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Spare Me the Truth

Written by C. J. Carver

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SPARE ME THE TRUTH

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For Vic and Jean Ayres

PROLOGUE

Three weeks ago, Saturday 3 November

She steps into a corridor. She is behind Peter Miller and Suzie Lui who are chatting excitedly, seemingly oblivious of any danger, but Stella takes one look at the four men and knows things have gone terribly wrong.

She is already bending forward, reaching to grab the case from Suzie, planting her weight on her right foot to spin round, make a run for it, but the men are fast. Much faster than her. She has barely moved and they've drawn their guns. A Glock, an Uzi and two MAC-10 auto sub-machine pistols which are immediately trained on her. The Uzi is on Peter, the Glock on Suzie. The men's hands are steady, their eyes hard and cold. They've done this before. They're pros.

Suzie gives a little scream. Peter goes as white as chalk and makes a soft whimpering sound.

There are places Stella will remember all her life – a shabby house in the East End, the hospital room where she gave birth to her daughter, a serene Mayfair street with rows of glossy black railings – but there will be nothing branded more deeply in her memory than this moment.

How had Cedric found out?

Nobody knew about this. Not even Bernard.

Had Peter or Suzie let something slip?

She suddenly sees how stupid she's been. She thinks she's so *clever*, but he's always been one step ahead. Was it the arrogance of age? The fact she thought she'd had a lifetime's experience? She's due to retire next year – perhaps she thought she'd go out in a spectacular shower of success but instead she's facing monumental dishonour and disgrace. Something that the office will whisper about in decades to come. How Stella Reavey, one of the so-called best, brought not just ignominy and humiliation to their front door, but how she risked their families, their friends, and their country. All through hubris.

The man with the Glock moves to take the case from Suzie. The young woman recoils.

'No!' she protests violently. '*No!*'

In one smooth movement the man raises his pistol, aims it between the young woman's eyes and pulls the trigger.

The bullet enters Suzie's skull, leaving a neat hole the size of a pebble in her forehead, but the back of her head is a mess of blood and bone, brain matter.

The woman's body drops into a soft crumple of slender limbs and cloth.

Peter is trembling from head to toe. A keening sound comes involuntarily from his throat.

'You didn't need to kill her,' Stella says. She is glad her tone is authoritative and doesn't reveal her fear.

The man doesn't answer. He grabs the case.

The weapons remain trained on her and Peter as the man steps backwards down the corridor. He vanishes through the door. She watches his men leave. The instant they are out of view she races after them but the door is locked. She spins round and tears to the other end of the corridor to find that door is locked too. By the time she summons help, it is too late. The men and the case are gone.

It is after midnight and Stella stands quietly and alone, wondering how to salvage the situation. She needs something from left field that can't implicate her, something unpredictable, something *random*, as her daughter might say. When an idea comes to her, she closes her eyes and wonders whether her conscience will ever forgive her for entering Dan's life again.

CHAPTER ONE

Thursday 22 November, 10.04 a.m.

Dan Forrester was in aisle five of his local Tesco supermarket, struggling to decide whether Jenny wanted a well-known branded packet of noodles or the cheaper generic version, blissfully unaware that in the next few minutes his life would be ripped to pieces.

It wouldn't be the first time.

He already knew how fragile life could be. That the wall between sanity and insanity, life and death, was paper-thin. One moment, life was mundane and ordinary, even boring, the next it tilted on its axis and plunged into chaos. Dan had survived the chaos before and was now in a place of harmony where the most stressful thing he had to think about was which type of noodles to buy.

'Daddydaddydaddy!'

Aimee tore down the aisle towards him like a sparkling Catherine wheel, a blur of white-blond hair and pink tinsel yelling at the top of her voice.

'I found it, foundit foundit!'

She narrowly missed his trolley and smacked into his shins, triumphantly waving a packet of chicken stock cubes in one hand while grabbing a fold in his jeans to stop herself from falling over with the other. Her face was flung back, her beaming smile like a laser straight to his heart.

