, cutting me off. ‘We’ve got that under control.’

‘Jack Westwood?’ asked Christopher.

I nodded.

Christopher only met Jack a couple of times. He broke up a fight between Jack and some guy who hit on you at Charlie’s nineteenth birthday party, but not before Jack broke the guy’s nose. But, of course, you won’t pay note to that, will you? Everything Jack does is seen by you through rose-tinted glasses. You colour his possessive behaviour as sweeping acts of friendship.

‘We’ll bring him in again,’ said Christopher.

Ritter gave him a look. ‘I don’t think—’

‘We’ll have him work with a sketch artist to create a composite drawing we can release to the public.’

‘Great,’ I said.

In the car park, Christopher called my name. When I looked across the forecourt, he was jogging towards me. ‘Got a second?’

‘Of course, Detective Jones.’

‘Sorry about that. I volunteered for the case and I ...’ He scratched the back of his neck, head bent, a familiar gesture that made me feel seventeen again. ‘I thought it might be less complicated if my superiors didn’t know our history.’

‘Does this lie make you a bent copper?’

He smiled. ~~I miss that smile.~~ ‘I really want to help find Elodie.’

I could see in his face he meant it. ‘How long have you been in the police?’

‘A while. I didn’t go to university so ...’ He winced, catching himself because university is our curse word. Most couples break up because one or both go away to study; we broke up because he retracted his application to Exeter. Christopher wanted to travel instead, work in a bar, work in a shop, but I wanted more from a future husband. You think I’m shallow, but you don’t remember the arguments and stress Mum and Dad had over money. You don’t remember them scrimping and saving for caravan holidays in Hunstanton. You don’t remember Mum taking on a second job to make ends meet for Christmas. I was thirteen years old when I stood outside the kitchen door, listening to Mum sob because Dad had been made redundant again and they didn’t know how they’d pay the mortgage next month. It was then I decided I’d never let myself struggle like they did. I’d have the big house, the expendable income, the luxurious holidays; being with someone who has no career prospects but a great tan from their time in Thailand wasn’t going to cut it.

I know what you’re thinking: I could’ve gone to university and into a career to earn the money for this lavish lifestyle myself, but let’s be honest, *you’re* the academic one. The smart one. The achiever. Not me. Everyone says so. So, I broke up with Christopher. Set him free. Even though I knew I’d done the right thing to get what I wanted, I was heartbroken. ~~I sometimes wonder if I made a mistake.~~ Do you remember the night he left for Bali? You were only fourteen, and though you’d never experienced heartache of your own, you sat with me while I sobbed on my bedroom floor and later, with three bags of Maltesers between us, we watched *Dirty Dancing*.

‘I thought you’d moved to Cambridge?’ I asked.

‘I did, but it didn’t work out.’ Which probably meant he moved there for a relationship that has since broken down.

‘How long have you been back in town?’

‘A few months. I would’ve looked you up but ...’

I waved him off. ‘Don’t worry, it’s fine.’

‘How’re you doing?’

‘My parents aren’t coping well. Dad always looks so lost and angry and Mum’s in denial.’

‘How’re *you* doing?’

I hadn’t really thought about how I was doing. Actually, I tried to avoid thinking about that as much as possible. ‘Fine,’ I said. ‘Keeping busy. Making binders.’

He held my gaze, his eyes narrowing. It reminded me of being young again and sitting on his flannel sheets while I tried to convince him I loved going to see him play rugby. ‘It’s okay if you’re not okay, Ada.’

Christopher has always been self-assured. He says whatever comes into his head even if it isn’t the polite thing to say. I used to like that about him.

Ethan would much rather dance around all issues. Yesterday evening, as I was cleaning the aftermath of the chicken cassoulet he’d requested for dinner, he looked up from his laptop long enough to say, ‘Mum said she rang you today but you didn’t answer. Was your phone off?’ He knew my phone wasn’t off. It bothers me he didn’t just ask me outright why I was avoiding his mother’s calls.

‘Ada?’ asked Christopher. The silence had lasted a couple beats too long.

I grasped for something to say. ‘Just ... find my sister. I know it’s a needle in a haystack but ...’ I trailed off because I was right, wasn’t I? Finding you would be a near-impossible task.

‘Actually,’ he said, ‘I have an idea, and I could do with your help.’

## Chapter Sixteen

### 9 Days Missing

#### **Adaline Archer**

I'd never pulled an event together so fast. Margot helped. You know, I've always liked Margot. She's smart, efficient; nothing fazes her. When I told her we had two days to arrange a lantern release in the park by your house, she took it all in her stride, pulling in favours with wedding vendors so, within hours, we had stacks of invitations and posters.

Margot, along with everyone else, thinks this event is to raise awareness of your disappearance. And it is. In part. Christopher asked me to keep quiet that the true reason is to draw the perpetrator out. I wonder if he used 'perpetrator' instead of 'abductor' or 'murderer' because he doesn't know what the police are hunting for yet. He says it's common for perpetrators to make an appearance at these sorts of events. Apparently, standing among family and friends of the victim knowing no one else is aware of what they've done gives them a sense of power.

Ideally, we'd hold a press conference, but Mum is refusing because pleading for your safe return would ruin her delusion that you're sunning yourself in the South of France. I wish she'd talk to the counsellor. I did offer to hold the conference myself, but the police advised against it. It must come from our parents, or the media will make a scandalous drama out of it, probably pointing the finger at our family. So, until Mum and Dad change their minds, we don't talk to the media.

Margot drove from London to deliver the printouts and help put them up around town. While we walked, she told me stories about your uni days I'd never heard before: the night you both dressed up in sun visors and Argyle jumpers to play pub golf, and Margot got so drunk, taxis refused to take her, but you walked her all the way home and put her to bed; the birthday Margot baked you a cake, accidentally using salt instead of sugar, and you

were so desperate not to hurt her feelings, you ate a slice without complaint. As I listened, love for you gurgled up. I was trying to recall the last time I *told* you I loved you, but I couldn't.

As Margot talked, I realised I could see you in the way she absently strokes her hair, the way she brings her hand to her mouth when she laughs, the way she bites the inside of her cheek when she's thinking. Do people see you in me too? If you never come home, when our parents look at me, will they only ever see the ghost of you?

Margot was going to stay at a local B&B until after the lantern release, but I insisted she stay with me. Ethan has had to go away for work for a few days, and I like to host. But when we returned from putting up posters, lurking outside my front door was a tall man in dark trousers and a sweat-stained shirt.

'Reporter,' warned Margot as we neared.

He rushed forward, thrusting a Dictaphone in my face.

'No comment,' said Margot, taking my hand and pulling me along the path to the house.

'Mrs Archer,' he called just as I closed and locked the front door behind us.

'How did you know?' I asked.

'Having a famous mother had its downsides too.'

'Reporters?'

She nodded. 'They were outside our house all the time when I was growing up. Elodie's story is gaining traction. It's good. It will get the word out and maybe even help find her. But it means more reporters will come sniffing. Just wait until they get hold of your email and number, then they'll call, email *and* text. The nuisance trifecta.

'I've spoken to Jack,' she said. 'He's really beating himself up about not being there the weekend she went missing.'

I didn't comment. Everyone adores Jack. Especially you. Years ago, when you were a know-it-all teenager crushing hard and I was your bitchy big sister, I told you he was possessive and weird, but you defended him, insisting he was just protective. Then I moved out and you moved away and your friendship with Jack was out of sight, out of mind. I think I lost you

the day you met him because we weren't truly close again until Noah died, were we? And then ... well, you know what you did to ruin that.

By 8 p.m. that night, the park had a big crowd. I'd been wrong to worry that not many people would come to the lantern release because it was short notice and late at night. It was the same crowd you see in Crosshaven fields on bonfire night: circles of mothers jiggling babies on their hips, trying to talk over their squawking offspring; groups of teens scrolling through their phones and giggling raucously, old couples huddling together in coats too thick for the evening summer heat. The difference was, I wasn't anonymous in this crowd. I felt all eyes on me as I walked around the park, checking last-minute details. I avoided eye contact because I couldn't stand to see any more pitying expressions. If they weren't pitying, they were fascinated or, in some cases, accusatory. As though they thought I'd chopped you up into little pieces and fed you to the ducks before they arrived.

'Good job you ordered that extra box of lanterns,' said Margot, surveying the turnout. They were the expensive, eco-friendly kind that didn't kill the turtles or burn down a neighbouring field. 'We've run out of pens though.'

'They'll have to share.'

'Saved you one.' She handed me a Sharpie.

This was something I saw online – people scribbling messages on the lanterns before releasing them. I'd been thinking all day about what I'd write. But you're the writer, El, not me. I thought about composing a poem because poems are always poignant, but I haven't written one since primary school and all my brain could dredge up was 'blue' and 'glue', which are not words that inspire sisterly love or profound meaning.

'Adaline!' I looked over to see Ruby approaching with Tom.

God, El, she looks bigger every time I see her.

She pulled me into a hug, her hard pregnant belly pushing against the flat of mine. I don't know what it is about pregnant women, but they make me a bit queasy. They have an actual person living inside them. Living off them. Like a parasite. One which expands their body and rearranges their organs and causes them to vomit and then, in a grand finale, tears through their vagina.

Months ago, when Ruby announced she was having a baby, I almost blurted, 'Are you keeping it?' because, for so long, that was the automatic

response to a friend telling you they were up the duff. It doesn't matter that we are adults with houses and husbands, I still feel the teenage terror from all those PSHE lessons, which drilled into you that getting pregnant will ruin your life and must be avoided at all costs. Then she whipped out her scan photo. I stared at the black and white nothingness of it and didn't know what to say. Ethan stepped in, congratulating her and asking all the right things. 'How far along are you?' 'Do you know if it's a boy or a girl?' 'Have you got a name picked out?' He so desperately wants a child of his own.

'Wow, this gathering is impressive,' said Ruby. Then her eyes locked on Margot and I could see the spiky thought bubble forming above her head: *New friend, Ada has a new friend. THREAT, THREAT, THREAT!* and before she could attack Margot, I said, 'Oh, Ruby, this is Elodie's best friend. She's been helping set everything up.'

She looked relieved. 'Have your parents arrived?'

I shook my head. Mum was still refusing to participate in any event that supported the theory you were abducted.

A while later, Christopher appeared. Dressed in a pair of jeans and a T-shirt, you'd have no idea he was a police officer, which I suppose was the point. 'How're you holding up?'

'Good,' I said, though I wasn't sure that was true. Rather than thinking about how I feel, I keep busy, not stopping until I'm so exhausted, I collapse into bed.

'Is ... Mr Archer here?'

I blinked, caught off guard. 'No, Ethan's away on business.'

There was surprise and disapproval on Christopher's face. It took me a second to draw the blinds on my embarrassment. I slipped into defence mode because Ethan's a fantastic husband. He is. And it doesn't matter that Christopher's an ex from a zillion years ago, he's still an ex; I couldn't have him thinking badly of my relationship. 'The firm has some huge new clients. He's an accountant and, well, he desperately wanted to be here tonight, but I made him go. Anyway, he'd be here if he could.'

Christopher nodded. 'Sure. Just asking because he's a witness from the night Elodie was attacked. The more people here to spot the attacker, the better.'

‘Oh, yes, exactly.’ I felt instantly stupid for misreading his motivation and fought against the colour flushing my cheeks.

‘There are a few of us here,’ he assured me. I could only assume he meant undercover officers. ‘We have the composite drawing Jack helped us with, but if you see the guy, give me the signal we discussed.’

Excusing myself, I made my way to the gazebo to get things started when an older gentleman stepped in my path, his hand held out in a formal greeting. ‘I’m George Winkelman.’

I took his hand, thinking his name sounded like something from the books I used to read to you as a child.

‘Your sister’s a lovely young lady,’ he said. ‘I couldn’t believe the news. Still can’t.’

‘How do you ...’

‘Mugs,’ he said. ‘Before that wrong ’un, Richard, gave her the sack.’

‘The sack?’

George looked abashed. ‘Well, I could be mistaken but, yes, I think so. Not that she deserved it. Elodie’s got a kind heart and she’s a hard worker. I saw the way Richard looked at her and, well, it wasn’t very gentlemanly of him. If there’s anything I can do to help find her, I will.’ He pulled a piece of paper out of his pocket and gave it to me. ‘There’s my phone number. You can call anytime.’

I can see why you like him, El. He’s warm, like Grandad was. But why didn’t you tell me you’d been fired? *Why* were you fired? When?

At the gazebo, I took the mic Margot held out to me. I’ve hosted hundreds of events, but my hands have never trembled the way they did as I lifted the mic to my mouth. After I thanked everyone for coming, instructed them how to light their lanterns and scanned the crowd for *him*, it felt wrong to step down without saying something heartfelt about you. I opened my mouth, and expectation swirled in the spaces between the gatherings of people, but nothing came out. The thing is, it feels cheap to say something mushy now you’re gone when I didn’t say anything like that when you were here, so I thrust the mic at Margot instead, who talked about your kind heart and how you were taken just as your dream of being an author was coming true.

The violinist we hired started up. When it came time to write a message on the lantern, I penned, ‘Ellie-Bee, you will come home. I promise.’ Then I shook out the lantern, lit it and, along with hundreds of other arms, lifted mine to the sky.

Margot counted down, ‘Three ... two ... one!’ and we let go. They drifted up high into the dark sky; hundreds of flecks of flickering gold. It made me think of the glitter painted across your cheeks on your seventh birthday.

I imagined you looking up at the sky, seeing all these dancing flames and wondering what the celebration was. Then the next morning, walking across a field not too far away, you’d find my lantern. *Mine* out of all the lanterns released tonight and you’d know I was searching for you, you’d know the lights in the sky were all for you, and you’d leave behind whatever adventure you abandoned us for and you’d run all the way to my front door.

A hand pressed against the small of my back. Christopher whispered, ‘You okay, Ada?’

I nodded, grateful he’d asked. Missing Ethan in that moment, I wished he was here, his arms around me.

The crowds lingered, enjoying the music and the coffee cart. I looked over at Richard and the flinty young redhead he was with and thought about confronting him over your dismissal, but then I heard Dad’s voice. He was standing at the foot of the gazebo with Mum. I hugged them both. They looked tired. Older. Dad hadn’t shaved.

‘You shouldn’t have done all this, love,’ said Mum all sniffly. ‘It’s too much.’

‘Actually, we’re meant to look out for—’

‘It’s not necessary. Elodie will be back soon and—’

‘Stop it,’ snapped Dad.

Mum blinked, aghast, but didn’t speak again. The tension between them was so thick, you could slice it up and spread it on toast.

‘If I’d known you were coming, I’d have picked you up,’ I said.

‘Jack brought us,’ said Dad, just as I spotted him and Kathryn coming across the park towards us.

We all hugged and kissed and hugged again. Dad caught my eye and said, in a voice so low only I could hear, ‘Sorry we’re late. We would’ve been here sooner but your mum ...’

I squeezed his hand. ‘Don’t worry. You’re here now.’

‘You threw this together quickly,’ said Jack smoothly. But he isn’t smooth is he, El? He has rough edges and spiky bits. I remember all the fights he got into at school. I remember Kathryn cradling a cup of tea in our living room, telling Mum she was at her wits’ end with Jack’s aggression, that Jeffrey was having to pay more and more money to different private schools to secure Jack a place.

Then, over Jack’s shoulder, I saw a man in a black hoodie, staring up at the dark sky through glasses I recognised. Ones he’d worn the night he attacked you outside my house.

Flinging my arm out wide, I frantically looked for Christopher. He was only a couple of car lengths away from where I stood. He started moving quickly through the crowd in the direction I was pointing. I knew I was meant to be subtle, but there was this crazy adrenaline pumping, so I was pointing instead. It took all my willpower not to shout too.

Jack was the first to realise what was going on. ‘Oh fuck, it’s him,’ he said, cluing in the others.

I didn’t expect Dad to start running, El, *running* at your stalker the second he laid eyes on him.

Mum screamed after him, ‘Martin! Martin! Martin!’

The crowd parted but the commotion drew your stalker’s attention away from the drifting lanterns. Seeing Dad bearing down on him, he turned and sprinted away. There was an uproar of noise as Christopher and a couple of other undercover police pelted after them both, knocking into bystanders as they did. Then I was stepping forward, ready to join the chase.

Margot grabbed my wrist. ‘Don’t. You’ll just be in the way.’

‘Jesus,’ said Jack, pushing his fingers back through his hair. ‘Intense.’

I stared at him, wondering why he hadn’t joined the pursuit. He was eager enough to go tearing after this guy after your party, so why not now? I couldn’t ask that – too accusatory – instead I said, ‘How’re you holding up, Jack?’

‘Not good to be honest,’ he said to Margot and me. Mum and Kathryn had moved off to the side to call the police even though I told them the other men chasing your stalker *were* the police. ‘Elodie’s my entire world. I know her better than anyone, maybe better than she knows herself. I just can’t believe she’s gone.’

Margot rubbed his arm reassuringly, and I felt a spike of annoyance that he was turning this into a grief-pissing contest. I’m not sure exactly what it is about Jack that pushes every single one of my buttons. I know, I know, he’s amazing, you think he’s woven from the purest cloth, but you’re not here to tell me I’m wrong, are you? So I’ll write whatever I like, okay? ‘Did you ever tell El how you felt?’

‘What do you mean?’

‘That she’s your entire world.’

He pulled this face like I was a particularly difficult maths question he was trying to work out. ‘No, not in so many words.’

I nodded slowly. ‘Well, how do you think she’d have responded if you did tell her?’

He shrugged, and I could see he was trying to figure out where I was going with this. ‘I don’t know.’

Hmm, I thought, nice and vague. ‘Do you have feelings for my sister, Jack?’

His mouth twitched. I’m sure he didn’t like me reminding him you’re *my* sister since he’s under the impression you belong only to him. Beside me, Margot shifted uncomfortably, but she was interested too; I could tell by the way her gaze didn’t leave his face.

Jack smiled. Before he could answer though, Mum shrieked, ‘Martin!’ and we all turned to see Dad with Christopher and the others trudging across the park towards us. It was obvious from their slumped shoulders they hadn’t caught him.

Christopher was out of breath. ‘We don’t have a name, but we know his face now. We’ll find him.’

On the way home, I said to Margot, ‘Do you believe Jack when he says Elodie is his whole world?’

‘Yeah, I do. It’s no secret he’s in love with her. Well, no secret to anyone but Elodie.’

‘What do you think Jack would do if he admitted how he felt to her and she rejected him?’

Margot was silent. I could feel her drumming up the courage to speak. ‘He has a watertight alibi, Ada. It wasn’t him.’

# Chapter Seventeen

## 11 Days Missing

### **Elodie Fray**

I didn't think I'd actually make the news. I thought Jack was wrong, and I would slip into the pool of missing women who only get a four-line mention in a local newspaper. That I'd become a notification that pops up on a phone and is swiped away.

But I sit on the big double bed in Wisteria's master room, watching the TV and it's so surreal because there's my face on the BBC news. It's the same image I've seen on every outlet. Taken at Ada's rehearsal dinner three years ago. I hate this picture – it makes my forehead look too wide. Still, it's out there. People are seeing my face. Hearing my story. Even though this is what Jack wanted, I feel guilty for causing a stir. For worrying people.

I imagine a woman my age sitting in her flat, eating her overnight oats, watching the same broadcast, and thanking her lucky stars it wasn't her who was snatched from her bed. But I can't bear to think about how my family are coping. It's an oil slick of guilt. My parents haven't appeared on the news yet. I'm dreading the day they do. Jack told me not to watch *any* segments with my family because it will be too hard. Even though he's right, I don't think I'll be able to resist.

It's been over a week since I vanished, but it feels longer. The gash on my upper arm could probably have done with a couple of stitches, but I've made do with thick gauze pads and sterile wipes.

My days are spent wandering around Wisteria and watching daytime television. It's a bit like being off sick from work, only I'm riddled with anxiety and the novelty is starting to wear thin, even though there are far worse places than a five-bedroom house with sea views to be confined to. Wisteria is filled with draped fabrics and big pillows and cosy rugs in neutral hues. Everything is soft – the colours, the surfaces, the way the light

filters in through the cream shutters. Kathryn was planning on selling, but Jack told me when it came to signing the papers, she couldn't do it. Wisteria's been in her family for generations.

A few days before I was taken, Jack came up to the cottage alone, stocked the fridge, and left clothes for me in the bedroom – his, mostly: T-shirts, a few jumpers which I haven't needed since it's only the last week in August, and pyjama bottoms I have to tie extra tight to keep up. Jack took the bloodied clothes I was wearing so he could get rid of them. He didn't bring any of my clothes in case the police had my friends and family go through my wardrobe to identify whether items were missing. To get the media exposure Jack wants, all signs must point to abduction. People are drawn in by the dramatic spectacle of kidnap: the thrilling mystery of whodunnit, imagining what they'd do if they were taken, checking the news every day to see if a body had been dragged from a lake or discovered in a park by an early morning dog walker. So, I have nothing here which is my own. Including my phone. I still find myself reaching for it, to aimlessly scroll through socials. I didn't expect to feel so *naked* without it.

As Jack insisted, I've stayed inside in case someone spots me – a hiker, a paddleboarder, someone drifting past on a kayak. I'm desperate to go for a run though. I usually go three or four times a week. This morning, I sprinted up and down the stairs until sweat pooled in the hollow of my neck but I still long for the breeze on my skin and the rhythmic slap of my trainers on packed earth.

My attention is pulled back to the TV as the camera pans down Crosshaven High Street and my pulse kicks. It looks tidier than usual, like the pavements have been swept for their big international news debut. Then I get a jolt as there's an interior shot of Mugs. It's glossier than I remember, like a film set. News presenter, Cathy Forster, is standing beside the counter wearing a dark blue suit, her short hair artfully swept off her face. She looks gravely into the camera and says, 'Friends and family of missing twenty-eight-year-old Elodie Fray, from Crosshaven, Somerset, are uniting today in a bid to find Fray, who has been missing for eleven days. Richard Morris, Fray's manager and close friend, is hosting a get-together here at Mugs as the community you see gathered behind me prepare to head out and search the woodland and surrounding area for the missing young woman.'

Close friend? Where did they get that from? Clearly, Richard hasn't bothered to inform them I'm an *ex-employee*.

His face fills the screen. He's sweatier on camera than he is in real life. 'All we want is for Elodie to come home safely,' he's saying. 'We've been handing out flyers, spreading awareness, and for every coffee bought, we donate a percentage of the earnings towards the reward for information which leads to the safe return of Elodie.'

I roll my eyes. Trust Richard to turn my abduction into a PR event.

'She's a stunning girl,' he says. 'And we're proud that all the members of today's search party are fuelled by our organic coffee, ready to get stuck in. We just hope she comes home safe.'

Then, to my disbelief, Hannah is on screen. And it's not just the Crosshaven pavements that've had a spruce because Hannah is wearing false eyelashes and her hair's been blown out. 'Elodie is actually *such* a sweetheart.'

My mouth falls open. She *can't* be serious.

'We weren't just colleagues. We were more like sisters, you know? And we just—' Her voice breaks and she brings her fingers to her mouth as though to suppress a sob. Her eyes are expertly misting with just enough wash of tears to make them glisten. How many times did she practise this in the mirror? 'We just ... we want her home.' The camera cuts to video clips of people trudging slowly through dense thickets, armed with long sticks to comb through the overgrowth for my body. Then there's a flash of a familiar profile – his long, straight nose and tuft of white hair peeking out from beneath his flat cap – George. He's with the search party. I didn't even *think* George would worry about me. I didn't think I meant that much to anyone outside of my family, Jack and Margot. George shouldn't be out there. What if he trips and falls in the woods? What if he gets hurt? What if he gets lost?

And for the rest of the day, as morning slides into afternoon, guilt creeps beneath the gaps of me. If I let it, it'll swoop in and take over. So I distract myself, I switch on the radio, take a shower, get dressed – Jack's top swamps me and I have to roll up the sleeves several times – and make myself dinner, taking my time clearing up afterwards, the radio turned up loud to drown out my thoughts. But, as late afternoon dissolves into night, I

can't ignore the twisty feeling of guilt. I can't sleep. But if I give in and leave now, it won't just be me in trouble, it will be Jack too. What he did was wrong, but he did it because he loves me. Because he might be the only one who does.

And then I think of Noah. The engraving on the bottom of the vase; he wanted me to be an author more than he wanted anything else.

*You want to die having never done what you love?*

My resolve hardens.

I can do this.

I *will* do this.

I have to.

## Chapter Eighteen

### 13 Days Missing

#### **Adaline Archer**

On Friday morning, I woke to the smell of frying bacon, and smiled. Ethan was cooking. He never cooks. His mum didn't teach him, preferring instead to do everything for her prized pup. Whenever I see her, she asks questions like, 'Are you feeding my Ethan well? Is my Ethan going to work with ironed shirts? Are you taking good care of my Ethan?' My Ethan. As though he is merely out on loan.

For the first time in years, Ethan was taking time off work. Since your disappearance, he's been really attentive, kind, and I'm grateful. I only have two single friends, and their dating horror stories of fat, balding men looking for wife number three makes me want to cling to Ethan and never let go. I'm lucky to have a husband who loves me. Who wants children with me. Who takes time away from his hectic, important career to look after me.

'Fuck,' Ethan yelped, his finger catching on a too-hot pan as I entered the kitchen.

I gaped at the mess he'd made, the egg white dripping off the counter and onto the floor, the fallen bag of flour, the cinnamon smeared across the glossy white tiles.

'What in god's name is that?' I asked, staring at his efforts. Inside the pan was a soggy, yet somehow burned, grey mass.

'French toast,' he said, as though it was perfectly obvious.

Laughter bubbled up inside me. 'Please tell me you weren't planning on feeding me that?'

'What? It'll taste great!' He picked up the pan and confidently tipped its contents onto a plate. The grey mush slithered onto the porcelain. We

stared. Then he grabbed a lighter from the drawer and started burning the top of whatever the hell this thing was to 'give it a crust'.

'It looks like you're cooking meth,' I said because it did.

And in his final act, he tossed some sugar granules on top with a flourish. 'Voilà!'

The laughter inside me erupted. 'What? What is it? Ethan ... Oh my god ...'

'What?' He laughed because my laughter was contagious even though he wasn't even in on the joke yet.

'It ... it looks like something you'd feed to inmates in an Uzbekistan prison or ... or at an eighteenth-century orphanage.'

He poked at the sludge on the plate and sighed heavily. 'Christ,' he said. 'What the fuck have I done? I followed the recipe!'

'What? Blindfolded?' I was howling with laughter as I picked up the plate and waved it around. 'Please, sir,' I squeaked. 'Can I *not* have some more?'

We collapsed into shared hysterics and leaned our heads together. We laughed so hard our stomach muscles ached. For a moment, I forgot you were missing, and it felt so good. So good.

Ethan dipped his finger into the sugar and swiped it across my nose. 'You're evil,' he said. 'Evil!'

It made me think of our first date. I don't believe I ever told you about it; you would've been at uni then, occupied with drinking and lectures and your exciting new friends. Ethan took me to a cooking class in Bath. I thought, *how original, what an interesting story to tell my friends*. On the train, we talked and talked, conversation spilling out, connecting in a way I'd never connected with anyone. We talked so much, we almost missed our stop. In class, we touched each other at every opportunity we got; his hand on mine, showing me how to fold one ingredient into another even though he had no idea himself, my finger brushing sugar off his lower lip. And while everyone else was egg-washing pastry, Ethan leaned forward and kissed me, right there in the middle of class. After, he took my hand and didn't let go for the rest of the session.

And there, as we stood in our expensive, beautiful kitchen and I looked into the eyes of my expensive, beautiful husband, I kissed him.

'Love you, Ada.'

I smiled. 'I love you too,' I whispered, clutching on to him, clutching on to this moment.

'Come on,' he said. 'I'm taking you out for some real breakfast. We'll go out of town. Somewhere special.'

It was impossible to go anywhere in Crosshaven now without people staring or bringing you up. Ethan was so thoughtful. 'Great.'

We went. We ate. For three hours, I was not Adaline Archer, the sister of that missing girl. I was Adaline Archer, the woman who eats professionally made French toast with her thoughtful, handsome husband.

But when I came home, you were still missing, and Ethan went back to work.

## Chapter Nineteen

### 17 Days Missing

#### **Elodie Fray**

I haven't seen another living person in sixteen days, and I think I'm going crazy. Jack should've been here three nights ago, but he hasn't turned up and I can't contact him. There's a phone in the house but I can't risk calling in case the police are monitoring people's devices and it might look just a *little* suspicious if Jack mysteriously gets a call from a supposedly empty cottage in Cornwall.

I'm running really low on food and it's not like I can simply pop to the shops. After I ran out of the fresh stuff Jack had stocked the fridge with before my arrival, I started eating like a student again: frozen pizza, pasta, beans.

Tomorrow is my birthday. Jack promised he'd be here for it. Although he doesn't like to travel for work, he often has to. Knowing he'd need a reason to keep popping to and from Cornwall, Jack got in touch with a few potential clients in the area and now he's designing an annex for a retired banker in St Ives. I keep wandering over to the window hoping to see him outside, leaning against his car, ankles crossed, with a bottle of something heady and an easy smile; but disappointment drops like a stone in my gut because he isn't here.

I look for something to wear and wish I had choices outside of Jack's clothes. When you're trapped in your Monday to Friday desk job in restrictive office attire, the idea of spending every day in pyjamas is a selfish, luxurious fantasy. In reality, you start to feel institutionalised. I pluck a baby blue shirt from the pile Jack left me. It smells of him: sandalwood and leather. I slip it on, and it falls mid-thigh. I wonder how many of Jack's bed buddies have wandered around in his shirts the morning after.

I get a flash of Jack and the petite blonde. The memory of them together is like stepping into a hot bath; at first it's uncomfortable, jarring, then the sting of pain melts into pleasure and I sink into it, remembering the way Jack's hips moved as he thrust in and out of her, the golden tan of his naked back, hard muscle sliding beneath skin, the smell of sex so thick in the air I could taste it.

My vagina throbs. Just once.

It's been so long since I've been touched.

I want to have sex. I want to have sex like Jack was having with that girl. Hard and angry and carnal. Hands pinned to the bed above your head. Fingers around your throat. The kind of sex that makes you question if you're a good feminist.

I lie down on the bed and touch myself.

I think about his body on top of mine. I imagine us on the floor of his bedroom, the hard wood scraping against my back as he moves inside me. The feel of him between my thighs, stretching me. His mouth on my breasts.

My nipples harden, stabbing against Jack's shirt. My legs fall apart, and I rub harder, breathe harder, imagine harder.

Hot breath on my neck. Teeth grazing my shoulder. Slamming into me again and again.

And then ... and then ...

A sharp intake of breath.

Not mine.

My eyes snap open.

I see Jack.

Jack standing in the doorway.

Jack staring at my hand between my spread legs.

Oh *fuck*.

## Chapter Twenty

### 17 Days Missing

#### **Elodie Fray**

You don't know true mortification until your best friend walks in on you masturbating. You just don't. I stand on the landing and listen to the sounds of Jack putting away food: the squeak of opening cupboard doors, the rustle of plastic bags, the clink of tins and the crackle of packets, the dull thud of the cupboard doors closing again. I tell myself that exploring my sexuality is natural. Men do it all the time.

Twenty minutes later, I've mustered the courage to go downstairs. I'm dressed in Jack's baggiest joggers and his biggest shirt, sleeves rolled down and buttoned all the way to the top. I am as covered as I can be without taking a sheet and throwing it over myself like a child's homemade ghost costume.

I step into the kitchen. He glances up as he puts milk in the fridge. 'Hey.'

There's an awkwardness between us. We watch each other a moment. Unsure. I want to hide upstairs until he leaves. Then he reaches back into the fridge and pulls out two beers. I don't actually like beer, but I take what he offers, our fingers brushing.

'Hope you washed your hands, Fray.' He grins.

'Oh my god.' I dump the beer on the counter and spin on my heel.

Laughing, Jack catches my wrist and pulls me around to face him. I tip my head towards the floor, letting my hair fall over my face so he can't see the beetroot of my cheeks. His arms wrap around me, and I rest my forehead against his chest. His body vibrates with laughter, and I groan.

'I'm so sorry,' I say.

'Don't worry about it.'

But I *am* worrying about it.

‘Look at me,’ he says, but I can’t. ‘Look at me.’ He steps back and lifts my chin. He’s so sincere, I feel myself start to uncoil. ‘It doesn’t matter.’

‘Really? It’s like walking in on your sister ...’ I’m not sure why, but I don’t blink in case I miss his reaction.

He glances down, just briefly. ‘Well, yeah.’

There are instant pinpricks of disappointment that he agrees.

Releasing my chin, he goes back to unpacking another bag.

‘Want any help?’

He shakes his head.

I drink the beer and with each sip, my humiliation eases. Just a little. But I can’t stop thinking about those pinpricks. Of course he sees me like a sister. It’s no different from how I see him as a brother. Then, when I look up again, I catch Jack staring *heatedly* at my lips wrapped around the bottle. He flushes and turns away quickly. I smile. Just like that, the pinpricks of disappointment disperse like stardust.

Jack cooks for us. Vegetables and chicken in a creamy sauce. I have never been so grateful to see broccoli. I crunch the tender stem, devouring it with as much enthusiasm as chocolate.

Jack laughs. ‘Enjoying that?’

‘You are god.’

‘Tell me something I don’t know.’

I roll my eyes. ‘There’s a thin line between confidence and arrogance.’

‘And I walk it so well.’

I snort and reach for the elderflower. ‘So, are you going to tell me where you’ve been? You were supposed to be here days ago.’

‘The banker in St Ives rearranged. I had to push the visit back. It would have seemed strange to come to Cornwall alone, days before the meeting.’

‘When’s the meeting?’

‘Already done.’

‘Really?’

He smiles. ‘I can hang out here for a while.’

‘Great.’

Then his face is all serious and it makes the little hairs on the back of my neck stand to attention. ‘What is it?’

‘I think we need more time. Your parents are refusing to hold a conference. We should at least wait until then. It will drum up the media attention we need to make this all worth it.’

‘But ...’

‘All those other girls are missing for years before they escape.’

‘Years?’ I am appalled. ‘No way. No.’

‘I’m not asking for years. Just another couple of weeks. What’s the point in any of this if we don’t do it right?’

This isn’t the first time Jack’s extended my stay here. I want to go home. But he has a point. ‘Can you convince them to do a conference? Seriously, Jack. I want to go back to Crosshaven soon.’

He nods.

We’re quiet for a moment, and then, even though I’m not sure I want the answer, I ask the question because it’s the only one that really matters. ‘How’re my parents?’

‘Fine.’

I frown. ‘Fine?’

‘Yeah, they’re doing okay.’

I can’t tell whether he’s telling the truth or lying to protect me, and I’m not sure which is better. I mean, I’m glad they’re okay. Obviously. But it doesn’t take the sting out of it; I’m their youngest daughter, I’m missing and they’re ‘doing okay’.

‘What’s wrong?’ he asks.

‘Nothing, I just ...’ I trail off because I don’t know how to reply. He won’t understand why I’d want my family to fall apart, even a little.

# Chapter Twenty-One

## 18 Days Missing

### **Adaline Archer**

It's your birthday today. I was there the day you were born – did you know that? Dad picked me up from Nan's and drove me to meet you. I ran into the hospital room, so excited because for weeks I'd been told when I met my new little sister, she'd have a present for me. I refused to hold you until I got my promised gift. It was a Sylvanian Family: white rabbits with brown-tipped ears – a mummy, a daddy and two little girls. The first girl I named Ada and the second I named Kimberly in honour of my very favourite Pink Power Ranger. Mum and Dad tried to coerce me to rename her after you, but I stood my ground.

You were only seven hours old when Mum put you – pink and screaming – into my arms. You were so small. I ran a finger down your soft cheek. You stopped crying then and made all these contented, gurgly noises instead. This is my first, truly clear memory. It's like my life started the day you were born.

On the way home, I couldn't stop thinking about you. Before we'd even got inside, Kimberly was renamed Elodie. I took her to bed every night and fell asleep rubbing her soft ears, which reminded me so much of your soft cheek.

I never told you that, did I? *Why* didn't I ever tell you that? It would've been weird to pop out with that memory over a roast dinner at Mum and Dad's, wouldn't it? No one blurts out heartfelt stories around a mouthful of Maris Pipers. And you always think there's more time. Another afternoon, another text, another family party, another quiet moment in my kitchen.

Anyway, it's easier to write it all down now, not knowing if you'll ever read it, than it was to talk frankly then, knowing you'd hear it. I'm starting to understand why you love to write. There's something freeing about

taking all those swirly thoughts from your head and storing them elsewhere. When you put pen to paper you can say whatever you like, however you like, and there's no one to judge. I could write all my darkest thoughts down on this sheet and burn it afterwards and no one would know. It's a freedom I've never felt before.

On the way to Mum and Dad's today, I drove past your house again. Below the police tape were dozens of bouquets of flowers and cards, from strangers or friends and family, I don't know. It reminded me of those lamp-posts you walk by where someone has clearly crashed their car and died. I had to pull over, take a minute. Dozens of people from the lantern release shared videos of their starry ascent, dozens more shared videos of our dad and undercover police chasing a suspect. You've gone viral. It's good. It means we're more likely to find you ... but find you *how*? In what state? Looking at these flowers, it's like you're dead, Elodie. Are you dead?

~~You're probably dead.~~

There are even more flowers and cards at Mum and Dad's. Mum has stacked all the envelopes on the coffee table. When I reached out and took one, she moved so fast to snatch it from my hand, she almost dropped her tea. 'They're not yours, Ada,' she scolded. 'They're for Elodie. She'll want to read them when she's back from her trip.'

Without a word, Dad got up from the sofa and left the room. Tea undrunk. Mum didn't even flinch as he closed the door behind him with a bit more force than was needed.

~~I think he'll leave her if she doesn't snap out of it.~~

I stared at our mother and, for the first time in my adult life, felt like a scared little girl, wondering who to call when your parents have mentally checked out.

'Mum,' I said gently. 'You know Elodie isn't on a trip.'

Her chin jutted out in the way it always does when she feels attacked, just like that Christmas she had her friend knit us those itchy, puke-green jumpers and we refused to put them on.

'The way we found her bedroom ... the glass, the blood,' I said. Mum closed her eyes and I think if she could've, she'd have stoppered her ears too. 'If she'd gone away on holiday, today of all days, she'd have called us,' I ventured. 'It's her birthday.'

Her eyes snapped open. ‘I know it’s her birthday. It was *me* in the hospital. It was *me* in labour for eleven hours. I know it’s her bloody birthday. Don’t you think I know?’

I stiffened. Forget eggshells, El, I was walking through a minefield and if I wasn’t very careful, I was going to get blown apart. ‘The investigators want to find her, but they need your help. Yours and Dad’s. If you agree to do the appeal with the media, and we get Elodie’s story out there, we have a better chance of bringing her home.’

‘Her story,’ repeated Mum angrily. ‘And what is her story? Does anyone know?’

I sighed. I couldn’t help it. She’s so ... *exasperating*.

She slammed her cup down onto the coffee table, tea sloshing over the rim and splashing onto your cards. ~~Ones you’ll never read if you’re dead.~~ ‘Don’t you sigh at me, Adaline,’ she seethed. ‘This isn’t some *fucking* event for you to organise.’ I couldn’t believe she swore. Mum never swears. I was so shocked by her language, I barely noticed her getting up. ‘You don’t understand what it’s like. How can you? You don’t have children. You’re not a mother.’

Not a mother.

How could she?

Not a mother. Not important. Not worthy. That’s what she meant. And she knows. She *knows* what I went through with the false pregnancy. She *knows* how long Ethan and I had been trying to conceive and failed every month. I could not believe she’d just said what she had just said.

I stood up. ‘I’ve got to go.’

Mum didn’t stop me. I got out of there as fast as I could.

To distract myself from my hurt and seething anger, I cleaned my house while I blared Britney Spears’ first album *Baby One More Time* because *no one* can feel down listening to bubble-gum pop.

Ethan was working late again – he arrived home just before 9 p.m. It’s amazing really, his ability to take off his jacket and his shoes without once looking up from his phone. Amazing also how he can be forever attached to his phone without answering a single one of my messages.

‘Dinner’s cold so I put it in the oven for you. Again.’

He didn't notice my tone. 'Thanks, darling.'

I sat with him while he ate the long-past-its-best meal. We didn't talk. Ethan just scrolled and scrolled through his phone while I sat and waited for him to look up from the glow of his screen. Years ago, in the beginning, we'd go to a bar or restaurant and our phones were these forgotten devices that lay in the bottom of a bag or tucked away in a coat pocket. We'd talk until closing time when they'd finally kick us out. Off our heads on serotonin, we'd mock all those married couples who sat in silence, having run out of things to say to one another years before, promising we'd *never* become them. So, is this karma or inevitability?

Finally, his head popped up from his screen. 'Are you ovulating?'

I was so lost in thoughts of years ago, it took me a moment to process his question. 'I don't know.'

'My calendar says you might be ovulating. Have you checked?'

'No,' I answered, stupefied.

He was cross and sulky. 'Why not? You have to be on top of this, Ada. The doctor said.'

'I know what she said, but I've had much bigger things to worry about than cervical mucus,' I snapped. 'It slipped my mind.'

Ethan was so supportive right after you disappeared, cancelling meetings, taking time off work. I'm not unreasonable, I know his job is important, I know it's what keeps a beautiful, solar-panelled roof above our heads, and I knew he'd go back into the office eventually. I just thought he'd have more time off. During the tense conversation we had after he missed the lantern release, he told me, 'Life goes on, Ada. Elodie won't come back just because we've stopped living our lives and released a few tossing lanterns into the sky.'

I didn't tell anyone what he said – not Mum, not even Ruby, none of my friends – because I want people to love Ethan and I want people to love us together, which means only speaking positively of him. Anyway, he apologised for the lantern comment later, but he stood by what he said about life continuing as normal. 'We need routine,' he'd said. 'We need stability.'

Lowering his phone, he sighed. 'I know you've had more pressing matters, but this is important and it's time-sensitive.'

He was talking about my age. My eggs. My withering, less-than-sprightly eggs. I am thirty-three and if we want to carry a healthy baby to full term, then he's right, we're against the clock. For the last six months, I'd ignored my fertility app, silencing the notifications on my phone which have always made me uncomfortable; it's like getting a text from your vagina reminding you to fill it with a penis. 'Well, I haven't checked so I don't know. I'll start again tomorrow.'

He reached across the table and took my hand. In the first few years of our relationship, he took my hand all the time. Now, he only takes it to soothe an argument. Sometimes, I wish I could go back and spend one night with the Ethan I met all those years ago. He was so tanned and toned and youthful back then. Not like now, where his hair is receding, and he has the slightest paunch because he takes new clients out for dinner every week and doesn't have time for cycling like he did before his promotion.

'I'm sorry,' he said tenderly. 'I know you're missing Elodie. This is a bizarre situation, but we'll get through it like we get through everything – together.'

And just like the world forgave Hugh Grant after his appearance on Leno back in the 90s when he apologised for getting caught with a prostitute, I forgave my husband. He looked equally as repentant, equally as sheepish, and I thought, *Oh, I love him, I love him, I love him so much*. I know I've complained about him – to you, at least, but I *do* love him. We're married. We have a house together. No, we're no longer that young, carefree couple who talk endlessly and kiss in the middle of a cooking class, but we're still in love.

Then his hand slipped from mine and onto his phone in one motion, and I was forgotten again. Our touching moment evaporating in the sweaty, summer heat. 'It's Elodie's birthday today,' I said, pining for that connection.

'Hmm,' he said, because he was scrolling and refreshing, scrolling and refreshing, and not really listening.

'Me and Mum had a fight, actually.' I don't *do* emotional so I overcorrected as I spoke, my words coming out cool and clipped. Perhaps that's why he didn't respond. Perhaps he thought I wasn't bothered about the fight with Mum. Or perhaps he wasn't paying a blind bit of attention.

Sometimes I think Ethan has only two settings: on his phone or trying to impregnate me.

‘Sorry,’ he muttered. ‘I’ve just got to reply to this email.’

He tapped at the screen and I waited. And waited. I was close to slapping it out of his hand when he got to his feet, pocketing it. ‘Right, I need a shower,’ he said, coming around the table and kissing my cheek. ‘Can we talk about this when I’m done?’

While he showered and I tidied away dinner, my phone rang. It was Christopher. I immediately thought he was calling to tell me they’d arrested your stalker; you’d been found, and they were bringing you home. I was so overwhelmed with these thoughts, I accepted the call but couldn’t speak.

‘Ada ... you there?’

‘Yes, I’m here. Is there news?’

I heard him suck in a breath, which meant it wasn’t good.

~~I was thinking~~ they’ve found your body. He’s going to tell me they’ve found your body.

‘No, sorry. I was just calling to see how you are.’ A self-conscious laugh. ‘It’s Elodie’s birthday today, isn’t it? How’re you holding up?’

I leaned against the counter. If I closed my eyes and listened to the sound of his voice, I could pretend I was eighteen again, lying on my bed with my flippy Motorola pressed to my ear. ‘Not great, actually.’ He waited, genuinely interested to know more. ‘I had a fight with my mum about her delusional theory that Elodie’s hanging out on a beach, and she lost it, said some pretty hurtful things actually.’

‘I’m sorry.’ And he sounded sorry too. I imagined him with a look on his face of honest sympathy, just as he did in the police station car park after he interviewed me. ‘People say things they don’t mean when they’re under stress and heartache. This isn’t your garden-variety family strain either. Your mum’s just handling it differently.’

‘I’ll say. I just feel so ... so ...’ I grasped for the word, to understand the swirling in the pit of my stomach. No doubt you’d know instantly, you’re so much more in touch with your feelings than I am. ‘Alone,’ I said. ‘I’m so alone.’

I was glad we were on the phone so he couldn’t see my teary eyes. Ethan hates it when I cry. He says women only cry to end a fight.

‘Well, you’re not alone,’ said Christopher. ‘Even if you feel like you are.’

We rang off, and I couldn’t stop thinking about how Ethan dismissed me. Perhaps he was just tired. Had a long day. We’d talk about it when he was out of the shower and then maybe I wouldn’t feel so guilty for opening up to Christopher.

I finished cleaning and went upstairs. Ethan was already asleep, sprawled across our king-sized bed. I stood over him, hurt, then I got changed into pyjamas, banging about louder than needed in a pathetic, passive-aggressive attempt to wake him before climbing into bed beside him. I scrolled through my phone, through all the well-wishers, through the people I haven’t spoken to since secondary school, through strangers and friends alike. I don’t know if they’re kind-hearted or morbidly fascinated. I didn’t reply to any of them, but I did think, *look at all these people who want me to talk to them about you, about how I’m coping, and look at my husband who’s snoozing soundly.*

From my nightstand drawer, I pulled out Elodie, the tiny Sylvania rabbit. I’d gone up into the attic earlier and brought her down, saddened I’d left her up there all alone for so long. I fell asleep with her held tightly in my hand.

In the morning, Elodie was still there, but my husband wasn’t.

## Chapter Twenty-Two

### 18 Days Missing

#### **Elodie Fray**

Today, I am twenty-nine.

