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The Madam

Written by Jaime Raven

Published by AVON

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AVON

A division of HarperCollins*Publishers*
1 London Bridge Street
London
SE1 9GF

www.harpercollins.co.uk

A Paperback Original 2016

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

ISBN-13: 978-0-00-817146-9

Set in Minon by Palimpsest Book Production Limited, Falkirk, Stirlingshire
Printed and bound in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, St Ives plc

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This one is for Catherine, with love.

PROLOGUE

Southampton: 2011

I was naked and covered in someone else's blood. It was smeared across my flesh and dripping from the tips of my fingers onto the carpet.

Around me the room seemed to be spinning slowly, like a fairground carousel. My vision was blurred, but I could make out various objects. A door. A sofa. A flat-screen television. A wall painting. A bed.

A man's body.

The body was lying on the bed, naked like me and face up. And there was more blood. It soaked the sheets and the rug of thick, grey hair on the man's chest. There were even splash marks on the wall above the wooden headboard.

I knew instinctively that he was dead. His eyes were bulging out of their sockets and he wasn't breathing. He was motionless.

The realisation that I wasn't dreaming hit me like a bag of ice. I made an effort to scream, but nothing came out. The shock of what I was experiencing had rendered me mute.

I tried to bring my thoughts to bear on what was happening.

Where was I? Who was the man? Why was there so much blood?

As I stood there, dazed and bewildered, the back of my head throbbing, it gradually came back to me.

A few moments ago I'd been lying on the bed beside the corpse. I must have been unconscious because suddenly I was awake and aware that something was wrong. So I'd rolled off the bed and onto my feet.

And that's when I looked down and saw the shocking state I was in.

Oh God.

The room stopped moving suddenly and my eyes focused on something on the floor. It glinted in the wash of colour from the bedside lamp.

A large knife. And there was more blood on the blade.

I backed away from it until I came up against the cold, smooth surface of the wall. From here I could see the whole room. The full, horrific scene of carnage.

I felt my legs wobble. A wave of nausea washed through me. I reached out and grabbed the back of a chair for support. The chair stood in front of a dressing table, and there was a big square mirror in which I caught sight of my reflection.

There was so much blood. On my face, my breasts, my shoulders. It even trailed down across my stomach into my pubic hairs.

As I stared at myself the rest of it came back to me. I realised who the man was. I recalled what had happened in the room before I lost consciousness. The raised voices. The violent struggle. The drunken haze that smothered everything.

And it was these mental images that finally dislodged the scream from deep inside my throat.

Holloway Prison: 2014

'I've got some bad news for you, Lizzie.'

They were the first words out of the governor's mouth when I was escorted into her office. Maureen Riley had only been in the job for a few months so I'd never had a one-to-one meeting with her before today. I'd assumed she was going to read me the riot act, tell me that under her stewardship I would have to change my ways and become a model prisoner. But I could tell from the solemn expression on her face that I'd been summoned for a different reason.

'I think perhaps you should sit down,' she said, waving to an empty chair across the desk from her.

But I just stood there, rigid as a tent peg, my blood racing in anticipation of what was to come.

She had her back to the window, through which I could see a fierce afternoon sun beating down on the streets of North London. The stark light accentuated the lines around her eyes and mouth, and I found myself momentarily distracted as I wondered how old she was. Mid-to-late forties? Early fifties? It was hard to tell. Her brown hair was liberally streaked with grey and she had a fleshy, nondescript face.

'I really think you should take a seat, Lizzie. What I'm about to tell you will be extremely upsetting.'

Everything inside me turned cold. My heart started thumping, thrashing against my ribs.

'Has something happened to Leo?' I said, my voice thin and stretched. It was the first fearful thought that sprang into my mind.

She clamped her top lip between her teeth and leaned forward across her desk. Her eyes were steady and intense, and I could see the muscles in her neck tighten.

'I'm afraid your son had to be rushed to hospital this morning,' she said. 'He was taken ill suddenly at his grandmother's.'

An awful stillness took hold of me. I tried to speak but the words snagged in my throat.

The governor rearranged her weight in the chair, took a long, deep breath and then uttered the words that every parent dreads to hear.

'Leo passed away, Lizzie. It happened several hours ago. I just received the call.'