'Well done, pumpkin.'

'I'm *not* a pumpkin. Pumpkins are *fat*.'

'OK. Well done, carrot.'

'Carrot?!' Her screech of indignation made several shoppers nearby flinch and give him stares of disapproval, but he was too old to be bothered by what other people thought. He was forty in two weeks' time. What was that all about? He'd been sixteen when his father turned forty – *ancient* – but here he was with flecks of grey growing through his hair just like Dad.

'OK,' he said. 'Celery.'

'Daddy, I'm not a *vegetable*.'

'Really?' He affected surprise. 'Not even an avocado? I love avocados.'

Aimee did a twirl, arms outstretched. 'Avocado, avocado, avocado,' she sang. 'I'm an avocaaado.'

Dan went back to his inspection of noodles satisfied he'd distracted her nicely from the subject of *fat*, which her best friend Tara had introduced her to at the weekend. Before her sleepover Aimee had had no idea what a calorie was, but now she was picking up cereal boxes trying to read the sides, determined to find out how many calories were in a Cheerio, whether she was having too many and if she should go on a diet. Apparently Tara's mother was obsessed with her weight and Aimee wanted

to know if she should be too. Jenny had had to restrain Dan from marching over the road and jamming Tara's mother's head inside a cereal packet.

'What else can I get, Daddy?' She was still twirling.

He pretended to think. 'Hmm. Well, one thing we really need is a reindeer for the hall table. I don't know which sort, though. They come in all colours. Gold, pink, silver or just plain brown.'

Her eyes brightened. 'You mean a *chocolate* reindeer?'

'Do you think you'll be able to find one?'

Aimee scampered away, heading for the aisle-end display of Christmas chocolates. He could keep an eye on her there. Without consciously making a decision, he put the cheaper noodles in his trolley and began to head for the spice rack further down. His mind was on nothing but ground ginger and dried chillies when he felt a familiar tell-tale prickle at the back of his neck.

Someone was watching him.

He didn't swing round to see who it might be, but maintained his inspection of condiments. After ten seconds or so, he turned to his trolley and dropped in a small bottle of ground ginger. At the same time, he took in the woman out of the corner of his eye. She was still watching him. This time, a small smile curved on her lips, as though she knew he was observing her.

Late fifties, she had glossy waves of dark hair threaded with silver. Strong jaw, cut glass cheekbones. Slender, wiry body. Understated trouser suit. Still smiling, expression warm, she stepped towards him.

'Dan,' she said.

Something hitched in his chest at the sound of her voice.

'I'm sorry?' he said. He didn't recognise her.

She came to stand in front of him. Her eyes were clear and candid, the colour of burnt hazelnuts. She carried no shopping. A plain leather satchel hung from her shoulder.

'You don't remember me.' She stated it as a fact.

Her clothes weren't cheap, but they weren't expensive either. Middle of the road. Bland. The same couldn't be said for her shoes, however, which were sleek high-heeled black leather with a patent finish. Smart and sexy. She could be a secretary or a barrister.

'I'm Stella. Stella Reavey.'

As she said her name, he felt a lightness enter him. Perhaps he *did* know her after all. She put out her hand. It seemed churlish not to take it. Her skin was warm and smooth, her grip strong.

'We used to work together,' she said.

'Er . . .' He wished Jenny was here instead of getting her hair cut across the road. After his breakdown five years ago he struggled to remember a lot of things. Some were small, like not remembering a favourite café or meeting an old friend for a pub lunch one Sunday, but others were huge, like not remembering anything about the office job he'd had before Luke and Aimee were born.

'Interesting how some things have stayed with you,' she told him, moving briefly to give some space to a blowsy woman walking past with her toddler in the trolley child seat. 'You knew I was watching you but you didn't give anything away. I guess it shows that our training sticks with us even if we don't realise it.'