Before I can let my lack of achievements creep up on me, I push them aside. I shower, dress, and head downstairs. ‘Do You Love Me’ by The Contours – the soundtrack to my youth – blares loudly from the kitchen. The smell of sugary batter hits me as soon as I step inside. Jack is at the stove, making pancakes. He rolls his shoulders, his back muscles rippling beneath his T-shirt. ‘Happy birthday, Fray,’ he calls. In one smooth motion, he tosses the pancake into the air – it spins, crisp and golden – before landing in the pan. He bows, pleased with himself, and I clap.

Surrounded by balloons filled with copper-coloured confetti, jugs of wildflowers and birthday bunting, we eat together. But guilt mixes with the maple syrup and fluffy pancakes because, even with all the effort Jack has made, I’m missing my family. Knowing it wouldn’t be fair to admit this, after all the effort he’s gone to, I eat and smile and thank him over and over. When we’re done, he says, ‘What’s next?’

‘Cake please.’

‘Who said I have cake?’

‘It’s a birthday, there’s always cake. It’s a cardinal, birthday-celebration rule. Besides, I saw muffins.’

‘Muffins are addictive. Sure you want to start down that dark path, Fray?’

‘Because they’re a gateway drug?’

‘Absolutely. One minute you’re biting into a blueberry and poppyseed and the next you’re sitting in your chocolate-ganache-stained pants strung out on gateau and wondering what time of day it is.’

I laugh.

‘Anyway,’ he whispers. ‘Close your eyes.’

I do as he says. The insides of my lids are painted red by the sun streaming through the window. I hear him behind me. A cupboard door opening. Something being taken from it. The rustle of tissue paper. Then, I hear the smile in his voice, as soft as silk against my ear. ‘Open them.’

A mint-coloured box sits on the table in front of me, tied with a thick cream ribbon. There’s a prickle of excitement as my fingers catch the satin. Inside is a green lace dress. Expensive. Beautiful.

‘Jack, this is stunning.’

‘And this too,’ he says, producing a smaller, second gift box from behind his back.

Inside is a pair of dark green silk pyjamas. I haven’t worn women’s clothes in weeks and I’ve never owned pyjamas as beautiful as these.

‘To replace the ruined ones.’ The set I was wearing the night I was taken were from a supermarket.

‘You *really* shouldn’t have.’

Jack’s mobile rings. He pulls it from his pocket and frowns at the caller ID. ‘It’s the St Ives banker; I’ve got to take this. Reception is better out front.’

When he’s gone, I start clearing away the plates. When I make pancakes, there’s batter on the countertop and a stack of utensils in the sink, but the only evidence of Jack having made anything are the leftovers and crockery we used. I carry everything to the sink, but we’re out of washing-up liquid so I wander into the utility room off to the side of the hallway.

But, as I’m searching through storage baskets, I accidentally knock a bottle of detergent behind the metal shelving unit. Sighing, I drag the unit away from the wall to retrieve it.

Then I see it.

A door. It’s painted the same eggshell white as the walls. If I hadn’t physically moved the shelving unit, I’d never have discovered it. This isn’t the entrance to the basement; that’s on the other side of the house. There are two deadbolts on the outside and a keyhole lock beneath the handle.

A feeling of wrongness slips down my spine. I slide the bolts out of their holsters. They’re stiff, like they haven’t been used in a long time. My

fingers curl around the door handle, my heart beating a little faster. Maybe I should wait for Jack. Or ... I push down on the handle. It's locked.

In the hallway, I peer through the window, but Jack is still on the phone, and I don't want to disturb him, so I search the little grey-painted key box mounted on the wall beside the front door. Ada has the same one, bought as a Christmas present by Kathryn last year. I pluck all the keys from their little hooks and try each one until I hear the unmistakable click of success. Then I stare down into yawning darkness. When I flip the switch on the pantry-side wall, the basement is bathed in artificial light. Carefully, I make my way down the narrow stairs and realise the basement is split into two halves. The half I've always known is full of old kayaking equipment, but this half has the makings of a bedroom with its double bed, nightstand and chest of drawers. I try to open them, but they're locked. To the right of the bed is a second door which leads into a little bathroom with a tiny shower cubicle, a toilet and a sink. I turn back to the nightstand and try the top drawer. It opens easily. Inside are loose sheets of paper, stationery, a CD, and an old Nokia, which I pick up eagerly, wondering if it would still work.

'Elodie?'

I jump. The Nokia flies from my hand, hits the floor and skitters beneath the bed.

Jack is standing on the stairs.

'Did you know this place was here?' I ask.

'Yeah, of course.'

'How did I not know about a secret room?'

'Didn't know it was a secret.'

'It was hidden behind a shelving unit!'

'Not very well if you found it.'

He's trying to be breezy, like it's perfectly normal to have a secret basement room in your house. No different from having windows or light switches. 'Jack, why didn't I know about this place?'

He casually scratches the corner of his mouth with his thumb. Casually shoves his hands into his pockets. Casually makes his way further down the stairs. Only, there is nothing casual about Jack right now. He's uncomfortable. *Why* is he uncomfortable?

‘Jack?’

‘I don’t like this room. Let’s go.’

‘Why?’

He looks away.

‘Why?’ I move closer to him, trying to catch his eye. ‘Jack?’

His jaw is clenched, his mouth is a hard line. He isn’t just uncomfortable. He’s tense. I lay a hand on his arm and he flinches, ever so slightly. Some of the tension creeps into my own body. I wait for him to open up because he won’t be pushed.

‘This is where I stayed whenever I came with Jeffrey. When it was just the two of us.’

‘Your Easter trips?’

He nods.

I always thought it odd that Jeffrey and Jack came away to Wisteria alone, but Mum said Kathryn insisted, claiming it was important they had time to bond.

‘Okay ...’ I say gently. ‘But why would you sleep down here when there are several spare rooms in the house?’ I make a show of looking at the windowless walls and the basic furnishings. It pales in comparison to the lavish bedrooms above.

He suddenly looks very young and vulnerable. I reach out and take his hand.

‘I didn’t just sleep down here, Fray. I *lived* down here.’

‘But ... why?’

‘It wasn’t a choice. The moment we arrived, he’d toss me down here.’

‘That doesn’t make sense. You went hiking and kayaking and had BBQs on the beach.’

He’s shaking his head. ‘Never happened.’

‘I saw the photos. Every trip you’d come back with photos. I saw them, I know I did.’

His laugh is mirthless and sends ice down my spine. ‘Yeah, a couple of hours before we’d leave for Crosshaven, Jeffrey would have me posing all over the place like some fucking catalogue model. Every photograph you

saw was taken in one afternoon. He brought spare clothes, made me change over and over so it'd look like they were shot on different days.'

I stand with my mouth open, searching for words that don't come. Anger and sorrow sludge their way in as I imagine that wiry, golden-haired boy I raced down to the little beach, banished to the basement.

'Why didn't you tell me?' I ask gently.

He shrugs. 'Who wants to admit they're that fucking unloved by their own father?'

We're both quiet. I want to tell him that Jeffrey *did* love him, but we both know it's probably a lie. 'Kathryn – did she know?'

'I told her. Once. Didn't believe me. Thought I was making it up so I didn't have to keep coming out here with him.'

Rage bubbles to the surface of me. 'Seriously?'

'She was in denial. She wanted Jeffrey to love me like he loved Charlie.' There's a quiver to his voice which makes my heart ache. 'My father was smart; whenever we were around others after we'd come back from a trip, he'd be as nice to me as he was to Charlie. He kept it up for days after. He was so good at pretending even I started to forget what he'd done. I can't blame my mother for believing him over me, not when he was such a good actor.'

Several times, Jack has compared the relationship I have with my parents to the one he has with his, but I think that's to make himself feel better because it's obvious he had it a thousand times worse.

I hug him tightly. 'I'm sorry.' It's a weak offering, but it's all I have.

'Come on,' he says, 'let's get out of here.'

He takes my hand and leads me up the narrow stairs. At the top, a thought leaves my brain on a breath. 'What reason do you think Jeffrey had for not liking you?'

This is a question I've tentatively asked before, but, as usual, Jack becomes hard like granite. Then he turns side on to me and says, 'Who knows what went on in his fucked-up brain in the years before he blew it out all over his office?' He shrugs. 'Crazy doesn't deal in reason.'

He's telling me a half-truth. I think he knows, or at the very least, has an idea. But I don't push it. Not tonight.

## Chapter Twenty-Three

### 19 Days Missing

#### **Elodie Fray**

The first time I kissed Jack was on the last day I saw Jeffrey Westwood alive.

We were at Jack's house, sitting on the ledge outside his bedroom window, our bare feet dangling two storeys above the garden below. It was late, there were stars in the sky and the smokiness of a bonfire in the air.

Kathryn and Charlie were visiting Jack's aunt in Taunton, and Jeffrey was locked away in the belly of the house, poring over emails in his study. We were alone. Jack's mood was stony, which probably had something to do with the gash that split his bottom lip. One that hadn't been there when he'd walked me to school that morning.

'You need to tell Kathryn. If she knew ...'

'I've tried. She doesn't believe me. Doesn't want to.'

'But the bruises.'

'Brushed off as fights at college.'

'She can't be that gullible.'

'She can when she wants to be.'

We lapsed into silence.

'Jeffrey isn't a good person,' he said simply.

'No, I don't think he is.'

Silence stretched on. I scooted a little closer. Our arms touched, mine bare and his in a leather jacket I picked up from a charity shop for his birthday. We looked at the sky. There were so many stars. I wanted to say something knowledgeable about constellations, or something profound about life and the universe and how time was finite, and in five years, when he'd moved out and had a job, none of this would matter. It would feel as far away as

the stars above us. But I didn't because Jack whispered, 'I don't know if I'm a good person either.'

I frowned. 'How can you say that?'

He shrugged. 'Maybe the apple doesn't fall far from the tree.'

'You're so much more like your mum. Everyone says so.'

'Weak.'

'Jack ...'

'I never want kids, El. I never want my child to feel as disappointed in me as I do in him. I couldn't stand it.'

I took his hand in mine. 'You can't be a bad person if everything you do is done with love. That's the difference between you and him.'

I was fifteen and young and very much in love with Jack Westwood. The kind of intense, feverish love that makes everything else turn to ash.

I loved his anger and ambition.

I loved his weathered sketchpad filled with drawings of all the different places we'd live when we left Crosshaven: a lofty London apartment, a thatched cottage, a rustic lakeside cabin.

I loved that he could twirl a pocket knife through his fingers with the same ease as he could a number two pencil.

I loved his mop of golden curls and the sharp angle of his jaw.

I loved that he was predictably unpredictable.

But I wasn't brave enough to tell him. To tell anyone.

'It's getting cold,' he said, shrugging out of his jacket and draping it around me. It was warm from his body. Far too wide across the shoulders. It smelt like him. I wanted to kiss him right there, on that ledge, with the earth beneath us and the stars above, and his thrifted jacket curled around me.

The heat in his gaze told me he knew what I wanted.

He smiled. Then he swooped down and kissed me.

I sank into the feel of his mouth on mine, into the hot press of his body. I was gentle, careful not to catch his split lip. Jack groaned, wanting more. He kissed me harder, until I was lightheaded and spinning; the only thing keeping me tethered were his hands on my waist, sliding beneath my top and along my bare back. His fingers moved to unhook my bra.

We were reckless and certain.

Young and wanting.

Breathless and wild.

‘What the hell are you doing?’

We sprang apart. Jack caught me before I fell. Jeffrey loomed behind us, his face twisted into a snarl of disgust.

Jack swivelled around and hopped down from the windowsill.

‘What did I tell you?’ barked Jeffrey, his Philly accent thicker in anger.

He shrugged.

Then Jeffrey was on him. He grabbed Jack by the throat and swung him into the wall hard enough to make it shake.

Jeffrey brought his face inches from Jack’s. ‘What did I tell you?’

Jack lounged in his father’s grip, like a bored model who’d had too many cameras shoved in his face, but his trembling hands betrayed him.

‘What did I *fuckin*g tell you?’

My heart beat so fast, I was sure it would crack a rib.

‘You hear me, boy?’

I wanted to get the hell out of there, but even if fear hadn’t rooted me to the spot, I couldn’t leave Jack.

‘I hear you.’

‘Fucking punk,’ he spat before letting go of him.

They stared at one another, chests heaving.

‘It’s time for her to go home,’ Jeffrey said.

Jack made to move towards me, but Jeffrey shoved him away.

The car ride home with Jack’s father was silent.

Jack and I have never talked about the kiss. It was like it never really happened, like it was a dream or a film. I thought maybe, understandably, Jack’s fear of his father outweighed his desire for me. Not wanting to cause friction between our families, I didn’t even tell my parents what’d happened. I should’ve, because a few days after Jeffrey’s overreaction, he killed himself. Maybe if I’d said something that summer, someone would’ve realised how unstable he was.

Years later, I got drunk on a dangerous mix of tequila and vodka and told Ada about the kiss and Jeffrey’s outburst. The next morning, she wanted to know more, but I was so ashamed of not being good enough for Jack, so

guilty for not telling anyone about Jeffrey's extreme reaction while he was alive, I pretended to have no memory of our conversation.

Now, since finding the basement room, my guilt has lessened, replaced by rage as I picture a small, scared Jack isolated in the windowless space for days. My hatred towards Jeffrey is ugly; I catch myself thinking I am glad of the bullet that cracked his skull like a watermelon. Glad he was left to bloat and rot in the August heat. Glad he died all alone.

I am curled up on the sofa with a blanket because the weather is unseasonably cool for the first week in September and I watch the news to distract myself. I get a jolt when I see my parents standing behind a pine podium lined with mics. On an easel to their right is a giant photograph of me – the one from my sister's rehearsal dinner. Dad is thoroughly ironed and combed and crisp, just as he was at my graduation, except now there are shadows beneath his eyes. Mum is wearing a buttercup yellow dress and her lips are painted pastel pink. As though she's about to host a picnic in the park.

Cameras flash. She looks dazed and I imagine there are spots dancing in her vision. My chest is tight; my ribcage pressing too hard against my heart as I wait for one of them to speak.

Mum clears her throat. 'Thank you all for coming today.' It's the first time I've heard her voice in weeks; it's like drinking a sugary, hot cup of tea. She pauses. Glances down at the sheet of paper in her hands, and I notice how pale she is. And tired. 'Our daughter, Elodie, is quick-witted and kind-hearted, she is beautiful and intelligent. She has been missing for three weeks and we want her back. We miss her terribly.' She picks up the glass of water on the stand and sips it. There is silence as the reporters wait for her to continue. She takes a moment before looking directly into the camera. 'Elodie, love, if you're watching this, if you can hear me: come home. Come home. We just ...' Her voice cracks and the paper shakes in her grip. The cameras flash again. A symphony of click, click, click. I feel the sting of tears as I watch her holding back her own. 'We just want to see you. We just ...' but she can't finish because she has dissolved into sobs. Ada steps into shot and Mum folds into her.

Dad leans into the mic, too close. 'To the man who broke into my daughter's home and took her from her bed: return her. We want her back.'

He's seething. The camera zooms in. He's been drinking. I can see it in the redness of his eyes and the heaviness of his lids. 'If I find you, I swear to god, I'll—'

Ada swoops in, putting her arms around our parents and cutting Dad off smoothly. 'Thank you to the media for taking our message to the public.' She is, as ever, collected and confident. Her voice doesn't waver with emotion like our mother's or bristle with anger like our father's. 'And to those of you who have sent us messages of love and support, and to the police for their time and effort in searching for Elodie: thank you. That's all we have to say for now.'

Then all three are escorted off camera as reporters yell out their questions.

I turn off the TV and sit in silence. I can still see my mother's trembling hands, my father's red-rimmed eyes.

Great, streaming ribbons of guilt tighten painfully around my chest, making it harder and harder to breathe.

*What have I done?*

*How can I fix it?*

My decision is made: I am going home.

## Chapter Twenty-Four

### 20 Days Missing

#### **Adaline Archer**

You have now been missing for almost three weeks. I'm sitting alone in bed, nursing day two of this hangover on an aggressively sunny, yet chilly, Friday in September. I'm no longer young enough to bounce back after copious amounts of fermented grapes, and writing to you feels more doable than finding the remote to watch reruns of *Dawson's Creek*.

Two nights ago, Mum turned up at my house in the early hours of the morning, barefoot and crying. It had finally sunk in: you are gone, you are not sunning yourself somewhere hot. We sat together in the lounge while she sobbed into her dressing gown.

Despite having an early start, Ethan got out of bed and made me and Mum some tea. While I comforted her, he put fresh sheets on the spare bed and texted Dad so he wouldn't worry when he woke up and she was gone. He did it all without complaining and I was reminded again why I fell in love with him. One moment, I wonder why we are still married, and the next, I can't imagine my life without him.

I slept in the guest room with Mum, wrapping my arms tightly around her, inhaling the smell of her lemony shampoo. We used to sleep together like that, do you remember? You'd creep into *my* room after a nightmare, not our parents', and you'd get into my bed and fall asleep, your warm little body curled up against mine.

Over breakfast the next morning, Mum announced she'd called our family liaison officer and agreed to do the press conference later that day. Ethan left for work, but he'd been so great with Mum the night before, I didn't mind. By mid-morning, the house was full: Dad, Kathryn, Jack, Charlie and Tobin joined us, along with some officials who locked themselves in my

living room with our parents to brief them on what to expect and what to say when they addressed the media.

In the kitchen, Charlie helped make cups of tea and little plates of sandwiches.

‘Good lord, your house is like something from a magazine,’ said Charlie.

It never gets old hearing how wonderful my home is. I take pride in it. I always dreamt of having a house like this, and enjoy that people envy what I’ve created, even if they do sneer behind my back that without Ethan, I wouldn’t have any of it. What people forget is I won Ethan over. He could’ve had anyone, and he chose me. I *earned* this house, so I thank Charlie for the compliment.

He’s sweet, Charlie. At Wisteria, while Jack whisked you away, Charlie and I used to take the kayak out and paddle to a little alcove. It was innocent enough. Though, when we were fourteen, he kissed me. It was gentle and awkward. I think I knew he was gay before he did.

‘She’s going to come home,’ said Charlie, cutting a sandwich into triangles.

‘I know,’ I said, even though I didn’t know. Nobody did.

‘Jack won’t rest until she’s found.’

I get the impression Charlie and Jack aren’t very close because Jack’s only ever been interested in forging an unbreakable bond with you. Charlie lives in London, and despite Jack travelling there fairly often for work, he only bothers to visit Charlie once a year. He’s exchanged obligatory Easter escapades with Jeffrey to Wisteria, for obligatory Easter escapades with Charlie in London.

‘How’s Jack coping?’ I asked.

‘He’s working away a lot. I think being in Crosshaven is hard for him without her. Work’s a good distraction.’

‘Where’s he working?’

Charlie shrugged. ‘London, Cornwall. Wherever. He called the other night, telling me how he wished he’d been here the night she was ... He’s convinced it’s his fault.’

‘Unlike Jack to take responsibility for anything,’ I said before I could stop myself.

Nothing is ever usually his fault. All those fights he got into at school? The other boy started it. All those times he mouthed off to a teacher or got angry and kicked a desk or a wall? The staff were out to get him. All the internships Jeffrey arranged to teach Jack responsibility which ended up letting him go? The companies weren't innovative enough, creative enough, didn't appreciate him enough.

Charlie stiffened beside me, twin urges wrestling within him: defend his brother, be nice to the woman whose sister might never be found. As ever, Charlie was gentle and awkward. 'Jack's life wasn't easy, you know that. And finding Dad's body the way he did ...'

'*They*. Jack took my little sister into that study.'

'He didn't know, Ada.'

We muddled through the silence.

'So,' I ventured, 'why *did* Jeffrey make Jack's life so difficult?'

Charlie put the sandwiches onto a plate and wiped his hands on the towel. When he looked at me, he was no longer gentle and awkward, he looked ... uncomfortable.

'Your mother wants you,' said Dad, appearing in the doorway.

He looks older. He's never looked his age, our dad, but lately he does. You've aged him.

Outside the guest room, I listened to Jack tell Mum, 'If you don't want to go through with the appeal today, you don't have to. No one would think any less of you, Meredith. Elodie certainly wouldn't.'

'I don't know what to do.'

'You look tired. We can call it off – it's not too late.'

What was he doing? We'd spent days trying to convince her to do this. Blood boiling, I pushed open the door. 'Got you a glass of water, Mum. How're we doing? All set for this afternoon? Dad was just saying how proud he is that you're doing this today.' A white lie. In my peripheral vision, Jack stiffened.

Mum looked up at me, doe-eyed and hopeful, and it was obvious things between our parents weren't good. 'He did?'

I nodded. Jack's eyes burned into me, but I ignored him. 'Absolutely. So' – I clapped my hands together – 'where're these dresses?'

Most of her options were in appropriately dark hues, all except for one brightly coloured number.

‘Jack’s choice,’ said Kathryn, holding it up and looking as confused as I felt.

Canary yellow didn’t exactly scream ‘serious address to the nation’. It was too bright. Too cheery. Completely wrong. I took it from Kathryn and held it out between my thumb and forefinger, treating it with the distaste it deserved. ‘Mum, I don’t think yellow is the way to go.’

Jack swept in, crouching down in front of Mum on the bed and placing his hands on her knees. I didn’t like his hands on her at all. ‘Black is for funerals. This isn’t a funeral. Elodie isn’t dead. She’s missing and we’re going to bring her home.’

Tears in her eyes, Mum nodded.

Jack went on, placing the cherry on top of his bullshit cake. ‘Elodie is a warm person. She’d like the yellow.’

‘And Noah liked Elodie in yellow too,’ said Mum and I swear Jack’s expression darkened. Though Noah was adored by us all, I’m not sure he was even liked by Jack.

Switching sides, Kathryn nodded along too.

‘Stop fussing,’ snapped Mum when I told her, *again*, that yellow was far too chipper.

For the rest of the day, Jack wore a shit-eating grin.

You always see the best in people. You root for the underdog. Which has blinded you to how smarmy and sly Jack is. When we were kids, other little girls wanted puppies, but you were obsessed with getting an elderly rescue from the shelter, something broken you could nurture. In Jack, you assumed you had a friendly Labrador (loyal and affectionate) when what you actually have is a rabid Rottweiler (territorial and vicious). I remember the way he marched you through my garden party, handed me that bottle of Dom Pérignon and made that nasty remark about my schooling. You were mortified, El, *mortified*. Yes, things between us that afternoon had been coated in a familiar frost, and maybe you thought I deserved it, but that little attack was led by him. He’s so ... *controlling*, and he only gets away with it because he’s good-looking and full of false charm.

The conference went as well as it could, I suppose. Mum was in pieces afterwards, and Dad went for a walk to sober up from the drink no one realised he'd had until it was too late. He's drunk more in the last three weeks than he has in the last three years. Mum performed her wifely duties, defending Dad even though I could see she was upset with him. 'He just needed to take the edge off, love. He's been stressed.'

I was surprised to see Christopher standing outside my front door after our TV appearance, holding a bottle of red. His hair was shiny, and he was wearing a gorgeous suede jacket. He seemed a little awkward as I got out of the car and went towards him. 'I picked this up for you,' he said, lifting the bottle. 'You did really well today, taking control of the situation the way you did. I, uh, forgot how capable you are.'

'Capable?'

He nodded. 'Even at seventeen you knew what you wanted and how to get it. You never needed anyone's help.'

'Well, the house wasn't exactly paid for by my wages.'

He looked over his shoulder at the house, as though seeing it for the first time. 'No, I didn't mean that. I meant you know how to handle yourself, how to take charge, organise people.' He smiled. 'Remember my eighteenth birthday when we hired those cabins in the Lake District?'

You'd have loved it, El. Waking every morning to the sound of laughter. The cool lake water on sun-warmed skin. Bikinis laid out on the jetty to dry. Dancing barefoot around the bonfire. Summer 2006 was the best summer of my life. It's the summer I fell in love with Christopher Jones. 'What about it?'

'The fire.'

As soon as he mentioned it, I could smell the smoke. It was an accident; someone lit the log fire and didn't keep an eye on it.

'You launched out of bed and banged on doors. You woke people up and got them out. You directed people. Took control. Everyone else was running around, panicking, but you were ...' He shook his head. Then he met my eyes and I think maybe I wasn't the only one who fell in love that summer. 'You never need rescuing. You're so capable, Ada. You haven't changed.'

I didn't know what to say, but my heart was beating hard. I never realised anyone saw me like that, in a way I've never even seen myself. 'Thank

you.'

I smiled, feeling good about myself for the first time in ... well, for the first time in a while, and took the bottle from him. When our hands grazed, I got a hot, lustful flashback to being a teenager again, stopping off on the way up to the cabin and letting Christopher go down on me in the back of his brother's Nissan Micra to 'Dani California' playing on the radio. God, we were so young.

'Is this a personal visit?' I asked, my voice low and husky. *Why* was my voice low and husky? I'm not a cheater. I've never cheated. I wouldn't.

'Personal.' He glanced down at my ring finger. Cleared his throat. 'Anyway, I just wanted to come by and drop this off. Seriously, Ada, well done today.'

Then he walked down the drive, climbed into his car and left.

It took a couple of seconds for me to turn and go into the house. I read a text from Ethan informing me he had a meeting Friday morning, so it made sense to stay in London until then. I took the bottle of wine my ex-boyfriend had given me, curled up on the sofa and drank the entire thing all by myself in my big, beautiful house, and tried not to think about you ~~or~~ ~~how lonely I am.~~

## Chapter Twenty-Five

### 20 Days Missing

#### **Elodie Fray**

The next morning Jack returns to Wisteria and my face is mask-tight with tears. He's barely through the front door when I pounce. 'Please take me home,' I say. 'I need to go back. I can't stay here anymore. I need to leave. I need—'

'Whoa. Slow down. What's happened?'

He wraps his arms around me and keeps me pressed tightly to him. My head is buried in his shoulder and I'm sobbing. I regret coming here. I should never have agreed to it. I should've pushed harder to go home after Jack found me in the car.

He makes soothing noises into my hair while I dampen his shirt with tears. When I pull back, he keeps his hands on my upper arms and I'm glad. He's solid and warm. 'What's going on?'

'I saw the news. I watched the appeal.'

He stiffens.

'My parents were so upset. I feel *sick* with guilt. I need to go home.' Urgency churns my stomach and I struggle to draw breath. 'Please can you take me back? I would've left already but I don't have a car and—'

'You want to go back to Crosshaven?'

I nod.

He stares. 'You are joking.' Anger simmers beneath his skin, tightening his muscles, tightening his fingers around my arms. Just as I'm about to tell him he's hurting me, he lets go and shoves past me.

Confused and unsure, I don't follow right away. In the kitchen is a furious symphony of cupboard doors opening and slamming shut. Eventually, I go to him. His back is to me. He clutches a tumbler of whisky.

‘Why’re you so mad?’

‘Why do you think, Elodie?’ He wheels around. There’s a livid jut to his chin. He brings his face close to mine. ‘Jesus fucking Christ. I told you not to watch *anything* with your family in it, didn’t I? I knew you couldn’t handle it.’

I take a step back. ‘I was only ever meant to be missing for a few days. It’s been three weeks.’

‘You agreed to an extension.’

‘Yes, because you said we should wait until my parents held a press conference. Well, now they have, and I want to go back.’

‘What’re you going to do, Elodie?’ His voice grows fake-bright. ‘Just drive back home, hop out the car and shout, “Ta da – gotcha!” or maybe you’ll just grab an apron and turn up at Mugs tomorrow for the early shift, pretend like half the fucking nation hasn’t been looking for you?’

‘Don’t be facetious, Jack. We can stick to the plan: I was taken, he wore a mask, I didn’t see his face.’

He thrusts his hand back through his hair and shakes his head.

‘I want to go home.’

‘The police hauled me into the station.’

I swallow, digesting this revelation. ‘You knew they’d question you.’

‘Not questioning, Elodie, *interrogating*.’ He pours himself a second glass.

‘But you have the perfect alibi. They can’t connect you to any of this.’

‘They’re trying. I was held for six hours last night. Going over and over the same shit.’ He takes another desperate gulp. ‘They suspect me.’

My stomach clenches. ‘How?’

‘I don’t know. But they do. And it’s going to look really suspicious if you reappear the day after they’ve leaned on me.’ He rubs the back of his neck.

‘Jack ... my parents are in pieces. I need to see them.’

He scoffs.

‘What?’

‘Nothing.’

‘What is it?’

‘Just leave it, El.’

‘No. I want to know – what’s happened?’

Silence. Then, 'I don't want to hurt you.'

My heart races with trepidation. 'Jack. Please.'

He drains his glass, then stares down into it. I can see him weighing up his options. He knows I won't let it go. 'I was the one who convinced your parents to hold the press conference.'

'Okay ...'

'Your mother's been in denial. Even faced with the trashed bedroom and your passport being found there, she was adamant you were on a holiday. I thought that's why she refused to appeal. I told her to do it, everyone did. She wouldn't listen. Then, when I was at the house, I heard your parents talking in the kitchen.'

I am silent, waiting for him to go on. I can see we're getting to the kernel of it. Jack's mouth is pressed into a tight, reluctant line.

'When I heard what they were saying, I saw red. I lost it.' His knuckles have gone white around the glass. I lay an encouraging hand over his, and some of the tension eases. 'We had a blazing row. Ada called the police. That's when they hauled me in for questioning.'

For a second, the shock renders me incapable. 'You fought with my parents?'

'Yeah.' He looks away, ashamed.

'But why? What did you hear them say?' Even though I have no idea what he's about to tell me, I have a feeling everything is about to change. I squeeze his hand, silently telling him it's okay. I want to know.

'They said they were lucky it wasn't Ada who'd gone missing.'

My skin shakes over my bones.

*Lucky it wasn't Ada who'd gone missing.*

Jack is still speaking; his lips are moving quickly but I can't hear anything over the sound of blood pulsing in my ears.

*Lucky it wasn't Ada.*

He takes the empty tumbler from my hand and fills it with water from the sink.

*Lucky it wasn't Ada.*

He is holding it out to me, but I can't take it. Can't move.

I never wanted to be in a competition with my sister, but my parents made it that way. They spent years piling the weight of expectation onto my shoulders. *You're* the academic one. *You're* going to succeed. *You're* going to do more, be more. Then Ada married Ethan, and I gave up my London life and my parents made it clear: I'd lost the race. I'd let them down.

My friends have always shrugged off my concerns that my parents preferred Ada, reassuring me everyone felt their sibling was the favourite, and my parents, like all parents, loved us equally because that's what parents do. They have a favourite colour, a favourite season but never do they have a favourite child. It's an inconceivable notion to those of us without children. Everyone knows parents will never answer when questioned which of their children they would save in matters of life and death. But my parents have, haven't they? No one even asked, and they chose her.

Jack was right: first born, most loved.

'Elodie?' Jack is pushing my hair back from my face. 'I'm sorry, I shouldn't have said anything.'

'It's fine.'

'I got wound up hearing you feel sorry for them after everything they said. I told Meredith to wear something black, muted – it's respectful, but she and Ada wanted bright. Bold.' He snorts, as though disgusted by the memory. 'You know they're still going ahead with Ruby's baby shower? It's all they talk about. Yeah, they're worried about you, but not half as much as I'd expected them to be. I don't think it will do them any harm if we wait a while longer. Maybe they'll give a shit if we drag this out.'

I am furious, which is better than unloved and wrecked. I take Jack's glass from his hand. 'You're right. Fuck 'em.' Then I knock back the burning whisky.

For the rest of the day and well into the evening, Jack works hard to bring me out of my stony mood, but I am Pygmalion's wife; ivory-made. Cold. He tells me I am loved. He *insists*, but my ears are unhearing, marble shells. He gets Kathryn's old record player and vinyl records from the loft. We sit on the rug in the lounge, drinking wine and listening to music from our youth. He's trying to take us back to a time when things were simpler, when we weren't faking an abduction and hiding out from the police. 'My Girl'

by The Temptations is playing, and I feel myself become warm like candle wax. When I was little, me and Mum would dance around our living room to this song – just the two of us – my feet in her white patent stilettos.

I could cry.

He strokes my hair, and I close my eyes to trap the tears.

With Noah gone, Jack is the only person left in my life who truly loves me.

This thought rises, then floats; it is both comforting and sad.

## Chapter Twenty-Six

### 25 Days Missing

#### **Adaline Archer**

Since the appeal, things have been ~~unbearable~~ intense. Mum and Dad get dozens of letters every day, ranging from kind to cruel. We had the option for them to be opened and read by police before being passed to us. Mum refused. She wants to read Every. Single. Letter.

Most are from people wanting to tell us we're in their thoughts and prayers, one or two are from those who've also had a family member disappear, the odd few are from sociopaths who get a kick out of sending letters claiming to have you chained up in their attic. I pass letters like that on to the police. It's strange to think that one of those letters could be a confession from your abductor and I've held it in my hand.

For weeks, I was desperate for Mum to rejoin reality and accept you were taken, and now she has, I think she was better off before. She cries and mithers and scrolls endlessly through the internet, reading facts about missing people, then spouting them at random.

A couple of days ago, over slices of cake at Kathryn's house, she said, 'Around 100,000 adults go missing in the UK every year.'

'Oh gosh,' said Kathryn, then we all stumbled through the resulting silence.

It made me think though. That's a huge number. Missing people are like bobby pins; over time so many of them vanish, but where do they go?

When I popped over to our parents' yesterday, she said, 'Sex trafficking doesn't just happen in foreign countries, you know, it happens in the UK too.'

Dad goes on long walks late at night. He says he's thinking but I'm sure he's looking for you. He came by my house the other night with his toolbox

and walked around fixing things that didn't really need fixing.

'I've ordered you a security light,' he told me.

'I have one.'

'This is better. Brighter.'

'We don't need it.'

'It's coming tomorrow.'

'You don't have to do that.'

'You don't rent. You own. What's the problem?'

'No problem, but—'

'Let me install the damn light, will you?'

I looked at our dad and I had that feeling again that he's shrunk since you were taken. When we were kids, I thought even a bus couldn't take him down. That childish belief he is indestructible hasn't ever faded. Until now, when it seems all it would take is a strong gust of wind. Dad is practical, not emotional. If I take after anyone in our family, it's Dad. If our roles were reversed and he appeared at your door late at night looking small and desperate to do something, to *fix* something, you would fling your arms around him and shower his face with kisses while he grumbled and half-heartedly pushed you away. But I am not you and you are not here.

'Sure,' I said. 'So, it'll be here tomorrow.'

He nodded.

'I'll, uh, make lunch when you come over then, shall I?'

Another short nod. And there we have it. He fixes lights and I fix lunches.

The next morning, in the supermarket getting ingredients for his visit, I was stopped *eleven* times by people who recognised me. I assumed a new identity the day I went from Miss Fray to Mrs Archer, but that was a choice. I had no say in becoming *that missing woman's sister*.

Like the letters, it was a mixed bag. Some wanted the inside scoop, sidling up close and talking in low conspiratorial voices to ask if there was any news. Others approached with a sympathetic head tilt and well-meaning smiles and wanted to tell me I was in their thoughts. It's the criers I can't cope with, middle-aged women with red eyes and dripping noses telling me how sorry they are, how awful it is. I become ironing-board-stiff in their

arms, and they seem disappointed and confused I don't dissolve with them. I've decided all food shopping will now be done online.

By the time our parents arrived, the tea was made and the biscuits were out. Mum adores the Waitrose chocolate biscuits I bring out for guests. As always, Dad moaned you can buy the same thing far cheaper in Lidl, but still took three from the tin and popped them on his plate. Dad hadn't even got his screwdriver out before there was a knock at the door.

Christopher and Detective Inspector Ritter had news. The sketch they'd released to the public of your stalker had come up trumps. Someone spotted him walking past their house and called the police. He didn't run this time. His name is David Taylor, he's forty-one and he works as a handyman. As Jack was the only one of us to get up close and personal with David, he was called into the station to identify him this morning.

Mum started bleating again like a sheep calling for her lost lamb. 'Elodie, Elodie. Did you find her? Where is she?'

She didn't pick up on the stony atmosphere in the foyer. One look at Christopher told me they hadn't found you.

'We've questioned the suspect and searched his home,' said Ritter. 'Unfortunately, we couldn't search his car. It's missing.'

'Missing?' I asked.

'Yes, Mr Taylor refuses to tell us where it is.'

'But he could have her in his car,' I said. 'Elodie could be in his car.'

Ritter gave me a tight smile. 'We're doing everything we can to locate the vehicle.'

Christopher's gaze flicked to Ritter's. He cleared his throat. 'Mr Taylor claims someone was paying him to follow Elodie.'

There was a shocked silence. Then a rushing torrent of questions. They told us if your stalker's story is to be believed, the person who employed him did so through a 'jobs for hire' website and always paid in cash, leaving the money under a bin just outside the rugby field where there aren't any cameras for miles. Apparently, the money was always left in an envelope with typed instructions, which David was told to burn after reading. The police will check his bank account to see if large sums of money have been periodically deposited, but it doesn't necessarily prove his version of events to be true, especially since he didn't keep any of the

alleged notes. If he had planned to abduct you, he could've been setting up his cover story for months before he acted.

'What did the advert say? "Psychopath needed to stalk young woman. Must be good at lurking"?' I snapped, angry at no one in particular.

'Of course not,' said Ritter tightly. 'Mr Taylor claims the advert was very vague and mentioned the job was a paid bird-watching project.'

We gave this information the silence it deserved. Then I said, 'Someone has a twisted sense of humour.'

'Where's David now?' asked Dad.

'We let him go this afternoon,' answered Christopher.

Dad was angry. 'Let him go?'

'Yes, sir,' replied Christopher. 'As soon as new evidence comes to light, we'll bring him back in.'

'If needed,' corrected Ritter.

As I saw them out, Christopher looked over his shoulder and I could see in his face he was sorry he hadn't brought you home.

After the news, Mum was restless; she walked around the coffee table so many times, I thought she might wear away the floor. The ploughman's lunch was left uneaten in the kitchen. I thought about serving it, but no one seemed in the mood to eat anything, so I sat down and tried to appear calm even though I was replaying the conversation with Christopher and Ritter on a loop. My fingers burned to call Christopher to see if he knew more than he'd let on.

Dad rang Jack and asked him to come over. He arrived half an hour later, apologising for Kathryn's absence. She had another of her migraines. I remember when Kathryn was strong and outspoken and always laughing. After Jeffrey's death, she faded, everything about her is *less*. Like we're viewing her through tracing paper. I worry this will happen to Mum and Dad if we don't find you, El. ~~Or if we find you dead.~~

Jack couldn't offer much more information. He sat on the sofa between our parents, which left me alone on the loveseat opposite. He answered all their questions, apologised profusely for not telling us the police had called him to the station, but he'd been instructed to keep this information to himself and, not wanting to jeopardise the investigation, he did as they'd commanded.

Then he added, 'I've been asked to do an appeal. Give an interview. I don't want to step on your toes and I'd rather stay out of the media, but they told me Elodie needs all the exposure she can get.' He looked to Mum and Dad for guidance even though I was sure he'd already agreed to do it.

Men like Jack can't resist the limelight. He craves affection, perhaps each woman who worships at his feet makes him feel a tiny bit better than his father ever did, so Jack was never going to pass up an opportunity to play the doting, handsome friend of the beautiful stolen woman when it's the perfect recipe for the nation to fall in love with him. I can imagine your face reading this, your narrowed gaze burning holes into the paper. But seriously, El, I've wondered if part of your appeal to Jack is that you haven't thrown yourself at him like everyone else. Not since you were teenagers. He's such a control freak, I'm sure it drives him mad.

Mad enough to hurt you?

Mad enough to pay someone to follow and snatch you?

Of course, Mum and Dad encouraged Jack to do the appeal. They hugged and back-patted and thanked him for all he'd done.

Later, while Mum was lying down in the guest room, I loaded the dishwasher with all the mugs – we'd drunk many, many cups of tea – when I heard Dad's sharp voice in the hallway. 'Why didn't she tell us?'

There was a pause. I crept out of the kitchen and through the dining room. I could hear the low, reassuring murmur of Jack's reply.

Then Dad, louder, angrier. 'How dare he?'

I stepped into the hallway. Dad only briefly glanced my way before yanking open the front door and leaving without saying goodbye. Without Mum. I stumbled outside and called after him, watching in panicked bewilderment as he stormed off down the street.

I felt someone behind me and turned. 'What did you say to him, Jack?'

He stared impassively. 'What do you mean?'

'He's upset.'

He shrugged. 'His daughter's gone. He's bound to be upset.'

'What did you say to him?'

He moved closer, invading my space. He paused, letting me take in the slow, condescending spread of his lips. 'Tell you what, I'll go find Martin,

you pop back inside and stick the kettle on.'

I stood, boiling over, as Jack turned and loped after Dad.

I have never trusted Jack. He has two faces and I think I am the only person he's taken off the mask for. Our family is coming undone at the seams and even though it's you who is gone, it's Jack with the scissors that will snip, snip, snip at the threads until everything falls apart.

## Chapter Twenty-Seven

### 28 Days Missing

#### **Adaline Archer**

‘Just done the washing up for you,’ announced Ethan from his place on the bed, his phone in one hand and his morning coffee in the other, even though I’ve told him a thousand times *not* to drink it in bed because he *always* spills it.

‘That’s great. Thank you.’ My smile was strained because I was trying ever so hard not to snap, ‘It’s not a favour to me. You live here too.’

Why is it that men always feel the need to announce they’ve nipped the Hoover round or done a load of laundry like they’ve just cured cancer? Then they beam at you as though they’re waiting for you to offer them a gold star or a blow job despite the fact that you do these chores every day without so much as a ‘thanks for that’ from the supposed love of your life.

‘I’ve got someone coming over later to fix the dishwasher,’ he said.

I slipped into my favourite black, lacy Agent Provocateur underwear. It’s expensive, you wouldn’t approve. No matter. I’ve learned the older you get, the harder you have to work, and exquisite, ridiculously priced underwear distracts from all the bits you don’t want to see when you look in a mirror. Besides, I was about to spend the afternoon at Ruby’s baby shower with all of her ‘mum’ friends, being reminded I am not part of their team, and the only consolation was that beneath my clothes would be sexy matching lingerie and beneath theirs would be ugly, nude nursing bras. Probably.

I wasn’t sure if going ahead with the baby shower was the right thing to do, but my therapist insisted socialising and maintaining good relations with friends and family is healthy so that’s what I’m doing, even though I’d rather be at home. The baby isn’t due until late December, but Ruby doesn’t want to look ‘too pregnant’ in the photographs so we’re having the shower now.

Ethan's hands were on me in an instant, phone and morning coffee forgotten. He nuzzled my neck and pulled my hips back against his crotch. 'Mrs Archer, you look so good I could eat you.'

Lots of my married friends complain their sex lives have been replaced with Netflix box sets; they'd kill to have their husbands grab them and bend them over the bed like they did in the early, lustful days of their relationship. So I feel guilty at the pinch of annoyance that Ethan always puts his hands on me when I'm getting ready to go somewhere.

'But *that's* when you're half-naked,' he's told me sulkily time and time again.

Handling his male ego like the slippery, fragile ball of glass it is, I said, 'But I'm not ovulating.'

Ethan pulled back and I thought, *Shit, I've smashed the ball.*

'You're more to me than an incubator,' he said, and I realised the ball wasn't smashed at all, it wasn't even chipped.

'I am?'

'Yes, of course,' he whispered against my neck, his hands moving to my waist again. Then I was remembering the *us* we were before we were trying, when sex was spontaneous acts of lust to be had on the kitchen counter, in the shower, on the stairs. 'I miss you. I want *you*.'

And as quickly as the underwear went on, it was taken right back off.

I was late to Ruby's. Punctuality is usually top of my list; it's rude to keep people waiting, but I didn't care because, for the first time in a long time, sex with Ethan had felt sexy again, and not just a means to an end.

'I've called you a zillion times,' huffed Ruby, ushering me inside. 'I didn't think you were coming.'

'I'm only half an hour late.'

'I thought something terrible had happened to you.'

'Well then calling me a zillion times wouldn't have made a difference, would it?'

Ruby took me in. 'Your skin looks great. You're so ... glowy. What moisturiser are you using?'

I could've been honest and said my glow was from multiple orgasms which can't be bottled and slathered over your face, but instead I answered,

‘Charlotte Tilbury. I’ll send you some. You look glowy too.’

‘That’s just sweat from morning sickness and being the size of a whale in this heat.’

The next couple of hours were a rush of putting up bunting and balloons, and arranging photographs of Ruby and Tom as babies on the little table by the door. I was relieved I’d done most of the planning and organising before you went missing. Every detail was taken care of, even the glasses on the refreshments table had *Welcome, Baby Pentland* printed up the side in tasteful gold *italic*.

‘Everything is perfect,’ said Ruby. ‘Oh, and the cupcakes with the little iced booties are so cute.’ She paused, glanced quickly towards Mum and Auntie Carol who were arranging vases of peonies, then lowered her voice. ‘You’re okay with being here today, aren’t you?’

‘Of course, Elodie’s still—’

‘No, I mean, being so involved in the baby shower must be hard because you and Ethan still haven’t ...’

It’s no secret we’re trying for a baby. *Supposed* to be trying. *It is* a secret that a year into my marriage I thought I was pregnant. The test was positive. I was happy, but scared too, because who actually wants to go through labour? I thought Ethan would be delighted, but when I told him, he turned grey and said, ‘I’m sorry, it’s just not the right time for us.’ Then listed all the reasons it wasn’t the right time for *him*. ‘I’m working towards a promotion at work, we haven’t moved into our “forever” home yet, we have a trip to the Maldives coming up in a few months. We could really do without this right now, Ada. Maybe we should talk about termination and try for another later down the line.’ He spoke as if the pregnancy were another of his business meetings that could be rescheduled. So I wasn’t surprised by his clear sense of relief when I went to the doctor and their test was negative.

I was very down in the months that followed. Ruby stepped in, dragging me out of the house and whisking me away for a spa weekend. She wasn’t even mad I cancelled half the treatments she’d paid for, instead curling up in the fluffy robe and crying in our room. She kept saying, ‘You’ll have a baby one day. I know you will.’

What she didn't realise was that I wasn't grieving for the pregnancy, but for the man I *thought* I'd married. It was the first time I realised how selfish Ethan is. I never told you this because I've always felt we are in a never-ending game of tennis with each other. Admitting my marriage isn't perfect would be like deliberately scoring a double fault.

'It's fine. I've loved organising the shower,' I reassured her. 'I'm happy for you and Tom.'

Then she was gone, pulling out her phone and snapping photos for her feed because a large portion of Ruby's life is dedicated to proving to people that she has one, and it is worthy of jealousy. Not that I can throw stones, since, as a woman without a career or children, so much effort is poured into curating the perfect life. Your house must always be pristine because if not, people will wonder what the fuck else you do with your time. Your hosting skills must be tip-top; guests' glasses should never be empty – like radio, there should never be dead air – and every aspect of the meals you serve must be impeccable because if not, people will wonder what the fuck else you do with your time. Your marriage must be loving and fun, but also meaningful, and you must make sure others know your marriage is loving and fun, but also meaningful, because if not, people will wonder what the fuck else you do with your time. It's important to note they must know about your fun, loving but also meaningful marriage *without* you shoving it in their face like a cream pie. It is a pie to be smelt and displayed on a window ledge and admired.