It took a couple of seconds for it to sink in. It can't be true, I told myself. How can my little boy be dead? He's only three years old, for Christ's sake.

But then it hit me and a sob exploded in my throat.

'No, no, no,' I cried out.

I clenched my eyes shut and the world tilted on its axis. I felt myself falling, but the screw who had brought me to the office grabbed me before I fell to the floor. She managed to lower me onto the chair as the tears poured out of me.

The governor waited a few minutes before she spoke again.

'I've been told that your mother was with him at the end, Lizzie. He was very ill, apparently. Viral meningitis.'

I felt a darkness rise up inside me. Not in my wildest dreams could I have imagined this. My darling son was everything to me. He gave meaning to my life, a life that had been twisted out of shape by bad luck and mistakes.

And now he was gone.

'I'm so very sorry, Lizzie,' the governor said. 'I know this is a terrible shock and I wish there was something I could say that would soften the blow. But of course there isn't.'

Images of Leo cartwheeled through my mind. I saw him in my arms just after I'd given birth, and when he took his first steps across

the living room carpet at nine months old. And then there was the very last time I saw him, not long after his first birthday. His bright blue eyes and curly fair hair. The smile that never failed to melt my heart.

Oh God how could he be dead?

I continued to sob hysterically. The governor got up and came around her desk. She placed a hand on my shoulder and spoke in a soft voice. But I didn't take anything in because the shock and grief were all-consuming.

When finally I recovered my composure she gave me a tissue to wipe my eyes and said she would arrange for a bereavement counsellor to come and see me.

'And of course I'll keep you informed about funeral arrangements,' she said. She then told the screw to take me back to my cell.

As I was led out of the room I broke down again, and through the deluge of tears I heard my mother's voice in my head from long ago.

'*You've ruined your son's life as well as your own, Lizzie*,' she told me after I was charged with killing a man. '*I hope God can find it in his heart to forgive you, because I know I can't.*'

Those words had tormented my soul for three long years. The weight of guilt was a burden I'd been forced to endure ever since they locked me up.

And now it was going to be much, much heavier.

I stopped crying on the way back to the cell block, but I could feel the scream building inside me.

It seemed odd that all around it was business as usual. The daily grind of the prison continued uninterrupted. Raised voices. Stilted laughter. Doors slamming shut. Small groups of women engaged in furtive conversation.

None of them knew about my loss yet. But they soon would. Holloway houses more than five hundred female prisoners, from murderers to petty thieves. When something like this happens the news spreads like wildfire.

I knew I could expect a lot of kind words and sympathy from most of the inmates. But a good few wouldn't give a toss. They were the druggies and bullies and psychopaths who cared only about themselves.

And as sod's law would have it a bunch of them were gathered in the corridor close to my cell. When they saw us approaching they fell silent. Then they stood aside to let us pass.

I lowered my gaze so that I didn't have to look at them, but not before catching the eye of Sofi Crane, the undisputed leader of the pack. She was a large woman with a hard face and a fierce reputation. I was one of the few inmates who weren't intimidated by her and that had always got under her skin. It was why she hated my guts and took every opportunity to wind me up.

She'd never seen me upset before, though, and I just knew that my obvious distress would delight her. But wisely she chose not to make any snide remarks as I was steered towards my cell.

The door stood open, and as I stepped inside the screw let go of my arm, told me again how sorry she was, and then retreated. I had no doubt that she'd tell Sofi and her mates what had happened. But that didn't matter. Nothing did any more.

As soon as Scar saw me she leapt up from the bed and dropped the book she'd been reading on the floor.

'Jesus, babe,' she said. 'What the bloody hell has happened?'

I looked at my cellmate, my lover of two years, and I realised that even she wouldn't be able to ease the pain of my loss.

'It's Leo,' I said, my voice cracking. 'He's . . . dead.'

Scar rushed over and wrapped her arms around me. She held me tight as the grief pulsed through me in waves.

'I don't see how I can go on,' I said. 'Not now that I've lost everything.'

'You've still got me, Lizzie,' she replied, and I felt her sweet, warm breath on my neck. 'I'm here for you and always will be.'

The tears returned with a vengeance and I cried into her shoulder, great wrenching sobs that shook me to the core. I wanted to die too at that moment. I wanted the ground to open up and suck me under. But I knew I wouldn't be that lucky.

