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Opening Extract from...

Heartbreaker

Written by Tanya Carver

Published by Sphere

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HEARTBREAKER

TANIA
CARVER

sphere

SPHERE

First published in Great Britain in 2015 by Sphere
This paperback edition published in 2015 by Sphere

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

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A CIP catalogue record for this book
is available from the British Library.

ISBN 978-0-7515-5788-6

Typeset in Plantin by M Rules
Printed and bound in Great Britain by
Clays Ltd, St Ives plc

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Sphere
An imprint of
Little, Brown Book Group
Carmelite House
50 Victoria Embankment
London EC4Y 0DZ

An Hachette UK Company
www.hachette.co.uk

www.littlebrown.co.uk

To Christabelle, research assistant extraordinaire

Acknowledgements

There are a whole load of people who deserve to be acknowledged for the part they play in putting these books together and never get the recognition. Time to remedy that.

To my agent Jane Gregory and the rest of the team at Gregory and Company: Claire, Steph, Terry, Irene, Ruth and Mary.

To my editor Jade Chandler and everyone else at Little, Brown in Team Tania: Thalia, David, Jo, Vicky, Andy, both Sarahs and I'm sure I've missed out loads for which I apologise.

To Beth - the next one's for you. Promise.

To all the booksellers who've got behind Tania. Thank you. I really appreciate it.

To Mark Billingham, not only a brilliant writer but also a real friend, even when I didn't deserve one. *Truth or Dare* should have been dedicated to him. In my head it always will be.

To Jamie-Lee for holding me upright.

But mainly for the readers who continue to buy and (hopefully) enjoy the ongoing exploits of Phil and Marina. Thank you. Seriously. You make everything worthwhile.

1

Gemma Adderley had had enough.

She had taken everything she possibly could, endured everything that had been slung at her, and was scared, humiliated, broken, hurt. Hurt above all. In so many ways.

As the front door slammed, shutting out the outside world once again, Gemma looked round the house. At her possessions. At her life. What was it Robert De Niro had said in that film she had watched once when Roy was out? Never get attached to anything you wouldn't walk out on in thirty seconds if you had to. Something like that. She sat at the kitchen table and looked at the walls, the floor. The cooker he had wanted her chained to. The fridge he had told her to keep fully stocked, even if she didn't always have the money to do it. They weren't her possessions. He had bought them. Had tried to make them possess her. There was nothing in the room – the flat – she wouldn't be able to walk out on. That she didn't want to walk out on.

Except Carly. And that was why she was taking her daughter with her.

Heart thumping, Gemma stood up, went into the living room. Thought once more of Roy. What he would say to her if he knew she was planning this. Do to her. The sins she would be committing. The punishment he would inflict – no, not him, not his punishment, God's, for daring to go against His will. And knew she wouldn't face that again. Never again. She

opened the door, gripping the handle, trying not to notice how much her fingers were trembling.

Carly was lying on the floor watching TV. Some unreal reality show. The kind she could only watch when Roy was out. She turned as Gemma entered, her eyes as usual wide, head and body flinching. Expecting God's wrath. Expecting to go straight to hell. Gemma's heart broke every time she saw her daughter do that. She had wondered where she had seen eyes like her daughter's before and the answer had come to her one night when she was watching the news. They'd shown footage of some war zone in the Middle East, tortured refugees making their way slowly out of the city, trying to forget what they had seen, trying to carry on, and she'd seen the same things in the children's eyes that were in Carly's.

A war zone. Just about sums it up, thought Gemma. Straight to hell. How could you fear going there when you were already living in it?

'Hey,' she said, trying to keep her voice light, 'we're going out.'

Carly sat up, looked round nervously. She had heard the door slam shut as well. It was usually a sign for them both to relax. Get together, find a shared strength to keep them going. But this was new. This was unheard of for the little girl. What her mother was proposing was against the rules. And she knew there would be punishments.

'But . . . ' Carly's eyes darted to the door. 'We can't . . . '

'We can,' said Gemma, hoping she sounded calm and in control, fearing she didn't. 'And we are. Come on.'

Carly stood up, dumbly obeying, even if it was against the rules. 'Where . . . '

Gemma summoned up a smile for her daughter. Only for her daughter, she thought. It had been a long time since she had smiled for herself. 'Somewhere nice. Somewhere safe.'

Carly said nothing.

'Come on,' said Gemma, holding out her hand for the girl to take.

Carly, clearly not happy but not wanting to go against her mother's wishes, walked towards her. Then turned back to the TV. 'I'd better turn it off. If I don't turn it off . . . '

'Leave it on,' said Gemma.

Carly stared at her.

'Yeah, leave it on.' Gemma smiled. That little act of rebellion had emboldened her. With Carly she turned, left the room.

She had already packed their bags, hidden them under the bed. She pulled them out.

'Are we . . . are we going on holiday?' asked Carly.