And while you're doing all this, you must stick to some very strict rules: you must not be too thin (women will gossip about your eating disorder) or too fat (women will bitch about all your baby-free, job-free time and how if they had all that baby-free, job-free time, they'd be doing Joe Wicks' workouts every morning). You must not be too loud (leave that to the men and the pint-drinking women of the world) or too quiet (that's for the knitters and the downtrodden wives which you are not, remember, because your marriage is fun and loving but also meaningful). Don't be too clever (you didn't go to university and get that post-grad job) but don't be too thick either (even though they suspect you might be a little dim, you barren, degree-less, stay-at-home wife).

In the corner, Uncle Gregory was having a quiet word with Mum. She dabbed at her eyes and he pulled her into a hug. They were talking about you in the last few minutes it was allowed. You see, even though we have more questions than ever, we'd agreed on a blanket ban regarding your disappearance for Ruby's shower because this was her special day and smudging it with grief and anxiety wasn't fair. So, by the time the guests arrived, Uncle Gregory and Mum were smiling widely, though Mum's seemed stitched on. She didn't look well – thinner, paler, older.

Uncle Gregory and the other husbands declared they were going to the pub to wet the baby's head, departing the house in the loud, collective noise that is exclusive only to men. Meanwhile, the women talked happily and endlessly about their children, and I thought, *I bet our male counterparts don't utter a word about breastmilk or nipple cream.*

Two hours into the party and I'd learned a lot about mothers.

1. You cannot mention you are tired in front of them because their retort will always be the same. 'You're not tired. You won't know "tired" until you have a baby.'

2. They complain endlessly about never getting a moment to themselves. 'Oh, I haven't been able to pee alone since the children.'

3. Every negative comment they make about their offspring, 'Isabel had colic for the first few months, she drove us crazy,' is followed by darty eyes and a knee-jerk positive to fend off the judgement from other parents that they are a subpar mother. 'But she's really advanced for her age. Everyone says so.'

4. They bitch about their post-baby bodies. 'My nipples haven't been the same since breastfeeding, but breast is best! Yes, I'm struggling to shift the baby weight but who doesn't pick off the kids' plates? It's just mum life, you know?'

5. Without you ever asking, they will bestow unto you their terrible birthing experience. 'I was in labour for thirty-six torturous hours. I tore and had to be stitched back together. And yeah, you will shit yourself. But it's all worth it.'

And after all this, they will turn to you and ask when you're having children, and if you're silly enough to hesitate or suggest maybe you don't

want a brood of your own, they will first look shocked, then appalled, then tell you, 'Oh, but being a mother is the best job in the world. I didn't know *real* love until I had a baby.'

That is what Pushy Mum (her twins have more hobbies than I have fingers) said when the woman with gorgeous coral lipstick, Jennifer, explained that no, she doesn't have children and no, she wasn't planning on any in the future. My head snapped up, surprised by her honesty.

What I've also learned is mothers *can* multitask better than the rest of us mere mortals because they will take in your bag-free eyes and your milk-less breasts and your tight, pre-baby body whilst simultaneously envying and pitying you, and they'll do it with a special brand of mother-only superiority which tells them their way of life is the *right* way of life and your way of life isn't.

So when the focus was turned on me and I was asked about the pending status of my uterus, I just smiled and said excitedly, 'We'll see.'

Super Mum (she has three sprogs and only feeds them homemade, organic produce and makes sure everyone knows about it) chimed in with, 'God, I don't know what I'd do without my babies.'

'You'll be next, Adaline,' said Helicopter Mum. (She hovers constantly around her child, not letting him do anything until she's mentally run through a risk-assessment.) Then, gently, she added, 'How are you doing, anyway?'

I felt everyone's eyes on me because the way she said it, slowly and laden with sympathy, meant she was asking about you. I felt panicked. If I lied and said I was fine, I'd be a heartless bitch. If I was honest and said I was tired and anxious all the time, I'd pollute the mood.

'Shall we do presents?' asked Ruby quickly.

I mouthed, 'Thank you' as the guests descended on her. No one even glanced at me as Ruby unwrapped breast pumps and babygrows and more dummies than you could shake a stick at.

'Let me help,' said Jennifer, collecting the last couple of empty glasses and following me into the kitchen. 'You're Ruby's cousin, Adaline?'

'Ada,' I said, popping the glasses into the sink, 'and yes I am.'

'She talks about you a lot.'

'How do you know Ruby?'

‘I did the flowers for her and Tom’s wedding.’

‘Lovely. Peonies and wild daisies?’

She looked impressed. ‘That’s right, excellent memory. Thank you.’

I glanced at her left hand. No diamond. It surprised me. All my friends are married or engaged or have children, and Jennifer was a few years older than me. ‘How about you? Are you married?’

‘Divorced.’

‘Oh.’ I thought of you. You’d reach out and touch her hand or do that thing you do with your face which makes people instantly trust you and open up. ‘I’m sorry.’

‘Don’t be. I’m not.’

It wasn’t said with malice, just stated like a fact. And, in a gesture which was much more you than me, I moved a little closer to her, letting her know I was there to listen.

‘It was a few years ago, and I’m much better off now he’s out of my life.’

‘That bad?’

‘Simon was a lovely guy. Everyone got along with him. He had two girls from a previous marriage – their mother wasn’t in the picture anymore – so I stepped into that role. It was hard some days. Raising children, especially when they’re not yours, can be difficult, but I loved those girls.’ She closed her eyes for longer than a blink before looking at me again. ‘We were coming back from a family trip to Florida, the plane was busy, our seats were split. Three and one – almost complete opposite ends of the plane. I offered to take the seat with the girls so Simon could get some rest. Only ... he didn’t rest. He spent the entire nine-hour flight talking to the woman he was sat beside. Kelly. They exchanged emails or phone numbers and within six months, he’d left me, taken the girls, and was planning a new life with Kelly in America.’

The anger was like heartburn. I didn’t even know Simon and I hated him. She raised his children. ‘What an asshole.’

She laughed. ‘That’s generous.’

I threw back the champagne and topped up our glasses. Giddy laughter from the living room seeped beneath the kitchen door but I wasn’t ready to go back in yet. I decided I liked Jennifer. Liked the way she carried herself,

liked her white T-shirt with an outline drawing of a pair of breasts and her light-wash dungarees. She's one of those women who is just effortlessly cool.

'It worked out for the best,' she said. 'I'm with someone incredible now. I'd never have found Lucas if Simon hadn't left.'

'Does Lucas have kids?' I asked, remembering she'd told Pushy Mum she didn't want any children.

'No, he doesn't. I told him when we met I didn't want any. After Simon took the girls, I realised that chapter in my life was closed. I never planned on being a mother; I was thrown into it. I was good at it. But the girls are gone and I don't need to replace them with children of my own.'

'And Lucas is okay with that?'

'Yes.' She smiled, happiness coming off her like a rosy glow from a fire on a cold night. 'He told me I'm the only person in the world he can imagine having children with and if he can't have them with me, he doesn't want them with anyone.'

Words stuck to the roof of my mouth like seaside toffee because what can you say to the world's most perfect response to telling your partner you don't want children? Who doesn't want to hear that they are more important to their partner than offspring which don't yet exist? And the way Jennifer offered the information up, she wasn't bragging or lying. I could feel she was telling the truth.

Sometimes it's like I'm in a secret competition with my other married friends. A game of 'Who has the Best, Most Envious Marriage?' and everyone is either exaggerating or lying to win. Even I do it. Ruby does it. She'll call me up late at night, crying that Tom has forgotten their anniversary again, then the next day, there will be a post on her feed exclaiming she's so thankful for her perfect husband, tantrum and late-night call forgotten. What must it be like to be Jennifer, in a relationship with someone who you don't need to lie for?

'And you're married?' asked Jennifer.

I nodded. 'Four years.'

'Children?'

I drained the last of my champagne. It was only my second glass and I could feel the bubbles popping in my head. 'Nope.' I realised this was a

little blunt and decided to reciprocate her willingness to share. ‘I had a false pregnancy three years ago. My husband – Ethan – was relieved I wasn’t pregnant. He wasn’t ready to be a father then.’

‘And he is now?’

‘Yes.’

‘Are you ready to be a mother?’

I paused. Then I said it out loud. ‘Absolutely fucking not.’

Out loud to a woman I’d known five minutes. And I felt a stone lighter. Truthfully, I don’t want children. Not anymore.

She raised one eyebrow but not in a snarky way. ‘Think you need another,’ she said, pouring me a third glass of champagne.

I laughed. ‘Think I do.’

‘Does Ethan know you’re not ready to be a parent?’

‘No. I say I want children because you’re meant to want them, aren’t you? If you don’t, who’s going to visit you in the care home when you’re old? I’m still taking the pill and he has no idea.’

Yes, little sister, it’s true. I am. After the false pregnancy, then trying and failing when *he* was ready, I realised I didn’t want children with him at all.

I waited for the judgement from Jennifer, the horror, the shock. It didn’t come. She just sipped her champagne and motioned for me to continue.

‘I know what you’re going to say,’ I told Jennifer. ‘You’re going to tell me to be honest with my husband, and that’s fair, but I’ve tried before, and if I tell him I’m taking precautions when he thinks I’m not, he’ll leave me, and I’ll be thirty-three and all alone. I know I should set him free but—’

‘Or do it for you,’ she interrupted. ‘Set yourself free. Being unhappy with your husband isn’t the happiest you’ll ever feel. Not if you take control of the situation.’

Jennifer’s words stayed with me all afternoon, whirling around my head even as I slid into the taxi with Mum to go home hours later. *Being unhappy with my husband isn’t the happiest I’ll ever feel.*

Mum was staying with me again because Dad had decided to go fishing, and she didn’t want to be alone. I offered her a tea when we got in, but she turned it down. I suppose I should’ve seen the problem then. When has Mum ever turned down tea? But I was so wrapped up in Ethan and the

children we don't have, I didn't pay it the attention it deserved. It was only 7 p.m. when I told her I was going up to bed. I wanted to think. So, I left her. I left her all alone downstairs. And I went up to bed. With Ethan in his office, I snuck to my sock drawer and pulled out my contraceptive pill. My secret. I hadn't even put it in my mouth when I heard the crash. Shoving the packet back in the drawer, I padded into the hallway. I didn't hurry. I should've, but I had no idea what had happened. The large wooden clock in the dining room is always falling off the wall and making an almighty racket. But it wasn't the clock, Ellie-Bee.

In the dining room, I saw blood. Saw her crumpled body on the floor. Then I started bleating, like she did when we walked into your house and realised something terrible had happened, 'Mum! Mum! Mum!'

## Chapter Twenty-Eight

### 31 Days Missing

#### **Elodie Fray**

I'm locked in the house. Jack has been gone for days and the key I have to the front door doesn't work. I can't get out. Can't leave. At first, I'm confused, but soon, fury bubbles and blisters beneath the surface of me. Jack's done this on purpose. He must've. He knows I want to go home, so he locked me in. I'm sure of it.

Fighting down panic, I reach for the phone in the hallway. I promised I'd never call Jack in case the police were checking phone records but what choice do I have?

The phone is dead.

And though the lights are working, none of the TVs are.

Frantic, I go through every drawer and pot, looking for another key. The windows are locked too, all except the attic-room balcony, but I'd have to be mad to try and break out of Wisteria that way. Eventually, rage and desperation turn into sickening anxiety. Time bleeds. It pours from my wrists and soaks into the floorboards. I watch shadows move across the soft cream walls. There's nothing left to do. Beneath a throw on the sofa, I shake like an abandoned dog. If Jack isn't back by morning, I'll have to smash a ground-floor window to get out. I've tried to avoid this because, if someone notices before I can get to Jack, and they report a break-in, the police could dust Wisteria for fingerprints and then we'll both have to explain.

I must've fallen asleep because I'm woken by a hand on my shoulder. I jump, my heart slamming against my ribs.

'It's me,' says Jack.

I blink up at him through the soft glow of the table lamp. My stiff muscles flare to life as I sit up. He hugs me; the cold still clings to his skin, his coat.

‘I wanted to come sooner,’ he tells me, ‘but the police asked me to put out an appeal for your safe return.’

Hope beats its wings inside my chest. ‘They don’t suspect you anymore?’

‘Don’t think so. I guess they couldn’t find any evidence. Makes sense since there isn’t any.’

‘Great.’ I get to my feet. ‘I can go home then.’

‘Once I’ve filmed the appeal. It helps my credibility. If they see I’m actively trying to get you back, it should shake them off for good. How’s your arm?’

‘Fine. Good.’ It’s been nearly a month since the attack and it’s healed nicely. I stare at the floor, building up the courage to ask him.

‘What’s wrong?’ asks Jack.

I take a breath. ‘Did you lock me in here?’

He frowns. ‘What?’

‘The key you left doesn’t work.’

‘There’s a spare in the hallway drawer.’

I move past him and out into the hallway. Jack follows. He watches as I pull open the drawer and there, in the corner, poking out from beneath loose papers, is a brass key. ‘That wasn’t there before.’

‘Did you look properly, or did you panic and just riffle through manically?’

I mean, I wasn’t exactly *calm* when I looked. I stare at the key, feeling like a total idiot.

He laughs. ‘You thought I’d resorted to imprisonment?’

Yes, I think. ‘No,’ I say.

He raises an eyebrow.

‘I thought maybe ... you were worried I’d leave.’

‘I know you wouldn’t leave. You’re not selfish. You wouldn’t accept my help, agree to stay here, only to stab me in the back when it gets rough. Not after everything I’ve done for you.’

I feel a pang of guilt because if he hadn’t come back when he did, I’d have done exactly that.

He scoops up the bags by the door and carries them into the kitchen. ‘You know a storm is coming?’

‘No?’

He unpacks the food shop. ‘Didn’t you see it on the news?’

‘No. The TVs aren’t working, I thought maybe ...’

‘What?’

I shrug, awkward.

‘You thought I interfered with the TVs too?’

‘No,’ I say too quickly.

There’s a beat of silence. ‘Why would I do that?’

‘In case I saw my family on the news and wanted to go home. I mean, you did have me abducted, Jack. Can you blame me for wondering?’

‘I did that for you. I’m risking everything for you.’ His anger hacks out like a cough; I feel guilty for even asking because he’s right. Then his irritation gives way to hurt. ‘Don’t you trust me?’

‘Of course I do.’

‘Good.’ He kisses my forehead and I’m forgiven. ‘Look, it’s probably just a fuse. I’ll fix it.’

‘Thanks.’

Jack finishes unpacking the food and pours us both a drink. He smiles at me and I smile back. It’s a relief to have him here. To feel less alone. To know he’s the one person who’ll always be there for me. Do anything for me.

I clear my throat. ‘How’re my family?’

‘Fine. Nothing to report.’

I nod.

‘Look, you’ve been gone a month, your story is gaining notoriety, *that’s* the important thing. I think my appeal will help push it over the edge *and* divert any suspicion. I’m sure when you reunite with your family, they’ll realise how much they missed you. Let’s just hold off a couple more days until my appeal is filmed and aired?’

Even after hearing my parents are more comfortable with it being *me* who was abducted, I can’t help but miss them; I wish they missed me too. And I do want to go home. ‘When will that be?’

‘Few days. I’ll stay until after the storm, go back to Crosshaven, do the appeal, then you can go.’

He looks at me imploringly. I don't want the police or anyone else to suspect he had something to do with my disappearance. I don't want him to resent me if I leave now. 'Fine,' I say. 'A few more days.'

Jack picks me up and spins me. 'I promise this is for the best.'

Later, we curl up on the sofa and binge watch Jack's pick: *The Ted Bundy Tapes*.

'He's *the* most terrifying serial killer,' I say as the credits roll.

'Why?'

'Because he's attractive, charismatic, educated. Girls turned up to his trial wearing "I love Bundy" T-shirts without even a smidgen of irony. Girls that would've been his victims if he wasn't already on trial.'

'That makes him more terrifying?'

'Completely. No one expects death to be wrapped in such a pretty bow.' I shudder. 'He was insane.'

'Experts didn't find anything wrong with him. He wasn't mentally ill.'

'So ... he was a high-functioning crazy.'

'Or he was perfectly rational.'

I stare at him. 'He murdered people.'

'You don't have to be insane to commit murder.'

'Jack.' The word holds so much reprimand, he blinks at me. 'Bundy cut off women's heads and kept shagging the corpses until they were mush.'

'Yeah, so that's a bizarre fetish.' He sees my look of horror and rolls his eyes. 'Obviously, but committing murder doesn't mean he was crazy. He was driven and ruthless, yeah, but he wasn't mentally ill.'

'I don't ...' I trail off, frustrated and a little angry he can't see my point. 'Are you defending Bundy?'

'No, of course not. I'm just saying, I don't think you can call him insane just to make yourself feel better.'

I sip my drink, pushing down the irritation that rises in my body and remind myself that Jack often says things just to get a reaction. Still, I don't want to argue. We've only had one huge blowout in twenty-three years and that was a few months after I started dating Noah. So, I give him his stage. 'Okay. Explain.'

He doesn't hesitate to take the spotlight. 'It's easier for people to tell themselves murderers and serial killers are mentally ill because it makes them feel safer. It's a security blanket. As though their neighbour or son or husband couldn't possibly be a killer because they don't have a mental illness. It's easier to chalk it up to that than it is to accept sometimes people just get pushed too far and they make an informed decision to take action.'

I take a second to organise my thoughts and I'm struck again by how *differently* Jack views the world. He is the king of controversial opinions. 'So ... what? Bundy was just a hot, sane serial killer?'

'Exactly.'

'I disagree. I don't believe anyone who can inflict such violence is legitimately well.'

I expect him to argue because once Jack has an idea in his head, it's almost impossible to sway him. But he surprises me. 'Yeah,' he says, reaching for the Merlot. 'Maybe you're right. More wine?'

## Chapter Twenty-Nine

### 32 Days Missing

#### **Adaline Archer**

‘Tell me, how has your week been?’ asked Harriett during our session today.

She’s closer to fifty than forty and has a beautiful home not far from mine. Her office is in a summer house at the bottom of her rose garden. She’s created a tranquil space of neutral tones and potted plants.

You bought me a plant when I moved into my place, do you remember? A money tree for prosperity. I couldn’t tell if you were making a dig about Ethan’s pay and my lack thereof, so I wasn’t sorry when it died. I’m sorry now, though. I think I’d feel more connected to you if I could nurture a living thing you’d chosen for me.

‘Fine,’ I said. All our sessions start with me telling my counsellor I’m fine and end with me block-booking more hours. ‘Mum’s out of hospital.’

‘And how’s she doing?’

‘Fine. The doctors said it was just dehydration and stress. We’ve got to watch her blood pressure, but she’ll be okay. She whacked her head on the corner of my dining table pretty hard. She had to have stitches. I feel so guilty.’

‘But you couldn’t predict your mother would faint.’

‘No, I suppose not.’ I reached out and took my glass of water from the coffee table. ‘It’s been a busy few days. I’ve been running around all over the place, doing the food shop for my parents, helping organise more search parties for Elodie, reading through all the letters from the public. Mum finally agreed to let me sort through them first. The more ... disturbing letters have taken their toll on her.’ I swallowed, remembering the one I read last night; some sicko detailing all the gut-wrenching things he’d done

to you before drowning you in his pond. Not wanting to discuss the letters with Harriett, I moved on. 'And I've been running errands for Mum too.'

'And how're you coping with all those responsibilities?'

I paused because I needed to tell her what happened yesterday, but I didn't want her to think I'm unhinged and melodramatic. Sensing my hesitation, she folded her hands in her lap and waited.

'Not well,' I admitted. 'Months ago, Mum agreed to this bake sale to help raise money for the Appleby Nursery. With everything going on, it slipped her mind and she only remembered the night before. She got herself really worked up. The doctor said Mum shouldn't get stressed, so I promised I'd bake something and drop it off.' I took a sip of my water. Even though I am forever cooking and baking and have a huge repertoire of recipes, I ended up making chocolate orange brownies because they're your favourite. 'I wasn't planning to stay and help with the sale, but the women were run off their feet without Mum, so I stayed and helped.'

I stared out at Harriett's rose garden, thinking it was such a shame in just a few months, they'd be dead. She'd potter down to her home office one morning, cup of coffee in hand, only to realise the roses she never truly stopped to appreciate are gone.

'Go on,' prompted Harriett.

'Well, it was all going fine until I overheard Louisa, this thin, pointy woman who definitely doesn't actually *eat* anything she bakes, making a comment about how lucky it is that Elodie isn't a mother, and I just got so angry.'

Harriett made a small note in her book. God, El, I really want to see what she writes in that book. I hope it's not 'crazy, neurotic bitch' underlined several times. 'And why do you think it made you angry?' she asked.

'Because Elodie is more than her reproductive organs. She's witty and smart and well-read. Talented. So talented. She got a book deal just before she went missing. She cares deeply ... about everything, even stray cats. You know she took in a stray cat even though it could've cost her her lease?' I thought of Seefer then and how I should look for her. 'Stray cats, stray people, even those who never deserved it.' And god, I was boiling all over again. Sitting on Harriett's sofa, I could feel the acidic burn of fury beneath my skin. I knew getting angry didn't help but I couldn't switch off

how I felt about that stupid woman's comment. 'Elodie is great at running and writing and her skin is clear *without* having to slap on overpriced, organic moisturiser every morning, noon and night. She's brave and adventurous. One of the most ambitious people I know. So why does it matter if she has children? Why does her disappearance somehow mean *less* because she didn't give birth?'

'Is that what you think Louisa was saying?'

'Yes.' I put the glass down. 'No. I don't know. I just ...' Without the glass, I didn't know what to do with my hands, so I picked up one of her tan cushions and started winding the tassels around my finger. 'I'm not completely irrational. I do understand in these situations children complicate things, but when I asked Louisa to explain herself, she started rambling about how it would be worse if Elodie had children because they'd miss her so much. And I flew off the handle.' I winced, remembering the look on the faces of those poor Bakewell-pushing, muffin-making middle-aged women. Thin, pointy Louisa was so shocked by my outburst, she looked like she'd accidentally swallowed a carb. 'I told them Elodie may not be a mother but she's a sister and a daughter and a cousin and a friend. I yelled that just because there weren't any sticky-fingered snotty-nosed brats wailing at the door for her, there was still an entire family of people who were falling apart missing her.' I put my head in my hands, mortified that I'd caused a scene like the ones in Mum's soap operas. 'They're my mother's friends. I've embarrassed her.'

'Do you think your mother would understand given the circumstances?'

'No. I don't. I think as soon as she finds out, she'll be livid, and it really will be my fault when her blood pressure goes haywire and she blacks out again. She's always been concerned about how things look; it's more important to her than how things actually are.' I'd abandoned the cushion in favour of spinning my wedding band around my finger. 'Mum and Ethan are the same that way.'

'Did you tell Ethan about the interaction you had with your mother's friends?'

I nodded. 'He agreed with them, said of course it would be far worse if Elodie had children. Children rely on their mother. And I can understand what he's saying but I don't agree. If they're right, if *he's* right, it means

you can be the perfect daughter or sister or cousin or wife, you can own a beautiful house, a great car, marry a fantastic man, host wonderful parties and buy only eco-friendly, organic, pressed foods which don't hurt the turtles or beavers or whatever, you can do all that, but if you die or disappear without ever having children, your life doesn't mean as much as the woman who *does* have children.' I ran out of breath. Harriett made more notes. 'There's just a lot of pressure.'

She looked up. 'Pressure?'

'To decide. To have a baby. It's not fair our sexual organs come with an expiration date while men can carry on reproducing until they're in their seventies. And if you're a woman and you decide you don't want a baby, you're selfish or defective, and people sit there and insist you'll "change your mind". Well, what if you don't change your mind? Are you a bad person?'

She didn't answer my question. She never answers them. She drops questions of her own like breadcrumbs and I pick up each one until I arrive at the gingerbread house where the walls are made of revelations. 'Do you want children, Ada?'

You probably saw that question coming. I didn't. It took me a moment to reply. 'I don't know. But if I don't have any, Mum and Dad won't ever have grandchildren, will they? And I'll have to live with that guilt. If Elodie isn't ever found, it's all down to me.'

'Do you think guilt is a good reason to have a baby?'

'No, probably not, but I don't know many good reasons to have one. I don't want one now just in case I regret it after my eggs have dried up and it's too late. I don't want one just so someone's obligated to visit me in the care home when I have dementia. I don't want one just because all my friends are having them.'

For the first time, I wondered if Harriett had children. I've looked in through her front-room window before and her house is immaculate. If she does have children, they're probably older. University age maybe.

'And besides worrying about whether people think your life has meaning after you're gone, are there any reasons you *would* have a child?' she asked.

And I knew what I was about to say weren't the right answers, but they were truthful. 'To save my marriage. To make my parents happy.'

‘Is your marriage in turmoil?’

‘I wouldn’t know. Ethan and I never talk about our marriage. He works a lot. I’m lonely most of the time, even before Elodie’s disappearance. If I try to tell him how lonely I am, he acts as though I’m being dramatic, he tells me we spend plenty of time together, that we live together *for god’s sake*, that I’m just being needy.’ Admitting I am lonely out loud made me feel like crying.

‘Does Ethan want children?’

I don’t know how we ended up talking about me and Ethan when I was there to talk about you, but not answering her questions felt petulant, so I said, ‘Yes. The last conversation we had about it, I tried to tell him I wasn’t sure I wanted any, but he wouldn’t let me finish, he just *insisted* I did want them and even if I didn’t, once the baby was here I’d love it, and that was that.’

‘It’s okay if you don’t want children, Ada. Motherhood isn’t a preference for everyone.’

‘I wish Ethan and I could just have it out, but we never fight. He refuses to engage in any sort of conflict. At the first sniff of an argument, he removes himself from the situation. He suddenly has a lot of work on and spends a few days in the city before swooping back home with a mini-break booked, and if I try to start the conversation over, he tells me I’m ungrateful, that so many women would kill to have their husbands book a break away and I’m ruining it. Then for days, he gives me the silent treatment and the loneliness is worse. So, I’ve learned not to say anything.’

I know she’s supposed to remain neutral, but I could sense she felt sorry for me. I’m not used to that. I pour blood, sweat and tears into the glittering production of my marriage. This is the first time I’ve peeled back the curtain and revealed the sad, tragic truth behind the scenes. I’ve never been this honest, ~~especially~~ not with you, not with anyone.

Harriett leaned forward. ‘Putting aside the situation with your sister for just a moment, are you happy?’

‘No.’ I said it without thinking, but as soon as I did, I knew it was true. ‘I don’t think I am.’

‘And what do you think would make you happy?’

I pulled a face. That isn't a question you get asked every day, but maybe it should be. 'I've never thought about it before,' I said honestly. I assumed 'finding my sister alive and well' was the obvious answer she wasn't looking for. 'I'd like to work again. Interior design or event planning, but Ethan likes me home. He said he never wanted a wife who works as much as him. But sometimes it's like I'm drifting pointlessly from one day to the next, and even though I'm not sure I want my day to be filled with nappies and Peppa Pig, I'd like something that's all mine.'

'A career?' she asked, which was a perfectly reasonable question, but the word 'career' threw me off.

'Not exactly a career,' I backtracked, 'just a job.'

'What do you think the difference is between a career and a job?'

I opened my mouth then closed it again, nervous to speak in case I got the answer wrong. 'A career is more intense. It requires more skill than a job.' I sighed. 'I suppose I've never considered myself intelligent enough to have a career. Up until I met Ethan, I was just a PA. Elodie is the bright one. I didn't go to university.'

Harriet scribbled another note. 'You can be bright without having gone to university.' She paused, letting that sink in. Then, out of the blue she asked, 'Do you think you'd make a good mother?'

'No.' It was honest. I think I am too critical, too detached, too much of a perfectionist to be a good mother. Maybe you agree, Elodie. Maybe you don't. How will I ever know if we don't find you? 'My sister would make a good parent. She's always been more nurturing than me. Warmer. Grandad told me once if we're different parts of the same flower, Elodie would be the petals and I'd be the thorns.'

Harriett was silent and thoughtful. 'Are you afraid of failure?'

'Isn't everyone?'

'If you don't try, you'll never succeed.'

'But if you're a bad mother, it's not like you can return the child. It's not a dress from Whistles.'

I could've sworn Harriett was suppressing a smile. 'No, a child is not like a dress from Whistles.'

'I'll have to get over it, I suppose, because I don't want to live the rest of my life feeling like I've let my parents down.' I picked at imaginary threads

on the hem of my silk shirt. ‘I did everything right. I got the husband, the house, the car, the fucking marble countertops in the kitchen. I got everything my parents told me I needed to be happy.’ Emotion throbbed in my chest and I felt on the brink of tears again. ‘What’s wrong with me? I should be happy. Ethan is a good man; why aren’t I happy?’

‘We can’t live our lives for other people,’ she said rationally. ‘Do you think your parents would want you to have a child just to make *them* happy or do you think they would take greater satisfaction in seeing you do things that make *you* happy?’

‘They’d want to see me do things that make me happy, I suppose.’

I wasn’t sure if this was true. After you graduated and moved to London, our parents raved about you to anyone who’d listen. Then you gave it all up. And they became obsessed with you finding a husband, a house, a career they could tell their friends about. They knew writing your book made you happy, but they wanted you to play it safe. I must admit, I was a little smug when you quit your job and moved home because the focus was finally on me. Spiteful and petty, I know. It’s as though our parents have put us in a race, they’re the people at the start-line, firing the gun. ‘But I could turn my whole life upside down doing things that I *think* would make me happy only to discover I was better off before.’

Harriett shrugged. ‘That’s the risk we all take when we make changes.’

‘I’m scared,’ I admitted. ‘I’m scared to change anything in my life in case I end up worse off. Perhaps I’ve been using my parents’ expectations as an excuse to make safe decisions. Perhaps now, especially now, they wouldn’t care if I was childless and single as long as I was happy. Perhaps it doesn’t even matter what they think as long as I’m happy with my life.’

Harriett gave me a look that told me I’d finally made it to the gingerbread house of revelations. ‘You’re a lot brighter than you think, Ada.’

## Chapter Thirty

### 34 Days Missing

#### **Elodie Fray**

The storm is here.

Jack and I are in the attic room at the very top of the house. It's gabled and angular. There's a big cast-iron bed and antique drawers, and a reading nook complete with a dark green velvet armchair and large gold lamp, switched off. The only light is from the candles on the sideboard, flickering golden in the dark. Above our heads are solid wooden beams. I reach up and run my finger along one, remembering a time when I stood in this exact spot, too small to do so. Jack stands in front of the big French doors that lead out onto a tiny balcony. I go to him and stare out at the ink-black sky above and the raging sea below; it thrashes against the rocks with wild fists.

Jack is excited. Breathless. And when he glances at me, I'm sure my eyes are glimmering too. As a little girl, I always embraced wet days. Ada would stare sulkily out the window, but I would have my wellies and raincoat on and out I'd go; puddle-jumping and twirling, mouth open wide and head thrown back to catch droplets on my tongue. I thought I'd always dance in the rain alone. Until Jack.

The French doors are ajar. The air feels full, like every particle is charged and vibrating. We wait. Jack takes my hand, strong and warm and so familiar it makes my throat ache.

And there it is: a streak of hot silver splits the sky. It's the start of a symphony; a second later comes the low crackle of thunder rolling above our heads and the first drops of rain which ping against the French doors like bullets, and the wind picks up, shaking the glass in its frame with frenzied fingers.

We settle in, sitting down with mugs of hot chocolate, and I decide this is better than TV. My longing for home is forgotten. The truth is, when I'm

with Jack, I am home.

I stretch my legs out in front of me and touch the delicate lace hem of the shorts – I’m wearing the silky green pyjamas Jack bought for my birthday. I have good legs, I think, admiring the way the flickering candlelight casts shadows on the contours of my calves. My gaze drifts upwards. Jack is staring at my legs too.

Coming to Wisteria has shifted something between us – before my disappearance, the idea of Jack staring lustfully at my legs would have been absurd, but now ...

He clears his throat and turns his focus towards the night sky. ‘We pulled it off.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘The plan.’ He gestures widely. ‘This.’

‘Can we really say that *before* I’ve written the book and signed a contract?’

‘We pulled it off,’ he says again.

I don’t reply. I am instantly nervous; I try very hard *not* to think about the questions the police will have once I’m found. I worry about messing it up, getting caught out. But I can’t think about that now.

‘I can’t wait to see your name on a book,’ he says.

‘If I have to work this hard to become an author, maybe I just don’t deserve it.’

‘You’re talented enough to do it, Fray. The market is the problem, not your ability.’

‘I know it’s all about luck, and what’s selling right now, but maybe it’s just not meant to happen. What if we do all this and I still don’t get the deal?’

‘You’re going to get it. They want true crime; you’ll give them true crime.’

‘Half-true crime. True-*ish* crime.’

‘Is there a market for that?’

My smile is wan.

‘You’ve wanted to be an author for as long as I’ve known you. We’ll make it happen. Don’t take no for an answer.’

‘*Don’t take no for an answer.* Is that the motto you live by?’

‘You know the motto I live by. *How far will you go?*’

‘How far won’t I go?’ I parry.

This time, my smile is genuine.

‘Got another motto?’ he asks.

‘Never thought about it.’

‘Here’s your opportunity.’

Through the gap in the door, a fine mist of rain comes in, smelling like sea-salt. ‘Go to bed with dreams, wake up with purpose.’

‘Apt.’

‘My mum has loads of those fridge magnets with sayings on them. Whenever we went on holiday – or came here for the summer – we’d pop into town and Dad would treat her to a magnet from the little gift shop on the High Street.’ I can still hear the bell ring above the door as I push it open, smell the clotted cream fudge as I step inside.

‘I know Ada’s motto,’ he says. ‘*Why be the understudy when you can be the star?*’

I smile but, just for a beat, I get a wave of longing for my sister. ‘I think Charlie’s would be something like ... *Kindness is free. Throw it around like glitter.*’

‘My brother has a good heart,’ he says with envy. Or sadness.

‘So do you.’

‘Jeffrey’s little motto was *Hardship breeds strength of character.*’

I’m not sure Jack’s aware that, as he says this, his thumb moves over the scar lacing through his eyebrow. I still don’t understand *why* Jeffrey treated his sons so differently. If either of them was to be the target of his aggression, I’d have put my money on Charlie. Where Jack is granite, Charlie is candle wax. Jeffrey was so accepting when Charlie came out, he treated him with a kindness Charlie deserved but Jack never received.

‘So, your motto – is it *Don’t take no for an answer?*’

‘Actually, that’s a close second.’ He reaches into his back pocket and produces his wallet. Carefully, he slides out a small, folded square of paper, smiles down at it and hands it to me. ‘This is a solid first.’

It is a doodle of a wolf howling at a moon with the uneven script of a child’s hand looping above: ‘When we’re together, you’re never alone ...

wolf.'

I grin. 'I did this.'

'You were nine, maybe ten. I'd had another row with Jeffrey and turned up at your door.'

It was winter, the December cold like iron in your chest, and there was Jack in a T-shirt and jeans, too desperate to get away from his dad to think of grabbing up a coat. We sat on my floor, huddled together beneath the duvet I'd dragged from my bed. Jack was quiet and shivering. There was a new cut above his eye, the corner of a book maybe, or an ashtray like last time. He whispered, 'I don't belong in that family.' And I didn't just hear the pain and rejection and loneliness in his voice, I saw it in his face too. So I tore a page out of my English book, took my blackberry gel pen, drew the wolf and scribbled the caption.

'Jack,' I am breathless with incredulity. 'You've had this in your wallet for almost twenty years?'

'It goes everywhere with me. It's a piece of history. Of us.'

My heart leaps in my chest. I turn the paper over in my hands. It's proof that I am important to someone. Important enough to be gently rehomed, again and again, in a lineage of wallets, and while they became weather-worn and battered over time, thrown out and replaced, my drawing was not.

Jack reaches out to take it. Our fingers touch. Our eyes lock. I can't tell what he's thinking, but he's watching my mouth with an intensity that makes heat pool low in my stomach. I could kiss him. Right now. This moment is pulsating with possibility if only I am brave enough, bold enough, to lean forward, to tilt my mouth to his; but I know a butterfly beating its wings in China can cause a hurricane in Texas weeks later, and I am not enough of either to risk a swarm of butterflies sweeping chaos across the serendipity of our friendship. So I let go of the paper, breaking our connection.

Keeping my eyes averted, I reach for my hot chocolate and watch the lightning set the sky on fire, illuminating the sea below, white with foam and spray.

'What're you thinking?' he asks.

I'm thinking about the petite blonde again. About him slipping in and out of her. About the musty smell of sweat and sex. And though I don't want to

lie, I don't want to be honest either, so I plump for somewhere in the middle. 'Why don't you ever let those girls get close?'

'What girls?'

'Ones like the blonde I saw you with.'

'I guess I'm just waiting.'

'For?'

Silence.

I glance at him. He's smiling like he has a secret. His eyes on mine are too much so I look away again. 'Don't you want to know love?'

'Don't you?'

'I have.'

'With?'

'Noah.'

I feel him shrug. The scent of him, sandalwood and leather, mixing with sea salt and rain. 'That might be the kind of love you know, but it's not the kind you want. Or need.'

Eyebrow arched, I turn my face slowly to his. 'And what do I need, Jack?'

His breath is on my lips. I glance down; he has a beautiful mouth. I watch as it curves into an easy smile. 'You need a love that burns,' he tells me. 'A love that consumes. Something exciting, unpredictable. Maybe even a little dangerous.'

When I raise my gaze to his, our faces are so close, I can stare straight into the depths of those Icelandic blue eyes. When the lightning hits, they glimmer like chips of ice. I lean into him, tilting my mouth up to his.

Then he pulls back, gets to his feet and holds out his hand.

Disappointment swirls. 'What are we doing?'

His smile tells me we are doing something wild and reckless and when I hesitate, he invokes those magic words, 'How far will you go?' Downstairs, he flings open the front door.

I dig my heels in. 'What if someone sees me?'

'No one else would be mad enough to go out in this.'

So I follow him into the storm. The rain is icy. Just for a second, I can't breathe through the shock of it. Then we are running barefoot down the path to the little beach, just as we did when we were children. The sand is

wet and slides between my toes. The sea rages. The sky sounds like it's being cracked into pieces. We stop at the foaming sea line. The silk pyjamas cling wetly to my body.

Jack's soaked hair has turned the same colour as the sodden sand beneath our feet. He is all beautiful angles and a wide, white smile. Lifting my hand above my head, he twirls me; I laugh at the absurdity of being out in the pouring rain. He spins me out and pulls me back, one hand on my waist, as though we are dancing to smooth Frank Sinatra, but the growling sky and howling winds are our melody. Electric gold strikes the horizon, and I'm trying to decide exactly what the rain pirouetting in the flash of light looks like. Not glitter, exactly. But close. It falls between us.

Jack pulls me closer.

We aren't laughing anymore. His body is so warm. I arch into him. There's a crackling, singing tension between us and I'm caught between excitement and terror, not knowing what's about to happen.

I want Jack's hands on me. Want to feel the weight of him pressing me into the sand. Want to feel him sliding between my thighs.

Then he kisses me.

It is not the awkward kisses of my teen years, where we clink teeth, and he uses too much tongue. Jack's kiss is expertly executed, and I am a live wire in water, sparking and thrumming beneath his hands as they move along my back and around to my front. He groans into my mouth, tasting like hot chocolate and sex, and I want him. I want him. I want him.

We stumble back up the path, lips still locked. Hands still exploring. My foot slides on a wet rock and I stumble. He catches me, lifting me easily into his arms, carrying me over the threshold of Wisteria. In the hallway, he sets me on my feet. Then his hands are in my hair, his lips on my throat, nibbling the delicate place between neck and shoulder.

It's only when we are outside one of the bedrooms that the fog of lust breaks and I have a moment of pause and my brain screams, 'What the hell are you doing?' But that voice isn't mine. It's Jeffrey. I pull away from Jack, stumbling out of reach.

'What's wrong?'

'I can't do this.'

'Elodie,' he pleads. 'Don't say that.'

But I do. ‘Jack ... we’re *friends*. We’ve always been friends. You’re like a brother to me and—’

‘Stop!’ he explodes, throwing his hands wide. ‘*Fuck* that. You are more. So much more.’ He eats up the space between us and takes my face between his hands again. ‘You’re all I want.’

‘Do you say that to all your bed buddies?’

‘Is that what you think? One fuck and I’m done?’

‘Classic Jack Westwood.’

‘Not with you.’ He presses his forehead to mine. ‘You and me, this is right.’

I still want him. Desire makes my body thrum. But if we do this, there’s no going back. ‘What if it goes wrong?’

‘Impossible. Nothing you ever do will make me feel this isn’t meant to be. I know everything about you.’

‘Everything?’ I smile up at him from beneath my lashes. ‘I could be a woman of many mysteries.’

‘I know you.’ He punctuates each word carefully. ‘I know you have to tie your hair up before you write. I know you can’t sleep if the duvet buttons are topside. I know you can never sing in key, but you always smile and curtsy like you’ve just graced the Royal Opera House.’ His thumbs are drawing circles on my cheeks. ‘I know all of you, and I’m all in, Elodie. *All in.*’

So many of my friends bitch that their fiancés wouldn’t even notice if they shaved their heads and here is Jack, noticing the tiny details of my life. I am so giddy, I could float away, but there’s still a concrete block of concern weighing me down. I bite my lip.

‘What?’

‘I haven’t been with anyone since Noah,’ I blurt. ‘It feels too soon.’

His hands drop, but he stays close. ‘You’re going to stop living your life because he can’t live his? Is that the girl you want to be tonight? Afraid? Safe? You want this. I know you want this.’

I raise an eyebrow. ‘Something that burns, something consuming and unpredictable, and maybe a little dangerous?’

‘Something people spend their whole lives searching for.’

And I could let myself slip-slide into his promises but what happens if it goes wrong? With Noah gone, Jack's the only person who has ever truly loved me. I can't lose that. I just can't. 'Jack ...'

There's pain in his face. I've hurt him. Then the shutters come down on his rejection and his hands slide from my skin. He doesn't look at me again. 'Okay. Yeah. I understand. I just ... I get it.'

He turns.

He's leaving.

Where's the relief? Why do I feel like my chest is caving in? I'm shivering, finally feeling the icy cold. Jack's door is closing. The moment is slipping. Then the thought crests again, riding on a second wave: he's the only person who has ever truly loved me.

I rush forward, 'Jack, Jack!'

I push my way into his room and then I am on him. We kiss again. It's the kind of kiss that turns your bones to silk. It isn't long before I'm naked and laid out on his sheets. Then he's inside me. And we are made to fit.

It's rough and impossibly gentle.

Lustful and so much more.

Consuming and not enough.

So we do it again. And again. And I know I will always want Jack Westwood.

# Chapter Thirty-One

## 35 Days Missing

### **Elodie Fray**

In the soft gold light of morning, Jack slides between my legs. We are naked and he is glorious. ‘This is it for me,’ he says, lifting a lock of my hair from the pillow and twirling it between his fingers.

‘What about all the other women?’ I ask, the feminist in me weeping.

‘Placeholders.’

And the relief is absolute because I am not a single fuck, a disposable one-night stand, a toss-away blonde, but more. Something important. Something lasting.

‘I’ve always wanted you,’ he tells me.

‘I didn’t know.’

He snorts.

‘I didn’t!’

‘I knew if we just had some time alone ... Away from Crosshaven. Just us. I knew it would fall into place.’

‘Why didn’t you ever tell me how you felt?’

‘I wanted to. Then Noah came along. I was playing the long game. I wasn’t going to risk telling you anything until I knew you were ready.’

‘I thought you were a man of risks,’ I tease.

‘Not when there’s so much to lose.’ He kisses me. It’s long and slow and makes me want more. He murmurs against my mouth, ‘How far will you go?’

‘Mmm.’ I make a dramatic show of thinking hard. ‘Couple of steps?’

He nips my bottom lip playfully. ‘How far will you go?’

I shrug one bare shoulder. ‘Three, maybe four steps ... if you’re lucky.’

He sinks his teeth into my skin, and I am whooshed into memories from last night: gripped cotton sheets, skin on skin, and hips moving in a rhythm that's all our own. 'How far will you go?'

I give in to him, so he'll give in to me. 'All the way.'

He thrusts into me again. 'Elodie.' His voice is hoarse with pleasure, as if the word has been dragged from him.

We spend the morning tangled up in each other; vines at the bottom of an olive grove. His arms are around me, thick and strong. I lay my head on his hard chest, feeling the rise and fall.

When he's asleep, I slip into one of his shirts and go downstairs to make breakfast. All that's left of the storm is a fine mist of rain and the egg yolk sun spilling lazily across the sky. I'm waiting for the panic of having slept with my best friend, something I'd sworn to everyone, to myself, I'd never do, but it doesn't come. I'm giddy and happy and full of love. Being with him is as easy as breathing. I can't believe it took us so long.

I gather all the ingredients for pancakes, but I can't remember the flour to milk ratio, so I grab Jack's laptop from his bag and google a recipe. Then, out of curiosity, I google my name. Until Jack changed the fuse the day he came back, I've been without TV, totally shut off from the world with no idea what's being said about my case. I click on the first link. It's a video ... of Jack. His face is freezeframed. I stare at it. At the frown lines between his eyes, drawn in concern, his ruffled hair. Behind him is my house, cordoned off by tape. I see a flash of uniform in the background; a policeman standing by the front gate. Anticipation sours into trepidation because he's lied to me. He said they'd asked him to film the appeal, not that he'd already done it. Why has he lied?

I hit play.

'If Elodie was with me now, I'd hold her and never let her go, but we have no idea where she is. It's the not knowing that's killing us. Elodie would never take off, she'd never worry anyone like this. He has her somewhere and ...' He breaks off, looks down at the floor, visibly upset. I never knew Jack was such an excellent actor. If I didn't know the truth, I'd eat up every word, every minor chord in his voice.

'Allegedly, there was a man harassing Elodie weeks before she went missing,' says the off-screen anchor woman. 'What do you know about

that?’

Jack looks directly into the camera. ‘I think it was him. The police had the right guy. He’s been following Elodie for weeks. She was terrified. He’s absolutely involved. As soon as they find some evidence, he’ll be locked up. We need justice for Elodie. For her family.’

Suspect ... who are they talking about? There can’t be a—

‘And how are the family coping?’

He pushes his fingers back through his hair and shakes his head. ‘It’s been hard. On everyone. And now with Meredith in hospital ... it’s all become too much. We just need Elodie home.’

Mum’s in hospital?

Gripped by panic, I stumble to my feet, knocking over the bag of flour in a dusty white plume.

He told me my family were fine. He said there was nothing to report. He’s lied and lied again. I take a deep breath, trying to calm down but I can’t. I can’t. I—

‘Elodie – what’s wrong?’

Jack stands in the doorway, wearing only a pair of black Calvins. Last night, this sight would’ve made my fingers burn to touch the hard contours of his stomach. This morning, it makes my fingers curl into a fist. ‘Mum’s in hospital.’

He frowns. Opens his mouth, sees the laptop on the counter, then closes it again.

‘Why didn’t you tell me?’ I spit.

‘Why would I?’

‘She’s my mother!’ I yell. ‘I asked you how my family were, and you lied to me.’

‘Because I knew you’d overreact.’ He storms forward and slams the laptop shut. ‘She’s just dehydrated. Stressed.’

‘Because of me.’ I am cold. So cold. I wrap my arms around myself. ‘I need to see her. Just take me home.’

He moves towards me. ‘Elodie ...’

I take a deliberate step back. ‘Take me home.’

‘No.’