Scar's body stiffened suddenly and someone else's voice came from behind.

'Just heard about your son, Lizzie. What a bummer. Still, it's not as if you've had anything to do with the poor little bugger these past few years.'

I pushed Scar away and spun round. Sofi Crane was standing in the doorway, her lips curled back in a malicious grin. I choked back a sob and a smouldering rage ripped through me.

'What did you say you bitch?' I shrieked at her.

'Oh sorry,' she said. 'Did I strike a nerve?'

Scar grabbed my arm but I jerked it free. I felt something primal take hold of me. The grief turned to anger and I launched myself at Sofi Crane with a ferocious bellow.

Before she had time to react I drove a fist into her face. The blow caused ribbons of blood to spurt from her nostrils. She let out a horrific grunt and stumbled backwards into the corridor.

I lunged forward, grabbed the front of her sweatshirt, shoved her hard against the wall. She lost her balance and collapsed in an untidy heap on the floor.

But I didn't let up. Instead I aimed a kick at her stomach with everything I had. She gave an anguished cry and rolled on her

side. I then kicked her in the small of her back and she curled up like a hedgehog to protect herself.

I was still kicking and screaming when two screws pulled me away and dragged me back into my cell. And that was where I remained until the commotion died down and my anger subsided. But it took a while because I was in such a state. My lungs burned with every intake of breath and my thoughts swam in feverish circles.

But I didn't regret what I'd done. Sofi Crane had deserved it, and I was glad I'd hurt her. But her suffering was nothing compared to the pain I was going to inflict on the bastards who had wrecked my life and taken away my only son.

I was now more determined than ever to track them down and make them pay. It would just have to wait until I was finally released from this rat-infested hell hole.

1

Present Day

Three years and eleven months. That's how long I spent behind bars for a crime I didn't commit. Almost the entire sentence imposed by the judge. Some people said I should have got life and been banged up for a minimum of fifteen years. But they didn't get their way, so in that respect I was lucky.

Inside I met four lifers who claimed they were innocent, and two of them convinced me that they were telling the truth. They were dead inside. You could see it in their eyes. No hope. No future.

Three years and eleven months had been just bearable. If I'd been a model prisoner I would have got out sooner on licence. But sheer anger and frustration caused me to make too many mistakes and too many enemies. That burning sense of injustice gave me a reason to live, though. Served as a constant reminder that one day in the not too distant future I'd get out and be free to find the bastard or bastards who had destroyed my life.

Well that day had finally arrived.

It was a warm, grey Thursday in late July. A light drizzle greeted me as I walked out of Holloway Women's Prison just after midday.

I was wearing faded jeans, a white Gap T-shirt and a denim jacket that was a size too big. I was carrying a canvas holdall containing all my worldly possessions.

This first taste of freedom felt strangely hollow, like sucking on a joint that's slow to take effect. Maybe that's how it is for everyone. A bit of an anti-climax until it truly sinks in.

The sky over North London was the colour of the walls in the cell I'd just vacated. It had been the same on the day I arrived. As grim and lifeless as a cancer ward.

The farewells had been short and sweet. I'd embraced a few of the inmates I'd come to regard as friends. They all got a pack of Marlboro Lights as a parting gift. The governor gave me a little pep talk and said I had to get on with my life and forget about the past. She then wished me well and told me she didn't want to see me back inside again.

I raised two fingers to the large, red-brick building just for the hell of it. I felt I had to make some sort of gesture. As feeble as it was I felt better for it. Then I walked along the access road to where Scar was waiting.

She'd parked the car with two wheels on the kerb and was standing with her back against the nearside wing. The sight of her sent my heart racing and I felt the sting of tears in my eyes.

She'd had her hair dyed and cut short, and it made her look younger than her twenty-six years. It was black now, instead of auburn. She'd also splashed out on a new leather jacket that she wore over a red cotton blouse and tight beige trousers.

As I closed the distance between us she gradually came into focus. Five foot five. Narrow face, high cheekbones. Body tight and toned. She was slender, but with not a hint of fragility. Her eyes were cerulean blue, same as the water colour that's cool and opaque, and a tiny silver stud glinted in the left side of her nose.