She'd used the word *training*. He said, 'Are you a driving instructor too?'

For a moment she looked as though she was unsure how to react, whether to laugh or cry. 'No.' She cleared her throat. Glanced over her shoulder, then back. 'I'm something entirely different. So are you, although you don't know it.'

His patience thinned the moment she began talking in riddles. Some people thought it amusing to play games with an amnesiac but joking around with someone who had suffered memory loss due to a colossal personal trauma was insupportable as far as he was concerned. His psychiatrist, Dr Orvis Fatik, told him people played tricks on him because they enjoyed the sense of control they wielded, especially if, before his memory was damaged, he had been the more dominant in the relationship. But, whatever the explanation, Dan rarely forgave them for making him feel stupid.

'I knew this wasn't going to be easy,' she continued, 'but I couldn't see any other way.' Her eyes were on his, frank and sincere. 'We're out of options. We need your help, Dan . . .'

He flicked a glance past Stella Reavey and down the aisle to see Aimee waving at him. She was holding a toy, an oversized white puppy, complete with red matching collar and lead. Her expression was pleading. He shook his head at her, making a pair of antlers with his fingers. *Reindeer*, he mouthed. She pouted in return but nodded.

'We need to find someone called Cedric. It isn't his real name, but a code name. CEDRIC.'

She was looking at him expectantly, as though he might suddenly clap his hands to his head and shout, 'Cedric! Of course!' but instead, Dan looked pointedly around the supermarket. 'Is there a hidden camera here somewhere?' he asked. His tone was biting. 'Did Matt put you up to this? Are he and his buddies cracking up in the car park?'

Last Christmas Matt had hired a stripper to approach Dan in a pub, pretending she was his ex-girlfriend. It had been embarrassing and humiliating and, although Dan had laughed it off, inside he had been seething. This time, however, he wasn't going to roll over and play nice and he changed his body language to exude aggression. To his surprise, Stella didn't back down. She lifted her chin and held his gaze, showing she wasn't easily intimidated.

'Matt?' she queried.

'An old school friend. He's renowned for his sick sense of humour.'

'God, no.' She looked shocked. 'It's not like that at *all*. Please believe me, Dan. Just listen to me for a moment.'

There was something so urgent about her, so intense – as though she longed to plunge her arms inside him and touch his inner core and connect with him – that he briefly overrode his instinct to turn his back on her.

'Thank you,' she breathed. 'Look, I'm sorry to drop in Cedric's name like that, but a professor of neurology at a brain research institute told me recently that sometimes memories can break through, even in the toughest cases of dissociative amnesia.

It all depends on whether the biochemical pathways allow a particular memory to be recalled. Obviously Cedric has been blocked or disrupted . . .' She ran a hand distractedly through her hair. 'I know this is difficult, but you need to know we used to work together before your breakdown. For the government, where –'

'In the Immigration Department?' he cut in, his interest piqued. He'd been told this was where he used to work when he and Jenny had lived in London. Perhaps he *did* know her.

Stella blinked. 'Not exactly.'

'Where was the office?' he asked, deciding to test her.

'Westminster.'

Correct.

'Who was my boss?' he asked.

'I was. But the person we reported to . . . I'm afraid I can't tell you who he is. Not yet.'

Wrong answer. His boss hadn't been a woman but a tall man with spectacles and untidy red hair. Jenny had shown him a photograph of him taken at an office Christmas party eight years ago.

Stella nibbled her lip. 'It's maddening that I'm not authorised to tell you much, but you have to trust me when I say a situation has arisen that is extremely urgent. It's a security issue, hence the need for discretion but –'

'I think you ought to stop right now,' Dan said stiffly. He should have ignored her from the start and he was angry at himself for not trusting his instincts. It had to be another prank of Matt's. He couldn't think what else she was doing here. His

attention flashed to check on Aimee and when he couldn't see her his blood pressure spiked only to fall a second later when she suddenly reappeared.