My stomach drops. His mouth is pressed into a thin, determined line. Once he has that look on his face, there's no reasoning with him. He can't stop me from leaving.

'Fine,' I say. I walk away from him, around the kitchen island and stride into the hallway.

He calls after me. 'What're you doing?'

I take the car keys from the drawer.

'Elodie, what the fuck are you doing?'

I shove my feet into my white trainers. 'Going to the hospital.'

'*Think* about what you're doing. We agreed.'

'We agreed I'd stay here until you filmed your appeal and you have.'

'I said when it was broadcast.'

'Semantics,' I snap, even though I'm sure this is another lie. I wheel on him. 'And it *has* been broadcast.'

'I'm sorry, okay? I'm sorry I lied. You're right. You deserved to know.'

I want to ask what else he's lied about but there's no time. I need to see Mum. 'I've got to go.'

'I said I'm sorry.'

Ignoring him, I yank open the front door, but Jack grabs my shoulder and spins me to face him. 'What's the plan?'

'Don't know.'

'*Think.*'

'I'll tell them that story we agreed about the shack and the masked man.'

He shakes his head. 'That story relied on it being dark. On you being disoriented and confused. Doesn't work if you pull up to the hospital in *my* car.'

He's right but the need to be with my family is overwhelming. I'll figure the rest out later. 'I'm going, Jack.'

'Elodie, you're smarter than this.'

And frustration that he won't let me leave and the anger that he has lied to me, withheld information, rises like vomit. 'What suspect do the police have? Is my stalker the same man you paid to take me? What's his name?'

'Without his name, you have deniability. I'm protecting you.'

'Let me go, Jack.'

‘It’s you and me, okay? It’s you and me. We’ll sort this out together, if you just take a minute and realise how rash this is. Come on, Fray. You’re smart, be smart about this. Don’t throw everything away because you’re not thinking clearly.’

His charm is turned on full beam. Usually, it is a lighthouse in the dark, guiding me to him, but all his lies have swept in; roiling clouds blotting everything else out. He is right though; I am smart, smart enough to realise he’s manipulating me. ‘I’m going.’

‘What about us?’ The front door is open at my back, the misty rain patters onto my bare legs. I try to turn towards it, but his fingers dig into my shoulders. ‘What about us?’

I think about Mum lying in a hospital bed, hooked up to machines, needing me. I should’ve left after I saw my parents on the news the first time. ‘Let me go.’

He tries to wrap himself around me, but I push him away as hard as I can. Then I turn and jog down the steps towards the car. Jack is faster. He makes it to the driver’s side door before I do and stands in front of it.

‘We aren’t going anywhere until you tell me what this means for us.’

I am still smarting with the knowledge he deceived me, so I use my words like bullets. ‘It was a mistake.’

And he looks at me like I’ve just given him a week to live. ‘You don’t mean that.’ Barefoot and wearing only a pair of boxers, he shivers with cold. He looks vulnerable and lost.

‘Go inside, Jack.’

‘Look,’ he says. He licks his lips. ‘I’ll drive. Just wait, okay?’

‘I can drive myself.’

‘You want me to sit here and wait for the police to bang my door down when you explain I’ve hidden you here for weeks? The least you can do is let me drive us both home. Yeah, I lied to you – I thought I was protecting you – but if this is going to blow up, I don’t want to be a fucking passenger.’

The look on his face tells me I am not going to win. All I want is to see my mum, so, against my better judgement, I relent and hand him the keys. I keep my head down as he strides into the house. I’m wearing nothing but

trainers and one of Jack's shirts but there is so much adrenaline surging through my body, I don't feel the cold.

Despite everything, I don't want Jack to get in trouble; maybe he can drop me off at the shed like we planned, and I can hitchhike back to Crosshaven. It will take so much longer but it will keep Jack as far from police questioning as possible.

Jack returns, dressed in jeans and a jumper. He doesn't look at me as he passes, but he hands me a coat. I don't put it on, I just hurry to the passenger side and get in. The vulnerable, lost Jack is gone, replaced by something harder and angrier. He rips the car into first and slams his foot on the accelerator. We take off. Fast. His jaw is tense, his face carved into a glower.

In the silence, I hear the raging tempest of his fury.

We careen down the hill, the trees on either side a blur of green and brown.

'Slow down,' I warn.

He doesn't.

We bounce along the pitted road, faster and faster. 'Jack!'

The car swings left. Then right. He isn't in control. I am pinned against my seat, gripping the door handle so hard my hand burns. He slams on the brakes and I am thrown forward before my seatbelt snaps me back. 'What the fuck?'

His gaze is fixed ahead. His knuckles bone-white around the steering wheel. 'I can't take you back. Not until we've sorted this.'

'We can talk about it later. I need to see her.'

'Meredith is fine.'

'People don't just pop into hospital for a rest.'

'I meant it when I said I'm all in with you. We aren't over – we can't be.'

'Jack, *please* just take me back. Or drop me off somewhere so I can—'

'I want to fix this.'

'MAYBE IT CAN'T BE FIXED.'

His mouth tightens, rage coming off him in blistering waves. 'You're wrong. You're *fucking* wrong.' He punches the steering wheel. I flinch. 'It's taken you years to admit how you feel about me. It took us coming up here,

away from everyone, for you to admit it and we had it. We finally had it and it's so good, Fray. It's right, and you're ruining everything.'

He reaches for me, but I snatch my hand away.

'Why're you being like this?' he demands.

'Are you kidding me? You didn't tell me about my mum lying in a hospital bed. You didn't tell me you'd filmed an appeal. Jesus, Jack, it was broadcast days ago. When did you film it? I mean—' I stop, realisation dawning. 'Oh my god. It was you. You *did* do something to the TVs ... you had to in case I saw the appeal. You—'

'Stop.'

'Locked me in Wisteria and left me with a key you *knew* didn't work. You've been manipulating me this entire time.' As I say the words aloud, another crushing realisation hits me. 'Did you really hear my mum say she was grateful it wasn't Ada who went missing or was that another lie to keep me here?' I am furious and certain. I stare at him, daring him to lie to me again. I'm remembering what he said this morning, that if we had some time alone away from Crosshaven, everything would fall into place.

'You think I'd do that?'

'Yes.' Then I'm out of the car and stomping down the hill. It's raining hard now but I don't care.

The car door slams shut. Jack's heavy footsteps sound on the packed earth. 'Elodie.' He grabs my wrist.

'Stay the fuck away.'

But he doesn't let go. He yanks me to him and looms over me; a sour mix of anguish and anger. 'Talk to me.'

I am silent and livid.

'This isn't just about you.'

I try to pull free; his fingers twist my skin. 'You're hurting me.'

'I love you.' His tone is desperate, pleading almost. 'I'm *in* love with you, Elodie.'

I don't know what my reaction is supposed to be – shocked, giddy, grateful? I am too angry to feel any of it. His declaration of love doesn't touch me; it breaks like a wave upon the shore, reaching for my toes but

never quite making it. All I can think is – why now? Why is he telling me this now?

‘Say something.’

‘I’m not going to tell the police you’re involved.’

He blinks, taken aback. ‘What’s that got to do with anything?’

‘If that’s why you told me you love me ... I won’t tell them this was your idea.’

‘You think that’s why? I told you I love you because I fucking *love* you.’

He lets go of my wrist and cups my face, a parody of the embrace we shared last night; his fingers are not gentle, they are bruising. He’s not acting himself; he’s starting to scare me.

‘You love me. I know you do.’ I see resolve harden in his face and I know what he’s about to do.

‘Don’t—’ I start to object, but his lips crush mine. He kisses me angrily, roughly. I shove against his chest, but he adjusts his grip on me. Moving one hand around my neck and the other to the small of my back, he jerks me against him, trapping my hands between us – pain shoots up my pinned wrists and I cry out. He seizes the opportunity, forcing his tongue into my mouth. I struggle, but it’s useless; he is so much stronger, so much bigger.

I bite down, catching something soft between my teeth.

He releases me, fingers flying to his bloody mouth.

I stumble back.

We stare at each other through the pouring rain; it distorts his features; he is a grotesque reflection in a funhouse mirror. I expect him to jibber with apologies. I wait. There is blood on his teeth and tension in his body. He is not going to say he is sorry. An instinct older than time tells me to flee. Too late. He lunges. I leap back, but the earth is slick, and my trainer shoots out from beneath me. The air is pushed from my lungs as I smack the ground. I lie on my back, struggling to breathe. There’s no time to recover; he is on me, driving me hard into the dirt. I fight him, kicking and clawing. He catches my pounding, flailing fists. With one hand, he holds my wrists hostage above my head, so high up my shoulders burn.

‘Stop,’ I choke.

‘We’re in love. You felt it’ – his free hand grips my bare thigh hard enough to bruise – ‘when I was *inside* you.’

I squeeze my eyes shut and in the spinning dark I tell myself this is not happening. But I feel the roughness of jeans, the hardness of him digging into my upper thigh and I can’t pretend anymore; it’s happening. The realisation starts in the pit of my stomach and roars to life, rushing up from my gut and out of my mouth in a high-pitched, terrified shriek. Over and over, like a siren.

Mouth claiming mine again, he swallows my scream. His tongue is moist and warm, slug-like in my mouth. I want to turn my head away, but I’m trapped between him and the hard ground, shaking with adrenaline and exhaustion. Pinned beneath him, all I can do is whimper and pant as his fingers move like maggots up my thigh until they are wriggling between my legs, moving my knickers to one side.

He whispers into my ear, ‘Let me make you feel it.’

‘Jack,’ I scream. His name is the only word I can find.

But this isn’t Jack – this is a stranger.

I think back to us as children racing down to the little beach.

The stranger clamps a hand over my mouth and tells me to be quiet.

I think of Jack bringing croissants to my house first thing in the morning.

The stranger yanks my underwear down my thigh.

I think of Jack sitting beside me on his big green sofa with a glass of wine and a smile. The sound of a zipper brings me back to myself. He leans away, unhooking the button of his jeans with his thumb. I bring my knee up into his crotch. He lets go of my wrists to clutch his groin, cheeks puffing, and I scramble from beneath him, slip-sliding on the slick mud. I pull my knickers up and then I am running.

He bellows my name.

I crash through the woods, banging into trees that seem to spring up in my path. My legs are elastic bands that have been pulled too tight. Bark bites into my skin as I squeeze between trunks. Sharp twigs and thorns from bracken slice and scratch as I run. I hear my heart soaring all around, feel blood rushing in rivers through my veins.

He howls for me. He's close. Still running, I look over my shoulder. Face twisted in fury, he bears down. If he gets his hands on me, he won't stop. Panic takes flight in my chest like a murder of crows. Then the ground vanishes beneath me and I am falling, tumbling down, down, down.

Sky becomes earth and earth becomes sky. There's a sharp pain in my skull and, finally, I am still. Everything is blurry and slow. I blink up at the light filtering through the canopy even as black roses bloom across my vision. Warm wetness pools at my temple. Jack is high above me, clutching a tree on top of the bank. He is shouting – I see the angry red of his open mouth – but I am too far under water to hear him.

As he skids down the slope towards me, a final black rose blossoms, and everything sinks into darkness.

## Chapter Thirty-Two

### 35 Days Missing

#### **Adaline Archer**

Dad was arrested. That's right, sis, *arrested*. I keep replaying the moment he was handcuffed. I just stood on the street thinking I must be in some bizarre reality TV show because this couldn't possibly be happening.

It started with another solo fishing trip which Dad insisted on leaving for in the early hours. There was a storm last night and it was still wet and windy today, so I was surprised he didn't reschedule. But our parents do look for any excuse to avoid one another these days. With Dad taking off on more fishing weekends and Mum spending more nights in my guest room, they aren't in one another's company very often. I've tried inviting them over for dinner but they're like the north side of two magnets; they just can't seem to come together. You hear of it a lot though, don't you? When a couple loses their child, it can split a marriage. I see how our parents struggle every day you are gone, and I wonder if Mum still believes it will be a tragedy if I never have children. Because, if I'm never a mother, I will never suffer the loss or disappearance of a child I've raised. That, at least, is a blessing. It's hard enough losing a sister. Sometimes, I want to ask Mum, if she could erase the memory of you to ease the pain, would she? ~~I think I would.~~

Anyway, with Dad out of town, it was up to me to drive Mum to the train station this afternoon. She'd planned a visit to her friends in Kent for a few days. At first, I didn't think it was a good idea, Mum leaving in the middle of all this, but then I looked at her tired, thin face and knew she needed a break.

'Phone me when you get there,' I told her on the platform.

'Don't you worry about me, love. Trish will take good care of me,' she said. 'You just look after your dad, okay?'

At home, I was greeted with a familiar noise: the burr of the Hoover. Strange since it wasn't in my hand. I stepped into the lounge to see the rarest of sights: my husband in his relaxed weekend garb, enthusiastically hoovering with his wireless headphones on, singing an off-key rendition of 'Wild Thing' by The Troggs, and I felt a squeeze of affection for him.

Sensing my presence, he looked over and his face split into a smile to match my own. He turned off the Hoover and removed his headphones. 'Hello, gorgeous.'

Gorgeous. He called me gorgeous when we started dating. As soon as we married though, I became 'darling', which I'm sure he saw as an upgrade because that's what his father calls his mother, but it makes me feel middle-aged. 'Who's the murder victim?'

He frowned. 'What?'

'You're cleaning, which means you've either had a stroke or you're covering up a crime.'

'Oh har-har,' he said. 'I know you've been under a lot of stress recently, so I thought I'd help out.' He brandished the Hoover nozzle. 'Do some cleaning.'

'I like it.'

'Yeah?'

I sashayed over to him. 'Nothing gets me wetter than a man with a Hoover in his hand.'

'Oh really?' He raised his eyebrows. 'Well then, you should see what I can do with a mop.'

He wound an arm around my waist and pulled me to him, 'Wild Thing' still playing through the discarded headphones on the coffee table. He kissed me. I know you'd roll your eyes and say something like, 'Running the Hoover round once in a blue moon doesn't mean you owe your husband a quickie on the sofa,' but this was Ethan *really* trying. So I let him fuck me over the arm of our custom-made sofa, and when he'd all but skipped upstairs for a shower, cleaning forgotten, I picked up the Hoover and finished the lounge.

'What's this?' The voice at my back was so gravelly, it took me a moment to realise it belonged to Ethan.

I turned around and stared at the little packet squeezed between his fingers. My contraceptive pills. You'd ramble and babble like you always do when you're caught out. I, on the other hand, go cold and hard like stone, so I stared at my husband and said, 'You know what it is.'

'I thought we'd stopped using protection.'

'We had. Then I changed my mind and started taking it again.' I lifted my chin. 'Why were you going through my drawers?'

'I was putting away laundry.' He shook the packet and the pills rattled in their foil prison. He was so very angry with me. 'Why're you taking them again?'

I could've lied, maybe I should've, but I'd spent so much time pretending to other people, I wanted to be honest with my husband. 'You're never here. You're always working. If we had a baby, I'd be the one taking care of it all by myself.'

'That's your fucking job.'

I inhaled sharply. 'Excuse me?'

'I'm not discussing this,' he said. 'Get rid of the pills. All of them.'

I was angry and I was caught, but mostly, I was angry. 'You never discuss things with me. You simply lay down the law and expect me to follow it. *Talk to me.*'

'Fine. Okay. What do you do with your day, Ada? You cook and clean and throw parties. It's time your life had some purpose. Some direction.'

I knew that's what other people thought of me – my friends who have children, my friends who don't have children but do have careers, maybe even you think that of me – but I didn't ever dream that my husband felt the same way. It hurt. It really hurt. But it's what I wanted, isn't it? I asked for a confrontation and now I had it.

'This is our deal.' He was bubbling with self-righteousness and fury. 'I work. *You* organise the house and have the fucking baby.'

'Our marriage isn't one of your business deals, Ethan.'

'A marriage is a contract. Of course it's a fucking deal. Since your counselling sessions, you've changed. I thought if I did some mindless chores you'd lighten up.'

It stung that his sudden desire to help me was really only to help himself.

‘You always act strangely with me after those counselling sessions,’ he barked. ‘I don’t know what she’s putting in your head, but I don’t want you to go anymore.’

‘It was *your* idea.’

‘Well, it stops here.’

‘I’m not one of your interns. You can’t make demands and expect me to obey.’

‘No, you’re not one of my interns. They’re free. You cost me a fucking fortune.’

I wanted to slap him. ‘Ask me again why I don’t want children with you.’

He tossed the packet of pills onto the table before storming upstairs.

I made to go after him, but my phone rang. I ignored Ruby’s call because I didn’t need an update on what size of fruit her baby was or if it had very cleverly grown fingernails this week. But then she sent me a message begging me to call her back. Curiosity piqued, I rang. She told me she’d just seen our dad stumbling towards town.

‘But that doesn’t make sense, Dad’s fishing this weekend.’

‘He was angry and drunk, heading for the high street. I think he’s going after Richard.’

‘Richard?’

‘Elodie’s boss. Haven’t you seen the news? He sold some story to the paper about her promiscuity, flirting with customers for tips, how he fired her for calling in sick all the time. He even suggested Uncle Martin had something to do with her disappearance. I just thought you should know ...’

Thanking her, I hung up. I didn’t even tell Ethan where I was going, just grabbed my car keys and ran out the door. Once parked, I half walked, half jogged down the high street. I heard Dad yelling seconds before I saw the large crowd. When I broke through the ring of people, I saw him pinning Richard against Mugs’ big glass window.

‘You think you can go around telling people *I* had something to do with my daughter’s disappearance?’ Dad bellowed in Richard’s face. ‘You malicious little—’

He raised his fist and I cried out, ‘Dad, stop!’

His head whipped round.

Taking advantage of Dad's momentary lapse in focus, Richard shoved him in the chest. Dad staggered backwards. The crowd gasped and surged back as he hit the floor.

I rushed forward and dropped to my knees beside him. 'Are you okay?' I helped him to his feet. There was rage on his face and whisky on his breath.

'Everyone thinks you did it,' spat Richard, squaring up to Dad. 'For the record, I was telling the truth. Elodie batted her eyelashes at all and sundry if it meant she got a better tip.'

Dad punched him.

One second I was hanging on to his arm and the next it was swinging. Richard's head snapped back. He stumbled to the side, clutching his face. Dad lunged. A man I didn't know knocked me out of the way and grabbed Dad before he could get a hold of Richard again. More people got between the two of them.

Just then, as Richard wiped the blood from his lip, two police officers broke through the crowd and dragged Dad off to one side. Someone must've called them before I arrived. A woman beside me was filming the entire thing on her phone. Looking around, I realised she wasn't the only one.

'Do you mind?' I snapped at the woman.

She jumped at my tone, then gave me a snotty look and said, 'Free country.'

I marched towards the police officers and tried to explain, but they wouldn't listen. Then everything spun out of control; they bundled Dad into the back of the police car. I couldn't stop them, El, I couldn't do anything. Seconds later, I had my phone pressed to my ear, calling Christopher. I launched into a near-hysterical retelling.

'Deep breath, Ada, it's going to be okay,' he said reasonably. 'Start from the beginning.'

I walked back to my car, sat inside, and told him everything.

'I'll see what I can do,' he told me. 'Look, go home, I'll call you as soon as I have information.'

The sun was setting as I arrived at the house. Ethan was gone, along with his overnight bag. He didn't answer a single one of my fifteen phone calls.

‘You’re my husband,’ I said to his voicemail. ‘I know we’ve had a fight ... a big one. But I need you.’

You would scoff at that – needing a man. You’ve never needed a man. Love has always been a bonus for you, not the goal. You and Noah were jigsaw pieces; you slotted into each other’s lives as though you were made that way. Ethan and I aren’t jigsaw pieces. We don’t quite fit. Not anymore. But he is still my husband and even though ‘through missing sisters and arrested fathers’ was not in our wedding vows, I think it would be covered, but he wasn’t answering. In fact, after my third call and second voicemail, he’d turned his phone off.

I paced our house. Just as my patience was about to snap and I was going to call Christopher for an update, my phone rang.

‘Look, Ada,’ said Christopher by way of greeting. ‘I’ll cut right to it – it’s bad news: Richard won’t drop the charges.’

‘What does this mean for Dad?’ I asked, shaking so hard, I had to sit down.

‘He’ll be charged with—’

‘Stop,’ I said, interrupting him. ‘Dad shouldn’t be charged with anything. Richard goaded him!’

‘I know,’ said Christopher. He sighed. ‘But that doesn’t change the law. Unless Richard drops the charges—’

‘I’ll take care of it,’ I said before hanging up.

Adrenaline surging, I called Uncle Gregory, thinking his job on the council might mean he could help track Richard down. ‘Listen, don’t call Mum ... I’ve got some news and I need your help,’ I said into the phone. ‘I need an address.’

I drove to Richard’s house alone. Crazy really. Normally, Ethan takes the lead on big issues: a discrepancy on a bill, remortgaging the house, anything that demands a lot of responsibility. But Ethan wasn’t around, and Dad needed help. Mum told me to look after him, she’d been gone less than a day and he was being held in a cell.

Outside Richard’s, I didn’t let myself get worked up; I got out of the car, pushed through the front gate and knocked on his door.

When he opened it and saw it was me, he tried to close it again. I put my foot in the way. ‘Please hear me out,’ I said, using my hostess voice;

inviting and friendly. ‘My family is going through a lot right now and, as I’m sure you can imagine, my father is very stressed with Elodie missing and he didn’t mean—’

‘To sucker punch me?’

I pressed my lips together and tried to arrange my face into something sympathetic. ‘I’m sorry he lashed out,’ I said, but bit my tongue so I didn’t add ‘you deserved it’. I cleared my throat. ‘But his daughter is missing. He’s devastated and confused. Really he—’

‘What do you want?’

‘Drop the charges.’

‘Nope.’

‘But—’

‘Freedom of speech – I had every right to go to the newspaper.’

I stared into his shifty eyes and down at the too-tight chinos digging into his doughy midriff and I hated him. He’s a bottom-feeder, desperate for attention; he sold his story to make himself feel important.

‘I’m not talking about this anymore,’ he said. ‘Leave, before I call the police myself.’

And with that, he slammed the door in my face.

All the day’s frustrations built and built until I felt like a kettle coming to the boil. I wanted to pound on his door or kick it in. Curling my hands into fists, I turned and jogged back down the path, through the gate and into my car. My life was in tatters, scattered all around me, and no matter how hard I tried, I couldn’t pick up any of the pieces.

Tapping on my car window made me jump. A young woman I vaguely recognised, with red hair and an elfin nose, was crouching beside my door. I rolled my window down.

‘You Elodie’s sister?’

I nodded. ‘And you are ...’

‘Hannah. I worked with Elodie.’ She looked back towards Richard’s house. It took me a second to realise that’s where she’d just come from, wrapped in a bathrobe. She lowered her voice. ‘I didn’t always get on with her.’

‘Neither did I.’

She smiled. ‘But I’m sorry about what’s happened to her. Sorry for your family too.’

‘Thank you.’

‘It’s my fault she was fired.’

‘Doesn’t matter now.’

She lingered, biting her bottom lip like she wanted to say more.

‘Yes?’ I prompted.

She sighed. ‘Months ago, Elodie mentioned a customer was following her. I laughed, joked about how all the boys love Elodie Fray and told her to get over it. I should’ve made her go to the police. When I saw David’s face on the news, I recognised him instantly.’

‘Hannah—’

‘Rich shouldn’t have accused your dad of hurting Elodie. It wasn’t him. I’ll make sure he drops the charges.’

I blinked in surprise. ‘Thank you.’

She nodded, then turned and started hurrying towards the house. Impulsively, I leaned out the window and called softly, ‘You can do better.’

Hand on the gate she replied, ‘I know.’

Later, I got the call to pick Dad up. Christopher was waiting for me in the police station car park.

‘Martin’s inside,’ he said before I could ask. ‘I just wanted to come and see you before you took him home. How did you get Richard to drop the charges?’ He looked at me in a way I realised my husband never has: with admiration and respect. As an equal.

‘I didn’t. It was Elodie’s co-worker, Hannah, said she’d talk to Richard.’

‘But if you hadn’t got the ball rolling ...’

I shrugged, feeling awkward.

‘I don’t condone what your dad did,’ he said gravely, and I felt a twinge of shame because Dad is a good man, I don’t want anyone to think of him as a violent drunk. Christopher leaned forward conspiratorially. ‘But, off the record, I saw the footage from some bystanders and it’s a shame Martin didn’t break Richard’s nose.’

I laughed. Six weeks ago, if you’d told me I’d be in a police car park, laughing about a coffee shop owner having his bones broken, I’d have

thought you were off your rocker.

‘Your dad has got a lot to thank you for,’ he said.

Christopher sees me as this capable, tenacious, bright woman, and not just some childless, trivial little housewife like everyone else does. I’m not sure which version is the correct one, but I know which version I want to be. It’s possible though that Christopher sees me through the same rose-tinted specs you view Jack. The kind that are fixed to your face after years of knowing someone.

‘While you’re going around taking care of everyone else, I hope you’re taking care of yourself too,’ he said. ‘Or that you’ve got someone making sure you do.’

And then something embarrassing happened: hot tears sprang to my eyes. I am usually so collected, but everything is falling apart.

‘God, Ada, I didn’t mean to ...’ he trailed off and pulled me into his chest.

‘I’m fine,’ I said.

His smell was so familiar and brought with it a thousand teenage memories: Christopher and I driving around the countryside on a hot summer’s night with the windows down and the music up; panting breaths and fumbling hands beneath the sheets in my old room. Back then I was so young and carefree and invincible. In every one of those memories, in the background, you were safe and alive and waiting at home for me with Mum and Dad.

‘You’re not fine,’ he said. ‘It’s okay to not be okay.’

Suddenly embarrassed, I pulled back and wiped my eyes. Christopher opened his mouth to say something, then Dad called my name. Over my shoulder, I saw him marching across the car park. ‘I better get him home,’ I said. ‘Thank you.’

I wasn’t sure what I was thanking him for, but I owed him gratitude. On the way back home, I let Christopher’s words and all I’d achieved sink in. He was right; if I hadn’t gone to Richard’s house, he wouldn’t have dropped the charges.

I made a difference. Me.

And you know what, I’m not leaving it up to other people to find you. I won’t stop looking for you, Ellie-Bee, not until my heart stops beating.

## Chapter Thirty-Three

### 35 Days Missing

#### **Elodie Fray**

The sound of my heart is loud in my ears as I swim towards consciousness. Finally breaking through the surface on a gasp, I am lying on my back, inhaling the powdery freshness of clean sheets. My eyes flicker open – the bright white light of day burns so I close them again. The insides of my lids are painted red. Opening my eyes and keeping them that way is a struggle; they keep sliding shut.

A gabled ceiling.

Red.

Wooden beams.

Red.

French doors – the sky.

I am in the attic room in Wisteria Cottage. I try to sit up, but I can't. I can't.

My arms have been pulled up over my head and secured to the iron-cast headboard behind me. Metal clicks on metal; I am handcuffed. Memories rush in on a tidal wave: the speeding car, Jack pinning me to the hard ground, his fingers between my legs as I begged him to stop, tumbling down a bank. My left temple throbs.

I test my bonds again but the metal cuts into my wrists; the pain is excruciating, and I clench my jaw to stop myself from crying out. There's no way I can get free without help. I go from hot to cold and back again; my chest tightening to a painful degree as panic threatens to consume me.

Inhale.

Exhale.

Inhale.

I look down to realise I'm wearing a clean T-shirt. There's no mud from where I fell, just little scratches and bruises littering my legs. How long have I been unconscious for? And what did Jack do to me while I was out? Without thinking, I try to move my hands to feel between my legs – check for torn flesh, blood, pain – any sign that he has put himself inside me, but my restraints don't allow for more than a couple of inches of movement.

He's changed my clothes. He's held my naked, unconscious body in his hands. He's cleaned my skin. My stomach churns. Panic starts to snip the thread of calm I am clutching. I drag air down into my lungs, and fight to stay in control. Holding still, I mentally check myself over. I'm not sore but then, what about all those women you read about who black out, are raped, and wake up having no idea until they turn over and see an unfamiliar man beside them or, further down the line, a degrading video or photograph emerges? If Jack had raped me, would I even know?

Sweat gathers in the hollow of my back as I realise, even if he hasn't done so already, he still could. I am half naked and chained to a bed. No one knows I am here. No one will ever know I am here because I helped him commit the perfect crime. He made sure he had a watertight alibi the day I disappeared: a busy London theatre, hundreds of people who can vouch for him, ticket stubs, CCTV. He could keep me in Wisteria or kill me and throw my body into the sea, and no one would ever suspect Jack Westwood because he is the devoted best friend who appealed for my safe return on national television.

Panic finally severing my thread of calm, I scream for help. The nearest neighbours are too far away to hear but I don't care, I am trying to purge myself of terror. Let it out along with all the air in my lungs. The bedroom door swings open. Jack, in joggers and a clean T-shirt, doesn't look like a kidnapper, a murderer or a rapist. Not like the thuggish red faces you see in mugshots on the evening news. Even as a child, you're conditioned to believe villains have warts and crooked noses where heroes have white smiles and strong jaws. Jack is good-looking and golden; even without the perfect alibi, no one would suspect him.

I've stopped screaming. In the abrupt silence, I hear waves crashing outside, and Jack breathing hard, and myself breathing harder. He stares at me, his face pale, contorted. With worry? Or anger, maybe. For several

slow-ticking seconds I don't know what he's going to do, whether he will climb on top of me, inside me, finish what he started. But then he softens, and approaches, arms raised, palms up, as though trying to calm a rabid animal. 'It's okay,' he soothes, 'you're okay.'

His hair is a wilderness of short, unbrushed curls, and there's a red mark around his eye which I can see will turn into a bruise. I got in one decent punch, I suppose. It doesn't make me feel good. Days ago, I couldn't have imagined a world where I'd have to hit Jack. The bruise is a mark of reality, a visible reminder of what happened on the hill.

He drags the green armchair from the reading nook and positions it beside the bed, far enough away I can't kick out at him with my unbound legs. I am barely breathing, waiting for him to speak. 'I'm sorry things got out of hand.'

I blink, trying to absorb his words but they jumble and tangle and knot in my brain. 'Out of hand?' I echo, because he can't possibly dismiss what he tried to do to me with such nonchalance. 'You tried to rape me.' When I say it out loud, it's like bursting a festering sore and watching all the anaemic yellow pus ooze out. It is painful and ugly, but it's the truth. It's the truth so I say it again: 'You tried to rape me.'

'No. I tried to make you see—'

'You tried to rape me.'

He scrapes the chair back and comes over to me.

'Elodie—'

'You tried to rape me.'

'Stop. Listen to me. I—'

'You tried to rape me.'

'Shut up!' He grabs my face, hard. 'Shut up! Just, fucking shut up.' With each word he gives my head a quick, hard shake. He lets me go. 'You wanted me last night. You wanted me this morning. We couldn't keep our hands off each other. I thought if we – I thought if you remembered how good it was, that you wouldn't want to leave.'

'Just because I said yes last night, or this morning, it doesn't mean you get an automatic pass.'

'I know.'

I open my mouth to tell him I loathe him, but a sob breaks free. Then another and another. 'Please let me go. Please, please, please.' I hate that I am begging but I am petrified and desperate and don't care that my face is damp with snot and tears.

'If I let you go now, I lose you.'

'You lost me the second I told you to stop and you didn't.'

'No. No.' He turns and kicks the chair. 'Up here, away from everyone else, you realised you love me. Give it time, you'll get there again. I know you, Elodie.'

'I don't know *you*.'

'You know me better than anyone.'

I twist and pull on my restraints; they slice into my wrists. I want the use of my hands, I want to be able to fight him off, shove against his chest, swing a fist if he tries to force himself on me again.

'Stop,' he warns so furiously, I do as he says. 'If you keep pulling, you're going to hurt yourself.'

'Does it matter?'

'Of course it matters.'

'You're hurting me by locking me up in this house. Let me go, Jack. You can't keep me here. It won't make anything better.'

'It will. It did.' He paces back and forth. I'm not sure if he is talking to me or himself. 'I don't care how long it takes, weeks, months, years.'

My insides plummet. Years? He can't keep me here for years. Oh, but he can, can't he? How would anyone ever know? Running through my head is a newspaper reel of all those stories of girls trapped in basement rooms, only to be discovered years or even decades after being taken.

'We're meant to be. I know it. It's me and you. It's us.' He stops pacing and stands in front of the French doors, the same ones we sat in front of to watch the storm, and I ached to kiss him.

He pushes his fingers back through his hair. Then spins on his heel and strides towards me. I scramble back, pushing myself against the headboard, trying to put as much distance between him and me as possible. 'I love you,' he tells me.

I'm silent.

‘Jesus, the way you’re looking at me. Like I’m a fucking monster. Just how Jeffrey used to look at me.’ He whips away so all I can see is his back. ‘Maybe I deserved the beatings, the nights spent in that basement. When I was a kid, he told me my mother was too soft to abort me when she should’ve and so we all had to suffer her weakness. He was right.’ His voice is delicate, cold, like the thin layer of ice over a puddle on a frosty morning. A childhood stained with violence changes a person. Moulds them. ‘It should’ve been me with a gun to my head that summer.’

‘No.’ The word escapes before I can stop it.

He turns to me, hopeful, relieved I am warming. Then I shift my weight and the cuffs above my head clink against the bedframe I am chained to, and my rose-tinted glasses shatter. It’s obvious; forgiving him is wrong, so wrong, but it’s easier to believe the man on a hill is a stranger, someone I will never meet again, because *this* Jack, the one with tears in his eyes, the one who is soft and who tells me he loves me, is the real Jack. It is easier to believe that than it is to admit I never knew the real him. That you never really know anyone, not all the way.

He crouches beside me. ‘Everything’s going to be okay.’

‘No. You can’t guilt me into forgetting what you did. You can’t haul out the violins and expect everything to go back to the way it was.’

‘You told me once that I couldn’t be a bad person if everything I do is done with love.’

The first time we kissed, the day Jeffrey caught us together on the windowsill.

‘This isn’t love. It’s control.’ He’s incredibly manipulative and I’m angry I didn’t see it before. But maybe coming up against a puppet master means it’s impossible to know your strings are being pulled.

He balls his hands into fists and presses them against his eyes. He makes a sound – a low growl of frustration. He is like a child in a toy shop being told he can’t have what he wants. I hate him for what he has done to us because there’s no going back.

‘It’s insanity,’ I spit. ‘You’re fucking insane.’

He raises his head slowly; the usual intensity in his eyes has bubbled over into something feverish and unstable, something which makes my breath freeze in my chest. ‘Told you before, don’t confuse insanity with drive.’

I look away, remembering him defending Bundy; it makes sense now.

‘I’m not going to hurt you,’ he insists. ‘I’m not. Listen to me, I lost control this morning; I thought the second we went back to Crosshaven, you’d overanalyse everything, overanalyse *us*, and you’d put an end to it because that’s you all over, Elodie. You have something good and you let it go, you have something bad and you hold it tight. I panicked, okay? I wanted what we had last night. I wanted to make you remember what we had last night. Look ...’ He breathes out. Runs his fingers through his hair again. ‘Now I have you here with me, I’m calm, in control. I won’t hurt you again and now’ – his expression softens – ‘we have time for me to make it up to you.’

I swallow. ‘That day in the woods after I was taken, if I hadn’t agreed to your plan to come to Wisteria, would you have let me go?’

He searches my face and I know the answer; even if I’d begged to go back to Crosshaven, he’d have dragged me here against my will. ‘I hoped it wouldn’t come to that, but I knew once we were alone, *truly* alone, you’d realise how you feel about me. It was different for me, I knew I loved you that first time we met, right here, right outside. This is *our* place. It brought us together ...’ He trails a fingertip down the side of my face as though we are two lovers and not a captor and his captive. ‘And now it’s going to keep us that way.’

My stomach turns over and I swallow against the rush of bile.

He is watching my mouth with the same hunger he did last night, moments before he kissed me. My heart thuds hard, but this time it is with terror, not excitement; if he decides he wants me, there is nothing I can do with my hands tied above my head. So, before this spark of lust turns into wildfire, I whip my head to the side, catch his finger between my teeth and bite down so hard, I taste blood. Wrenching his hand back, he stumbles. I am tense, terrified, waiting for him to react. He examines his torn finger with shock. Then laughs. ‘Last night was perfection, Elodie. You were everything I knew you’d be.’

## Chapter Thirty-Four

### 36 Days Missing

#### **Adaline Archer**

After picking Dad up from the police station on Saturday night, I drove him back to mine. I wasn't even surprised to see Ethan still hadn't returned. Dad mumbled something and went upstairs for a shower.

I don't know if you know this about Dad, but he only ever cries in the shower. The first time I heard him, Nanna had just died, and through the wall came this soft burbling beneath the spray of the running water. Now, fifteen minutes later, Dad emerged from the bathroom in a cloud of steam, the redness of his eyes the only sign he'd been crying, and I stood in the doorway of my bedroom in my *Saved by the Bell* pyjamas and was so shocked that my dad, my strong dad who could carry my six-year-old self under his arm without breaking a sweat, had been crying. I think it was the first time I realised parents were just people and not unfeeling cornerstones of our family.

The evening I picked Dad up from the police station, I was still riding that wave of power at having made a difference, and I called Mum. Calmly, I told her what had happened with Dad and the arrest. She started gabbling, but I spoke clearly and concisely and said I knew she and Dad weren't in a good place, and if they didn't want to stay together that was fine, but they had to at least *try* to communicate because throwing thirty-five years of marriage away without so much as a conversation wasn't acceptable and running away wasn't going to solve anything either. She didn't contest my point, so I went on, impressing upon her that of course she was hurting, and I'd never know how much because, as she pointed out, I'm not a mother, but Dad was hurting too, and his pain was just as valid as hers.

Mum was so quiet, I thought maybe she'd hung up. Then she said, 'I think your dad needs to join me in Kent. Trish and Colin have plenty of room

here.'

By the time Dad came out of the shower, eyes so red I knew he'd been sobbing, I'd booked train tickets.

The next morning, I dropped him at the station, and we stood awkwardly on the platform. You and Mum are huggers. Dad and I are not. But he stood there with his suitcase, dressed in his jacket and a cap that belonged to Grandad, and I was struck again by the realisation that he was no longer that big, strong man who could set me atop his shoulders for apple picking in the summer. Sometimes, I still see our parents through a child's eyes, as though they are faultless and all knowing, but if Dad were a stranger in the street, I'd consider him an older gentleman. And then, out of nowhere, I thought, when Mum and Dad die, with you gone too, I'll be all alone. My breath caught in my throat. I wasn't meant to be all alone. Impulsively, I hugged Dad. He made an *oomph* noise as I squeezed him tight. It wasn't the kind of easy, natural hug you'd give. Dad patted me on the back.

'Mum's going to meet you at the other end,' I told him because he'd lied about the fishing trip, and it was important to reiterate that we'd know if he got off at the next stop and didn't make it to Kent.

I drove around for an hour, just thinking. I wasn't looking forward to returning to an empty house, so I switched the radio on and turned left and turned right until I found myself outside yours again.

The first and last time I slept at your house was in the days after Noah died – until the morning I came downstairs, and Jack was standing in your kitchen with a cup of tea. Let himself in with a key you'd given him. I was surprised; I didn't have a key to your place, our parents didn't. He told me you'd rung him in the early hours, complaining my presence in your home was suffocating, that you wanted me to leave but didn't want to hurt my feelings. I was so embarrassed, so *stung*, I didn't even argue, just got my things and left while you were still sleeping. Later though, I wondered ... I told Ethan I thought Jack had lied, but Ethan said if you didn't want me to leave, you'd have called to find out why I left. And that was it. I never brought it up again, but it niggled. Still niggles. In the months that followed, things between us were frosty, so I thought maybe there was truth to Jack's story, and then I was angry you involved him, humiliated me the way you

did, and beneath it all was the pain that those days we spent together meant more to me than they did to you.

A flash of movement pulled me from my thoughts; on the wall outside was a cat. Tan, white and black with a coppery-coloured heart on its flank. Your little stray. I'd never had a pet of my own. I was too tidy, too clean, I couldn't cope with the hair. But what would become of that cat without you? I decided I'd come back later with a cat carrier. Even if I didn't take her in myself, I could drop her off at a rescue centre.

On the way home, I drove past Jack's. His car wasn't on the drive again. Since your disappearance, he'd been working away more often, taking projects further afield. Charlie said it was too hard for Jack to knock around Crosshaven without you. I wonder if our parents will feel the same if you never return? Will they move away? Will I be left only with Ethan?

At home, music played loudly; Ethan's overnight bag sat at the bottom of the stairs. I was surprised he'd returned so soon after our fight. He was in the kitchen, grilling cheese toasties. For one of our very first dates, Ethan offered to cook. Only, he didn't know how, and the restaurant takeaway he'd hoped to pass off as his own never arrived. So, he made the only thing he could: cheese toasties. Since then, whenever he's forgotten an anniversary or cancelled plans for work, he apologises with his signature dish.

He placed toasties on plates before looking at me. 'I'm sorry I wasn't here for you. As soon as I picked up your voicemails and messages, I came right back.' He proffers the plate. I take it. 'I rang your dad and he told me the charges were dropped.'

'Okay,' I said. 'Thank you. We should sit down and talk about—'

'I don't want to fight. In fact ...' With a boyish grin, he whipped tickets from his back pocket and held them up with a flourish. 'We're going to a show tonight. So have a bath, slip into something gorgeous and I'll take you out.'

'But—'

'Let me make it up to you. Let's just have a night out.'

Ethan doesn't like conflict; he erases it like a shaken-up Etch A Sketch and replaces it with a luxurious gesture.

‘Please.’ He came close. Put a loving hand on my arm. ‘We can talk tomorrow. I promise.’

I felt myself warming. He’d apologised. He’d made an effort. Rejecting him now might make things worse.

I smiled. ‘I’ll go get ready.’

In the taxi on the way to the venue, Ethan nonchalantly informed me his client and his wife were joining us.

~~Sometimes I hate my husband and wonder what the fuck happened to the man I fell in love with. I’ve never admitted to anyone how I sometimes feel about Ethan, but it’s like the question of a tree falling in the woods, if you never read these letters, have I told anyone at all?~~

‘Is that why you came home and apologised, so I’d help you entertain your guests?’ I asked, irritated he’d tried to disguise a business meeting as a romantic treat.

‘Don’t sulk,’ was all he said.

## Chapter Thirty-Five

### 45 Days Missing

#### **Adaline Archer**

Autumn seems to have happened overnight; the trees are bursts of orange, red and mustard. True to British weather, it rained last night, transforming the roads into glossy black mirrors, and turning the fallen leaves into piles of mush along the kerbside.

This morning, I waited impatiently for Ethan to settle into his study to catch up on work. Then I fed him a lie about going to do the food shop and hopped in my car.

We never did talk about our argument. Every day, Ethan has worked, and every night, he's either worked late or been out with clients. Yesterday evening, at his request, I joined him. His client's wife was so mind-numbingly dull, I had drunk a lot to make her seem more interesting. I'd have been better off with a brick for company. At least you can draw a smiley face on a brick.

At home, Ethan was all over me. I was so drunk and so lonely and so tired of thinking about you, I threw myself into sex with him.

Afterwards, while Ethan slept, I stumbled to the bathroom and vomited pink champagne into the toilet then wept on the bathroom floor. All I could think about was that you were gone, and our family was decaying all around me, that you are my sister, and we weren't as close as we should have been, that not knowing what happened to you is a fever I can't soothe. Guilt and frustration mixed with the rich food of the restaurant Ethan had taken me to and I vomited again until my stomach was empty and my throat was sore.

This morning, I realised, not only had I been patchy with my contraceptive pill lately, I'd had unprotected sex followed by sickness so, if I didn't want a baby, I needed the morning after pill. Of course, I couldn't just nip into

the local chemist. If people in Crosshaven didn't know me before you went missing, they do now. I drove to a supermarket nearly forty minutes out of town.

With the pill tucked away in my handbag, I made to leave the supermarket but realised I couldn't go home empty-handed or Ethan would question why I'd left for a food shop and come home with nothing. Grabbing a basket, I started filling it with blind abandon, knowing I needed to get out to the car and take the pill sooner rather than later. Then, in the toiletries aisle, I spotted Jack. Yes, *your* Jack. Even at thirty-one, he is every inch the private-school boy, isn't he? They all look alike: jaunty quiff, strong jawline, broad rugby-playing shoulders.

The panic at seeing Jack in the supermarket was immediate. The pill in my bag felt like a neon light. I started to back away. He looked up. Our gazes locked. He seemed panicked too, but we're British and it's rude not to say anything.

'Ada,' he greeted me, his smile forced.

'Jack,' I returned with a short nod. Only then did I notice the yellowing bruise around his eye. 'What happened to your face?'

'Bike accident.'

'I didn't know you had a motorcycle.' Though I wouldn't be surprised.

'No motorcycle, those days are long gone.'

Of course they are, seeing as the image he plumps for now is squeaky-clean golden boy. 'Just a regular old push bike then?'

He nodded. 'That's right. What're you doing out this way?'

I was flustered; I hadn't even thought to prepare an answer to this question, so sure I wouldn't bump into anyone I knew. 'I'm avoiding people,' I said honestly. 'With what's happened to Elodie and with Dad being arrested, it's just easier to drive that little bit further out.'

'And how is Martin?'

'Fine. With Mum in Kent, taking a little break.'

'Well, Richard got what was coming to him. I warned him not to sell any stories on Elodie, but he did it anyway.'

I frowned. 'You knew before the article came out?'

‘I went to school with the editor of *The Crosshaven Herald*. He mentioned it.’

And then it hit me: that day at my house when I caught Dad and Jack talking in the hallway right before Dad stormed off, it was because Jack told him Richard was going to the papers. Jack wound our dad up like one of those clapping monkeys and let him march directly into the line of fire. ‘You used my dad,’ I levelled at him.

‘I’m sorry?’

‘You couldn’t stop Richard from selling his story, so you used my dad to get revenge.’

I caught the surprise on his face that I’d put it together, then the quirk to his lips as he realised I couldn’t prove my theory even though I was right.

‘You did, didn’t you?’ I pressed. He didn’t answer. He turned and started browsing the products as though I wasn’t even there. ‘Come on, Jack, it’s not like you to avoid confrontation.’ He started walking away. I followed. ‘Well?’

‘He deserved to know.’

We turned past the bakery, the inviting aroma of fresh bread doing nothing to soothe my rage. ‘How could you do that to my family?’

He stopped just before the checkout and said, ‘Ada, I can’t take responsibility for Martin’s behaviour. He’s an adult – what he did with that information was his choice.’

God, Elodie, he’s a condescending, arrogant bastard. As he turned to dismiss me once more, I reached out and snatched his basket from him. ‘I see you, Jack. Don’t think I don’t because I do.’

He smirked, then reached out and took the basket from my hand. As he did, I looked at it and saw, among a few ready meals, was a bag of cherry cola bottles and a box of tampons. An alarm went off in my head: SOMETHING’S NOT RIGHT! SOMETHING’S NOT RIGHT! He saw me eyeing the contents of his shopping and smoothly dropped the basket to his side, out of view. Too late. I’d already seen. It occurred to me then, I’d been so distracted by my own panic at being asked why I was so far out of town that I hadn’t returned the question.

‘So why aren’t you shopping locally, Jack?’ I asked evenly, detecting just the briefest flicker of nerves.

‘I’ve really got to get on, Ada,’ he said, already joining the queue.