'Yeah,' said Gemma, 'that's right. A holiday.'

'Where?' asked Carly, excitement building despite her fear. 'Somewhere hot and sunny? Like Benidorm?'

It was one of the seven-year-old's favourite programmes. Something Gemma let her stay up and watch if Roy was out. Which was most nights.

'Not Benidorm, petal, no. But somewhere nice. Somewhere we'll feel . . . ' What? What could she say to her daughter, tell her about where they were going? 'Safe. Happy. Somewhere happy. Come on, get your coat on.'

Carly turned to go to her own room, stopped, came back. 'Can I bring Crusty?'

Her toy bear. She took it everywhere.

'He's already packed. We won't forget him. Now come on, we've got to go.'

But Carly didn't move. A thought had occurred to her. Gemma stood, waited. She knew what the child was going to say. Had her answer prepared.

'Is . . . is Daddy coming with us?'

'Not, not just yet, petal. D'you want him to?'

'He's Daddy.' Her voice flat, monotonous. The words like something learned by rote at school. 'We're his family. He's the head. In charge. Just like God. He has to know what we're doing all the time.'

'That's right. He's Daddy.' Not dwelling on the rest of her daughter's words. Hoping she was young enough to forget all that stuff in time. 'Well, look. We'll get going and he can come and join us later if we want him to. How does that sound?'

Again those wide war-zone eyes. Carly nodded.

Gemma knew she didn't mean it, knew she had done it more out of fear of disagreeing than because she wanted him to join them. She knew also the conflict that would be raging inside her daughter, tearing her apart. But it had to be done. It had to be.

'Good,' she said. 'Right, just a couple of things to do before we go.'

She took out her phone, dialled a number she had memorised. Waited.

'Gemma Adderley,' she said when someone answered. 'Safe Haven, please.'

The voice on the other end of the line asked her where she was. She told them. She was given directions, told where to be.

'The car'll be with you in ten minutes. Is that okay?'

'Yeah,' said Gemma, hardly believing that she was actually doing this. After toying with it for years, wanting to but not having the strength, the courage to actually do so, she was leaving Roy. And with him would go all the pain, hurt and suffering that she and her daughter had endured for so long.

'Yeah,' she said again. 'That's fine.'

'The driver needs to give you a word so you know it's from us. The word is strawberry. If they don't give you that, don't get in, okay?'

'Okay.'

'See you soon.'

Gemma ended the call, looked down at Carly. Her daughter had her coat buttoned up and was staring up at her, trying to be excited but unable to hide the fear in her eyes. In that moment Gemma thought it wasn't possible for her to love another person more.

'Come on, petal,' she said. 'Let's go.'

They reached the front door.

'Oh,' said Gemma, 'one more thing.'

She went back into the living room, took the book – Roy's only book – from pride of place on the shelf. The Bible. The family Bible, a source of guidance and prayer. A template to live your life by. She felt the edges. Hard leather, scuffed and indented where it had struck her and her daughter. A weapon of anger, of fear.

She felt rage build inside. Wished she had a fire so she could throw the book on it, watch it burn away to nothing. Instead had to content herself with opening it up at random and ripping out pages, throwing them round the room in a frenzy.

Eventually she wore herself out, dropped the book on the floor, knowing it would serve as a goodbye letter, and went to join her daughter.

She looked at the front door once more. He never locked it when he went out but she knew she was expected to remain inside. Imprisoned not by lock and key but by fear. Of what would happen if she dared to be out when he returned. If she dared to even think about leaving. Well, now she was. Leaving for ever. And it had taken her longer than she could remember to build up the courage to do that. To walk out of her open prison, never to return.

Gemma and Carly held hands as well as they could with their bags; left the house together.

As Gemma closed the door behind her for what she hoped would be the last time, another Robert De Niro quote sprang to mind. Something about life being short and whatever time you got was luck. That was what she was having now. Luck.

She had been given this chance for a fresh start, and from now on, Gemma Adderley was going to create her own luck.

2

Nina felt the air on her face, cool and welcome. Closed her eyes and kept walking.

The club had been good, she had to admit. Itchy Feet night at Lab 11. Just one room with bare brick walls and a bar, kind of damp-smelling, but it played good music for a club night. Not the usual stuff all the other places played. Fifties music, swing. Retro. Just what she liked. And she'd enjoyed herself, mostly. It hadn't been her idea to go but she didn't want to seem like the odd girl out or the killjoy who held all the others back. Especially as they hadn't known each other long and were still bonding as a group. The first uni semester was like that. Just as she'd expected it to be. She wanted to make friends with the rest of the group she had been put in halls with, and this seemed to be the best way of doing it. Also, she suffered from serious FOMO. She hadn't heard the phrase before she had arrived at uni, but it had stuck in her mind ever since. FOMO: Fear of Missing Out. And now that naming it made it officially a thing, she was relieved to admit it was pretty strong inside her.