Heart racing, I dropped my basket and left.

Tampons and cherry cola bottles. The only person I know over the age of twelve who still enjoys cherry cola bottles is you. Jack can’t keep a woman longer than the night he acquires her, so it was unlikely the tampons were for a secret girlfriend. And what about that black eye? Was I really supposed to believe he’d fallen off a bike? Something was off and if I could catch him out in one lie, maybe I could catch him out in others.

I broke the speed limit a few times to get to Jack’s house before he did. Parking haphazardly outside, I jumped out of the car, hurried up the drive and around the side of the house. I’ve only been to his a few times for family parties and such, but it’s enough to know that his garage was reserved for Jeffrey’s vintage cars, and if Jack owned a bike, it was bound to be in his shed. My heels sank into the grass as I moved quickly across the lawn. Knowing I didn’t have much time, I wrenched the door open, gaze zeroing in on the distinctly bike-shaped object beneath a dusty old sheet. I lifted it up to reveal a blue and black bike with a missing front wheel and a rusty old chain. It hadn’t been touched in months and his bruise was probably only a week old. He’d lied to me about that black eye, Elodie. I knew it, didn’t I tell you I knew it? Why lie about it if he had nothing to hide? I looked back towards the house, my heart slamming against my ribs. Were you in there? Was he keeping you in his house?

At the sound of a car pulling up outside, my blood ran cold. Instinctively, I dropped the sheet and reached for my phone only to realise I’d left it on the passenger seat. Jack would see my car and come looking for me. Without my phone, what could I do if he went berserk and attacked me? Backing out of the shed, I slammed the door shut, then turned and raced back across the garden. I drew in a breath, preparing to scream for help if I needed to. Emerging from the side of the house, I was relieved to see it was a neighbour’s Ford I’d heard. I hurried towards my car and got inside. As I looked up, I caught sight of Jack in my rear-view mirror, and I pulled out of there as fast as possible.

I needed to tell Christopher about the black eye, the lie, the tampons and cherry cola bottles. As I neared my house, I was momentarily bewildered

by the swarm of paparazzi outside, camera bags slung over shoulders. They looked inhuman, just bodies with Nikons for heads.

As I got out of the car, there was an obnoxious flash of cameras. Some reporters dropped to their knees in the grey puddles for better angles. They circled me, firing questions so fast I couldn't understand them. It made me think of screeching seagulls aggressively jostling for scraps. The front door flew open and Ethan stepped out, shielding me from the press, and guiding me inside.

'I've been calling you,' he said, locking the door behind us.

'What's going on?' I asked shakily, sure he was about to tell me they'd found your body.

Ethan took me softly by the shoulders. 'Your mum called an hour ago. David Taylor's car has been found ... and Elodie's blood-soaked pyjamas were inside.'

## Chapter Thirty-Six

### 56 Days Missing

#### **Adaline Archer**

I met with Christopher on a chilly October morning. It wasn't the kind of crisp autumn day we loved as children where we would crash through piles of leaves outside, it was the kind of grey autumn day where the sky was fat with the promise of rain, and we'd cosy up indoors with our Tamagotchis and Disney videos.

Today was the first time since summer it'd been cold enough to wear a coat over my jumper. Christopher was wearing a coat too, paired with jeans and boots and a tan scarf. Sat at a little table outside the café in the park, it wouldn't be obvious to anyone that over coffee and cake, we were discussing kidnap and secrets.

I know your secret, Elodie. Christopher spoke to your agent, Lara, about the last time you met with her a few weeks before you went missing, and when he mentioned your book deal, Lara had no idea what he was talking about.

'But what does this mean?' I asked. 'Does this have something to do with her disappearance?'

He shook his head and sipped his coffee. 'David confessed to stalking and kidnapping Elodie. We gathered DNA samples from her house, and the blood on the pyjamas found in his car belongs to your sister. With physical evidence and a confession, there's no reason to believe Elodie lying about her book deal has anything to do with David taking her.'

'Then there's no need to tell my parents she lied?'

'No.'

'Thank you. I don't want to upset or confuse Mum and Dad.'

‘They don’t need to know. It’s not relevant to the case. Just to make sure the tabloids don’t get hold of it, Lara signed an NDA. If the public found out, it could prejudice a jury when it comes time to press charges against David.’

If I’d found out about your lie before you’d gone missing, I’d be angry, indignant, but now you’re gone, the lie pales in comparison to everything else. And I know what it’s like to so desperately want to please people – our parents, to have everyone think you have your life together – that you lie to them and even to yourself.

‘So,’ I said. ‘Where do you think David is keeping Elodie? You’ve searched his work, his home, any building around here connected to him, and you’ve found nothing. He’s sitting in a prison right now while she’s out there somewhere.’ I took a breath. ‘Without him, how do you know she has access to food or water?’

He rubbed a hand over his face. ‘We’re still searching.’

It was obvious that the police were searching for your body. No one but me and our parents held on to the hope we’d find you alive. ‘Jack has something to do with this.’

‘Ada ...’ He was exasperated, but trying to tread carefully. I knew he wanted me to drop it, but you’re my sister and I promised I wouldn’t stop searching for you, so how could I ignore this instinct? ‘Just because David didn’t admit to doing something more serious to Elodie, it doesn’t mean he hasn’t. He says he was paid to take her and leave her in his car, but we don’t know that’s true. Besides, Jack was in London when Elodie disappeared.’

True. There are photographs and videos and train tickets to prove he was far away from Crosshaven, but I can’t shake this feeling, El, I just can’t, and I needed to make Christopher understand. ‘He lied about getting that black eye on a bike ride. The bike didn’t even have a front wheel—’

‘You shouldn’t have gone onto his property like that.’

‘And if he’s lying about that, he could be lying about anything.’ I paused, giving that statement the time it deserved to sink in. ‘He was buying cherry cola bottles and tampons in a supermarket almost fifty minutes outside town.’

‘I can’t arrest someone for buying fizzy drinks and women’s toiletries.’

‘He’s always been obsessed with her,’ I pressed. ‘Don’t you remember how he’d follow her around everywhere even when they were kids? The number of times you and I would be fumbling under the covers in my room and Elodie would come barrelling in, closely followed by her vicious, blond shadow?’ Then I felt myself flush because it was the first time I’d referenced our sexual history. Not that it mattered. Back then, we were lustful teenagers; it didn’t mean anything now. ‘Anyway,’ I said quickly. ‘I still think Jack has something to do with it.’

‘He’s been on national television pleading for her safe return.’

‘Yes, and isn’t that the perfect cover? *You* were the one who told me these psychos get a kick out of coming to events for the victim or events run by the victim’s family.’

‘Observing, not throwing themselves in headfirst. That’s bold.’

‘That’s Jack.’ I sipped my coffee. Above us, a squirrel leapt from tree to tree, sending a shower of autumn leaves raining down on us. It might’ve been pretty if I wasn’t so frustrated and angry. ‘Jack’s always been arrogant and sly. If anyone could manipulate an entire community into believing his bullshit, it’s him.’

‘Watertight alibi,’ he said simply. Then he reached out and put a hand on my wrist. His skin was warm; it felt completely natural to have him touch me, like my body remembered. ‘Have you considered that this suspicion and anger is aimed at Jack because he was very close to your sister, and maybe you’re feeling guilty and saddened that you weren’t as close to her as you’d have liked?’

If anyone else had been this direct, it would’ve come across as an attack, but Christopher was trying to help; he was sincere and rational. So rational, it made doubt creep in. What he was saying made sense and was partially true. I *do* feel guilty and miserable that we let ourselves grow so far apart and have played a game of one-upmanship for most of our lives; I worry constantly I won’t get the chance to make things between us better, but I still think Jack was a part of your disappearance. ‘Perhaps David and Jack know each other. Perhaps they’re working together. David said someone was paying him.’

He nodded. ‘Yes, but that could just be a story David is spinning to move ultimate responsibility from himself. Throw us off. It happens all the time.’

‘But you found wads of cash.’

‘He’s a handyman. A lot of those jobs are paid cash-in-hand. Ada, he can’t provide any evidence of the typed instructions he was allegedly given or even the original listing for the ad.’

‘So why admit to following and abducting her but not come clean about anything else?’

‘He admitted following her right away because we had witnesses, but he only admitted abducting her *after* we found her bloody clothes in his car. He’s a liar.’

‘You told me he has learning difficulties,’ I said, ‘meaning, he was an easy target for Jack to manipulate.’

‘If David knew Jack was the one paying him, he’d say so to save himself. Besides, David and Elodie’s DNA were found in that car. Not Jack’s.’

I took a breath. Talking about you was exhausting and although I wasn’t getting anywhere with Christopher, I wasn’t ready to give up on my theory. ‘What if we found proof David and Jack do know each other?’

He sat back in his chair, his dark eyes appraising. ‘You’re not going to let this go, are you?’

‘No.’

He smiled to himself before looking me seriously in the face. ‘If you can prove they know each other, *maybe* we can take a closer look at Jack Westwood.’

## Chapter Thirty-Seven

### 58 Days Missing

#### **Elodie Fray**

There's no natural light in the basement. I imagine myself wilting like a flower deprived of sunlight, pieces of me shrivelling up and falling off. According to the paper calendar Jack has given me, I've been down here for twenty-three days. Jack moved me to the basement when he realised keeping me in the main house was too risky; in the attic room there are French doors which lead onto a balcony. Even though it is three storeys up, he knew that, given the chance, I'd smash the glass and climb down the trellis of wisteria attached to the brickwork outside.

There's only one exit out of the basement: the door at the top of the narrow staircase. My first escape attempt was in week one of my captivity. I spent an entire day sitting at the top of those stairs, my backside going numb on the hardwood, waiting for Jack. The second he opened the door, I fought him. He endeavoured to soothe me, but it was like trying to extinguish a forest fire with a teacup of water. I punched and shoved and kicked, but the stairs were too narrow, too restrictive, and he was too strong. He grabbed my wrists and roughly marched me into the belly of the basement so fast my toes didn't touch the wood, then he pinned me face down on the ground and straddled me until I stopped struggling and shrieking like a wounded animal. He told me to calm down before I hurt myself. He told me I was the most important thing in the world. He told me he loved me, that he didn't enjoy restraining me any more than I did, but even as he said it, his erection pressed against the small of my back.

I told him to go fuck himself. That I'd rather be dead than be anywhere near him ever again.

He was furious. He dragged me, kicking and biting, into the tiny bathroom and locked me inside for a day and a night to punish me. Or maybe he was

trying to protect me from himself. He was livid that I'd hurled my words as hard as I'd hurled my fists.

The en-suite is no bigger than an airing cupboard. All I could do was stare at the four walls, bite my nails until they bled, listen to the maddening drip of the leaky shower. Sleep was impossible and could only be attempted sitting on the toilet seat; I didn't get more than fifteen unbroken minutes at a time. Although I had access to water, he didn't bring me any food. When he finally let me out, I was so grateful, I didn't even disobey as he ordered me to undress in front of him and put on fresh clothes.

I'm clinging to the knowledge that Kathryn wants to sell Wisteria by December. It's October now. Though I'm not sure I can wait any longer, I take comfort knowing when the cottage is sold, Jack will have to relocate me. Then I'll be out of the basement, which opens up more possibilities to escape and if I can't, wherever he takes me *has* to be more populated than Wisteria. More people can only mean more chances of discovery.

Now, I sit on the bed and wait for Jack to return with dinner. The first night he confined me to the basement, he set me up with a mini fridge and a microwave so while he's away, I can feed myself. When he's at Wisteria though, he likes us to eat together. I'm nervous. This evening I will explore my boundaries. See how far he'll go to keep me happy. I started out small, asking for little things: cherry cola bottles and new hair ties, but now I want to push it just a little. I am laying the groundwork for bigger things. But this will be the biggest so far.

Even though I'm expecting him, when the basement door opens, I feel sick and my fight-or-flight instinct kicks in. Tonight I will attempt neither. I hear him close the door then lock it. His footsteps are musical as he descends the stairs. He's in a good mood. Taking a breath, I try to extinguish the fear which ignites inside me.

A paper plate appears beneath my chin. 'Milady,' he chimes, setting it down in front of me and holding out my cutlery – a plastic spoon. I take it, careful not to touch him as I do. My food is already cut up. He's not stupid enough to give me a plate I could break over his head, or cutlery made of anything more dangerous than cheap plastic.

As usual, he claims the armchair beside my bed.

‘Thank you,’ I say, focusing on his mouth. I can’t look at him, not right away, because I know as soon as I do, the memories from the hill will overwhelm me. I must ease myself into his visits, like dipping a toe into an ice bath; first there’s the shock, but once you lower yourself in, you eventually become numb to it.

‘Pasanda,’ he says. ‘Your favourite.’

‘Looks great.’ I hope that if I am calm, if I do not act like a wild animal, he will not treat me like one and maybe, just *maybe*, I will win a small battle, if not the war. Months ago, if someone told me I could hold polite conversation with the man who kidnapped and assaulted me, I’d have called you a liar. Truthfully though, you don’t know what you’re capable of until you’re tested. Raising my gaze a little farther, I settle on his nose. ‘You’re such a good cook.’ I smile, no longer the wilting flower; today I am daisy-fresh.

‘You almost never smile anymore.’

I bite my tongue against the ‘Why the fuck do you think that is?’ and say, ‘You seem in a good mood.’

‘I am.’

I should ask why but I don’t because, even though a good mood might make him more amenable to my request, I *hate* that he gets to feel any sort of happiness when he has reduced my world to one of constant fear. ‘Good.’

‘I like that colour on you.’

I’m wearing a dark green T-shirt – his – and a pair of black boxers – also his. He says he likes me wearing his clothes, he says he looks at me and thinks, ‘Mine.’

I poke at a lump of meat and say, ‘I’ve been thinking ...’

‘Oh, yeah?’

Time to find out how much I can ask for. I wait until he sets his fork down before I begin. ‘Yeah. I was wondering if we could drive past my house? I wouldn’t get out or anything – I just want to see if Seefer is okay.’

‘The stray?’

I nod. ‘I miss her so much. I thought I’d be back in Crosshaven by now.’ I’m careful not to say ‘home’ as he’s told me repeatedly Wisteria is my home now. ‘She doesn’t have anyone else to take care of her.’

‘No.’

I let out a breath, trying to convey in one exhalation all the hopelessness a person can feel. I’m not stupid or delusional; I counted on him saying no. When Ada was renovating her house, she dragged me to multiple furniture auctions and private sales where she taught me during negotiation you always ask for the impossible, then settle instead for what you actually wanted in the first place. That way, you make the other party feel like they’ve won and they’re more likely to give you what you want. I widen my eyes, as if suddenly struck by a new idea. ‘Maybe you can bring her here then? Please, Jack, for me?’

‘That *thing* is always hissing at me. Never liked me.’

She’s a better judge of character than most then, I think, but say, ‘It would make me happier. Less lonely when you’re away.’ I’m hoping someone will see him taking Seefer and think it’s odd. In all the media coverage of my house, police were stationed outside. Maybe they still are. And even if no one notices, having Seefer here with me will give me reason to get out of bed in the morning because on the days Jack is at Wisteria I am coiled and tense, but on the days he isn’t, I lie in bed for hours, staring up at the ceiling, trapped in flashbacks of the attack or caught up in fantasies of escape.

‘I’ll think about it.’

‘Thanks, Jack.’ Finally, I raise my eyes to his and smile, letting my gaze linger because sugar is always more appealing than salt. And there it is, I am submerged in the memories, trapped beneath him, begging him to stop as his fingers pull my knickers to the side. I quickly drop my gaze and stab at a piece of chicken. ‘It’s October,’ I blurt in a bid to draw attention away from my discomfort. ‘Your mum wants the cottage sold before Christmas; what will happen then?’

‘It’s already sold.’

‘Oh. Right. Okay ... I thought you said ...’ I am momentarily stunned, trying to process the information. ‘So ... where will we go?’

‘Maybe I’ll bunk down here with you *Flowers in the Attic*-style.’

My stomach turns over. ‘Anyway, where will you take me?’ His house in Crosshaven must be the only other option. Which will be better. Much

better. I'll be closer to my family, it's suburban, there are neighbours to hear me scream and—

'We're staying here.'

I blink. 'But ...'

'I bought it. Wisteria is mine.'

Bile and dread inch up my throat as I stare down at the spiced lumps of chicken flesh on my soggy paper plate.

'I was waiting to tell you, hoping when you got your book deal, I could surprise you with a trip away to celebrate. But the book fell through and then you were trapped in a lie and only my mother knows about the house sale, so Wisteria became the perfect place to hide you,' he says. Then, 'What's wrong?'

There was an end in sight. But now ... it is endless. I could be trapped in this basement for the rest of my life. And what happens if Jack dies suddenly, a stroke, an accident? No one could've predicted Noah would die in a hit and run. It could happen. And then what? I will starve to death in here, only to be discovered when new homeowners move in and the stench of my decomposing corpse permeates their beautiful home.

'I thought you liked Wisteria.'

'I liked it *before* you fucking locked me inside it,' I explode, jumping to my feet.

He is just as quick, scraping his chair back and dropping his plate onto the bed next to mine. 'I did this for you. Do you know how fortunate you are to have someone love you so much they'd do anything, *risk* anything, to be with you? Most girls will live their whole lives not knowing love like that.'

'Lucky. Fucking. Them.'

'You had to ruin it.' He throws his hands up. 'We were enjoying a nice dinner together and then you spoil it.'

'You're a twisted psycho and you're not as clever as you think you are. You dangled all those pretty, blonde kidnap victims in front of me, telling me they all have one thing in common: book deals. But that isn't the only thing those girls have in common: they escaped. They were found. It's only a matter of time before you trip up.'

He laughs and I am infuriated.

‘What?’ I snap.

‘You know what all those captors had in common?’ He steps closer. The threat is real and makes my breath come out in short, sharp pants. He has the look on his face of someone who has won. ‘They didn’t have a fall guy.’

He’s knocked the wind from my sails. ‘What’re you talking about?’

‘David Taylor was stalking you for a long while before he broke into your bedroom. He was arrested after your bloody pyjamas were found in his car.’

‘I don’t believe you.’

He pulls a folded piece of paper from his back pocket and holds it out to me. ‘Go on, take it.’

I do. It is a newspaper article. The heading reads ‘ARREST MADE IN CASE OF MISSING GRADUATE ELODIE FRAY’. Then I see the photograph of the suspect and my stomach cartwheels because I recognise him – the man who’d been following me. I skim the article enough to know everything Jack has said is true. ‘David’s going to tell the police you’re behind it.’

‘You think I’m that stupid? Elodie, he has no idea it was me. I was paying him anonymously for months,’ he brags. This arrogance isn’t new but it’s the first time I’ve found it truly repulsive.

He takes a step towards me and I back up so fast, I smack into the bedside table. ‘Did you always plan to abduct me?’

‘No.’

‘Then *why* were you paying him to follow me?’

‘Because you were so wrapped up in your book, your coffee shop job, scrabbling around for your parents’ approval, mourning *him*, that you couldn’t see me. I knew if we spent more time together—’

‘By scaring me into it?’

‘—that you’d finally let yourself love me. I was hoping you’d be too afraid to live alone, that you’d agree to move in with me. But you were too stubborn. When things started snowballing with your book-deal lie, I saw the opportunity to have you here to myself and I took it. I did this for us, Fray.’

‘The police are going to figure it out.’

‘How? Your stuff was found in David’s car, your DNA, I have an alibi and now there’s an arrest ...’

He’s still talking, his mouth is moving, but his words fall away, replaced by the white noise filling my head. I am never getting out. *Never*. The instinct to flee spikes and I dart a look at the stairs. The door is locked. I don’t have the key. And even if I did, Jack would wrestle me to the ground before I made it even halfway up. He catches my shoulders. ‘Are you listening?’ he barks. ‘I did this for you. Where’s the gratitude?’

I wrench myself away, but there’s nowhere to go, so I skirt the wall furthest from him. ‘Gratitude? *Fucking* gratitude? Who would be grateful for this?’ I throw my arms out wide. ‘You tried to rape me—’

‘Stop it.’

‘You tried to rape me and—’

He kicks the chair. It smashes into the wall in a violent burst of noise. ‘No one will ever love you like I do. Noah wasn’t fucking capable of loving you like this.’

‘Thank god.’ I am trembling; there are hot tears in my eyes. ‘Thank god he didn’t love me like this.’

‘That’s a shaky fucking pedestal you’ve put him on. Have you forgotten all the evenings he left you sitting by yourself in some restaurant because work was more important? All those evenings you rang me in tears because he’d let you down again? He was fucking one of his students. You know that, don’t you?’

‘SHUT UP!’ I scream.

‘I saw him. I went to London.’

‘You’re lying.’

‘He bought a ring too. Don’t know if it was for you or her but he bought an engagement ring.’

‘You didn’t like Noah, not at first, you were just waiting for something to go wrong.’

‘At first? I *never* liked him. It was an act, Fray. I knew if I didn’t at least appear to get on with him, I’d lose you.’

I think of all the social gatherings I attended with Noah and Jack and how I’d sometimes glance up to see Jack watching Noah, his face twisted in

disgust like he'd just walked in on him doing something terrible instead of winding an arm around my waist or pressing a kiss to my lips, and how Jack would catch me looking and smile his brilliant white smile and the moment that came before would dissolve.

'You were so wrapped up in that piece of shit,' he growls. 'Everything was about him.'

A mirthless laugh breaks from me. 'What – because it should've been about you?'

'Exactly.'

'I'm not that stupid; if you really believed Noah was having an affair, you'd have wasted no time in telling me.'

'Why spill his dirty little secret and risk your weakness – risk you taking him back – when I could just get rid of him altogether?'

The silence roars loudly between us. There's an amused little twist to his lips. He's enjoying this, the theatrics, the drama. Enjoying watching me try and fail to keep up. 'What do you mean?' I blink up at him as he consumes the space between us.

'You say I won't get away with this, keeping you here, but I've already gotten away with so much.' He wraps a hand around my throat and forces my chin up. Pressing me firmly against the wall, he brings his mouth a whisper away from mine. 'There are two kinds of love, Elodie: the kind you'd die for and the kind you'd kill for.'

The hit and run.

My breath evaporates in my lungs. I can't breathe. I can't. 'You murdered him.'

'He was making you miserable and I knew I could make you happy. I had to put an end to it – you'd never have done it yourself.'

It's too much. I can't believe what he is telling me. I don't want to believe it. 'Stop. Just stop.'

'No.' His hand around my throat squeezes. 'You need to hear this, Elodie, because I want you to love every dark corner of me just as I love every dark corner of you. I need you to know how far I'll go for us.' He brushes his thumb over my lips. I close my eyes against the tears. Jack lets me go.

‘He’s dead because of you.’ The truth burns like acid on my skin and I want to scream, I want to—

Before I can register what I’m doing, my hand shoots out and the slap of flesh echoes around the room for longer than it should. My palm tingles and it’s so good, I do it again. I lift my hand for the third time, but he catches my wrist. We struggle. I scream at him, full of rage and betrayal. I swear fluently and violently as he forces me down onto the ground, flat on my back. He mounts me. I try to bite but I can’t, I try to kick him and claw at him, but I can’t. He locks my wrists in his hand; I can’t do anything with him pinning me down. I whine and whimper and scream. Jack’s free hand wraps around my throat again. He squeezes, not hard enough to cut off my air or even hurt – but it is a warning.

‘Don’t you ever hit me again,’ he growls.

I glare up at him. Then I am bucking again, trying to throw him off but he is immovable, too strong, too big, too broad. Writhing beneath him is turning him on. I stop, breathing hard.

‘Are you done?’ he asks.

‘Fuck you, fucking, fuck you.’

‘That’s it, let it all out.’

I cry. I hate myself and I cry. Jack waits as though I am a child throwing a tantrum. When he finally gets up, I stay down. I am too weak and too crushed by despair to stand. I lie in a broken, weeping heap as he makes his way up the stairs. ‘I’ll get your fucking cat.’ He opens the door. I do not move. ‘Piss me off again and I’ll kill it.’

And then he has left the house.

## Chapter Thirty-Eight

### 63 Days Missing

#### **Elodie Fray**

I destroy it all. Everything Jack has given me to make this prison feel like home. I tear up the T-shirts, the calendar, the bed sheets. I tip over the chest of drawers. I flip the bedside table. I smash my fists into the mattress. I take the ready meals from the fridge and launch them at the walls. Then I lie on the hard ground among the rubble and scream until my throat is shredded and I am hiccupping.

If I'd never met Noah, he'd still be alive. I think of Florence in the weighted mournful silence of the funeral where she wore a darkly glittering dress of tragedy, sadness and loss, of which I am the unknowing seamstress. I weaved threads of pain into her life which cannot be unpicked.

I didn't drive the car that hit Noah, but I may as well have done.

I'm still lying on the ground when the realisation hits me: I had sex with my boyfriend's murderer.

Jack is a murderer. If he's capable of murdering Noah, he's capable of murdering me. I don't think he wants to, not right now anyway, but he could if I push him or fight him and he loses control. Maybe it will be an accident, but I know this situation can only end in death: mine or his.

My entire right side is numb from lying on the flagstone floor. I'm just about to get up when I see it beneath the bed. At first, I am so stunned, all I can do is stare. Then I think of Jack returning and I scramble to retrieve it. Crouching beside the bed, I grip my prize tightly in one hand, almost afraid if I stop touching it, it'll vanish.

The Nokia.

The one I found the day I discovered this room; Jack had startled me, and I'd dropped it.

Heart pumping, I turn the phone on and wait. ‘Come on, *come on.*’

Finally, the screen loads – a pixelated graphic of two hands – and I am thirteen years old again. ‘FUCK!’ I shout – no bars of signal. I fling open the bathroom door and stand on the toilet seat. All I need is one bar. One *fucking* bar. But there’s nothing. I dial 999 anyway. It doesn’t work. Of course, it doesn’t. I squeeze the phone, shaking with frustration and anger, but force myself not to lob it, knowing it might come in useful later.

I sink to my knees, suddenly too tired to stand, and stare at it for a while. I lose myself in a daydream where, miraculously, there is a signal, and I call for help. I’ll sob into the phone, so relieved, and tell them who I am and where I’m being kept. Then I’ll stay on the line to the calming, soothing voice of the operator as I wait for the police. They’ll storm the house, kick down the door and pull me from the basement and out into the garden. I’ll cry, of course, but the relief – god, the relief – I’ll ring my parents and they’ll sob, and I’ll sob. Dad will jump in the car with Mum and speed all the way and when they arrive, we’ll fall into a tangle of relieved, grateful tears and warm, tight hugs. Dad will say, ‘It’s alright, Chuck. You’re alright.’ And we’ll drink hot tea and, wedged between the safe pillars of my family, I’ll watch as Jack is put in handcuffs and dragged roughly into the back of a police car, set for a life in prison.

I don’t know how long it will be before Jack returns and now my need to destroy has faded, logic has resurfaced; I can’t live in this hideous mess and even if I wanted to, Jack wouldn’t let me. He’s a neat freak. I look down at the phone lying limply in my lap and draw in a shaky breath, then I stand on shaky legs and start putting the room back together with shaky hands. Once the bed is made, I carefully hide the Nokia beneath the mattress and even though I’m not religious, I pray Jack doesn’t find it.

One of the drawers from the dresser is in pieces; splintered wood and nails are strewn across the floor. I pick one of the nails up – it’s about three inches long and almost as thick as my pinkie. I don’t have any shoes – Jack says I don’t need them – so I am grateful I saw it before I stepped on it.

I freeze.

It’s the closest I’ve found to a weapon in my confinement. I hear Jack’s velvety voice: *How far will you go?* Not all the way because I couldn’t stab Jack with it – I don’t think I could stab anyone – it’s too personal, you’d

have to get too close; nevertheless, an idea is crystallising. I see Macaulay Culkin placing a nail upright on the stairs to fell the home invaders. I see the fleshy sole of Daniel Stern's foot being pierced by it and hear his scream as he tumbles. Every Christmas, I watch *Home Alone* with my family; we bicker over who sits where and which snacks are best and whose turn it is to make the hot chocolate, but, as soon as the first shot of the glittering McCallister house brightens our screen, we're all quiet.

I know what I must do.

## Chapter Thirty-Nine

### 67 Days Missing

#### **Elodie Fray**

At first, I take four nails and place them sharp end up on the stairs but, deciding this may be too obvious, I leave only two. I hope it's enough. I don't know what he'll do to me if he realises I've set out to maim him in an attempt to liberate myself. I walk up and down the stairs a hundred times, trying to work out the very best place to position them to ensure his foot will come down on it. It's difficult, my feet are smaller than his and our tread is different but, after playing around for a few hours, I'm confident I've got them just right; I've seen him descend these stairs often enough. If I fail this time and he doesn't notice, I'll just try again.

The room is as tidy as I can make it – two of the five drawers in the dresser are broken so I've wedged them in as best I can; if the place were still a wreck, it might alarm Jack and he'd approach with caution. For my plan to work, I need him to be as unsuspecting as possible.

Jack's never gone longer than five days – it's been four since his last visit, which means he's due any minute, so I have taken the Nokia from its hiding place beneath the mattress and slipped it into the waistband of the boxers I'm wearing. If I escape – *when* I escape, I'll have it with me. As much as I hate when he's here, my stomach churns with the fear he's dead – a car crash, a fall, a sudden heart attack. It's strange wanting so badly for someone to suffer, but being so completely reliant on their safety.

At the click of the key turning in the lock, I get to my feet, feeling for the Nokia in the waistband of the boxers to make sure I haven't lost it. As always, Jack opens the door, then locks it before descending, but I don't hear the jangle of keys as he slips them into his pocket, which means they're still in his hand. What I do hear though is Seefer; she meows loudly,

announcing her arrival. A cat carrier comes into view. I'm surprised, I didn't think he'd actually fetch her.

Holding my breath, I watch as Jack misses the first nail I'd positioned on the second step and I'm pleased to see he's wearing trainers – they have a much thinner sole than his boots. His footsteps are steady; a hammer against cloth. My eyes flicker to the second nail – my last hope – but I quickly look away from it and lock my gaze onto his. He smiles. Distracted, he doesn't see the nail. His foot comes down on it with such surety. It's like a magic trick – the nail disappears beneath his trainer, *into* his trainer. He screams so loudly, I cover my ears against it. The cat carrier tumbles down the stairs, landing at an awkward angle on the bottom step. Jack lifts his impaled foot – too fast – off balance. He tumbles too. There's a sickening crack as his head hits the flagstones. He lies motionless at the bottom.

*Go, go, go.*

I lurch forward, barely hesitating before I leap over him, and scabble up the stairs. The keys are halfway up, and I feel weak with relief. Grabbing them, I race to the top. Then, with trembling hands, I force the key into the lock. Mercifully, it clicks open and I throw the door wide.

At the sound of an off-key screech, I whip around. Seefer!

Fuck. Fuck. Fuck.

I look at Jack, still unmoving on the ground.

*Piss me off and I'll kill it.*

I can't leave her behind.

I imagine him holding her down by the scruff of her neck, taking a knife and stabbing it into her tiny body over and over.

I can't. I can't.

Stumbling back down the stairs, I bend to grab the cat carrier. Seefer yowls, wildly twisting and turning in her cage. I dart a glance at Jack. I can't see his face but when I look down, his white trainer is slowly turning red. A burbling belch of bile rises as I picture the nail splitting his skin, ripping through flesh and sinew. Seefer hisses, drawing my attention. I clasp the carrier handle and turn, jogging back up the stairs.

I am thrown forward. I whip my head to the side just in time to avoid breaking my nose. Air whooshes from my lungs and I gasp, struggling to draw in more. The carrier slips from my fingers and clunks down the steps.

Seefer yowls again. The hand that has hold of my ankle squeezes and drags me down. My grasping, desperate fingers fail to take a hold. Then my knees are on the cold flagstone but the hard edge of the last step cuts into my stomach as Jack forces a foot onto my back.

The Nokia has slipped from the waistband of my boxers and lies on the step above me. I throw my hand out to take it, but Jack beats me to it. He takes the phone and smashes it against the banister. I scream for him to stop. I try to claw my way up the stairs, out of this basement.

A large shaft of light from the open door is our spotlight. But this is his stage and he is the star. He flips me onto my back and hauls me across the floor. He straddles me. Incandescent with rage, his hands wrap around my neck. He squeezes. This is not a warning. Seefer is screeching and Jack's eyes are bulging.

'You fucking bitch,' he snarls.

Saliva drips from his mouth and into my eyes. I blink and blink and blink.

I dig my nails into his hands, but he squeezes harder and I cannot breathe. I buck. Hands still crushing my throat, he wrenches me forward then slams me down. Pain explodes across the back of my skull.

I gasp and gurgle and the world swims and my lungs are empty, and Jack is screaming that I am a fucking bitch, a fucking, *fucking* bitch. I want to beg; I want to tell him I am sorry, but I open my mouth and there are no words left in me.

I hear bones cracking – where, I don't know – but it sounds like fireworks popping off in my brain. Tears stream from my eyes and I cannot breathe. I cannot breathe and I am slipping. My back arches and I try to scream but I can't, and I feel bubbles of spit on my lips and Jack squeezes even harder.

His eyes are bloodshot and full of hate and we both know the truth: I am a dying animal and he is willing to go all the way.

## Chapter Forty

### 106 Days Missing

#### **Adaline Archer**

The flyers we put up for you around town all those weeks ago were weather-beaten and peeling off buildings and lamp-posts, so I got a group together – me, Ethan, our parents, Kathryn and Jack – and we all went out wrapped up in coats and scarves against the frosty November air, and set to work replacing the old missing person posters with new ones.

Since we haven't found your body, the police could only charge David with kidnap. Even though everyone else believes he's the only one involved, I'm not convinced. I've kept my suspicions about Jack largely to myself; telling our parents about my theory will only upset them.

After an hour of flyer distribution, we reconvened for coffee and cake at The Busy Bean in town.

'So, Kathryn,' I began, 'what're we doing for your birthday next week?'

'I thought I'd have a quiet one this year.' This was because of you and the smog of grief which has followed our parents since the discovery of your bloody clothes.

'I think we could all do with something to look forward to,' I said, sounding like an enthusiastic children's TV host. 'We should have a little get-together.'

'That would be lovely, Ada, but the downstairs is being repainted next week and it might be difficult to find a venue at such short notice.'

'Hmm,' I said, frowning as though in concentration. I counted to five before widening my eyes as if I'd just had a bright idea. 'Well, it doesn't need to be a huge celebration. Perhaps we could have a small gathering of twenty or so for drinks, and then the six of us plus Charlie and Tobin could go to Castello's for a meal afterwards.'

‘Oh, Ada, that’s a wonderful idea,’ said Mum with more cheer in her voice than I’d heard in a long while. ‘We could host the drinks if you like,’ she offered.

‘Or we could have drinks at Jack’s,’ I said nonchalantly. ‘It’s far more spacious and much closer to town.’ I stared at Jack over the rim of my mug, and he returned my gaze with a steely one of his own.

‘Don’t worry, sweetheart,’ Kathryn said to Jack. ‘I know you haven’t been feeling your best of late.’

‘Oh?’ I said and refrained from facetiously asking, ‘Cramps?’ at the memory of the tampons in his basket.

‘Is your foot still bothering you, love?’ asked Mum. Then she turned to me. ‘Jack trod on a nail at a worksite a few weeks ago.’

‘Headaches,’ he said shortly.

‘He’s not sleeping well,’ Kathryn elaborated, and Jack’s expression soured.

‘Why aren’t you sleeping well, Jack?’ I asked.

‘I’m fine.’

‘Oh well, that’s great,’ I said brightly. ‘Drinks at yours around six on Friday night then?’ I held his stare, daring him to refuse and before he could, I added a sprinkle of challenge. ‘Unless you don’t think you can manage ...’

His smile was easy and relaxed, but he was gripping the handle of his mug so tightly I thought it might snap off in his hand. ‘Great idea, Ada. Drinks at mine.’

Triumph. Instead of squealing with delight, I smiled demurely and said, ‘Perfect!’

The following Friday, in the taxi ride over to Jack’s, I studied my husband. He looked good in his best jeans and white shirt. His eyes have the beginnings of fine lines now. ~~I don’t know how. It’s not as though we laugh together all that much anymore.~~ Then, appraising me too, he said, ‘Isn’t that a little bit too ... sexy for a middle-aged woman’s birthday celebration?’

I was wearing a pencil dress in livid scarlet with a Charlotte Tilbury lipstick to match. I always feel powerful in red and if there was ever a night

to feel powerful, this was it. ‘At your request, I’ve worn this to many of your tiresome business dinners.’

He didn’t reply because we both knew he liked to show off to his colleagues what he had and they didn’t, and when it came to clients, whether it’s cars or accounts, sex sells.

Jack’s house isn’t the typical Ikea-bought black-furniture bachelor pad. If he has one positive attribute, it’s his good taste. Although the exposed brick work, sleek lines and distressed oak furniture of his home isn’t found in mine, I can appreciate its allure.

It’s not very often I attend an event as a guest instead of a host, but I was glad to leave the stress of cooking and cleaning and topping up glasses to someone else for a change. Jack was all smiles and charm as he seamlessly moved from one group of people to the next, handing out canapés and refreshing drinks, but the mask of calm slipped when he approached me, blue eyes flashing angrily. ‘There are far more than twenty people here, Ada.’

The perfect picture of innocence, I blinked and made a show of looking around the room. ‘There are?’

The only part I had in planning Kathryn’s birthday, besides manoeuvring it to Jack’s, was the guest list. I’d agreed to keep it small with only twenty attendees but squeezed in an extra ten on top of that at the last moment. The fact is, Elodie, the more people at his house, the busier he’d be and the more freedom I’d have to snoop.

‘Yes,’ he said through gritted teeth. ‘Can’t you count?’

‘Clearly not.’ I couldn’t help the slow curve of my lips as I recalled his remark at my garden party. ‘Remember, Jack, I didn’t even finish my A-levels.’

He looked like he wanted to crack me over the head with the bottle in his hand, right there and then. But he isn’t stupid. I took a sip of my champagne and watched him stalk away. When he was gone, I snuck into the kitchen and poured three bottles of tonic down the sink. As I’d hoped, a short while later, Jack told Charlie he was popping out to grab more mixer from the shop.

Heart thumping fast in my chest, I seized the opportunity and nipped upstairs. First, I used the bathroom in case anyone had followed me up,

taking off my rings and placing them on the sink as I washed my hands. I left the tap on and closed the bathroom door behind me as I exited; if someone came looking for me, they'd hear the water running and assume I was in there.

Besides the bathroom door, there were four others. Where you could probably draw the first floor of Jack's house from memory, I was struggling to recall ever having been up there. I pulled open the first door to my left, but it was just a cupboard full of spare towels and toiletries, so I swung right, passed the bathroom door and opened another: Jack's study. It was much the same as the other rooms in his house, sleek, minimal and neat. I ran a finger over his desk and saw there wasn't a speck of dust. Really, Elodie, his living space was serial-killer clean. I expected both of his desk drawers to be locked. They weren't, but there was nothing incriminating inside either of them, just organised stationery and sketch books. Frustrated, I stood back, looking for more drawers to open, more paperwork to riffle through, but besides the exceptionally tidy desk, his framed qualifications above and the built-in bookshelves adjacent, there was nothing else.

His office was very impersonal. Even on Ethan's desk there's a framed photograph and me and him on our wedding day. The only things Jack declared worthy of frames were a technical sketch of the first building he designed alongside a photograph of it, his qualifications, and a photograph from his days playing for Crosshaven RFC. I didn't have to scan the faces of rugby players for long before I narrowed in on him. Front and centre. Why was I not surprised? I was just about to turn away when I spotted another familiar face in the background. In it, he was mid-step, carrying a toolbox up on the slope above the field where the photograph was taken, and he was looking directly into the camera. Dark hair, thin face and black round-rimmed glasses: David Taylor.

It took a moment for the surge of triumph to break through the shock of my discovery and when it did, I reached out to snatch the photograph from the wall then stopped because Jack might catch me with it and destroy it. Thinking fast, I decided to take a picture on my phone instead, only to realise I'd left my handbag in the bathroom. Hurrying from the office, I burst into the bathroom.

And froze.

Jack was standing in front of the sink, slowly turning off the tap. We stared at one another, the back of my neck prickling with panic.

‘Got lost?’ he drawled.

Stalling, I smoothed down my dress. ‘I thought I heard someone down the hall,’ I said as coolly as possible. Then, to throw him off I added, ‘In the bedroom.’

He didn’t believe me, Elodie, not for a second. He closed the gap between us, and his rather spacious bathroom suddenly felt impossibly small. His eyes drifted over me, lingering on my bare legs. ‘If you wanted a closer look at my bedroom, all you had to do was ask.’

His words implied sexual advance, the look on his face implied threat. We both understood he was stronger than me and if he chose to, he could take whatever he wanted. I wasn’t brave enough to call him out on it though. ‘A tour would’ve been lovely, Jack, but Ethan and all the other guests are probably wondering where I am,’ I said to remind him we weren’t alone.

He stood so still; unease crawled across my skin, leaving little goosebumps in its wake. He reminded me of one of those coiled vipers you see on nature documentaries, right before it strikes, sinking its fangs into the little mouse’s body. I was tempted to ask questions: how did he know David Taylor? Had he disclosed it to the police? Was he in on your fake book deal? But the urge to get away from him prevailed. ‘Anyway,’ I said. ‘I’ll see you downstairs.’

I was desperate to leave the bathroom, but my back was to the door, and I didn’t want to take my eye off him, not even for a second. I backed up a little, reaching behind me for the handle, then I whipped around to open it.

‘Ada.’ I froze as I felt the heat of his body pressed against my back. ‘You forgot your bag.’

I found I could hardly breathe as I took my Chanel from him. I always knew Jack was possessive and confrontational, and though I suspected he was involved in your disappearance, I didn’t view him as dangerous. Not until I was trapped in a small space with him. But he is. I felt it.

As I hurried down the stairs to rejoin the safety of the party, I feared for you.

I messaged Christopher asking him to meet me on the corner of Jack’s street. I didn’t want to ring him in case someone at the party, or Jack

himself, overheard. I was so eager to tell Christopher about Jack and David, I couldn't come up with a feasible excuse for my leaving, so I went without telling anyone. Outside, it was bitter, and I hadn't thought to grab my coat, so I was grateful when I saw Christopher idling on the corner.

'Wow, Ada, you look ...' he said as I climbed inside.

'They know each other,' I blurted. 'Jack and David know each other.' I glanced over my shoulder, paranoid Jack had followed me out. 'Can you start driving so we can talk about this?'

Christopher pulled away from the curb. 'Jack told you this – that he knows David?'

'Of course not. In his study is a photograph of the two of them together.'

He frowned. 'Jack might be brazen, but displaying a photograph of him and your sister's captor cosyng up together isn't smart. You sure about this, Ada?'

'They aren't cosyng up. It's a team photo of Crosshaven RFC taken when Jack played there ten years ago. In the background David is carrying a toolbox. You said he's a handyman, well he must've worked for the rugby club.'

'This doesn't prove—'

'He lied. Jack said he'd never met David. He's lying.'

'Or Jack didn't come across the club's handyman,' he wagered. 'Can you name or even describe any of the cleaning staff from your secondary school?'

I pressed my lips together. 'No.'

'There you go.'

Christopher's phone rang and he slowed.

'What're you doing?'

'It could be work,' he said.

'You're off duty, it can wait.' I knew I was being demanding but I finally had some evidence that Jack is a liar. If I'd known then how important that call was, I'd have answered it myself. 'Jack paid David to follow and abduct my sister. David doesn't know it was Jack, but it was.'

'Jack doesn't strike me as the type to share.'

‘He doesn’t have to. Now David’s single-handedly taken the blame, Jack has Elodie all to himself.’ His phone sounded again. ‘This has all been about Jack getting close to my sister. Mum told me after Elodie realised she was being followed, she stayed with Jack a lot but knowing him, that wasn’t enough, so he took it further. You said if I could prove Jack and David knew each other, you’d take a closer look at Jack.’

He nodded. ‘Where’s the photo?’

‘In his study. I wanted to get a picture of it, but I left my phone in the bathroom and then Jack found me and—’

He glanced sharply in my direction. ‘If you’re right and Jack has something to do with Elodie’s disappearance, he could hurt you, Ada.’

I shifted in my seat because I knew he was right. ‘I’m being careful. Look, drop me back off at the house and I’ll run in and grab the picture.’

‘Ada ...’

‘Please.’

We were only a couple of minutes away from Jack’s and in that time, Christopher’s phone hadn’t stopped ringing. He parked on the corner again. I hopped out of the car. ‘I’ll get the photo and come right back.’

Then I turned and hurried down the street, leaving Christopher to answer the phone, not knowing that call was about to make everything crumble around me.

I hadn’t even made it up the path when the front door flew open. Ethan looked frantic. When he saw me, sorrow washed over him, softening his features. ‘Where have you been?’ he asked gently.

‘Fresh air,’ I managed. ‘Has something happened?’

Then I heard urgent footsteps behind me. It was Christopher, his phone gripped tightly in his hand.

‘Will someone tell me what’s happened?’ I asked, terrified. I could sense what was coming; my knees felt weak, my skin felt hot, my lungs felt empty.

And just as I changed my mind and thought *I don’t want to know* – Christopher said it.

‘We’ve found a body.’

## Chapter Forty-One

### 112 Days Missing

#### **Adaline Archer**

The next morning, I took my time showering and doing my make-up. Nightmares of you have left me with dark circles, so I carefully applied concealer. It made little difference – I still looked tired. I didn't really care how I looked, but there was something comforting about the routine of getting ready for the day. It didn't give me much time to think about the task ahead. With Mum refusing to identify the body, I stepped in, aghast at the idea of leaving Dad to do it all alone. They hadn't told us much about the body, just that it matched your description and had been found dumped in a river.

When I heard Dad pulling up outside, I went downstairs to Ethan and kissed him, winding my arms around his neck and up through his hair, pressing myself close to him. 'Thank you for being here,' I whispered.

Ethan was supposed to catch the train to Brighton today for a friend's birthday, but he cancelled. He didn't have to do that, especially since things have been rocky between us after I admitted I didn't want children. Not that we've discussed the issue since.

On the way to the morgue, Dad and I didn't speak. He's a man of very few words at the best of times, so I didn't expect much in the way of conversation. Instead, I thought only of you. One memory was pin-sharp. The day you left for university. I came by to see you off. You were pink-cheeked with excitement and nerves. We hugged. Your breath was warm in my ear as you whispered, 'Love you.' I didn't say it back. Then you climbed into the car and you were gone.

All the way to the morgue car park, I paused and rewound this small unchangeable moment. And as Dad and I were led into a waiting room and

given weak cups of coffee, the guilt and regret of not telling you I loved you too sat like curdled milk in my stomach.

When we were taken through to view the body, I was trembling. I glanced at Dad for reassurance, but he looked afraid too. And frail. It was the day we'd been dreading since the moment you went missing because if you were lying cold and dead on a steel table just metres from us, any hope of finding you alive was lost for ever.

Ritter talked to us outside the mortuary door. I nodded along, not taking in a word of it. All I could think was: *is it you? Are you in there? Please don't be in there. Please, please don't be in there.*

I think you're in there.

Then the door was pushed open and Dad stepped inside. I hesitated, not sure I could do this, but Ritter was at my back and the only way to go was forward. The mortuary was exactly what you'd expect: clinical, quiet, clean. Everything was shiny steel. Practical. Decomposing bodies leak fluids and steel is easy to keep clean. No stains. My stomach turned over.

I spotted the body laid out on a gurney beneath a white sheet, and felt faint.

I don't know how, but I forced myself to keep moving forward. It seemed to take a long time to cross the room and take my place beside Dad. We both stared silently at the covered body.

I waited without moving, without breathing.

~~It was you. I knew it was you.~~

A man wearing a plastic tabard over pale blue scrubs pulled back the sheet.

Dad let out a sob, clinging to me like a child.

We both sank to our knees.

## Chapter Forty-Two

### 117 Days Missing

#### **Adaline Archer**

My rings were missing. I had a vague memory of taking them off and laying them on the sink in Jack's bathroom the day of Kathryn's birthday party. Years ago, I had a duplicate engagement ring made to wear when travelling in case of theft or loss, so I've spent the last couple of weeks wearing that. Despite having spent thousands on it, Ethan is none the wiser.

I called and asked Jack if he'd found my jewellery; he said he hadn't and when I asked to come over and look, he told me he was busy. It would've been the perfect opportunity to take the photograph from his office. He's lying; I'm sure he has my rings, and this is some cruel punishment for trespassing in his office.

Desperate to get inside Jack's house, I popped over to visit Kathryn, claiming my mixer was broken, and asked very imploringly if I could borrow hers. Kathryn is such a gentle soul, she welcomed me in. 'Would you like a drink, darling?'

'Oh yes, thank you. I can't stay long; I have a lot to do before my dinner party this evening.'

And while she bustled into the kitchen, I sprang to work, flipping open the little dove-grey key box in her hallway to find Jack's spare. I know she has one; she's been round to water his plants when he's gone on long business trips or holidays. I kept her talking. 'Have you seen Mum lately?' I asked, scanning all the little keys on hooks without really listening to her answer. Kathryn is exceptionally organised and every one of them was labelled with a little plastic fob. As soon as my fingers curled around the one labelled 'Jack', I felt a huge load of stress ease from my shoulders. I closed the box, slipped the key into my coat pocket and took up my position by the door.

‘Your parents have a new lease of life since finding out it wasn’t Elodie,’ she said, her voice growing louder as she came down the hall towards me. ‘Great news, you must be so relieved.’

And I was right there again, in the mortuary beside Dad, staring down at the face of a dead girl I didn’t know, sickened by the bruises which circled her neck, standing out against her paper-white skin like black ink smudges. I could still feel the weight of our dad as he clung to me, relief making both our knees weak.

‘Yes,’ I said. ‘We’re relieved but very sad for her family.’

Kathryn swallowed, looking unsure of herself. ‘Absolutely. Of course.’

The girl has since been identified as Amy Heath, a twenty-eight-year-old nurse from a village just outside Crosshaven. I read the newspaper article reporting her death and the statements of grief made by her family and thought, *Thank god it wasn’t you*, and I didn’t even feel guilty for it.

Just as I parked down the road from Jack’s, I called Christopher. ‘I got the key,’ I said.

‘What key?’

‘Jack’s house key.’

‘I told you not to break in there.’

‘Is it breaking in if I have a key?’

‘Yes,’ he said, exasperated.

‘Well, I’m here now and I wanted to tell you that you can expect a copy of the photograph this afternoon.’ Which was partly true. If I’m honest with you, I told him just in case something happened to me in there and I didn’t come back out.

‘Ada,’ he said seriously. I heard the rustle of clothing and I imagined him roughly pulling on his coat. ‘Do *not* enter his house.’

‘Don’t worry, it’s Thursday – Jack goes into the city on Thursdays.’

‘I’m coming to meet you. Wait for me.’

I waited ten minutes before I got out of my car and walked towards Jack’s. I was so eager to get inside, I wanted to sprint, but that would draw attention. If a neighbour caught me entering, I’d tell them I was scoping out the space for a surprise birthday party we were organising for him in January. That way, the neighbour wouldn’t let on to Jack I’d been there.

I'd just pushed the key into the lock when Christopher appeared at the end of the driveway. 'Ada,' he whispered fiercely.

Veins flooded with adrenaline, I turned the key and pushed inside.

'What the hell?' he hissed, hurrying after me.

'Get in here before someone sees you,' I snapped.

He hesitated only a second before crossing the threshold and closing the door behind him. He glowered at me. 'We need to leave,' he said. 'Now.'

'As soon as I've got the picture, we will.' Before he could say another word, I jogged up the stairs and swung into the study.

My mouth fell open in an 'O' of shock – the photograph was gone and in its place was another. A framed quote, 'All is fair in love and war.'

'Bastard,' I breathed.

'Where's the photograph?' asked Christopher, coming up behind me.

'Gone.' I kicked the shredder beside the desk. It toppled over. I was angry, so very angry. 'All is fair in love and war ... he is an arrogant son of a bitch.'

Christopher knelt and started scooping strips of paper off the floor and back into the shredder. 'What're you talking about?'

I flung my hand out in the direction of the replacement frame. 'He's mocking me. He knew I'd seen the photograph and now he's replaced it with this goading little quote. He's talking about my sister. All is fair in love and war. He has her,' I said, anger, panic and frustration tightening around my chest like a thick vine. 'He has her.'

'Ada.' Christopher stood and took my face in his hands. He was so warm. I blinked up at his dark eyes and felt myself calm. I took a deep breath and then another and another.

'I need to find the photograph. We could look, it might be here, we could —'

'If you're right and he switched the photograph out for that quote, it means he's onto you. The photograph is long gone. We need to leave, okay?'

Usually, someone talking to me slowly like I'm a little bit dim would set my teeth on edge, but he was obviously nervous. As an off-duty police

officer who'd broken into someone's home, he could lose his job. I nodded. 'Okay.'

'Okay.' His hands were still cupping my face, tilting my head back just a little. ~~It reminded of being a teenager in the seconds just before he'd kiss me goodnight at the door.~~ 'Okay,' he said again, dropping his hands. 'Let's go.'

But as he turned, we heard a key in the door downstairs.

We stilled.

Jack's voice rose through the floorboards.

Christopher grabbed my hand and started down the hall and through the only other open door on the landing. Jack's bedroom. Christopher whirled me around the king-size bed, searching for somewhere to hide.

'Here,' I whispered, tugging him towards the door opposite the bed. We spilled into the en-suite, hearts racing. Just before Christopher could pull the door closed, I put the flat of my palm on it to stop him, leaving it open just a crack and whispered, 'He might hear it shut.'

Laughter chimed down the hall seconds before the bedroom door swung open. Music clicked on and filled the entire house, breathy and fast. Through the gap, I glimpsed long blonde hair the same honey shade as yours, and my breath caught. Jack and the girl were kissing, hungrily, angrily, his fingers tangling in her hair, tugging her head back so he could deepen the kiss. She was petite and slim like you, but she had her back to me so I couldn't see her face.

Then he tugged her dress over her head and removed her bra before picking her up and throwing her onto the bed. She squealed. He climbed on top of her, capturing her mouth again. The thought of you being pinned beneath him made me feel panicked and queasy. I fought the desire to throw the door open because I couldn't tell if the girl was you. I looked to Christopher, but he was studiously turned away, too much of a gentleman to watch.

Jack and the blonde pawed at each other. Soon, Jack was naked too. I leaned forward, trying to see the girl's face but Jack was on her again, sinking into her. He threw his head back and groaned, 'Elodie.'

Shock ricocheted through me and I stepped forward. Christopher grabbed my arms and yanked me away. 'That's not her,' he whispered, barely

audible over the music.

‘It is,’ I hissed.

I tried to move past him, but he stepped in my path. ‘She has a tattoo on her hip.’

I frowned. ‘Elodie doesn’t have any tattoos.’

‘I know. But *she* does.’

I moved over to the gap in the door with Christopher hot on my heels in case I decided to fly in there. The blonde moaned loudly, her legs circling Jack’s waist. I couldn’t see her hip.

‘Elodie,’ he groaned again.

My head whipped up to Christopher.

‘It’s not her,’ he mouthed.

Their sex was loud and rough. Jack wrapped his hands around her throat. He called your name over and over. I know rough sex, but this was more than that – it was as if he was punishing the girl. Nausea rolled through me. Seconds bled into minutes and my heart raced. If he didn’t release her soon ... if he didn’t let her breathe again. Then, just as I was ready to step in, he let her go and she gasped and panted and clung to him. The girl flipped her head to the side and finally I could see her face.

‘It’s not Elodie,’ I breathed. On the back of my relief came disgust. Jack was procuring girls that look like you for sex. How long has he been doing this for? Surely this was proof of his disturbing obsession. Proof he took you.

I turned to Christopher to share my thoughts. But he was leaning over the sink, head out the bathroom window. I went to him.

‘We need to get out of here,’ he said.

‘You can’t be serious. We’ll break our necks.’

‘What else are we going to do?’ The sharp, unfamiliar snap in his voice made me feel guilty. We wouldn’t have been in that situation if it weren’t for me. ‘The second they’re done, Jack’s coming in here.’

He was right. Adrenaline pumping, I wracked my brain for a plan. Pulling my phone from my pocket, I sent a message. For the next couple of minutes, I paced the bathroom, sending messages back and forth. I was so engrossed, I didn’t notice that the rhythmic slapping of flesh against flesh

had stopped. The air smelled of sex and sweat. I went back to my viewing spot. Jack and the girl lay in bed, panting and naked. Then, very abruptly, Jack reached for a remote, clicked off the music and got up.

‘Get your stuff,’ he said, walking out of sight.

The blonde, skin glistening with sweat, climbed off the huge bed and bent to pick her dress up off the floor where Jack had discarded it. ‘You could at least let me shower first,’ she said with an Irish brogue.

Christopher tensed.

‘Get your stuff,’ he commanded again.

‘You could join me,’ she offered huskily.

‘Get your stuff.’

She wiggled into her dress. ‘I know who Elodie is,’ she said sulkily. ‘I saw her on the news.’

Jack stepped into view, wearing joggers and a clean T-shirt, and loomed over her. ‘I told you to get your stuff.’

He looked like he wanted to hit her, and she knew it. She lifted her chin defiantly, though there was a shake to her voice when she said, ‘No need to be rude, I’m leaving. Make sure you transfer my money before I’m home.’

A few minutes later, the front door slammed shut. Jack started stripping the bed. Glancing around the en-suite, I saw the laundry basket in the corner beside the shower. My stomach sank. I was barely breathing as Jack scooped up all the sheets and started marching towards us. Christopher and I stepped back, as though we could meld into the tiled walls.

He was going to find us. There was nothing we could do.

Then the doorbell sounded.

Jack stopped in his tracks.

He muttered something under his breath before dumping the sheets onto the floor outside the en-suite door. He turned and padded out the room. I exhaled, my heart pumping hot adrenaline through my veins. I waited until I heard the front door open before I took Christopher’s hand and led him out the en-suite. He dug his heels in. ‘What’re you doing?’

‘Using the distraction,’ I said. ‘It’s a friend.’

‘A friend?’

I yanked him into the bedroom and onto the landing. We paused at the top of the stairs and I glimpsed my accomplice's flat cap and tufts of white hair. 'Well, if you'd be so kind to jumpstart my car,' George was saying to Jack, 'I'd be ever so grateful.'

He sighed. 'Yep. Sure.'

Then George led Jack out onto the street, and Christopher and I shot down the stairs, through the living room and out the back doors. We sprinted across the grass. Christopher followed me around the back of the shed where we crouched down, our breath clouding out in front of us.

'Who was that?'

'A friend of Elodie's – he gave me his number the night of the lantern release and told me if I ever needed anything, I could get in touch.'

Christopher's dark eyes were furious. 'We almost got caught.'

'But we didn't.' I took his hand in mine, grateful when he didn't whip it away. 'Look, do you see now that Jack is a crazed sociopath?'

'I never said I didn't believe you, but I can't arrest him for calling out another woman's name during intercourse, especially when *I* broke into his house.'

My legs started to cramp so I dropped to my knees. The grass was damp and soaked through my jeans. 'I'm going to prove Jack knows David. The photo is gone but there must be another way. Can you ask the rugby club for a record of employees?'

'Ada ...'

'Please. If I'm right then David Taylor was manipulated by Jack and while David goes to prison, Jack gets away with it.'

Christopher's eyes searched my face and whatever he saw there made his soften. 'I'll see what I can do.'

## Chapter Forty-Three

### 150 Days Missing

#### **Elodie Fray**

‘She’s twenty-six, lives on a riverboat, makes her own granola and wears those baggy trousers you see on elephant riders ...’ Jack is clicking his fingers, trying to summon the word.

‘Harem pants?’ I offer.

‘Yes! Harem pants, she loves them, can’t get enough.’

‘Paired with wicker sandals?’

‘Absolutely. She doesn’t believe in monogamy, and she has one of those hamsa tattoos on her hip.’

‘Doesn’t know “harem pants” but does know “hamsa”,’ I tease. ‘Interesting.’

He grins. ‘You’re stalling.’

‘Hmm. Okay, I’m going to say her name is ... Sky?’

‘Bingo. I also would’ve accepted River and Rain. And Yasmin if I was feeling generous.’ He slides the plate of mince pies across the kitchen island towards me and I take one. It’s January and we are still working our way through the Christmas leftovers. ‘You go.’

Seefer jumps onto my lap and rotates a couple of times before she slumps herself down. I rub that sweet spot beneath her chin and she purrs loudly. Stroking her eases my anxiety, if only a little. ‘Okay, he’s in his fifties, wears those cheap check shirts from Burton’s and he’s always in the pub, every night, sitting at the corner of the bar. He’s red-faced and balding and he can make any innocuous conversation racist.’

‘Any?’

‘Any. It’s a skill his twenty-something children loathe.’

‘For example ...’

‘Really?’

‘Just trying to get a feel for him.’

I roll my eyes. ‘Like, you’d say, “Nice weather we’re having,” and he’d answer, “Yeah, and they’re all out in it, aren’t they? Walk through town with your eyes closed and you’ll think you’re in *bloody* India.”’

Jack snorts. ‘What an arse. Okay, let’s see. My money’s on Andy or Steve.’

I nod. ‘I also would’ve accepted Dave. Ooh, I have another.’

‘Go for it.’

‘She doesn’t own a TV and she makes sure everyone knows it. She lives in a big country home and goes to book club but always googles the author’s interpretation first so she has the *most* insightful comments. She has two children, a boy and a girl – privately educated, of course – their hobbies include riding, piano and tennis, and she wouldn’t dream of feeding them anything that isn’t organic or steamed and she makes sure everyone on social media knows it. She uses the hashtag *blessed*. But ... she’s bored of her work-away husband and even though she knows he’s fucking his secretary, she won’t leave because she will not fail this wonderful thing called life.’

‘You know this woman, Fray?’

‘Nope.’ I smile. ‘Just really good at the game.’

‘Her name’s Ada?’

For a second, my smile falters and I accidentally let a little of the hatred I have for him seep out, but I’m quick to recover. ‘Try again.’

‘Karen?’

‘No way. She’s not a Karen. Karens are infamously divorcees who complain to the manager.’

He throws his hands up. ‘Fine, you win, Fray. What’s her name?’

‘Penelope or Ffion. At a push? Felicity.’

‘What?’ he exclaims in mock outrage. ‘Ffion! How the hell was I supposed to guess that?’

‘I think it’s safe to say I won.’

He narrows his eyes but he is smiling. ‘*This* time.’

After days spent bingeing our favourite Christmas films, Jack declared we would have a TV-free day which means I've had to spend an exhausting amount of energy engaging in conversation and trying to pretend I can stand to be around him.

'Hot chocolate?' he offers, getting to his feet. 'Mulled wine?'

'Mulled please.'

He peers into the saucepan on the stove. 'Think we need some more star anise. There's some in the utility. Back in a sec.'

And just like that, he is gone, leaving me all alone in the kitchen. I glance at the back door. My fingers drum against the wood. Seefer, sensing my tension, meows loudly. Jack's jacket hangs on the back of his chair; inside the right pocket are the keys. I fight the urge to grab them and run. In three months, this is only my sixth time out of the basement and only the third time restraint-free. If I fuck up, he won't bring me up to the main floor again.

I run my fingers over the little half-moon scars Jack's nails left when he strangled me on the basement floor. A permanent, physical reminder of what he is capable of. Upon regaining consciousness after the attack, Jack begged for my forgiveness, spinning candyfloss promises that it would never happen again, but they soon dissolved when I croaked that no, he wasn't forgiven.

He flew into another rage. 'You're addicted to misery. If you spent less time focusing on where you are and more time focusing on who you're with, we could both be happy. You know me, you know what I want, what I've always wanted.' He's convinced all he needs to be happy is me. What Jack really craves is attention and unconditional love, the kind his father could never offer but lavished instead on Charlie. Jack needs not just to be the centre of someone's world but the whole of it.

My recovery was slow and painful. In the weeks that followed, my breath rattled and rasped in my throat. I struggled to swallow or speak for days and when I did, my voice was hoarse, foreign, a fifty-a-day smoker. Even as Jack fussed around me, trying to nurse my injuries, I was painfully aware that one day he could kill me, even accidentally, and my only shot at survival is to give him what he wants: to be my whole world. He'd have to work for it, of course – giving into him too easily would raise suspicion. I'd

gain his trust and once I did, I'd make my escape. I let him run Arnicare into my bruises and soothe oils into my half-moon scars. Let him think he'd done enough to win me over.

Then, one night seven weeks ago, I planted a seed and said, 'I do miss cosying up together on that huge sofa with a good crime documentary.' As if by magic, that seed grew and he believed this black dahlia was his because the following week he led me upstairs. I didn't even care that he'd handcuffed us together, I only cared that in some small way, I'd won.

And I continued to win.

On trip two, we baked brownies together. He made sure to keep me away from anything sharp. He let me lick the batter off the spoon and I let him watch, then I giggled like I'd been caught doing something forbidden. He wanted me – I could see it – but he was happy that we had a truce and I was breaking off pieces of my love and letting him nibble on them.

Trip three, we read *Of Mice and Men* – his pick – on the living-room floor in a nest of squashy cushions and duvets. We read our favourite passages to each other, and I tried not to flinch when Lennie shook Curley's wife to death, and we both got teary when George told him to stare at the flowers before shooting him in the back of the head. I cried because I know only one of us will survive this and one day, I'll have to put Jack down too.

Trip four, I was taken upstairs without restraints and the urge to run was overwhelming, but I'm not stupid, the doors were locked, and it was a test. I suggested AcroYoga because I know Jack loves to show me how much stronger he is than me and it was a chance to exercise my acting ability. When he put his hands on me, I pushed down the memories of the attempted rape, pleased I successfully hid my hatred of him, even briefly hiding it from myself.

Trip five – 30th December – we had our Fake Christmas. He couldn't risk disappearing at Real Christmas because his mother would be suspicious. He cooked. We ate. Afterwards, we sat on the sofa and watched *It's a Wonderful Life* and he leaned in to kiss me. My body quivered with revulsion, which Jack mistook for desire. 'I'm not ready,' I blurted, and he stilled.

'I thought ...'

‘You know I—’ I hesitated, only for a fraction, but he didn’t notice. ‘—love you, Jack, but I want to wait.’ I smiled up at him from beneath my lashes. ‘We have all the time in the world.’

‘You’re right.’ He nodded. ‘I won’t make you.’

I’m not sure which of us he was trying to convince. ‘Besides, there’s more power in making someone change their mind than there is in taking what you want by force.’

Don’t I know it. I smiled and nodded and, swallowing my disgust, kissed his cheek.

Trip six is the first he’s ever left me alone, even for a second, and especially with the keys. My fingers are still drumming. I want to flee. I force myself to hold still because this is his ultimate test. It doesn’t take this long to find the star anise, I’m sure of it.

‘Here we go,’ says Jack brightly, stepping back into the kitchen. He wiggles the little bag of ingredients at me and moves over to the stove.

I drop my hand from my half-moon scars and give Seefer some fuss. She purrs and pushes her head into my palm. Maybe I should’ve grabbed Seefer and gone for it just now. Maybe it wasn’t a test. Then I look up and catch Jack staring at me with the biggest grin and I know it *was* and I passed with flying colours.

Now is my chance. The golden, glittering chance I’ve been building up to for months.

I get up and walk over to him, leaning against the kitchen counter in a way I know accentuates the curve of my hips, the tightness of my waist. ‘Jack Henry Westwood, would you please accompany me on a real date?’

## Chapter Forty-Four

### 154 Days Missing

#### **Elodie Fray**

There's snow on the ground. It's freezing but the sun is a golden ball of light in the cloudless sky. Jack takes my mitten-clad hand and we walk slowly across the icy path to a Land Rover which isn't his. A rental, I assume. He helps me into the passenger side, but I take my time, breathing in the fresh, cold air. It's the first time I've been outside in three months, but I can't make a big deal about it because this is a date and I'll spoil the illusion for him if I dare to add a dose of reality. As he walks around the front of the car, keeping his eyes firmly on mine, I smile and ever-so-gently try the door. It's locked. I'm undeterred. I'll have my moment. As long as I hold my nerve and my patience, I'll have my moment.

We drive down winding country roads; I see only two other cars and even though they pass by us in a second, I try to make eye contact. Not that it matters. I am all but hidden beneath a fur hat with earflaps and a pair of oversized sunglasses. Jack's idea. For the cold, he'd said; for the bright sun bouncing off the snow, he'd said. I played along, thanking him, pretending I had no idea they were meant to disguise me from the public.

As we drive, I fight the urge to rip them off and bang on the glass and scream, 'I'm here. I'm alive. I'm alive.' I think maybe if the car door was unlocked, I'd throw myself out, not caring what chance of survival I had.

'So,' I say, 'where're you taking me?'

'It's a surprise,' he says.

'Boo,' I say, the word leaving my lips puckered in a kiss. 'I'm in a lot of layers so I take it there won't be skinny-dipping?'

He smiles. 'You hate skinny-dipping.'

'Maybe. Maybe not.'

Jack is thinking about me naked. His breath is coming a little harder and he keeps darting heated looks at me. Good. I want him thinking about sex – it’s the most effective form of distraction.

Jack parks on a dirt track, one of the many small, icy lanes we’ve driven along to get here. I mean, I knew we weren’t bound for some fancy restaurant – Jack has some trust in me but not enough to test it out in a crowd, especially one which didn’t allow for hats and sunglasses – but all I can see for miles and miles is marzipan fields and winter-bare trees that look as though they’ve been dipped in icing sugar. He opens my door and I step out. The air is so cold, I know it won’t be long until my cheeks are skiing-in-the-Alps pink, and I’m grateful for the thick coat and jeans he gave me before we came out.

Taking my hand, he leads me to the back of the Land Rover and opens the boot. For one terrified second, I balk, thinking he’s going to throw me in. Then he leans down, picks up a rucksack and—

‘Holy fuck.’ I take a step back. ‘Is that a gun?’

His laugh is easy, carefree. ‘Rifle. Don’t look so panicked, I’m not going to hurt you.’

‘Jack ...’ My heart beats fiercely.

‘Come on.’ He tucks the weapon into the side of his rucksack and throws it over his shoulder before holding his hand out to me. ‘We’re hunting.’

‘Romantic.’

‘Memorable,’ he corrects. ‘Let’s go.’

I take his hand and let him lead me into the woods.

Trying to stay calm as we crunch across snow, I tell myself if he wanted to kill me, the Wisteria basement would be ideal; concealed from the public, there’s no chance of being discovered, he could throw my corpse in the sea and no one would have a clue. He isn’t stupid enough to bring me out in the open to end my life. And I’ve been good. I’ve been perfect. I haven’t given him any reason to want me dead. Not unless he’s learned to read my mind. Still, I’m acutely aware of my half-moon scars. Of what he is capable of.

‘Nervous?’ he asks as we walk.

‘No,’ I lie.

He raises a brow.

‘I don’t like guns,’ I admit.

‘How do you know? Ever been this close to one?’

Only the handgun lying next to your dad’s body, I think. ‘No.’

‘Well then.’

‘Where’d you get it?’

‘One of Jeffrey’s.’

‘I thought his guns were illegal here? I thought the police confiscated the ones they found?’

‘They didn’t find this one.’ We follow a barely visible trail deeper into the woods, away from civilisation. If anyone were to see us – Jack in his cream turtleneck and navy wool coat, me in my dark green duffle and knee-high boots – we could be mistaken for a couple enjoying an intimate winter walk. ‘Jeffrey took me hunting, you know.’

‘When?’

‘On our solo trips to Wisteria.’

‘I thought he kept you in the basement room? You said he only made you pose for photos?’

He shrugs. ‘There were a couple of occasions we went out and did stuff. I took a real interest in hunting and he liked to show me how skilled he was with a gun.’

How much of what Jack told me is true? Did Jeffrey ever really keep him in the basement or was that some twisted story to gain sympathy? He’s an architect – it’s possible Jack built that room just for me. As we pick our way across the snow-covered earth, I take deep breaths, squashing down the need to escape.

We stop just before a clearing. Jack crouches slightly, motioning for me to do the same.

‘Look,’ he whispers. I follow his gaze. Thirty, maybe forty metres ahead, a deer forages, oblivious to our presence.

‘Pretty,’ I say even as a knot twists in my stomach.

‘I want you to shoot it.’

I stare at him. ‘Me?’

‘Yeah. You should know what it’s like to take a life. It’s powerful. An experience we should share.’

The way he refers casually to murdering Noah makes my skin heat with revulsion, despite the cold. I look down, brushing imaginary snowflakes from my coat so he can't see the disgust on my face. For the millionth time, I wish I'd never agreed to come to Wisteria. Then I remind myself that even if I'd insisted I didn't want to go along with his plan, Jack would've taken me to the cottage by force. He acted like I had a choice, but I never did. Just as I don't have a choice now.

'Here.' He hands me a set of binoculars he's taken from the rucksack. 'Watch her. Get to know her.'

I hold the viewer to my eyes, magnifying the warm rust colouring of her fur, the white smattering of spots along her body, the long lashes framing her large dark eyes. She grazes, using her nose to shift the snow, uncovering patches of grass.

'She's beautiful,' I say, lowering the binoculars.

'Even beautiful things aren't exempt from the kill,' he says, fixing me with a penetrating stare. He takes them from me, then looks through them himself. He doesn't move a muscle, he's tense and alert, his focus entirely on his prey.

I hold still too, even as my thighs burn from crouching, but my gaze darts all around, noting any possible escape routes if I get the chance to run. I think about screaming as loud as I can, but if there's no one around to hear it, Jack will just drag me back to the car and I'll never be allowed out again.

'You're nervous,' he says.

'I don't want to kill anything.'

'Everyone wants to hunt and anyone who says they don't is lying. It's an undeniable, primal need. You eat meat.'

'That's not the same thing.'

'It is,' he counters. 'All meat comes from a kill. If you're going to enjoy meat, you should take pride in killing it first.'

'So this isn't just for fun ... you're going to eat the deer?'

'Why can't it be for both?'

I swallow hard.

He puts the rifle in my hands. It's heavy, alien; I've never held a gun before.

‘You’re going to shoot her.’

‘I don’t know how.’

‘It’s simple.’ He comes closer and before I can protest, he rests the butt against my shoulder and shows me how to aim. I see the deer through the rifle.

‘You need your weight behind it.’

His hands drop to my hips. My heart scatterguns. I don’t want his hands on me. I’m back on the hill, his grip bruising as he holds me down. The rain mingling with my tears as I beg him to stop.

‘You can do this,’ he whispers, moving my hips to shift my stance. Then he slips his hands around the front of my body so I’m pressed firmly against him.

‘You’ve got two shots. First to wound, second to kill. She favours her right, so, when she tries to run, swing right, cut her off before she can escape.’ His breath fogs in the wintry air. ‘Just squeeze the trigger.’

We are playing a game of chicken. I’m pretending to trust him and he’s pretending to trust me. He wants to know how far I’ll go to please him, to convince him he’s won me round and all is forgiven so we can skip, hand-in-hand, into the realm of happily-ever-after.

Can I turn the gun on him? This thought is dark and potent. Will I be quick enough?

‘Do it,’ he whispers. His hand snakes across the back of my neck, moving my hair to one side, exposing my throat. He hardens against me. It’s turning him on. It’s sick. *He’s* sick.

‘No!’ My protest is so loud, the deer skitters into the safety of the woods.

I spin around, raising the gun and level it at his heart. My head fills with white noise.

His mouth takes on an amused little twist, but I see the shock in his eyes. The fear.

He’s not convinced I have it in me.

Not convinced I will go that far.

I close my eyes and pull the trigger.

## Chapter Forty-Five

### 154 Days Missing

#### **Adaline Archer**

Ruby had the baby. I haven't seen her since I visited the hospital a couple of weeks ago, but she called and asked me to pop over this morning.

Gingerly, Ruby lowered herself and baby Claudia onto the sofa; god knows how many stitches are holding her perineum together. I made tea because it is a sin to walk into a new mother's house and expect her to do it. Even from the kitchen I was inhaling that new baby smell which makes everything feel fresh and serene and still.

I returned with two steaming mugs. 'God bless you,' she said, taking one from me. 'And thanks for the flowers; they're beautiful.'

Everyone loves flowers. I sent George some too, to thank him for distracting Jack so I could escape. But I think George was most pleased with the crate of biscotti I dropped round after he mentioned you'd often 'gift' him some from Mugs. I didn't go into all the details with lovely George about why I needed him to distract Jack, and he was gentleman enough not to push.

'How're you feeling?' I asked Ruby.

She smiled. 'Happy. So happy but so exhausted. I've never been so blissed out and tired in all my life. You just don't know anything like it until you've had a baby.'

'Good. And has Tom gone back to work?'

'He didn't have a choice. Work has been so busy for him.'

I nodded again even as I silently judged him for not taking the full amount of paternity leave to help raise his child. Ruby was pale and tired and still in pain.

‘Poor Claudia,’ she said. ‘Nobody wants to be a January baby – it’s the most miserable month of the year.’

‘That’s true, she’s in for a lifetime of “re-gifted” presents from the Christmas reject pile.’

‘Years of bland Boots bath and body sets. And what about when she’s older? Two words: dry January.’

‘Ah yes, the dreaded new year’s resolution will be a thorn in her side, but I’ll spoil her.’

‘Here,’ said Ruby, holding Claudia out to me.

As I took her, I couldn’t help but think about the first time I held you.

She was sleeping, her tiny fists bunched up beside her chubby cheeks. ‘She’s so small,’ I whispered. ‘She has Tom’s dark hair.’

We were both quiet, staring at the baby in my arms. ‘One day it will be me holding your baby,’ Ruby said.

I made a noncommittal sound and hugged Claudia closer.

‘That’s still the plan, isn’t it?’ she pressed.

I looked up; Ruby’s tired eyes bored into mine. ‘Maybe.’

‘Why “maybe”?’

I took a breath. I know it shouldn’t matter what other people think, but Ruby and I have been talking about babies for years: trips to the park, joint family holidays at a Cornwall cottage just like we used to do with the Westwoods at Wisteria, watching our children in their first nativity. I know Ruby, her family unit was pretty poor growing up and I’d become entrenched in this perfect future she had planned for her own children. She was going to take my rejection of motherhood personally. ‘I’m just not sure it’s what I want.’

She narrowed her eyes. ‘Why?’

Why is it no one ever asks a woman why she *does* want children, but everyone’s keen to ask a woman why she *doesn’t* want them? ‘Lots of reasons,’ I said vaguely. ‘I like having my own time and with Ethan working as much as he does, I’ll be left at home to take care of the baby.’

I didn’t tell her the idea of pregnancy turns my stomach or when I picture motherhood, I see snotty noses and dirty nappies and a screaming, red-faced baby, and I simply don’t feel that *pull* so many of my friends talk about.

‘But what will you do without a baby?’

I gave a little self-conscious laugh. ‘What do you mean?’

Claudia woke, gurgled and started to cry. I got that panic I always do when a baby starts to cry, as though it’s my fault. Ruby grimaced as she leaned forward to take her from me. Once Claudia was in her arms again, Ruby lifted her jumper and let her bare breast flop free. ‘Come on, baby girl,’ she cooed. ‘Are you hungry, beautiful?’ Ruby’s a natural. Claudia found her nipple quickly and fell quiet again. ‘I just mean it’s not like you have a career or anything. Throwing parties and decorating the house is all well and good but don’t you want your life to have some purpose?’

The hairs on the back of my neck stood on end. It didn’t sound like Ruby – it sounded like Ethan. ‘He’s been in contact with you, hasn’t he?’

She flushed. ‘Who?’

‘Ethan.’ I was furious. How dare he call Ruby? How dare she go along with it? No wonder he’d stopped going on about children; why bother when he had my cousin doing his dirty work?

‘He’s worried about you. I am too. You have what you want: the big house, the perfect husband, but you could lose it all. Ethan might walk if you aren’t on the same page, Adaline.’ Claudia whimpered and Ruby shushed her, stroking her wispy dark hair.

‘Well, maybe he should. Maybe I want to be with someone who doesn’t view me as an interchangeable incubator for his offspring. Maybe I want to be with a man who can only imagine having children with me and if he can’t have them with me, he doesn’t want them with anyone,’ I said, thinking of Jennifer and Lucas.

She shook her head. ‘That just doesn’t happen. That guy doesn’t exist.’ She looked back down at her baby who’d fallen off her nipple. ‘Is this because of Elodie? You’ve been ... different.’

‘Well, of course I have. Something this big changes you. Elodie’s disappearance made me reassess my life.’

‘So what now? You’re going to leave Ethan and work in a coffee shop?’

I shift uncomfortably in my seat, deciding whether or not to tell her. ‘No. I’ve been thinking about going into event planning or interior design.’ I’d actually contacted a few companies just to see. I don’t think I’d have done it without Harriett reassuring me I’m brighter than I think or without

Christopher telling me how capable I am or without you suggesting I'd be good at it, all those months ago. One interior company just outside of Crosshaven asked me to send a portfolio; between taking care of our parents, and endless research on Jack and David, I'd been putting something together to send to them. Ethan caught me working on it last night and snapped that he never wanted a wife who worked and besides, I was going to make a fool out of myself. 'I want to work. I want to earn for myself.'

She pulled a face. 'Come on, Adaline, you haven't worked in *years*. And even when you did, you were a just a PA on a shit wage. Without Ethan, you'll have nothing.' She let her words hang in the air like a bad smell, before continuing in a patronising tone. 'Have a baby. Just one,' she said, as though she were trying to convince me to indulge in sugary confectionery and not a life that will forever be tied to my own. 'You'll love it when it arrives. Being a mother is unlike anything else in the world.'

I looked at her bloodshot eyes and her leaking boobs and the dark circles and thought I'd never judged her for wanting a child; why was she judging me for *not* wanting one? I'm starting to believe being a parent is like standing in quicksand, and rather than asking for help out of it, they want to pull you in so you're all sinking together.

I shouldn't have been surprised Ruby thought so little of my ability to succeed without my husband. Up until recently, I'd thought so little about myself. It still hurt though, El. I have a feeling you'd be supportive if I told you I wanted a career, even if that meant losing Ethan and the shot at a baby I didn't want.

'I've got to go,' I said, standing up.

Claudia started to wail.

'Oh, really?' asked Ruby.

'Yes, I don't know if Ethan told you but we're having dinner with his family tonight and I need to go.'

Ruby looked panicked. 'Are you sure?' she asked over her screaming bundle of joy. 'Tom isn't back until this evening. Can't you stay?'

I wanted to fling her words back at her. Remind her motherhood is simply the best and this – the house, the husband, the baby – is exactly what she

wanted so why complain that I'm leaving her to it? Instead, I said, 'No, sorry. I have to go.' I ran a finger along Claudia's cheek. 'Take care.'

Ethan was going straight from the office to his family's house so there was no time to have it out with him. By the time I arrived at Steve and Lynn's home, I was still upset by Ruby's comments and by Ethan going behind my back. It didn't help that every time I'm forced to see Ethan's parents, a cloud of dread descends because their favourite pastime is making me feel an inch tall. His parents don't think I'm good enough for their son and never have.

When I first met Steve, he Google-mapped our parents' home and I think Mum and Dad's three-bed semi-detached didn't quite compare to their four-bed detached with two reception rooms, and it was all downhill from there. I used to worry *I* was the problem – I wasn't university-educated, our family aren't rich, I was too opinionated – but I quickly learned that neither Lynn nor Steve had a single positive thing to say about either of their sons' partners, past or present.

In the early years of our relationship, I was so swept up in Ethan's charm, his money and the fantastic sex, that I could overlook how his parents treated me. Naively, I thought when we were married, Ethan would speak up against his parents when they put me or my family down. I was wrong.

Lynn welcomed me inside. She is round and homely, though every time I look at Ethan's cookie-cutter mother, I remember him telling me she sat him down just before he went away to university and told him, 'Be careful about taking a girl back to your room and putting yourself in a position where she can accuse you of something,' deciding not to discuss with her son the importance of hearing a 'yes' before having sex with a woman and instead choosing to paint women as insidious liars out to wreck a man's life.

With a smile, I greeted Ethan's parents and my traitorous husband. I made polite conversation, biting my tongue against Steve's insistence that if women did as good a job as men, of course they'd be paid the same. Sometimes I'm sure he says these things just to bait me, but I tell myself to sympathise with him because his dislike of women is most probably a product of his mother abandoning him when he was young. She went on to remarry and have a daughter; I've only ever heard Steve spout jealous poison regarding his half-sister.

Mum and Dad don't know how I feel about Ethan's family. Before the wedding, which was mostly directed by Lynn, our families only crossed paths once when we had dinner at my parents' house. Mum put so much effort into hosting, but Steve and Lynn spent the entire evening making little snide remarks, referring to their house as 'cosy' and making Mum change the cutlery twice because of watermarks on the silverware. They didn't even stay for dessert. I knew Mum and Dad were hurt, but we didn't talk about it, and Mum just kept saying, 'Ethan comes from a lovely family' when what she really meant was 'wealthy'.

The Archers make out they're a close-knit group, but their youngest, Daniel, moved to Bali to be an artist. This left Steve, with all his abandonment issues and blatant disregard for any career in the arts, spitting feathers, and now it's like they only ever had one son with his financially stable career. I actually bought a few of Daniel's paintings and had them shipped to the UK. Every time Lynn and Steve come over, they compliment those pieces without even knowing they were created by their forgotten son, and I get a little kick out of it.

I was just about to tuck into a slab of chocolate fudge cake when Ethan whipped the plate out from beneath my poised fork and held it up. 'Mum, can you cut this in half?'

I glanced at him.

'It's too big,' he told me. 'Do you need all that sugar and cream?'

A few months ago, this comment would've made me hate my body and go on another diet to shrink my size eight waist, but this, along with his sly attempts to manipulate me via Ruby, made anger sizzle. I bit my tongue though, not wanting to cause a scene in front of his family.

Steve chortled. 'Lynn doesn't have any self-restraint either.'

To my outrage, Ethan laughed.

'Ada, I picked up some prenatal vitamins for you,' said Lynn, taking her place beside her husband.

I stiffened, then glanced at Ethan who was studiously focusing on his dessert. This was another set-up.

'Ethan mentioned you two are ... struggling. I read it's never too early to take prenats,' said Lynn. 'It'll all be worth it in the end. My life just wouldn't be the same without children.'

But this is the thing. For years, Lynn's life consisted of weekends spent at the side of a rugby pitch in all weathers while shedding her carefully chosen friends and replacing them with other mums from the school gates, pouring hours into her children's homework to ensure they go to good universities, only to have them grow up and fly the nest. Meanwhile, she is a wife, a mother and nothing else. I don't want that for myself. And it's taken me long enough to admit it.

Everyone's eyes were on me, waiting for me to speak. 'That's nice.'

'Nice?' Lynn seemed perplexed by my choice of word. 'It's *wonderful*. Isn't it, Steve?'

'Yes,' he said. 'Choosing not to have children is rather selfish in my opinion.'

I looked again to my husband who was nodding. *Agreeing* with his family that I was selfish for not wanting him to spunk inside me and fill my womb with a child he had very little interest in raising since it was 'my fucking job' to do so. 'I think it's easy for a man to tell a woman she should have children, especially when *he's* not the one who has to give birth.'

'Well,' said Lynn after a pause, 'birth can't be that bad, I've done it twice.'

Yes, and you're married to Steve, which proves you're a glutton for punishment, I thought, imagining you thinking the exact same thing.

'*When* you have a baby, if it's a girl, you can name her after your late sister,' said Lynn. 'We wouldn't mind, would we, Steve?'

You have been missing for five months. Not once in that time has anyone been so bold as to refer to you as deceased in my presence. I'm not stupid, I'm sure most people think it, but not many are insensitive enough to say it out loud. I put my fork down. 'I'm sorry?'

Lynn looks to her husband for reassurance. 'Yes,' said Steve. 'We thought when you have a child, it would be a kind thing to do.'

'She's not dead.'

There was an awkward silence.

Steve cleared his throat. 'Sorry?'

'She's not dead,' I said again. 'My sister isn't dead.'

He sat up straighter, puffing out his chest. 'A body hasn't been found yet but let's be serious ...'

I turned in my seat to Ethan, forcing him to finally acknowledge me. Reluctantly, he looked up.

‘Are you going to let them say these things to me?’

I waited. I’d spent our whole relationship carefully treading the line of defending myself as much as I could without being rude or difficult. But it wasn’t fair. These were *his* parents. We were supposed to be a team and I’d never let our mum and dad speak to Ethan the way his had spoken to me. We stared at one another. His parents were jabbering at us, but we ignored them. A line had been drawn in the sand of our relationship and he had a choice to make.

‘Well?’ I pressed. I was calm. I was so very calm as I waited for my husband to decide: tell his parents what they said was insensitive or don’t.

Ethan shook his head like I’d let him down, then turned his attention back to his cake.

That’s it then.

I shouldn’t have been surprised; Ethan very rarely went against his parents. Until right then, I’d accepted that, but Ruby was right, I was different now; your disappearance had changed me in more ways than I realised.

I stood. ‘Thank you for this evening—’

Ethan’s head whipped up. ‘Ada, sit down.’

‘—it’s been enlightening.’

I pushed my chair back and exited. Ethan followed me down the hall, catching up with me at the front door and grabbed my wrist, spinning me to face him. ‘If you leave now, I swear to god—’

‘What?’ I cut him off, not caring if his family overheard. ‘You’ll do what, Ethan? We aren’t happy. We haven’t been happy in a long time.’ I spoke the truth out loud, felt it crystallise in my hands and held it up in the weak winter sunshine streaming through the windows. ‘You spend more time at work than you do with me, you aren’t supportive, you go behind my back and try to manipulate me. Ruby and then this dinner with your family, it’s a set-up. It feels like all I’ve had for *months*, even with my sister missing, is people wanting to know when I’m going to let you knock me up!’

‘Oh sure, it’s all my fault. Everything is my fault.’

‘No. It isn’t. We got married without ever talking about children and you assumed I wanted them.’ I held up a hand to stop his protest. ‘Which isn’t an uncommon assumption to make, but neither of us ever brought it to the table to discuss. And when I did think I was pregnant, you were awful.’

‘It wasn’t convenient.’

‘For *you*. It wasn’t convenient for *you*.’ I sighed. I think, at one point, I did want children, then he reacted the way he did to the pregnancy and I realised if I did want them, it could never be with him. ‘We can’t do this anymore.’

I was expecting to be met with anger and insults but what I saw in his face was sorrow and resignation. He took my hand in his and just held it. We were both submerged in the quiet mourning of a relationship we knew was ending even though neither of us were ready to say it out loud, to discuss divorce lawyers and dividing up the house. Ethan wiped away tears from my cheeks before I realised they were there.

He let me go.

I took my coat and left the house, my heels clicking down the stone steps. I strode past the car, deciding instead to walk home, and come back for it tomorrow. It was cold, my breath streaming out in front of me. You can pour years into a relationship, pour into it hopes for the future, memories from your childhood, mix laughter and sex and love into it and with one conversation on a sunny, freezing afternoon in January, you pull the plug and watch it all drain away.

You’d be proud. I know you would. I couldn’t imagine how Mum and Dad would react. Even now, as I write this in my bed, I *still* can’t think about how they’ll take the news.

Anyway, I walked and walked without any idea of where I was headed. I wasn’t ready to go home, back to a big empty house I knew I couldn’t afford to keep without Ethan. I know so much about him, so much useless information which up until an hour before was as essential to me as air: the way he takes his coffee, how he likes to be touched, his plans for our future.

Then I looked up and you know where I was? Your house. Again. Only, it’s not yours anymore. The landlord has rented it out to someone else. Mum and Dad were horrified, worried the new tenants were morbidly fascinated by your disappearance, but there is a young couple in there now

who moved from Bristol. Weeks ago, we had to pack up all your things and put them in storage because we are clinging to the hope you will one day return. I saved your vase though, the pretty green one Noah made for you. It's safe on my bedside table.

I stood at the gate and stared at the house. The bedroom light winked on. If I cleared my mind of the truth, I could pretend it was you up there in that room, climbing into bed with a book and a tea, your stray cat curled up beside you.

I turned, searching, started making noises to attract your cat. I *completely* forgot to come back for her. I'd asked Ethan about taking Seefer in, but he was so disgusted by the idea, I dropped it. I spent another twenty minutes looking for her with no luck.

By the time I got home it was dark. Ethan had been and gone, taking with him a couple of suitcases and most of his clothes. I tried not to worry about what I'd tell him if he asked for the engagement ring and wedding band back; they were still missing. I know Jack has them even if I can't prove it, just as I am sure he has you too.

## Chapter Forty-Six

### 154 Days Missing

#### **Elodie Fray**

There's a soft click.

I open my eyes.

There is no explosion of noise and fire. His chest does not rip open like a pomegranate. There is no blood splatter on my face.

There is only me and Jack and the hard barrel of a rifle between us.

He stares, a chilling mixture of amusement and rage, but his emotions are merely watercolours compared to the vivid ink of my disappointment and fear.

'Safety's on,' he says, voice low and velvety, like he's telling me a dirty, intimate secret.

Then he darts forward, seizing the barrel. I jerk away. My foot catches and I topple backwards. Jack, still holding the gun, topples too. He crashes down beside me in a flurry of powdery snow. I let go of the rifle. Then I'm up and running, running, running. Branches snatch at my hair and skin but I don't slow. I'm careful to avoid dips and fallen logs. It's icy and I slip and skid but don't stop. Jack is behind me, bellowing my name. I don't look back, not this time. I am wild and untamed; an animal running to stay free.

My chest is tight and aches from the cold; I'm gasping for breath but adrenaline surges and I sprint. I need to make it to the road. I'm going the wrong way. I veer right, risking a glance over my shoulder. Jack isn't far behind. He is all muscle and rage as he hurls himself after me.

I hear the whoosh of a car.

It fades almost as soon as it begins. I sob with relief and run in the direction of the noise. Through the trees I see the flash of a passing vehicle.

'Stop!' I choke. 'Stop!'

But it's already gone. I put my head down and run faster.

'Elodie!' His voice is loud, closer now.

The wind shrieks, slapping my cheeks with razor-laced palms, my fingers are numb with cold and my heart gallops in my chest. I'm almost there, I'm almost—

I hurtle onto the road.

I see the car before it sees me. It doesn't slow.

Something slams into my back, and I shoot forward, rolling towards the opposite shoulder.

A car horn blares angrily at the mad woman who tried to throw herself in front of it.