She opened her eyes, still walking, looked at the others she was with. Andrew was from Manchester, gay and mouthy. She'd had a friend like him in sixth form. She hoped he could be her surrogate. Every girl needed a gay best friend, she had decided. Laura was the other girl in the group. Nina could see

herself gravitating towards her too. They seemed to have lots in common and they were on the same course. The other two boys were Mark and John. Lads. That was all she could think of to say about them. They were good fun; bright, funny, but not really on her wavelength. Good lads, though, happy to be seen out with girls and didn't stigmatise Andrew for being gay. A great bunch to be with and it seemed like they all got along together. Early days, but that was a good sign.

Mark and John were clowning as they went. Loud, laughing like everyone was watching.

'Oh,' said Andrew, 'you and your laddish fun . . . '

This seemed to be a pattern, fooling around as soon as they got a drink inside them. First time away from home, experiencing that nervous, giddy freedom. Nina wasn't like that. She was cautious, careful. Took everything as it came, in her stride. Tried not to have fixed expectations. That way she wouldn't be disappointed. That was what she'd always told herself. But she smiled at them. They were funny.

'Did you see that guy?' asked Andrew.

'Which guy?'

'Looking at you. That guy. Dark hair. Big eyes. Like Jared Leto.'

Nina knew exactly which guy he meant. She had fancied him but didn't want to admit it. Not in the game plan, she'd told herself. Do the degree, have fun, get out. Don't get lumbered.

'Nah,' she said. 'Must have missed him.'

Andrew's eyes rolled and widened in stage shock. 'Missed him? How could you? My God, if you didn't want him, I was going to have a go.'

Nina smiled.

Her ears were still ringing from the BPMs in the club, but she let Andrew go on, not really listening to him, pleased with the constant buzz. It was light now, early Saturday morning.

They had gone into town quite late and Nina had paced herself with her drinks. Always bottles, always in her hand, making sure she knew who had bought them, ensuring no one could have tampered with them. Always in control. The way she liked it.

'Where are we?' asked Laura.

'Digbeth,' said Nina. 'Birmingham.'

'Yeah, I know that. But where are we? How do we get back home?'

Nina looked round. All the streets looked the same in Digbeth. Run-down warehouses and factories supposedly having had the cultural magic wand waved at them. The new hip and edgy part of town. All cool bars and vintage clothes shops. She could see the silver-spotted undulating form of Selfridges in the city centre off in the distance. Like a massive science fiction slug had just died there.

'Head for that, I suppose,' she said. 'Get a cab.' If we've got any money left, she wanted to add. She had budgeted carefully for the night. She hoped the rest of them had. She didn't fancy walking all the way to Edgbaston.

'Nah,' said Andrew, 'let's—'

'Guys.'

They stopped talking. Up ahead, Mark and John had stopped walking, John turning to them, serious expression on his face.

'Guys,' he said again, gesturing towards a doorway, suddenly no longer drunk. 'Come here, guys, come here . . . '

Nina moved forward, caught up with them. The other two followed. She looked to where John was pointing. There, huddled in the doorway, was a little girl.

The child looked away from them, curled herself into a foetal ball, eyes screwed tight shut; if she couldn't see them, they wouldn't see her. Her clothes were dirty but not rags, her face

equally grimy; tears and snot had left tracks down it. She clutched hard at a teddy bear in her hands, pulled it towards her chest. She looked like she had been living rough on the street. She looked, thought Nina, like the kind of kid you saw on the TV news from a war zone.

Looking round to see what the others were doing – nothing – Nina knelt down in front of the girl.

'Careful,' said Andrew, 'she might have something—'

Nina turned, gave him a hard stare. He said nothing more.

'Hello,' she said quietly. 'What's your name?'

The little girl didn't reply, just screwed her eyes up tighter.

All sorts of thoughts tumbled through Nina's head. She'd been trafficked, she'd run away from somewhere, she'd been abandoned. She might not even speak or understand English.

'I'm Nina,' she said. 'What's your name?'

The little girl started to cry. 'Go away,' she said, clutching her toy like it was a life raft.

Nina edged forward. 'What's your name? Look, we can help you.'

Nothing.

Andrew knelt down next to Nina, wanting to help. The little girl flinched, seemed as if she was about to cry again. Wide-eyed, he moved back. Nina stayed where she was.

'Where's your . . . your mum? Where do you live? Do you know?'

The girl shook her head.

'Look, we'll get help. We won't leave you, okay?'

The girl still said nothing. Held on harder to the bear.

'Can you tell us anything?' said Nina, sensing that words were now futile and they should phone the police. 'A name? Anything.'

The little girl looked up at them, her eyes wide with ghosts.

'Why are you here? What happened?'

The girl seemed about to answer but stopped herself. The enormity of what was behind the words too much for her. She looked away from them again, eyes down.

Whatever she had been about to say was now locked up firmly within her.