And then it's gone.

Jack is on top of me. He clamps a hand over my mouth, muffling my scream. Bringing his face close to mine, he says in a low rumble, 'You're going to get up and come with me.'

Gripping my wrist, he gets to his feet and hauls me up. With his free hand, he adjusts my hat. Then we are moving, I stumble alongside him and the tears come, streaming down my sweaty face. He marches us across the road and into the woods, snatching up the gun and rucksack where he dropped them – I guess running into the road with a weapon would've drawn far too much attention. I open my mouth to beg for my life but a sob burbles from my lips.

'You could've killed yourself,' he says furiously. 'You're welcome, by the way.'

Maybe he won't murder me and bury me beneath the frozen earth. Still, I remember his hands around my neck, squeezing until I blacked out. If he loses control again, that could be it. My mind keeps spinning in a blind panic as I am catapulted back into the basement, Jack straddling me, eyes bulging, spittle landing on my cheeks as he choked the air out of me.

Back at the Land Rover, before I know what's happening, Jack whips out a cable tie and secures my hands to the inside handle of the passenger door. He bundles me inside. When he climbs in, he takes a pair of sunglasses – his – from the glovebox and puts them on me. They're too big and slide down my nose. I don't fight or kick or spit or shout. There's a heaviness

winding around my muscles and I sink against the door, resting my forehead against the cold glass.

‘You failed your test,’ he says simply. ‘You really believe I’d give you a loaded gun? Didn’t think you’d actually shoot me though, Fray, but I’m glad you did.’

He is smiling at me like I’m a particularly bright student. ‘We’re more suited for each other than I could ever imagine. You’re ruthless, like me. Different sides of the same coin.’

I want to tell him he’s crazy, but I don’t have the energy to argue.

He chuckles, full of bounce. ‘We’re made to fit. We are. And I passed my test, Fray, I did. You tried to shoot me, you ran away, and I kept my cool. I meant it when I said I’d never hurt you again. Last time, in the basement, I thought I’d lost you and god, I’ve never felt so sick, so wrecked.’

I shiver, thinking of the half moon scars on my neck and remembering how close he brought me to death.

‘One day, you won’t have to pretend to want me, you just will,’ he says, ‘and when I know I can trust you, once you admit you’re in love with me, we’ll move away. We’ll get new passports, new identities. Move to Australia, New Zealand, somewhere far away with beaches and the ocean and a deck where we can sit and drink wine. You can write under a different name – you’ll get another agent, I know you will. And we’ll have kids. Or not, you know? Maybe I won’t ever want to share you. Maybe we won’t ever want to share each other.’

A tear slides down my cheek. I’ve mourned my freedom, mourned never seeing my family and friends again, but until now, I haven’t mourned Jack. He was a constant in my life for twenty-three years. He believed in me when no one else did, not even my family, and he made me think maybe blood isn’t always thicker than water. That maybe blood was just slippery and stained everything it touches, but everyone needed water; water is life.

Jack turns the key. Nothing happens. He tries again and still nothing happens. ‘What the hell?’ he mutters, examining the dashboard. ‘Shit.’

‘What is it?’

‘Battery’s dead.’

My heart skips. ‘Call the AA?’

Jack raises an eyebrow. ‘And what? Stuff you in the boot while they examine the problem? Or maybe you’d prefer I drag you back into the woods, tie you to a tree and hope you don’t get hypothermia.’

‘What, then?’

Agitation builds. He thrusts his fingers back through his hair. ‘Don’t know. Let me think.’

I wonder if he was joking about the boot and the woods.

‘Don’t move,’ he commands.

‘Jeez, and here I was planning a trip to Guernsey,’ I snap, pulling on the restraints.

Jack mutters under his breath and slams the door shut.

He pops the bonnet and while I’m out of his line of sight, I try to slide my hands free, but the plastic is pulled tight and slices into my skin. I twist around; the rifle and the rucksack with the hunting knife is on the backseat. If I could get to it ...

A car approaches, I see it out the back window. For a moment, I think it will drive right by, but the driver puts on the indicators and parks up behind us. Anticipation builds in my chest. Jack, hearing the car, peers around the bonnet before moving swiftly to the driver’s side door. He pulls it open and leans in. I can’t hide my excitement, the smug spread of my lips.

‘Listen to me,’ he says in an urgent whisper, reaching for the rucksack. ‘Try anything and I will kill whoever is in that car.’ He whips the hunting knife from the bag and slides it into his inner coat pocket. Then he pulls the folded blanket forward and winds it around my shoulders so it drapes over my restrained hands. ‘I’ll kill them, and it’ll be your fault, got it?’

The quiet venom and sincerity in his voice makes my breath hitch in my throat. I think of Noah and I believe him. Jack ducks out of the car, closing the door behind him, and I watch in the rear-view mirror as Jack smiles and greets the man. He’s in his sixties, with greying hair and a paunch, which speaks of Sunday morning cream cakes and mid-afternoon biscuits. He has a kind face and he’s wearing a cornflower blue shirt which makes me think of my dad. Even if Jack didn’t have a knife, this man isn’t a match for him.

‘I can give you a jumpstart,’ says the man.

Jack hesitates, darting a look back at the Land Rover. He’s worried I’ll scream for help. He doesn’t want to accept this stranger’s aid but what

choice does he have? ‘Yes, thanks, that’d be great.’

My stomach lurches. Maybe I could shout to the man to call the police and get back into his car. Then he’d be safe. But I wouldn’t have time to explain *why* he needed to call the police or who I am or that Jack has a knife. I’d shout and he’d hesitate, confused by the shrieking woman inside the car, and Jack would attack him. But maybe—

‘Grandad,’ sing-songs a buttery little voice. I twist around and see a little girl leaning out of the window, waving an iPad in the air. She is no older than seven or eight, her dark hair pulled up high in a swishy ponytail. ‘Password please!’

‘Just one moment, Sarah,’ calls the man.

I think of Jack thrusting the blade into the man’s neck as his granddaughter watches on in mute horror. Then I imagine Jack storming towards the car, as focused on the little girl as he was on the deer, ripping open the door and dragging her out, stabbing the knife into her small body too. My mouth fills with salty water and for a moment, I think I might vomit. I can’t put that child in danger, I can’t put the kind-faced man in danger either.

The man gets back into his car and pulls up in front of us. I close my eyes and listen to them chat as they set to work charging the battery; the man tells Jack his name is Harry and he’s taking his granddaughter out for pizza. As always, Jack is charming, but there’s a spikiness to him. If you didn’t know him you wouldn’t be able to tell, and if Harry picks up on it, he doesn’t say.

I jump at the sound of someone tapping on the window. It’s the little girl – Sarah – she’s wearing a pink puffer jacket and earmuffs. ‘Hello,’ she says.

‘Hello,’ I say, taken aback.

‘Come away from there, Sarah,’ calls Harry.

‘I was just saying hello to the lady,’ she parries.

He appears beside the car, already taking his granddaughter’s hand and leading her away. Then he stops. ‘You alright, miss?’

I tense. My gaze flickers to the rear-view mirror where I can see Jack silently approaching them from behind.

‘Yes,’ I say, pleased when my voice doesn’t waver.

‘She’s pregnant,’ offers Jack. ‘Don’t want her out in the cold.’

‘You’re having a baby?’ asks the girl.

I nod because words are jammed tight in my throat. I’m glad the glasses are covering most of my face because I know my desperation is written all over it.

‘My mummy’s having a baby too,’ she tells me excitedly.

Harry chuckles. ‘Come on, kiddo.’

They turn and walk past Jack, who swivels on his heel, keeping them in view. The little girl spins and, still walking beside her grandad, waves at me. I can’t wave back, but I give her my most brilliant smile.

There’s a lump of cement in my gut as they climb into their car. I could still shout for help. I still could. But I don’t. I watch them drive away, honking their horn goodbye as they go.

Grinning, Jack gets into the car. It starts without protest. ‘You passed with flying colours, Fray,’ he tells me, excitement lacing his voice. We pull away. ‘Flying colours.’

## Chapter Forty-Seven

### 159 Days Missing

#### **Elodie Fray**

I expected Jack to do the usual: take away the TV or lock me in the bathroom or tie me to the bed as punishment for trying to escape again. He didn't. He restocked the mini-fridge and said he'd be back soon. That was five days ago. I'm sitting cross-legged on the floor in front of the microwave, watching the mac 'n' cheese ready meal spin in slow circles beneath an anaemic glow.

I've a new hatred now, and it doesn't ebb or flow, it sits with me all day, every day. It consumes me, eating up my stomach like a ravenous parasite. This hatred isn't just reserved for Jack, it's for me too. I hate that I let him turn me against my family, praying on my insecurity that they didn't love me like they love Ada. I hate that I let him manipulate me into agreeing to come to Wisteria and walking into a situation weaved from every woman's nightmare. I hate that I had sex with him. I hate that I've failed every single escape attempt. I hate that I turned a gun on him and pulled the trigger. It's true that you don't know what you're capable of until you're pushed. I remember nights spent with Katie, Olivia and Ivy in our mildew-riddled student house which always smelled faintly of Pot Noodles, our laptops and coursework discarded in favour of our favourite procrastination game 'Would you Rather'.

'Would you rather lose your hearing or lose your sight?'

'Would you rather burn to death or drown?'

'Would you rather only be able to whisper or only be able to shout?'

'Would you rather shoot your oldest friend to escape captivity or remain captive forever?'

If you'd asked me that in the comfort of my student home, where doors were things you could move through freely and a walk to the shops was a severely underappreciated privilege, I'd have picked the latter. Every. Time. But how can you ever truly know yourself, know what you're willing to do, until it's a reality and not a rhetorical?

Seefer meows loudly and thrusts her head into my lap, purring before I've even touched her. I rub beneath her chin and feel love for this cat pour out of me, breaking through the surface of my hatred. She has a tray in the corner of the room and I'm down to the last of the grey pebbly litter. When Jack's gone this long, I'm grateful he provides sealable bags for me to clean it out with until he comes back and takes them away. Seefer is restless. She can't manage more than a week without being let out of the basement; I feel guilty. I give her one too many treats every day to make up for it.

Now, she meows loudly and rolls onto her back. This is a trick. She looks like she wants a belly rub but the second I go in for one, she'll attack my hand.

'I'm sorry you're stuck down here too,' I whisper, tickling her furry little cheek.

Bored of my affection, Seefer struts past her cat bed and leaps effortlessly onto mine before curling up like a little pretzel in her favourite spot.

I go back to staring at the microwave, focusing on the small crack in its glass front. I remember the rage and power I felt when I destroyed this room. My arms shook with the effort of lifting the microwave up and smashing it down. It didn't break though. I can't imagine having energy like that ever again. Jack replaced the chest of drawers with a shelving unit complete with soft storage cubes. Minimal nails. Minimal risk. If Ada were in my place, I bet she'd pull off the perfect escape first time. These thoughts used to be chased with a shot of bitterness, but not this time. Instead, I feel that little-sister longing to learn from her.

The microwave pings. I retrieve my meal and take one of the disposable plastic spoons Jack has provided. The food is beige and smells like cheesy feet. I think maybe Jack leaves me with terrible ready meals so I am mouth-wateringly keen whenever he comes back to Wisteria and cooks for us. I've barely forced a forkful of mush past my lips when the basement door opens. Jack is humming. He's in a good mood. Seefer hops down from the bed and

dashes up the stairs and out through the open door. Jack is definitely in a good mood because he doesn't call her a fleabag as she passes. Instead, he continues humming as he locks the door behind her and bounces down the stairs. These days, he pauses, just for a second, to check I haven't littered them with sharp foot-piercing objects.

He holds up a carrier bag. 'Got you some goodies.'

'A spare key to my prison?' This belch of sarcasm surprises me – I guess now I'm no longer play-acting I can be as scornful as I'd like.

Jack's good mood is an impenetrable bubble though because he just smiles and shakes his head. 'Afraid not. How about this?' He delves into the bag and produces a Terry's Chocolate Orange before tossing it to me.

I catch it one-handed. 'Not exactly free movement but I'll take it.'

He stands over me. I'm suddenly hyper-aware that I'm sitting down on the floor, the top of my head just level with his groin. Abandoning dinner, I get to my feet as nonchalantly as possible and wander over to the bedside table, keeping him firmly in my peripheral vision, the same way you might a rabid animal.

Leaning back against the table, I fold my arms. 'If you're here to ask for a second date, you can just go ahead and hold your breath until I say yes.'

A smile tugs at his lips.

I glare.

'Actually,' he begins, 'I'm here to show you something.' He produces his phone from his pocket. My eyes light up. Even though he knows there's no signal down here, he *never* brings his phone into the basement. When I was allowed upstairs, he kept it locked away, along with all the kitchen knives. Just in case. He pauses. Looks up. There's something dark and hard behind his eyes which sends a quiver of unease through me. 'I've had a lot of time to think and I know how to fix the hostility between us.'

'Let me go? Turn yourself in to the police?'

Ignoring my deadpan suggestions, he continues, 'You have no respect for your own well-being. You almost got yourself killed on that road. You don't value your life and then, when those people pulled up to help us and I told you what I'd do to them if you tried anything, you finally listened to me.'

I'm irritated and impatient. 'What's your point, Jack?'

‘Motivation. You’re lacking it. If you’re motivated to *try* with me, you’ll succeed. You’re just not trying hard enough. So, I paid a visit to your sister.’ He pulls up a video on his phone. The camera work is shaky, the picture is grainy. It’s dark. There’s a floor shot. Boots treading carefully up a flight of stairs. A door being pushed open. A bed comes into focus. I recognise it before I see my sister’s sleeping form. He zooms in on her face. Her brow is furrowed, like she’s having a bad dream. Leisurely, the camera drifts down the length of her body, pausing briefly on the loose shoulder strap of her silk cami before lingering on her bare legs, the sheets twisted between them. Then the camera swings right; Jack’s gloved-hand appears in shot, placing two rings on her nightstand before turning back to Ada. She’s still sleeping, one arm slung above her head. He reaches out and lightly strokes her cheek.

Jack clicks off the video.

My breaths come in short, sharp bursts as irritation gives way to fear.

‘If you don’t start trying,’ warns Jack, ‘*really* trying, maybe it’ll be your sister who’s found on the side of the road.’

‘But Ada hasn’t. She wouldn’t—’

‘She’s snooping. She’s been in my office. *Dumb* bitch.’

Not *that* dumb if she’s the only person to suspect Jack was involved in my disappearance.

‘Don’t for a second think she’s sticking her oar in for your benefit,’ he parries. ‘She just wants to come out of this a fucking hero. She’s a showy bitch.’

I am guilt-stricken; I’ve called my sister showy on countless occasions. But had my opinion of Ada informed Jack’s, or has Jack’s opinion of her informed mine? ‘And how am I supposed to try, Jack? What do you want from me?’

His stare is penetrating. ‘Everything was perfect the night of the storm. The way we connected. It was the last time things between us were the way they should be.’

My head thumps and the room tilts. Sex. He wants sex. Wants me to let him put himself inside of me. *This* was his idea of changing my mind – blackmail. Give myself to him to save my sister or don’t and let her die.

## Chapter Forty-Eight

### 160 Days Missing

#### **Adaline Archer**

He's been in my house, Elodie. Jack has been in my house. I woke up yesterday morning to find my engagement ring and wedding band had been returned. He must've come in when I was sleeping. I feel so violated. The framed quote in his office about all being fair in love and war was a warning but this, this is a threat. He wants me to know he can enter my house at any time.

Terrified, I leapt out of bed and flew downstairs. The spare house key was missing. I called Christopher, and in a petrified rush, explained what had happened.

'I suppose I can't report it as a break-in since he used a key and nothing was stolen,' I ventured.

'It'll be difficult, but you need to change your locks. When's Ethan home?'

I paused, the pain of our failed marriage rippling through me, momentarily blotting out the fright of Jack having been in my bedroom. It hadn't even been a week since Ethan left; he spent the first two nights at a hotel in London before flying to Slovenia for work. He's still there now and I have no idea when or even *if* he'll return to our home. He might just send someone for his things and that will be it. 'Not sure,' I hedged.

'You shouldn't be alone. Can you call him and find out?'

I sighed. 'He isn't going to be back for a long while. We're ...' It took a moment to get the words out. 'We're separating.'

Silence crackled down the line. 'I see.'

'I haven't told my parents.'

'I'd ask if you're okay but ...'

‘I am.’

If we’d broken up before you went missing, I wouldn’t have coped. But with you gone, it put things into perspective. Now I have focus. Now I have to find you. ‘It was the right thing to do.’

Even though I couldn’t see Christopher, I could sense his warmth, could imagine the crease of concern between his brows. He cares about me. He’s even forgiven me for *almost* getting him caught inside Jack’s house.

‘Do you want me to come over?’ he asked.

‘I’d like that but I’m actually going to visit Kathryn to see what I can find.’

‘On Jack?’

‘Yes.’

Having seen Jack with the girl who looked like you, Christopher was starting to come around to the idea he was involved in your disappearance. Although he couldn’t ask the rugby club for employee records in an official capacity, he’d requested them from a friend of a friend, only to discover their records don’t go back that far, thanks to a fire that burned all their paper files years ago.

‘If Jack has her and she’s still alive, where do you think he’s keeping her? We were in his house and I’m sure she wasn’t locked up in a room somewhere.’

‘I don’t know,’ I admitted. ‘We used to go to this cottage every summer with his family, but Kathryn sold it last year. He’s an architect though – maybe she’s in one of the buildings he’s working on?’

‘Let me know what you find out. In the meantime, I’ll call a locksmith.’

‘Don’t worry, I’ll handle it,’ I told him because I needed to get used to doing things by myself, though it was good to know that although I may be single, I wasn’t really alone.

I got to Kathryn’s around ten in the morning under the pretence of needing photographs for a collage I was making for Jack’s upcoming birthday party. She welcomed me inside and told me all the photographs and other memorabilia were in Jeffrey’s study.

‘I’ll make a pot of tea,’ called Kathryn, padding down the hallway towards the kitchen.

Jeffrey's study hasn't changed: floor-to-ceiling cherry wood panelling, large desk and leather chair, grand fireplace and high, arching windows. The floorboards beside his desk were lighter, the varnish having been scrubbed away. I remembered Kathryn knocking on Mum's door gone midnight just days after the discovery of Jeffrey's body, her hands red and blistered from bleach and hours spent cleaning her husband's blood.

In preparation for my visit, Kathryn had pulled some boxes of photographs from the large cupboard behind his desk, but I walked past them and started dragging out more boxes, ones filled with paper and journals and photo albums. It didn't take long to realise the journals were Jeffrey's, penned in his cursive script. I flipped through, only stopping when I saw Jack's name.

*I look into Jack's eyes and all I see is rot. He's violent and selfish. A sociopath. He's going to take that poor girl and burn her inside out, leaving her charred and writhing. Jack isn't my son. He isn't, but Kathryn thinks I'm—*

I slapped the book shut as Kathryn glided into the room.

'Tea,' she announced.

I quickly shoved the journal back in the box and made sure my smile was pleasant before turning and taking the cup she held out to me.

'Found what you were looking for?' she asked.

'No, not yet. I'll be a while longer if you don't mind?'

'Not at all, Ada. I'm expecting a call any minute though – you don't mind if I leave you to it?'

I tried not to look too pleased. 'That's fine.' I laid my hand on the cardboard box which sat on the desk. 'Is this for me too?'

'Oh, no, that's Jack's. His shredder broke so he asked me to run some bits through mine.'

I felt colour creep into my cheeks as I recalled kicking his shredder the day Christopher and I snuck into his house.

'These days, you can't just toss client information into the bin, can you?' she remarked.

Heart racing with anticipation, I nodded and sipped my too-hot tea. I couldn't stop thinking about what Jeffrey had written. 'I found some journals. Were they Jeffrey's?'

'Yes. I could never bring myself to read them. He loved to write. Loved his luxury stationery. Pens, expensive paper. I bought him a new journal every year.'

Jeffrey's suicide note was typed. Why would a man who loved to write type out his suicide note when he was surrounded by opulent, leather-bound books and reams of thick paper? It seemed odd, but delving into the nuances of Jeffrey's suicide with his wife wasn't appropriate.

Absently, I plucked a photograph from one of the boxes. It was of Jack and Charlie when they were kids, standing outside Wisteria Cottage in wetsuits, each holding a huge ice cream. 'Mum mentioned you sold Wisteria. Do you regret it?' I asked, remembering how Kathryn had agonised over the decision for years.

'No, darling, I found the right buyer in the end.'

'Oh?'

'Well, he wanted to keep it quiet. You see, I think he's planning to have us all come and spend a summer there when he's put his own stamp on it.'

'Who?'

'Jack.'

I almost choked on my tea. 'Jack bought Wisteria?'

'Charlie didn't want it and Jack was so passionate. I thought—'

Just then, Kathryn's phone rang, and she excused herself.

If Jack bought Wisteria and wanted to keep it a secret, he could have you there. I was desperate to tell Christopher, but I knew there was more to discover. I got to work quickly, riffling through the box of paperwork Jack had left with his mother to shred. It was mostly old records and junk mail, then I found the jackpot: bank statements. I ran my eyes down the list of transactions a couple of times before I noticed large sums of cash being withdrawn sporadically but always the same amount: £250. I'd put my life on it that the sum of money David was paid in exchange for following you was that exact amount. I stuffed the statements into my bag.

Determined to find a photograph of Jack and David together, I continued searching, sorting through grainy pictures of Jack and Charlie during their childhood in America; I flipped through the photographs, watching them grow. Just as I was about to give up, I came across a collection of photographs from Jack's rugby-playing days.

My heart leapt – this was it!

It wasn't the professional photograph which had hung in Jack's office, but one taken on a disposable camera at a slightly different angle, presumably by Kathryn, and in it, David is completely visible, strolling across the lawn behind the team with his toolbox. The relief was dizzying and so complete, I wanted to jump up in the air and click my heels like they do in the movies. Carefully, I placed the evidence in my handbag beside the bank statements.

Having more than what I came for, I quickly turned to leave. In my haste, I swept the box of photo albums I'd liberated from Jeffrey's cupboard off the desk and onto the floor. Hurriedly, I scooped them up. But my attention was caught by a little cream album that had fallen open. Inside were photographs of Dad. Ones I'd never seen before. He was in his early thirties, maybe a couple of years after I was born. He was handsome with his dimples and thick hair and I could see why he'd caught Mum's eye. As the pages turned by on my lap, trepidation crept over me; the entire album was dedicated to our dad with a woman who wasn't our mum. Snapshots of them on a ferry, smiling at the camera, arms looped around each other's waist; the two of them enjoying drinks on a veranda in the sunshine, Dad staring into her eyes in a way I thought he only ever looked at Mum. The last photograph made my chest ache: them kissing outside the Arc de Triomphe.

Dad and Kathryn kissing in Paris.

'Right-o,' said Kathryn, bustling back into the study. 'All sorted on the phone. Did you get what you were after?'

I stared at her, unable to speak. Dad and Kathryn had an affair and took a romantic trip to France. Perhaps this is why Kathryn and Jeffrey moved to America. Knowing about the affair might've been enough reason for him to relocate them if it kept his wife away from our dad. Then pieces started slotting together, forming a picture too painful to look at: Jeffrey's hatred of Jack, his insistence in his journal that Jack wasn't his son, his extreme

reaction to finding you two kissing when you were teenagers because he knew something we didn't: Jack could be our half-brother.

## Chapter Forty-Nine

### 160 Days Missing

#### **Adaline Archer**

Making excuses about an appointment I'd forgotten, I left Kathryn's house, but not before I swiped the spare key for Wisteria Cottage from the grey key box. I had no intention of using it, sure the police could secure a warrant after I handed everything I'd found over to them, but picked it up just in case. Eventually, I'd return it without her knowledge, just as I did with the spare key to Jack's.

I drove around the corner and pulled over, sending Christopher a message to ask if he'd meet me in half an hour. Then I called Dad because I couldn't talk to him about this face-to-face. If I did, I wouldn't get to Christopher in time. I was right about the affair, I knew I was, but the very *second* it was confirmed, nothing would be the same again.

'Alright, Ada?' said Dad. 'This is a nice—'

'Did you have an affair with Kathryn Westwood?' I blurted before I could change my mind.

Silence stretched down the line like a violin string being pulled too tight. He cleared his throat. 'Where's this come from?'

My heart sank – he hadn't denied it. Surely if you'd been accused of an affair that had never happened, you'd be indignant, horrified you'd ever been asked. 'You went to France with her.'

He sighed. 'She told you that, did she?'

'I saw the photos.' I paused, letting him digest what I knew.

'It's not how you think, Ada.'

'So what is it?'

'Your mum and I took a little break. It's not that I didn't love her; I'd lost my job, we were stressed, it caused a lot of arguments. I moved out.'

‘I don’t remember that.’

‘You wouldn’t, you were still in nappies at the time. Kathryn was there for me, for us both, and one night ...’

The child in me wanted to stick my fingers in my ears and sing ‘Lalalalala ...’

‘Anyway, I’m not proud of it,’ he said gruffly. ‘Not proud of sneaking behind Jeffrey’s back the way we did. I told Kathryn to tell him the truth, but she didn’t want that, thought he’d leave her with nothing. Things between us came to an end after a few months, and when my head was clear, I knew I wanted to fix things with your mum.’

I remembered the stories of Jeffrey and Dad brawling in the Westwoods’ front garden. ‘You never fought with Jeffrey over money owed on a horse race, did you?’

‘No.’ He sounded resigned. ‘It was never about money.’

‘It was about you and her?’

‘Jeffrey accused Kathryn of an affair. I’m not sure he knew who with. She denied it. He was angry. Hurt her. She rang me and I went over to help.’

‘And Mum? Does she know what you did?’ I said this with more scorn than intended. Even though Mum and Dad had separated at the time, it still felt wrong.

He cleared his throat. ‘I told her eventually.’

I winced, imagining Mum finding out her husband had been sleeping with her best friend. ‘When?’

‘When they came back from America, after the first trip to their fancy cottage.’

My mouth fell open. ‘Nine years? You waited nearly a decade to tell her?’

‘What do you want me to say, Ada?’ he barked, remorse turning to anger. ‘I’m only human.’

I stayed quiet, collecting my thoughts. I’d always looked up to our dad, he wasn’t a rich man or a particularly emotional man, but he’d always been honourable. Or, I *thought* he was. But what is honourable about shagging your wife’s married best friend, separation or not?

Dad sighed. ‘It took your mum a while, but she forgave me, forgave Kathryn too. She’s a good woman. Better than I deserve.’

Just for a second, I wavered, wondering if leaving Ethan had been the wrong decision. If Mum could forgive Dad for what he'd done, surely Ethan and I could get past our differences? But then I reminded myself one size doesn't fit all; just because Mum reconciled with her husband, it doesn't mean I should or *could* reconcile with mine. Perhaps it would be different if we had children. Perhaps Mum wouldn't have taken Dad back if it wasn't for us. I took a deep breath, preparing to ask the one question to which I was scared to know the answer. 'Dad ...' I began. 'Is Jack ... is he your son?'

Another silence, this one so big you could fit a universe inside it.

'No,' he said firmly.

I sagged against the car seat. 'Are you sure?'

'Kathryn said he wasn't.'

I sat up. 'But there was never a DNA test or—'

'Stop it,' said Dad, suddenly angry with me. 'Jack is Jeffrey's boy and that's the end of it.'

'Dad,' I said gently, tiptoeing into this conversation. 'I think Jack had something to do with Elodie's disappearance, and before you tell me I'm wrong, I just need to know something.' He was quiet and I took his silence as encouragement to continue. 'If Jack is your son but he did something to Elodie ...'

'I'd kill him,' said Dad. 'I'd kill him.'

I met Christopher at the little park-side café, which was open despite the freezing weather, serving hot drinks through a little hatch. Wrapped up in a thick overcoat, jeans and leather boots, he waited for me with two takeaway coffees. His dark hair shone like burnished bronze in the weak winter sun. As we walked down around the path lined with bare, frost-covered trees, Christopher looked at the photograph, the bank statements, listened to the discovery of Kathryn and Dad's affair and my theory that Jack had killed his father.

'Elodie told me Jeffrey tossed Jack around his bedroom the day he walked in on the two of them kissing, and I'm convinced that's because he knew Jack could be our brother. If Jack *is* obsessed with her and has been for all

these years, why wouldn't he kill a man who mistreated him and stood between the two of them?'

'Ada, the Jeffrey Westwood case was ruled a suicide.'

'Yes, but Jack knew we were going away for the summer. He knew it would be weeks before Jeffrey was discovered. The night we left for Wisteria, my parents and Kathryn received emails from Jeffrey about being uncontactable due to work. After he was found dead, it was assumed those emails were in preparation for his suicide. But what if Jeffrey was already dead when those emails were sent? What if it was Jack who sent them to cover himself, *and* he typed the suicide note?'

Christopher shook his head. 'But the coroner—'

'They had to use the time stamp on the emails to determine when Jeffrey died because by the time we found him he was ... sludge. No one saw Jeffrey the morning we left for the cottage. When we pulled up to the Westwoods' house, Jack was already waiting outside. And let's not forget Jack's the kind of psycho who's bedding girls that look like my sister and calling out Elodie's name during sex.'

He pulled a face. 'It's grim. I'm not saying Jack's ... stable ... but killing his father?'

'Jeffrey may not have been Jack's father. I think Jeffrey was going to stop Jack from seeing Elodie, and that was enough for Jack to take Jeffrey out of the picture.'

We were quiet again, taking it all in. 'So you think he's keeping Elodie at Wisteria Cottage?'

I nodded.

'It's going to take me a couple of days to get a search warrant.'

'A couple of days?' I echoed incredulously. 'We need to go now. It's just after one, if we headed down there, we'd arrive while it's still light.'

'Ada,' he said kindly, 'we need to do this through the official channels. If he does have your sister, we don't want him to get off lightly.'

Panic prickled across my skin. 'She's at Wisteria, I know she is. I'm right about the money, aren't I? David Taylor was paid £250 each time he followed Elodie and more when she was taken?'

Christopher didn't say anything, but I could tell from his face I was right. 'Say Jack does have Elodie, he still has a watertight alibi for the night she went missing – how do you explain that?' he asked.

'David took her to Wisteria.'

'The car wasn't found anywhere near Wisteria. There's nothing connecting Elodie or David to that cottage.'

We walked along in silence. Even though there were holes in my line of thinking, I knew I was onto something. Coffees finished, we placed our cups in the bin.

'We're going to get her back,' he said confidently. 'We will.' Then he grinned down at all the evidence I'd given him and shook his head before carefully placing it in his backpack. 'You should've gone into the police force.'

Months ago, I'd have heard a comment like that and taken it as a dig at being a housewife, just like I did when you told me I should've gone into interior design. But, like you, Christopher has only ever had faith in me. More faith than I had in myself.

'Actually,' I said, 'I've applied for some interior design jobs. I don't have a degree in it or anything but maybe someone will take me on, let me start from the bottom or ...' I trailed off because Christopher had stopped in the middle of the path, his face cracking into a huge smile. 'What?'

'Ada, that's fantastic.'

I bit my lip. 'Really?'

'Yes, absolutely.'

His excitement was contagious and before I could stop myself, I was smiling too. His reaction was what I'd come to expect: Christopher never put me down, never made me feel unworthy or stupid. 'It feels strange to be doing these things ... planning for the future and getting excited when Elodie's still missing.'

'It's going to feel strange, Ada. She's your sister and she's missing. There's no right or wrong way to deal with it.'

'Thank you.' We started walking again. 'You know, you're one of the only people who believes in me,' I said, then held up my hand to stop his polite insistence to the contrary. 'You think I'm bright and capable and tenacious. You make me want to be the woman you see.'

He stopped again. The park was quiet and still. He came close, until there was barely a breath between us. I inhaled him – fresh pine and man. I'd always loved his smell, it brought with it memories of his naked skin against mine. Our eyes locked. Despite the wintery chill, heat rolled through my body. 'You *are* that woman.'

His gaze travelled slowly to my lips. His hand went to my waist, then slid to the small of my back. We wanted to kiss. It would be a good kiss. But my heart was still bruised, and Ethan's side of the bed still lukewarm. Reluctantly, I stepped back. It was like leaving the warmest bed I'd ever known. But my god, I wanted him.

Christopher cleared his throat and looked away. 'I should take everything you gave me to the station.'

'Sure,' I said. 'Absolutely.'

His eyes lingered on my face a moment longer, trying to work me out. I slammed the door shut on my feelings and stared impassively back. 'Okay,' he said eventually, disappointment thick in his voice. 'I'll speak to you later.'

Then he turned and I watched him go.

## Chapter Fifty

### 161 Days Missing

#### **Adaline Archer**

I woke early, my heart pounding in my chest, gripped by anxiety. I dreamt of you trapped in that cottage, screaming for help and though I could hear you, I couldn't find you. I stumbled from room to room, pushing doors open, spilling into darkness, yelling your name.

I forced myself to sit and eat breakfast but felt so sick, I threw half of it away. As soon as I was showered and dressed, I called Christopher.

'Have you got a warrant?' I asked by way of greeting.

'I've submitted the evidence.'

'Now what?'

'We wait.'

'Can't. I need to do something. I need to go there.'

He groaned. 'Ada ...'

'I do,' I said, marching into the hallway and pulling on my walking boots. 'Now. Right now.'

'Do not go to that cottage.'

But I already knew that was exactly what I was going to do. I grabbed my jacket and keys.

'I mean it,' he warned.

'My sister is in that cottage. I know it.' I took my bag and left the house. 'I'm going to get her.'

'Ada, be serious, if Jack is as dangerous as we think he is, going there is the worst idea. It's—'

I hung up and slid into my car.

Wisteria is only an hour and forty minutes away from Crosshaven but, with ice on the ground, it took closer to two hours before I was climbing the

hill towards the house. Then, suddenly fearing Jack might be at the cottage, I slowed and looked for a break in the trees; I couldn't risk Jack hearing the car then looking out the window and seeing me coming. I swung into the woods, parking only five minutes' walk from Wisteria. My car would only be seen if you were looking for it.

It was getting dark already, the sky was thick with cloud cover. As I neared the house, I tasted the salty air, heard the roiling sea, the crash of waves tumbling against the cliff face.

The house came into view, seeming to rise from the earth as I crested the hill. Winter had banished the lilac plumes of wisteria, leaving only the skeletal remains of branches clinging to the stonework. When I saw Jack's car parked on the driveway, my heart raced. He was there because you were there. I made sure to stay close to the treeline in case I was spotted. If Jack did kill Jeffrey, he wouldn't think twice about throwing me off the side of the cliff.

I was hoping Jack wouldn't be here and I could just use the key I'd taken from Kathryn and slip into the house to look for you. With him inside, my ill-thought-out plan turned to slush. But I knew I *needed* to get into Wisteria. Then I saw a flash of movement across the driveway as something dived beneath Jack's car. A second later, a cat's head poked out from under the bumper. I crouched, making little noises to attract its attention. Slowly, it crept out from the car and shot across the drive towards me, meowing and weaving between my legs. I knew this cat. Knew the copper-coloured heart shape on her flank.

'Seefer,' I whispered, stroking along her back.

Any doubt I had that you were in that house evaporated. This wasn't a coincidence. I scooped Seefer up. She squirmed and kicked in my arms. I carried her back to the car and dialled Christopher.

'She's in the house,' I said. 'Elodie is in Wisteria.'

'You saw her?'

'No, her cat. I have her cat in my car.' I glanced at Seefer who was curled up on the passenger seat. 'There's no way this cat walked all the way to Cornwall.' I heard rustling, like he was passing the phone from hand to another. 'Are you sure it's hers?'

‘Yes, I’m sure. Jack’s car is here. Elodie is in that house and as soon as he leaves, I’m going in.’

‘Ada ...’

‘Meet me.’

‘I can’t.’

‘Tell the police I’ve found Elodie.’

‘You’ve found a cat which may or may not be hers.’ He sighed, as frustrated as I was. ‘I can’t send a fleet of police cars because of a cat.’

‘Christopher, I *know* she’s in there.’

‘If you wait just a couple more days, a warrant will come through and—’

‘Is this because of yesterday?’ I fired at him.

My heart pounded in the silence. I knew I was being unfair and regretted it instantly. Christopher wasn’t being difficult because I didn’t let him kiss me yesterday; I was just frustrated with all the red tape when I knew how close I was to finding you.

‘Ada,’ he said, sounding hurt. ‘No, nothing like that. Look, please just listen to me and wait for—’

‘I’m done waiting.’

I rang off. Frustration and anger pulsed through me. I would wait and then, the very second Jack left, I’d go inside. Even if I had to sit in this car all night.

In my bag, I found the notebook I’ve been using to write down my thoughts. That’s what I’m doing now. It’s cold and dark and I am waiting, thinking about you. I don’t know what will happen once I enter that house. I’m terrified to go in. But what terrifies me more is never finding you.

I have a secret, Ellie-Bee. When you were little, eight or nine years old, you wrote a story about a cherry tree which ate children from the neighbourhood. You won a prize for it and showed your story to Mum and Dad. You were so happy, your cheeks pink with pride. But our parents worked long hours, they were tired and busy. You left it on the dining table that night and after you’d gone to bed, I took Dad’s work pen from his bag, and wrote notes all over your work, telling you how brilliant you are. Because it’s true. You’re one of the most talented people I know. Every week after that, there’d be another story on our dining table. I read them all.

I got lost in castles; I wished on magic spiders with cobwebs spun from silver; I hunted trolls through thorny forests. I think you thought it was Dad scribbling praise on your stories. It made you so happy, I never told you it was me.

As we got older, instead of nurturing your talent, I grew jealous of it. Flaunting my not-so-perfect life in your face, pretending it was something it wasn't. There are lots of things we don't tell each other though, aren't there? I never told you how jealous I was that you went to university either. Mum and Dad gushed about it all the time, 'Isn't Elodie so clever?' 'Isn't Elodie so brave moving to a new city?' 'Isn't Elodie doing so well? Oh, Ada, don't you wish you'd gone to university, love?' I was jealous of your huge geographical melting pot of new friends, jealous of your wild nights out, jealous even of the crappy, damp student houses you had to decorate with fairy lights and bunting just to make them bearable. Beside my jealousy was pride, but I don't think I told you that either. Between the moments of one-upmanship were pearls of sincerity.

If you're in Wisteria, if I can save you, we will create more of these pearls until there are so many, we could make a dress from them, a tent, a house.

I let you down. I wasn't the sister you needed. But that's going to change. Like I said, I won't stop looking for you, Ellie-Bee, not until my heart stops beating.

## Chapter Fifty-One

### 161 Days Missing

#### **Elodie Fray**

Give myself to Jack to save my sister or don't and let her die.

This ultimatum has wound itself around every moment like a steel cable, growing tighter and tighter until I can't breathe. Letting him hurt Ada isn't an option. It's that simple. Only, it isn't simple at all because to save my sister, I have to let Jack put himself inside me.

I am sitting on my bed. The clock on the nightstand tells me it is three in the afternoon. I haven't moved from this spot since I woke at four this morning. My throat is dry and my eyes are sore.

Above me, the basement door is pulled open. My heart somersaults in my chest the way it always does when he visits. Jack descends, his footsteps stopping halfway down the stairs. The banister groans as he leans over it. I don't look at him.

'Get a shower,' he tells me. 'Do your hair. We're having an early dinner.'

Then he is gone, the basement door locked behind him. Months ago, I'd have disobeyed, but I've learned to pick my battles. An hour later, he is back. He waits at the top. I am wearing a pair of his boxers and a baggy cream sweater. Even though I haven't eaten since yesterday, I feel sick at the thought of food. Jack holds the door open and I have to squeeze past him and the cumbersome shelving unit to get through. He puts a hand on my shoulder, and I flinch. Then he steers me out of the utility room. Instead of heading to the dining room as I anticipated, he guides me into the living room and closes the door behind us. The curtains are open, and I blink in the withering winter sun.

'Sit down.'

I do as he says, sinking into the cream sofa. Everything in this room is soft – the colours, the surfaces, the way the fire bathes us in a golden glow.

‘... on too long. It’s time to decide.’

I blink. Jack has been talking and I haven’t heard a word. ‘Sorry?’

His brow furrows. ‘Are you listening?’

I nod.

He stares at me a moment longer. I do not squirm.

‘I was saying this has gone on too long.’ He gestures between us. ‘This situation is hostile. I miss *us*.’

I don’t speak. Nothing good ever comes from interrupting Jack during one of his declarations of love.

‘We can fix everything if you make the right choice. Have you decided?’

I clench my teeth and breathe through my nose.

It takes me three whole breaths to push down the rage that rises in my body, the rage that makes me want to leap from the sofa and hit him until he is nothing but toothless, wet flesh. Three whole breaths before I’m capable of replying.

‘You want me to decide now?’ I manage.

‘I don’t see the point in dragging this out much longer.’

My palms are clammy. I thought I had more time. I try to swallow but it feels like there is a rock in my throat. ‘Sleep with you or you’ll kill Ada?’

Jack’s Icelandic blue eyes are cold. ‘I’m trying to help you. What’s your decision?’

He told me before that there is more power in making someone change their mind than there is in taking what you want by force, but really, what choice do I have? I clasp my hands tightly in my lap to stop them from shaking. ‘Okay.’

He jolts. ‘Really?’

I nod.

He stands, pulls me up into his arms and swings me off the ground. He’s thrilled. Setting me down on my feet, he says, ‘This is the right decision, I promise.’

My stomach churns.

His smile is wide. 'I've got something for you.' He takes my hand and leads me to the dining room where there's a parcel waiting on the table. It's wrapped in pale pink tissue paper. He tells me to open it. Jack is at my back, blocking my exit. With no other option, I obey. Inside is a white silk slip. A lover's gift.

'For tonight,' says Jack.

'How did you know I'd say yes?'

He comes close. His breath warms my neck. 'Because I know you.'

'I thought you liked me in green.'

'White is more appropriate. We're starting over tonight. It will be like our first time.'

I put my hand on the table to steady myself. It's too much. Too real. I can't. I can't. He brushes my hair to one side and his lips find the soft space between my neck and shoulder. He kisses my half-moon scars and I remember his nails breaking through my skin. His hand slides up my legs and under my sweater. I am too scared to move. He grinds into me.

'Fuck it, why wait?' He spins me to face him then lifts me easily until I am sitting on the dining table with him between my legs. He kisses me. I am stiff beneath his hands. He doesn't notice.

I spiral away from this moment and I'm back on the hill. Jack grinds me into the dirt, pushing his fingers into me. The weight of him is crushing and I can't breathe, I can't—

The angry vibrating of a phone brings me back to the moment. Jack reluctantly releases me and scowls at the caller ID.

'What's wrong?' I ask.

Without a word, he grabs me by the wrist and marches me back to the basement door. 'I need to get this,' is all he says.

In my prison, I sit and wait. I need another shower. I feel grimy, like his fingerprints are all over me.

It's not long before he returns, carrying the slip dress. He tosses it on the bed beside me. 'I need to leave.'

'How long for?' I ask, trying not to sound relieved.

He is tense. Flustered. 'Few hours.'

'Who called?'

His eyes search my face as he decides what to tell me. His hesitation means the call is important. I smile up at him, hoping he'll soften. He does. 'The police,' he tells me.

I sit up straighter. 'Why?'

The anger is back. 'Why can't they just leave me the fuck alone?' He starts to pace. 'I've handed David over to them on a fucking plate, for Christ's sake.'

'What do they want?'

He pushes his fingers back through his hair. 'A couple of questions. I don't know. I bet this has something to do with your sister.'

My heart races. I get to my feet. 'No, I don't think so,' I babble. I need to divert his attention away from Ada. 'She's no threat. I mean, she's just a housewife. She couldn't possibly ... you're overestimating her.'

He nods. 'Yeah. You're right.'

I am breathing too fast. It's fear and hope. Maybe the police know something. Maybe they'll come. Maybe ...

'I need to go,' he says. Distracted, he turns to leave. Then he stops and spins towards me. He strides over, grabs me before I can protest and claims my mouth with his. He pulls away slowly, and looks right into my eyes. 'I won't be long. If I can get out of this ... maybe I can go tomorrow.'

'No,' I say, shrill. I take a breath. 'Just go and get it over with.'

He kisses me once more before leaving.

The tears come. I can't stop them. The reality of the choice I've made is hitting me. I feel myself sinking into a hole I know will take me days to claw my way out of. The longer I am trapped here, the more failed escape attempts stack up, the harder it is to keep going.

For a long while, I let myself indulge in loud, body-wracking sobs. I have a headache and my sweater is tear-stained. I peel Jack's clothes off my body and put the slip dress on. It's refreshing to wear clothes that fit properly, that don't smell of him. The silk is cool against my skin. I sit on the bed and try desperately not to imagine Jack tearing at this later.

Then I hear someone calling my name. I freeze, holding my breath. Listen. It comes again. And again. I jump from the bed and sprint up the stairs, taking them two at a time. I press my ear against the door.

‘Elodie, Elodie, Elodie!’

The voice is getting further away. I panic. I curl my hand into fists and pound on the door. I scream. ‘I’m in here!’ I bang on the wood so hard I’ll bruise.

‘Elodie?’

‘Ada?’ My head swims. The relief that washes over me is followed by an urgency that makes my heart thump. ‘I’m here,’ I stammer. Then louder, ‘I’m here!’

I press my ear to the door. There’s a pause and then the door handle rattles. ‘It’s locked.’

‘He keeps a spare key in the grey box mounted on the wall by the front door,’ I say, remembering that’s where I found it the first time I discovered the basement room months ago.

‘I’ll be back.’

I am dizzy with disbelief. She’s here. Ada is *really* here. She returns quickly. I hear the scrape of metal on metal as she pushes the key into the lock. I hold my breath. The door clicks open.

And there is my big sister.

We collide in a tangle of tears and warm breath and relief.

‘Ada,’ I whisper again and again. Each time it is sweeter, butterscotch on my tongue.

‘Ellie-Bee,’ she says into my hair.

I squeeze her tightly, as tightly as I did when we were children and I crawled into her bed after a nightmare. I cannot believe she’s here. ‘How did you find me?’

She pulls away. ‘Long story. We need to call Christopher.’ She is sliding into organisation mode. Pulling her phone from her back pocket, she puts it on loudspeaker.

‘Who’s Christopher?’

She shushes me. A man answers.

‘I’ve found her,’ says Ada breathlessly. ‘I have Elodie.’

‘What?’

‘I have her.’

‘Are you—’

Ada gestures for me to speak. 'It's true,' I say. 'I'm here, I'm—'  
'Elodie?' He sounds shocked.

Even though he can't see it, I'm nodding to this stranger. There's a lump in my throat which rides out on a sob.

Ada grins at me, her eyes shining.

'Ada,' says the voice on the other end of the phone. 'Where are you?'

'Wisteria. I was right. Jack had her this entire time. He—'

'You need to get out of there.' The snapping urgency in his tone erases Ada's smile and sends dread skittering across my entire body. 'We called Jack into the station for questioning and—'

'I know,' I offer. 'He left already. He's gone.'

'He called a few minutes ago and rescheduled for tomorrow. Jack's on his way back to Wisteria. You need to get out of there, you need to—'

But I don't hear the rest because the sound of a key in the front door rings out like an alarm. Terror slides icily down my spine. Ada is wide-eyed and mute with fear. She spins in the direction of the noise, but I grab her arm. We won't make it out of the utility room and into the hallway before Jack's inside the house. If we run now, we'll cross paths with him. The only way for Ada to stay hidden is to come down into the basement. Pulling her inside, I reach past her to close the door.

'What're you doing?' she whispers as though I've lost my mind.

'Lock it,' I say. 'Lock it now.'

She thrusts her phone at me and does as I say.

We clatter down the stairs. 'Elodie, what the hell are you doing?'

'There wasn't enough time to get past him. If he sees you, he'll kill you.' The panic is so ferocious, I feel like I'm breathing through a crushed straw.

She takes her phone from my hand and presses it to her ear. 'Christopher? Christopher?'

'No signal,' I tell her. 'Hide.' I start shoving her towards the bathroom. My mind is spinning. I need to breathe. I need to calm down.

'It's the second time I'll be forced to hide in a bathroom because of Jack.'

'What?'

She shakes her head.

Then I'm struck by a terrible thought. 'Ada, your car, if it's parked out front Jack will see it and he'll know you're here, he'll—'

'I hid it. It's parked a little way down the hill in the trees.'

I exhale. 'Good.'

'We need a weapon,' she says. 'Something to defend ourselves.'

'There's nothing down here and Jack locks away all the kitchen knives.' Knowing he'll be here any second, I start corralling her into the tiny bathroom. 'When he comes, you *must* stay hidden. No matter what happens, don't come out. He might take me upstairs – if he does, you leave, okay?'

'Elodie—'

'I'm serious, Ada. If he takes me, you get out of Wisteria and you run. Get help. Call the police.'

'Christopher *is* the police. He's going to come. The roads are icy so it may take a while, but the police are on their way. They—'

She doesn't get a chance to finish her sentence because Jack's key is turning in the basement door. I shove her into the bathroom, pull the door closed, then step away quickly and hover beside the bed. Jack descends. He stops on the stairs when he sees me. His eyes run hotly over my body, wrapped in a slip of white silk. The slow curve of his mouth tells me he approves.

He prowls towards me. Then his hands are on my skin, running up my bare thighs and moving around to cup my arse.

'You're back,' I manage.

'I've waited too long for this.' And I know he won't wait a second longer because I have finally promised to give into him. His mouth closes over mine and he slams me back against the bedside table. I glance towards the bathroom door, praying Ada doesn't come out. Jack kisses me like he is suffocating, and I am air. It's desperate and hungry. But I can't let him do this with my sister on the other side of the door.

I pull back, pressing my hands against his chest to stop him. 'Jack, listen. I want this to be special. Take me upstairs. Take me to the attic room where we watched the storm.'

I see in his face twin desires: give in to his base instinct and have me right now, or recreate our first night together and indulge me. For once, luck is on

my side. He nods. Then takes my hand and leads me out of the basement.

## Chapter Fifty-Two

### 161 Days Missing

#### **Elodie Fray**

Jack and I are back in the attic room. He's used a cable tie to secure my hands to the radiator pipe outside the en-suite. I've had to bite my lip from quipping, 'How romantic.' I stare across the room and out of the repaired French doors. The moon is silver-white and round in the night sky; a single, petrified eye.

Jack is lighting candles. Dozens of them. They litter every surface: the antique dresser, the bedside tables, the floor. He is boyish and springy as he sets his scene; the star of the show preparing for opening night. When he's done, he puts the lighter on the bedside table, pulls a pocket knife from his jeans and flips it open. Even though I know he doesn't intend to kill me, the sight of the blade still makes my pulse spike. Barefoot, he pads over and crouches in front of me and I try not to shrink away. Lowering my gaze, I stare down at the floor, separate my wrists the few millimetres the cable tie allows and hold them out so he can cut me free. Nothing happens. I wait. *Still* nothing happens. Slowly, I raise my eyes to his. His breath is coming faster. I can *feel* his need. Feel the heat coming off his body. My stomach curdles. With my hands still bound, Jack kisses me hard, grabbing a fistful of my hair and tugging my head back to deepen the kiss. I don't struggle, it's a waste of energy and it will only anger him. Finally, he takes the knife, slices the cable tie and then helps me to my feet, his hand strong and firm around mine. On the dresser is a collection of bottles and glasses.

'Champagne?' he offers.

'Rum,' I say, hoping something so potent will steady my nerves.

He raises his shot in a toast, the flickering light from the flames splinter off the glass, golden in his hair. 'To us!'

I gulp down my drink, shuddering at the sickly-sweet taste and the familiar burn that snakes down my throat. Jack takes the glass from me. Then he swoops down and kisses me, spinning me around and slamming me against the dresser hard enough to knock the open bottle of rum to the floor. It splashes up onto my bare feet. Mouth still on mine in a bruising crush, Jack lifts me easily, his hands gripping my bare thighs, and I'm forced to wrap my legs around him. He turns and throws me onto the bed, stands at the foot and removes his T-shirt.

I am laid out before him; a present he is eager to unwrap. Swallowing the impulse to grab the sheets and cover myself up, I think of Ada, praying she has listened and got out of Wisteria while she has the chance. From the top of the house, I'm hoping Jack won't hear the front door go as she escapes. He climbs onto the bed. My skin prickles with fear as he moves up my body until he's on top of me. His face hovering above mine. I stare up into the eyes of the man who wants to own me. My throat closes. I'm doing this for Ada. To distract Jack. To keep my sister safe. If she's right, the police are on their way. I can get through this. If I know there's an end, I can get through this.

Cold air whispers against my naked thighs. Jack captures my mouth with his, his hand snaking beneath my dress. I fight the urge to shove him away. His fingers curl around my knickers then clench into a fist.

My heart beats so powerfully, I can feel it in my lips.

Jack yanks my knickers down my thigh, and I am thrust back to the past, to the hill, pinned beneath him in the dirt as his fingers pushed my underwear to the side and I begged him to stop.

He groans my name now, dragging me into the moment. My knickers are off, tossed to one side. I need to take back some control. 'Jack.' My voice is breathy and strained. 'Let me.'

He hesitates. He likes to dominate but he also wants a willing participant, so he relents, slowly easing off and rolling onto the bed beside me. I'll do whatever it takes to survive, to save my sister. I owe her that. Trembling, I straddle him, his jeans rough against my inner thighs. His hands find my waist instantly, pinning me to him. He starts moving me back and forth, grinding me against the hardness of him.

‘I’ve never wanted someone so much,’ he whispers, and I can feel him growing feverish. Impatient.

I thrust my fingers into his hair, then I am kissing him. I want to leave my body. I want to fill the space around us. The cold night air. The silence. I know what’s coming. What I will have to do. I’m dragging this out because even with his exploring, groping hands, kissing is easier than sex. Than having him inside me. The thought makes every muscle in my body tense. I can’t do this. I can’t. I can’t. Panic has taken hold. I break off the kiss.

Sensing this, Jack moves fast and flips me onto the bed. He’s on top again. I am seized by the memory of him holding me down on the wet earth, clamping a hand over my mouth to stop my screams, and I go rigid beneath him.

Jack rears back, reaching for his zipper.

I see Ada a second before Jack does. She stands at the foot of the bed behind him, holding a wooden knife block above her head. Jack whips around. Too late. She brings the block down. There’s the crunch of bone, a warm splatter on my face. He’s flung to my left and off the bed. I touch my cheek and my fingers come away bloody. Ada drops the knife block and reaches for me, hauling me up.

Then we are running. I skid on the spilt rum and knock over the pillar candles on the floor. Hot wax flicks up the back of my bare legs.

Ada propels me through the door. Yelling, ‘Go, go!’

We hurtle onto the landing and down the first flight of stairs. Jack bellows my name with such palpable rage, I swing my head up. He’s barrelling after us. Ada is shoving me forward as we race across the first-floor landing. Blood rushes through my ears and all I can think is *run, go, get out*.

I’m tripping down the last flights of stairs, gulping for air, panic flashing through me. If he catches us, he’ll kill us. I think of his hands around my throat on the basement floor, the purple fury on his face as he choked and choked until I blacked out.

My foot hits the bottom step. I can see the front door. I can—

Someone screams. And screams again.

I skid to a halt and spin around. Look up.

On the lip of the stairs, in front of the arched leadlight window, Jack has Ada pinned against him, his forearm roping around her shoulders, his hand

around her neck. My heart plummets. He has my sister. He has her and he isn't going to let her go. I know now, in this moment, we aren't all going to make it out of this house alive.

'Jack, don't do this, please, please, please don't,' I gabble, already knowing my efforts are futile.

Panicked, Ada reaches up to pry his hand from her, but Jack seizes it and wrenches it behind her back. She yelps.

I start towards them.

'Stop.' Jack's voice is the low rumble of thunder.

I do as he says.

I look towards the front door. So close. So close to freedom I could sob. If I turned and ran now, he wouldn't catch me. I'd be out the front door before he made it down the stairs. I'd race across the foyer, yank open the door and burst out into the night. I'd hide in the woods. He'd never find me in the dark. I could do it. I could run. My stomach clenches, fear mostly, then guilt for even thinking it, because I can't leave Ada with him. She means no more to him than Noah did; she is merely an obstacle to be violently and permanently removed. He'll murder her. He'll do it just to punish me.

'Run,' Ada gurgles.

I pull my gaze away from the door and back up towards Ada and Jack.

He squeezes, cutting off her air. She claws at the hand crushing her windpipe.

'Stop,' I shriek. 'Stop!'

She is turning red.

'JACK!'

In his expression is pure, inarticulate fury. The veins in his arm bulge. He's going to snap her neck.

'Please,' I beg.

Her eyes roll back. She stops clawing his hand; hers falls limply to her side.

'I'll leave with you!' I shout.

He continues to crush her throat, just to let me know he still holds all the power. Finally, his grip loosens. Ada coughs and splutters and gags. In his

eyes, ones locked unfailingly on mine, I see a promise of revenge. ‘Come up here,’ he commands.

For a moment, I don’t move. Can’t. I stare at the hand clamped around my sister’s neck. It is the same hand that held my wrists hostage above my head on the hill, the same fingers which pushed into the dryness of my body even as I pleaded with him to let me go.

‘Now,’ he growls, giving Ada a sharp shake.

She whimpers.

My chest hollows and fills, hollows and fills.

First, I force one foot, then the other, until I am climbing up the stairs towards them. It’s the longest walk of my life; I wear fear as a pair of iron boots, and try desperately to think of a way out of this, to save Ada, to save myself, but panic fogs my thoughts.

As I near them, I swear I smell smoke.

Ada’s eyes are wild and streaming. She’s still coughing. She wants me to run and she’s angry I haven’t. But how could I abandon her, knowing it would mean the end of her life?

Jack drags Ada back a couple of steps to let me pass. I’m careful not to make any sudden movements as I do; it would take only a second for him to break her neck. As I edge backwards on the landing, I hold my hands up in a show of surrender. If this was a film, Ada and I would exchange a look and in the one, fleeting second of eye contact, we’d have a plan. We’d work together to take him down. But this isn’t a film. The fact is, Jack is bigger and stronger, and Ada is firmly in his grasp. I could rush him but not before he tosses her down the stairs or crushes her windpipe. The only advantage we have over him is that he doesn’t know the police are on their way. If I can keep him talking ...

I swallow thickly, under layers of panic, and find my voice but it’s shakier than my legs. ‘Just let Ada go and then we can pack a bag and leave together. You and me. We’ll go to New Zealand just like you said.’

Jack is sweating, breathing heavily, his bare chest heaving. He looks barbaric. This close, I see blood matted in his blond curls, little rivers of scarlet running from his temple. In the hard granite of his face, I see a fire raging within him.

‘Once Ada is gone, we can start our new lives together,’ I say in placating tones. This strikes a chord with Jack, who appraises me with interest and maybe a thread of understanding. I’m getting through to him. He’s weighing up his options. I’m offering him what he wants: me. Willingly. It’s all he’s ever wanted. ‘If you let Ada g—’ I stop myself, knowing if I push this point too hard, he will buck against it. Jack doesn’t like to be told what to do. Thinking fast, I backtrack, reword. ‘We can pack a bag ... or ... or not, we can buy new things. We can get in your car right now and go, just the two of us; it doesn’t matter where, as long as we’re together. You and me. It’s all I want,’ I lie. ‘Come on, Jack.’ I smile like we are lovers planning a trip. ‘How far will you go?’

I hold my breath, waiting for him to decide. Seconds bleed into minutes. Sweat collects in the hollow of my collarbone.

‘Okay,’ he says simply, releasing Ada’s arm from behind her back.

The relief is treacle-thick and so sweet, I get a head-rush: he’s going to let her go. I, on the other hand, have committed the rest of my life to a murderer if the police don’t get here soon. This realisation is a chaser so bitter, I feel sick.

‘You’re right.’ His voice is buttery smooth and eerily calm. ‘We’re going to leave. Just us two. Change our names.’

Ada opens her mouth to argue but I give her a look, imploring her to keep quiet before she gets herself killed.

‘You’re right, Fray.’ His smile is the last swirl of sunlight before an eclipse, when everything goes dark. And my heart beats so fast in response, it might shake me to death. ‘With Ada gone, we can start over.’

I’m repeating his words, trying to work out the *wrongness* of them. I’m not prepared for his quickness. In one, swift movement, he pulls the knife from his jeans pocket, flips it open and thrusts it into Ada’s back.

She arches.

Agony and fear and shock. I see it all on her face.

The sound she makes is horrid – gurgling like an emptying drain.

I cannot scream. Cannot breathe.

Cannot save my sister.

Jack flings her down the stairs with bone-breaking force. I hear her tumble from top to bottom, landing with a dull thud.

In his face is thrill and satisfaction, but no remorse. Not even a drop.

I see myself in slow motion, leaning over the banister, my sharp intake of breath as I stare down at her body – she is all strange angles, face down like a collapsed marionette.

Jack doesn't stop me as I rush past him and down the stairs. I fall to my knees beside her. Blood soaks the fabric of her blush pink jumper in a swell of livid red. The coppery tang of it is so heavy in the air, I taste it. She isn't moving. I push her hair back from her face and touch the clammy-grey of her skin. My heart catches in panic as I place two trembling fingers to the side of her neck. I'm looking for a pulse but I've never done this before, I don't know how. I must be doing it wrong because there's nothing there. I can't feel ... I can't ...

'No,' I whisper. 'No, no, no, no.'

Jack's heavy footfalls cut across my pleading as he slowly descends. He's whistling a tune I know, but my brain is so fogged I can't ...

I lay my palms flat on Ada's back, checking for the rhythmic rise and fall of her breathing. But she is so still. Too still. Panicked, without thinking, I wrap my hand around the hilt of the knife and pull it free. Blood gushes.

'Oh fuck, oh god.' I drop it and press my hand to the wound on her lower back. Warm blood squelches between my fingers. I shouldn't have removed the knife or maybe ... I need to ... to ... but I can't think over Jack's incessant whistling. It's a nursery rhyme. Unbidden, the words float into my brain.

*Jack and Jill went up the hill/ To fetch a pail of water/ Jack fell down and broke his crown/ And Jill came tumbling after ...*

I turn on him. 'Shut up! *Shut. Up.*'

'She's gone.'

'No.' My protest is nothing more than a whistle of grief.

Thrusting my fingers into the hole the blade created in Ada's jumper, I tear a strip off and tie it tightly around her tiny waist, covering the stab wound to stem the flow. But the truth is soaking into me, just as her blood has soaked into the skirt of my white slip – there's no pulse.

Ada is dead.

She's gone.

My hands, my forearms, are slick with her blood; a macabre pair of evening gloves. My stomach roils and I double over, dry heaving. Soon my heaves turn to sobs, raw and repeating.

Jack starts whistling again and my grief bubbles over into red, razored rage.

I'm up on my feet. I charge him. Blindsided, he staggers back into the console table. Anger bursts from me in harpy shrieks. I get in a few good punches, my fists raining down on his bare chest, leaving red smears. I rake my nails across his beautiful, hideous face, gouging four bloody ruts into his cheek. Enraged, he snarls. His hand shoots out. Pain explodes across my face. I'm flung to the side, hitting the ground so hard, my teeth snap together. I lie on the hardwood, ears ringing, relearning how to breathe. When I lift my head, my vision swims. I've fallen beside my sister, her face is turned away, I see the caramel waves of her hair, and blood spreading across the floor.

'You never learn,' he spits. 'You never  *fucking*  learn.'

I struggle up until I'm on my hands and knees. I smell smoke, just as I did before, stronger this time. Glancing towards the stairs, I see plumes lazily drifting on the landing.

The spilt rum, the candles I knocked over.

'Ada didn't love you. Never has,' he laments. 'Yet you choose her, choose everyone else but me, over and over.'

My eyes land on the knife, my first sliver of hope, lying at her elbow where I dropped it.

'You're ungrateful,' he hisses.

Slowly, carefully, I reach for it. If he catches me, his foot will come down on my hand and break my bones before I've even had a chance to use it.

'All I've ever done is love you. I  *love*  you.'

My fist closes around the knife, the hilt tucked snugly in my palm. The sliver of hope now a slab, I turn my head, looking at him over my shoulder. He's still talking, but his words disappear beneath the drum of my heartbeat. Knife in hand, I feel a rush of triumph so strong, poison drips

from my tongue: 'Jeffrey should've beaten you to death when he had the chance.'

The silence that follows is disbelieving. Charged. My words so cutting, they're a match for the split flesh of my sister's back.

He lunges.

But I'm ready. I twist around, slashing the knife sideways above his right knee. It slices through jeans and skin. Jack howls and buckles. Scrambling to my feet, I race across the foyer to the front door.

It's locked.

Fuck.

My heart free-falls.

Desperately, I grab the handle again and pull so hard, pain rips through my shoulders. It doesn't budge. Jack must've locked it when he came back. Ada has a key but there's no time to—

He comes up behind me and grabs a fistful of my hair, yanking my head back to expose my throat. Blindly, I swing the knife. Blade meets skin. He yowls and jumps back, releasing me, ripping several of my hairs out by the root. I spin on my heel to face him; he's pressed to the wall, gritting his teeth against the gash across his right arm.

Making the most of the distraction, I bolt, hesitating only a second before sprinting past Ada and into the dining hall. Frantic, I ping-pong between table and sideboard before bursting into the kitchen. I skid to a halt at the back door and try to yank it free, but it's locked too.

'No way out, Fray.'

I spin.

Jack stands in the doorway, despite the gash on his head, the slash across his knee and arm. He grins, cocky, triumphant. There's nowhere left for me to run. My gaze darts wildly. To my left is the archway I just entered through, at his back is the hallway, behind me the locked door which leads out into the garden, and all that stands between us is the kitchen island and the knife still clutched in my hand.

Terror makes the room spin and rise on the swell of a tide. Jack prowls towards me and I skirt around the island, keeping it between us.

He feigns a lunge to the left and I swipe the knife, trying to fend him off. He laughs, short and scoffing. His mockery makes anger flare in my gut, heating me from the inside out. ‘Stay the hell away from me.’

‘You’re fucked. You can’t leave. There’s nowhere left for you to go.’

He’s not wrong. Gazes locked; we circle the island. He’s limping. Not that it matters; even if I could outrun him, he’s right, I have nowhere left to go.

‘I’ve been good to you,’ he tells me.

‘Oh, please.’

‘I could’ve chained you up, locked you in a box, got you out to play whenever I fancied. I could’ve had you over and over. Instead, I was patient. I waited. I gave you Wisteria. I gave you everything.’

‘You gave me a locked basement. You strangled me. Tried to rape me.’

His expression sours. Oh, how he hates to be reminded of his sins.

‘Why me, Jack?’ I scream. ‘WHY?’

‘BECAUSE YOU’RE THE ONLY PERSON WHO HAS EVER LOVED ME.’ The emotion in his voice is raw. In it is every beating his father gave him, every time his mother denied the truth.

Jeffrey and Kathryn ruined their son. But that doesn’t excuse what Jack’s done. Who he’s killed.

‘I’m not playing anymore. There are two choices here. One: put the knife down, come with me and we both leave here alive.’ He pauses for dramatic effect. ‘Two: don’t, and you can leave in a body bag with your sister.’

My heart thuds in terror which I hide beneath a taunting smile. ‘Really, Jack? We’re plugging for the old “if I can’t have you, nobody can” cliché? Thought you were better than that.’

‘If the shoe fits ...’ He changes direction swiftly and I stumble. Amused by my skittishness, he smiles. ‘Choices, choices. Which will it be? Don’t worry, we’ve got all the time in the world. I’d decide soon though, I’ve got a body to toss into the sea.’

And his grin is so arrogant and cruel, I can’t help myself. ‘Or maybe I’ll just drag this out until the police arrive.’ I see just a flicker of surprise. ‘You think Ada came all the way out here without calling the police first?’

‘You’re bluffing.’

‘Why do you think I agreed to go upstairs with you? I was trying to keep you occupied until they got here. Shouldn’t be too long now.’

His eyes narrow, in hurt or suspicion, I don’t know.

‘What? You thought I *wanted* to fuck you?’

His face falls.

After everything, it’s still my words which cut deeper than the knife. I stick my fingers in the wound and twist. ‘It was a distraction. That’s all you’ve ever been. A distraction from grieving Noah, a distraction until the police rocked up.’ I laugh, filling each crescendo with venom and mocking. ‘You think you’re the only one of us who knows how to manipulate?’

‘You bitch,’ he spits.

‘If the shoe fits ...’

He darts to the side, trying to grab me. I jab the knife at him, and he backs off. I scurry away, desperate to keep the island between us.

‘Option two it is then.’

Dread floods my body. ‘How’re you going to get away with it? How’re you going to explain away two bodies, Jack?’

He grins. ‘Easy. You were so desperate for a book deal, you came up with a scheme to get exactly that, you roped David into it, roped me into it, toyed with my feelings for you, convinced me to hide you in Wisteria. I was in London when you vanished, my alibi is watertight, it only stands to reason you came here willingly. After all, it’s the truth. But I didn’t want to go through with it, tried to talk you down, but you were unhinged, grief-stricken over Noah, crumbling beneath the pressure of the lies you told, the job you lost. And when Ada came looking for you, knew the truth, knew your abduction was all a lie, she threatened to expose you. You were deranged, you attacked her, killed her to keep your secret.’

I swallow and swallow again. ‘No one will buy that.’

He stops moving. I stop too. My back is to the sink, the cupboards. Jack is blocking the second exit again. ‘Won’t they?’ he quips. ‘It’s your fingerprints on the knife that killed her.’

‘And yours.’

‘Because I wrestled the knife from you.’

‘You bastard.’

‘When I found you standing over her body, I stepped in, tried to restrain you but you flipped, attacked me too. It was self-defence. It was me or you, and I chose me.’ His grin spreads like butter across his face. He has thought of everything. He will kill me and walk away with a narrative that will have him rise from the ashes of this house a hero. ‘Lies are easier to swallow when they’re wrapped in truth.’

This was always going to end in death.

I can’t choose whether I’ll live. It’s too late for that now. But I can choose how I die.

Fired with that furious thought, I cast around. Keeping him in my peripheral vision, I start yanking open cupboard doors. Even though my arm is shaking with the effort of holding out the knife, I don’t lower it. He’ll go for me the second I do.

‘What’re you doing?’ he hisses.

I spot what I’m looking for and snatch it up.

Jack’s eyes fall on the bottle of paraffin in my hand. I open it. He’s quick, rushing around the island to get to me. I squeeze the bottle, splashing his bare chest with paraffin. He backs up, yanking a towel from the handle of a kitchen drawer and angrily drying his chest.

‘What about option three?’ I spit, dousing the cupboard, the curtains, the island. I sweep cookbooks onto the floor and soak them too. ‘Neither of us make it out alive. We burn. Wisteria is already burning; can’t you smell it?’ I wet the floor, the towel on the side. ‘So let’s add some fuel to the fire. You wanted a love that burns. That consumes. Something exciting, unpredictable. Maybe even a little dangerous. Well, here it fucking is.’

I toss the now-empty bottle into the sink and pull open a drawer. And another. They’re mostly empty since Jack hid all the cutlery and knives, so it takes only a second to locate the polished silver flip lighter. Windproof, the one we used for the BBQ every summer.

His eyes widen. For the first time, he is scared. ‘You wouldn’t.’

‘You want to know how far I’ll go, Jack?’ I flip open the lighter. The flame springs to life. ‘All the way to the fucking end.’

‘Don’t you—’ He darts for me again, sliding in the paraffin.

I swing around the island, out of reach. He talked about me being unhinged, deranged; I didn’t know the girl in his defence story. I do now.

She is wild and reckless, driven mad by grief. She is ready for this to be over.

Jack's expression pendulum-swings from rage to terror. Fuck you, I think, now you know how it feels. For the first time in our entire relationship, in these thorny, dark months, I have the power and I am drunk on it. It will cost me my life. But the thrill, the glory, it's worth the price.

'Don't,' he growls.

I smile back. Hold out the lighter. Gather all the memories of my family, my greatest hits, and wrap them around me like a silk blanket. They'll burn with me.

Jack lunges across the island.

The lighter slips from my fingers. He seizes the front of my dress and jerks me to him. The paraffin-soaked cookbooks go up in flames. A line of fire zips across the floor and sets the cupboards ablaze, the ceiling.

Jack is sprawled out across the marble counter. I try to pull away but his hand closes around my throat and I can't move. Can't breathe. He is screaming at me. I see flames in his eyes, feel them at my back. Hot. Too hot to bear. Jack squeezes hard.

Desperate, I swing the knife.

I blink. And blink again.

I expected Jack's body to put up a fight, for him to be made up of more than just skin and tissue. Yet the blade plunged into his neck with ease, buried to the hilt. He lets go of my throat and his hand closes around mine. Around the handle of the knife. We are suspended here. He is stunned, as disbelieving as me that this is happening.

That I did it.

His hand falls.

I let go of the knife.

He slides off the counter and staggers back, collapsing onto the hardwood floor. Out of view.

I breathe in fire and smoke.

I cannot believe ...

I cannot believe what I have done.

I stumble around the island.

He is on his back, staring up at the ceiling. His gaze drifts to mine. I crash to my knees beside him. His mouth opens; he gurgles. Blood bubbles at the back of his throat and bursts on his lips.

The man who manipulated and abused and murdered slips away and is replaced by the little boy who came to me over and over, needing to be loved, who kissed me on the windowsill of his old room, who drew sketches of all the places we'd live when we grew up.

'Jack,' I gulp. 'Jack.'

He lifts a hand to my hair. A featherlight touch. I lace my fingers through his. Jack's skin is warm and familiar. His mouth opens but his words are lost.

'Don't leave me,' I say. 'I'm sorry. I'm sorry. I'm—'

His eyes roll back.

And then he is gone.

He is gone.

And I will never know if he heard me.

I sit with my grief and my love and my hate for only a second before carefully, reluctantly, lowering his hand to his chest.

Then I am coughing, choking on the smoke which fills the kitchen. I need to get out. Escape. I push to my feet and stagger down the hall. Dark grey clouds of smoke roll down the stairs and cling to the foyer ceiling. I look to the locked front door.

Oh god, oh god, oh god. I run to Ada and riffle through her pockets until I find the key she used to get in, then I race back to the door. My hands are slick with blood and fuel; it takes two tries before I manage to unlock it and throw it open.

Glancing back into the house, the kitchen glows, completely engulfed. My gaze darts to Ada. I can't leave her. Can't let her burn. Covering my mouth and nose with my hands, I run to her. She's light but I am weak from exhaustion. I drag her. It takes longer than it should, and I battle to keep moving. Flames lick out of the kitchen and streak across the wooden floor towards us. I heave and heave until we are spat out into the night. Into the freezing January air.

On the cold ground, I sit and hold my sister. Everything is in vivid colour: Ada's milk-white skin, the ruby bloom of her blood, the silver glow of the moon in the inky sky, the orange flames which dance in windows, the black smoke billowing out the open front door, the flash of red and blue lights cresting the hill.

I do not move. I sit and I watch.

I watch Wisteria Cottage burn.

**After**

## Chapter Fifty-Three

### 760 Days After

#### **Elodie Fray**

Tippies is my favourite bookshop in Crosshaven. It's floor-to-ceiling bookshelves which climb so high up there are two rolling ladders that always make me think of that scene in *Beauty and the Beast*. It has character, style. I love the hanging plants, the huge Persian rug and the gorgeous Georgian fireplace. Love even more the smell of coffee and paper and learning. I do not love the anxiety that puffs and swells at the bottom of me like rotting fruit. I've been signing books for nearly an hour, and while most people are overwhelmingly friendly, I do not forget the death threats, the hate mail and the backlash that followed after *Wisteria*. Not everyone was pleased I survived Jack Westwood. It took a lot of convincing for me to attend tonight. To make my first and last public appearance since *Wisteria*. It is a ticketed event. The press I've continued to avoid are outside, huddled against the shuttered windows. I try not to think about them because when I do, I feel like a rabbit being circled by wolves.

Despite the queue that loops around the shop, we haven't sold many copies this evening; most people here tonight already have theirs. Well-loved copies with creased spines and dog-eared pages marking their favourite parts. The book has only been out for a month, but it's already a best-seller. Marketing came up with the brilliant, morbid idea to publish it on August 16th to mark the two-year anniversary of my disappearance. The media went mad for it and sales skyrocketed overnight.

'It's amazing to meet you,' says the woman standing over me with perfect eyeliner. She's excited maybe, or nervous; her fingers tremble around her battered copy.

'You too.' I smile as I take it from her. 'What's your name?'

'Mel.'

‘I like your tattoo,’ I say, spotting the inked rose on her wrist.

‘Thank you.’

I sign the inside cover, trying to make the message as personal as possible.

*Dear Mel,*

*May the wings of your eyeliner always be even.*

*Love,*

*Elodie x*

I hand it back and watch as her eyes run over it. She grins. ‘Thanks. And’ – she clears her throat – ‘sorry for your loss.’

This hits hard, a well-meant sucker punch. I swallow and nod, unsure which loss she’s referring to – there have been so many – but she’s sincere so I thank her anyway. ‘If you wait a moment, my—’

‘How’re you doing?’ Josh, my publicist, crouches down beside my table. He’s tall and lean with dimples and stubble. ‘Do you need a break?’

‘I’m fine. Thank you though.’

‘Water? And where’s—’

‘Grabbing drinks.’ I shake my head in mock-reproof. ‘Too slow, Josh.’

‘Here we are,’ says Ada, placing two glasses of lemon ice water down on the table.

‘I could’ve got those for you,’ Josh reminds her.

‘You were busy and I’m perfectly capable,’ she replies, but her eyes are on Christopher who stands nearby, a copy of our book in one hand and a glass of something bubbly in the other. He smiles at her. Some people wait their entire lives to be smiled at like that. She takes her seat beside me and welcomes Mel, reaching out for her copy of *One Small Mistake*. ‘May I?’

As she signs it, Mel asks with so much hope, ‘Don’t mean to pry, but did you and Christopher get together?’

Ada blinks. ‘Well, you see—’

‘Yes,’ I answer. ‘They live together.’

Mel smiles widely.

Ada tries to glare at me, but there’s joy in her eyes, just as there always is when Christopher is mentioned.

‘What?’ I ask innocently. ‘Just being honest.’

They’ve been in their home for six months. They would’ve moved in sooner if it had been up to Christopher, but Ada wanted to live alone for a while and find her feet in her new career as an interior designer. Their house isn’t huge or grand, but it is filled with love and warmth, and every room is expertly decorated by my talented sister. Give it another year and she’ll leave Advent Interiors to start her own business.

Ada greets the next person in line. It is an older woman wearing too much perfume. ‘And just so you know,’ she whispers to Ada conspiratorially as her signed copy is handed back, ‘I can recommend some incredible oils to heal the scar on your back.’

‘Okay, thank you,’ says Josh, kindly but firmly moving her along.

I give him a grateful smile, reach under the table and take Ada’s hand, squeezing it in mine. She squeezes back, her smile fixed as she greets the next reader. I sign the book on autopilot, caught in the memory of paramedics dragging Ada from me the night Wisteria burned. Laying her out on the freezing January earth. Hearing one of them say there was a pulse, faint, so very, very faint, but there. The warm honey-sweet relief that she was alive, that I’d heaved her from the house. In the hospital, when she was finally awake, she thanked me for saving her.

‘No,’ I told her. ‘You saved me.’

She smiled weakly, my big sister so small in her bed, so pale and bruised. ‘We saved each other.’

A woman who is all sharp angles and a slash of red lipstick coolly hands her book to me and tells me her name is Stephanie. She turns to Ada. ‘Your letters to Elodie are beautiful.’

Ada’s letters, slipped between the pages of my prose, are the chapters most loved by our readers. Three years ago, that would’ve sent me into a tailspin of jealousy. Now, though, all I feel is pure, undiluted pride.

It wasn’t long after Wisteria burned that Ada’s car, along with Seefer and all the letters Ada had written to me, was found. In the days that followed, I sat beside her hospital bed, wires and tubes running in and out of her skin, and devoured every one of her penned entries. With each one I read, I unwrapped her, layer by layer like pass the parcel until I found my sister inside. The true her, not the too-shiny, perfect wife she pretended to be.

Ada smiles now, colour creeping into her cheeks. ‘Thank you, Stephanie.’

It’s moments like these I am glad Ada *finally* convinced me to write *One Small Mistake*. The media coverage of my disappearance meant I had my pick of publishers, just as Jack had predicted. Everything I thought I’d ever wanted was proffered to me on a silver platter, but it may as well have been a rotting, writhing dish of maggots. It had lost its appeal.

Until Ada.

‘I’ve been reading your work since you were a child. You’re talented, Ellie-Bee,’ she told me at the hospital. ‘For years, Jack manipulated you, isolated you from me, from our family. He took away Noah. Tried to take me too. Please, do *not* let Jack Westwood take this as well.’ She squeezed my hand. ‘If you can help just *one* woman recognise the red flags, maybe you can save her from her own Jack.’

She was right. But I couldn’t finish the book without Ada. The truth is, my story was never about me and Jack. It was about us. Me and my sister. It always was. ‘I heard you’re donating all your profits to a mental health charity,’ Stephanie says, snatching me from my thoughts. She enquires casually, as though my response doesn’t matter, but her focus on me is pin-sharp, the way Jack’s was when he was hunting that deer. ‘Is it true?’

I cast around for Josh. He normally swoops in to field difficult questions, but he is uncharacteristically absent. I finish scribbling my message and slide the book across to Ada, deciding to answer her honestly. ‘It is.’

‘Because you think Jack was mentally ill? Or because his dad was? I suppose Jack may never have done what he did if it wasn’t for how Jeffrey treated him, do you agree?’

I don’t want to profit from Jack’s death. From my abduction. And the reluctant part I played in it. That’s why I turned down an astronomical amount of money for interviews and television appearances. That’s why I turned down a career as Elodie Fray, author, and the tremendous advance Harriers offered for a follow-up novel to *One Small Mistake*. That’s why every penny I made from this book has been donated. But I do not tell this to the stranger in front of me because everything I’m willing to share about me and Jack and Wisteria Cottage, everything that can help other women avoid repeating my mistakes, is in the pages of this book. So I give her a

non-committal shrug, trying to mask the unease that prickles across my skin in the face of her questions, and hold out Stephanie's copy to her.

She doesn't take it. 'You work at Somerset Rape Crisis Centre. Why is that?'

Shock rises through me like saliva before vomit. In a bid to keep my new life private, only a handful of carefully selected people know where I work. Where I live. Beside me, Ada tenses.

'Are you hoping for redemption after putting your family, friends and the rest of the nation through hell? How do you feel about David Taylor being charged as an accomplice? Do you regret killing Jack?'

I am the unwilling assistant tied to a spinning target. She is a seasoned knife thrower, flinging her questions at me like flying daggers. Only, they are intended to impale. And they do. Each one slices and tears and lodges bone-deep. The guilt that sits across my chest in a steel band tightens and I can't draw breath.

'*She* didn't put us through hell. *Jack* did,' Ada snaps. 'He had her kidnapped from her own bed. The choice he gave her in the woods wasn't ever a choice. He would've taken her to Wisteria either way because he was in too deep, and he wanted her. He was obsessive and controlling and killing him was the only way she could save us both.'

Immediately I am overcome with the memories of that night. The people around me turn to ash and I am being dragged back to Wisteria.

'Of course she doesn't regret it,' retorts Ada.

Tippies. I am in Tippies Bookshop. I am not trapped inside the cottage. Breathing deeply, I wipe my damp palms against my dress. Sweat, I remind myself, not blood.

Stephanie hasn't taken her eyes off me. She is looking for something, trying to turn over a boulder at the bottom of me to examine all the things I battle to keep hidden. And she finds them. The guilt that turns my face into my pillow at 3 a.m. to muffle the endless sobs. Moments of missing Jack that are so fierce, they become a physical ache. Moments of hating him for what he did, what he tried to do, that are so vivid, they burn. And the regret that I took his life, that I couldn't find a better way, thuds through me like a second heartbeat.

'Do you deserve this book deal, Elodie?' asks Stephanie.

I swallow. There is only so long you can ignore your critics, the ones who post about you online and fire off death threats and hate to your inbox. There is only so long you can ignore the voice inside your head that tells you they are right. Now, I am faced with both, and I am silent because I'm sure I deserve her barbed questions.

'Yes,' hisses Ada. 'She does. Don't you think she's been through enough? She was manipulated, sexually assaulted, beaten, held in a basement against her will for months. Why should she give up her dreams because of what *he* did? She isn't responsible for her abuser's actions, and she won't continue to suffer for them. My sister saved my life. She's helping people at the charity, with this book and, as you're clearly aware, she hasn't made a penny from it. If she were a man, you'd have no problem with her publishing this book. If—'

I lay a hand on Ada's arm to stop her. 'I think you have everything you need for whatever you're writing,' I tell Stephanie, nodding towards the phone in her hand which is recording this exchange.

Ada, realising she has given several powerful soundbites, swears under her breath.

'You've had your pound of flesh,' says Mum, appearing behind Stephanie. 'I think you'd better leave.'

'Now,' intones Dad.

'Nobody wants you here,' says Mel, the girl with the perfect eyeliner.

Then the rest of our readers, our friends, our family, chime in with a surge of support. Stephanie is surrounded and uncomfortable. Josh emerges from the back room, red in the face and trying to work out what is happening. As soon as he gets the gist, he is escorting Stephanie through the bookshop and out the back door. And I feel a rush of love for everyone who came tonight.

Ada's eyes are on me, making sure I'm okay, and I give a minute nod of my head.

When the last copy of *One Small Mistake* is signed and our ticket holders have gone, we have a moment with our family and friends.

'You girls,' says Mum, a swell of emotion cresting her voice. She is wearing her best shoes, the satin ones with the little bow detail. 'I'm so proud of my girls.'

Dad clears his throat. 'We both are.' It could be a trick of the light, but I think his eyes are shiny.

My parents were ineffably relieved both their daughters were alive, but I had a lot of explaining to do. Even though Ada and the police had been willing to keep my fake book deal a secret from my parents and the public, I couldn't. I told Mum and Dad everything. Understandably, it took them a long while to forgive me, to understand why I lied about the book, why I felt compelled to agree to Jack's plan after he had me abducted. But my parents' anger soon gave way to concern as I told the rest of my story to the police and discussions about sentencing were had. The reality that their youngest could be facing prison for initially agreeing to her own abduction settled like a chemical smog.

The police couldn't prove Jack's involvement in Jeffrey's death, but they could prove his involvement in Noah's. Going back through his bank statements, they saw Jack had hired a car the day before Noah was hit. After some investigating, they discovered Jack had taken that same car to a garage out of town to repair a shattered windscreen, and with paint traces found on Noah's body, they were able to positively identify the car Jack hired as the one which hit Noah. I think this, along with my story and, eventually, Ada's too, they were lenient, giving me a one-year suspended sentence.

'It's wonderful to have everyone together,' says Mum.

I look around the room and feel lucky. George, our adoptive grandfather, catches our eye and lifts the biscotti by way of greeting. He's in possession of the most loved copy of our book. Mum smiles back, but there's a flicker of sorrow in her eyes. She's thinking about Kathryn and Charlie. I know because I feel it too. Kathryn sold the house and left Crosshaven a week after Jack's funeral. She's living in London now, not far from her son and his husband. Mum and Kathryn exchanged a couple of emails after she moved, but they haven't spoken in over a year.

'Don't keep apologising, Elodie,' said Mum all those months ago. We were planting lavender in her garden. My counsellor said gardening would help with the panic attacks, the flashbacks, so I spent a lot of time in my parents' garden. 'It's done. Jack's fate was sealed the day you met as

children on the front steps of Wisteria,' she told me. 'Even if you'd refused to go with Jack that day in the woods, he would've forced you to anyway.'

Which was true, though I couldn't help but think Mum and Kathryn's friendship turned to ash the night Wisteria did.

I wrote to Kathryn once, but she never replied. I didn't expect her to. After all, I burned down her holiday home and took her son's life. But I needed her to know I was sorry. That I loved Jack, even after everything, I loved him. This is a carefully guarded secret. I mentioned it to my counsellor once and she started talking about Stockholm syndrome, so I never spoke about it again.

'Elodie, love, are you sure you won't write another book?' asks Mum.

I shake my head.

'But writing is who you are. And think about all the money you could donate to charity with a second advance. All the people you'd help.'

'I am helping, Mum. I *work* for the charity.' After Jack, I couldn't go back to marketing. I couldn't sit behind a desk and pretend I was the same person. The need to connect with people who'd been through what I'd been through, the need to help them, was an itch, a nettle beneath my skin that only eased when I got the role at the Somerset Rape Crisis Centre.

'I know ...' she says. 'But don't you listen to that *nasty* reporter or whoever she was. You had to write this book. People needed to hear your story. And you've done so much good with the money.'

Then Ada and I are alone.

'You should tell them about your new book,' she says.

'No. And neither can you.'

'Elodie—'

'No one can ever know.'

This secret is my most valuable and Ada is the only person trusted with it. I do not want to be Elodie Fray, the girl who gained a career from a fake kidnapping gone wrong. But Mum was telling the truth; writing is who I am. It is sewn into the fabric of me. So I have written another book, submitted anonymously to another agent, penned under Noah Pine. His green vase sits on my writing desk; a reminder to live life doing the things I love. Without him, I'd never have quit my job and finished my first

manuscript. I was lucky to have been loved by him. Writing this book under his name is the best way to honour that. To honour him.

‘Okay,’ she says. ‘I won’t tell them, I promise.’ Ada watches me over the rim of her champagne glass then asks, ‘Will you tell Josh?’

‘Of course not. Why would you ask that?’

‘I see the way you look at him. The way he looks at you.’

I glance over my shoulder. He is across the room, talking to Christopher, though his eyes are on me – were before I looked over – and my heart beats just a little faster. He smiles, all white teeth and dimples. ‘He’s kind,’ I say, dragging my focus back to my sister. ‘He plays football. And he cycles. It’s a universal rule that all men who cycle have kind hearts.’

‘And great legs.’

I smile.

‘They’re not all like Jack,’ says Ada gently.

Her words are a wash of cold water, sobering. ‘I know,’ I say, though I’m not sure I do.

‘Josh isn’t Jack,’ she says. ‘He’s one of the good ones. Trust me.’ And I suppose I should; Ada recognised Jack’s intent before anyone else did. ‘You don’t need a man to make you happy, or to make anyone else happy for that matter,’ she offers. ‘But don’t close yourself off to love because you’re scared.’

My smile has all the strength of milky tea.

‘Look ...’ She tucks a loose lock of hair behind my ear. ‘Love is always a risk; it’s giving another person the power to destroy you and hoping they choose not to, but when it goes right ...’ I don’t even think she’s aware that as she says this, her gaze drifts towards Christopher. ‘When it goes right, it’s like falling through stars.’

For a while, the party moves around me, and I sit on the edge, drinking it all in. Then I pick up a copy of *One Small Mistake* and slip into the children’s section around the corner, settling down on a huge floor cushion. I just need a minute to myself.

I’m still haunted by nightmares of what happened. But like the bruises, they’ve faded. People want me to hate Jack. It makes them uncomfortable to think I don’t. But he was not *just* a murderer. Not *just* my captor. It is not

*just* black and white. It is grey because Jack was not a cartoon villain. He was a person with a past that moulded him. This is not an excuse, it is fact. So I cannot hate him. Just as I cannot undo what happened.

I still dream of him ... we are children racing down the hill towards the small beach and plunging into the sea, shrieking against the slap of cold water. We are teenagers joyriding in a vintage Cadillac, his strong fingers, like tree roots in earth, lacing through mine. He is twenty-something, sketching all the places we are going to live together when we leave Crosshaven. There were always two sides to him, light and dark, and I think, over time, I can forgive them both.

I imagine him here with me now. The him I knew *before* the abduction, *before* he killed Noah, when he was confidence and challenge and that last square of dark chocolate melting on your tongue. I see him sitting crossed-legged on the cushion opposite mine, all golden curls and cheekbones, the leather and sandalwood scent of him all around.

‘We pulled it off,’ he tells me.

I hold *One Small Mistake* in my hands, feel the weight of it, the importance; it is the paper and binding and validation I wanted for so long. Even though I am proud of what Ada and I created together, there is a sombre current – the reality that Jack is not here to see it and never will be.

‘Life’s too long to be unhappy,’ he says.

‘Sometimes it’s too short.’

He shrugs.

‘I’m not unhappy,’ I tell him. ‘I just miss you. Miss the way we were. It’s hard. After everything, getting through each day is still hard.’

‘You’re talented, and ambitious and brave.’

I feel the sting of tears.

He smiles. ‘See you in a better world, Fray.’

‘Goodbye, Jack.’

I close my eyes, listening to the rise and fall of chatter in the next room, allowing myself only one more moment of Jack Westwood before I join them.

He promised me once, the morning after I let Margot believe I had a book deal, that I would get published, even if it killed him, even if it killed us

both. We didn't know then how right he was, and he was right about so much.

Except for one thing.

I didn't need a love that burns. That consumes. That blisters and melts the skin from my bones. I needed this. The love I have with my family. My friends. My living, laughing, breathing sister. And maybe someday, the love I'll have with another man. What I need now and what I'll need always, is a love that washes over me like river water. That soothes. A love I can bathe in.

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## A Note from the Author

Thank you for taking the time to read *One Small Mistake*. I hope there was something in this book you could relate to. Just like Elodie, I put my career on hold to focus on my writing. Fortunately, my parents were supportive, but there were people in my life who weren't, who insisted I was naive to think I'd ever be a published author. That I'd made one huge mistake. It was that feeling of crushing inadequacy and desperation that inspired Elodie's story. Although I'd never advise going to the extreme lengths she did, if there's one thing I've taken away from this wild, terrifying, exhilarating writing journey, it's to never give up on your ambitions. Those, alongside the people who believe in you, are the shafts of sunlight that break through a drizzly sky. Bathe in them.

**Dandy Smith** lives in the Somerset market town of Frome with her fiancé and cocker spaniel. She has an undergraduate and master's degree in Creative Writing from Bath Spa University and enjoys all things aerial fitness, true-crime and chocolate orange.

# About Embla Books

Embla Books is a digital-first publisher of standout commercial adult fiction. Passionate about storytelling, the imprint was launched by Bonnier Books UK in 2021 and publishes books that will make you ‘laugh, love, look over your shoulder and lose sleep’. It is named after the first woman from the creation myth in Norse mythology, who was carved by the gods from a tree trunk found on the seashore – an image of the kind of creative work and crafting that writers do, and a symbol of how stories shape our lives.

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