'Dan. Listen, *please*.' Stella's tone was earnest. 'We used to work closely together, OK? And when I say closely, I don't mean sharing an office, although we did do that too. I mean we depended on each other, *really* depended . . .' She paused as though struggling to find the right words.

To his relief, Aimee began walking down the aisle towards them. The quicker they got out of here the better, but Aimee was taking it slowly, her tongue pressed against her lower lip as she concentrated on not dropping the large gold-foil wrapped reindeer.

Stella's gaze clicked straight to Aimee and then straight back to him. His heart went cold. She knew Aimee?

'We depended upon each other in the field,' Stella went on, her words coming faster. 'We were a team. I saved your life once. You saved mine too.'

He stared at her. *What?*

'Look . . .' She turned her neck and pulled down her jacket collar. 'See this?'

He stared. The scar was the length of his thumb and crawled like a grey worm across her neck muscles, puckering at each end.

'You know the scar on your abdomen?' Stella said. 'You got it in the same firefight.'

No way. He'd had enough of this. He was out of here. He didn't care if Matt was involved or not. She was creeping him out big time.

'Daddy . . .' Aimee was standing expectantly in front of him, holding out the golden reindeer, waiting for him to take it and put it in the trolley.

'Hi, Aimee,' Stella said.

'Hi.'

Dan didn't hesitate. He whipped round to Stella. Gripped her upper arm and swung her around so they faced away from Aimee. 'How the fuck do you know my daughter's name?' he hissed.

'Hey, steady on, Dan.' She looked alarmed. 'You're hurting me.'

He didn't relax his grip. He pushed his face close to hers. His tone was ice-cold. 'You say another word to my daughter, and I will kill you.'

Stella fixed him with a clear gaze but as he stared her down he saw a flicker of uncertainty.

'Christ,' she murmured. 'You're bloody scary when you want to be. No wonder Bernard warned me to be careful, but I honestly thought that when you saw me something in your memory might –'

'Stop,' he hissed. 'Not another word. My daughter and I are leaving now. I don't want to see you again. Got it?'

He turned to Aimee and put her reindeer in the trolley. 'Time to go, sweet pea.' Holding Aimee's hand in his, he started to wheel the trolley towards the exit.

'Daddy, slow down!'

'Sorry, sweetie, but I'm in a hurry.'

He glanced over his shoulder but Stella seemed to have vanished. Grabbing his phone he rang his old school buddy.

'Yo, Dan the Man,' Matt answered. 'What can I do you for?'

'Have you just sent a woman called Stella Reavey to wind me up?'

'What? Stella *who*?'

Matt's bafflement sounded genuine but Dan pushed on.

'Some woman in the supermarket is claiming to be from my past.'

'Is she attractive?' Matt brightened. 'If she is, hang on to her until I get there, OK? You're married, remember?'

'She wasn't picking me up, you idiot. She . . .' – he paused briefly to amend what he'd been about to say – '. . . obviously made a mistake.'

He hung up, wondering if Stella Reavey was some kind of stalker. She looked so *normal* – sounded sane too – but she'd been way off the wall. Had he overreacted? Not as far as protecting Aimee was concerned. The woman knew enough about him to get him interested but then things had started to unravel. Him, caught in a firefight? His scar was from an accident in his workshop when he'd been repairing the back door of their old home and the chisel slipped. Jenny had rushed him to hospital where he'd had six stitches. Apparently the blood stain on the workshop floor had still been there when they'd sold the house a year later.

Was the woman on drugs? He drove cars for a living for Chrissakes. He didn't get involved in gun battles. He used to be a civil servant, a paper pusher, and the closest he would have got to any weaponry was watching a cop show on TV. The most excitement he got in life was when the lawnmower refused to start. Well, that wasn't quite true, considering yesterday one of his clients had decided to overtake when specifically asked

not to do so, narrowly escaping a head-on collision. What was it with some men that they wouldn't listen? They had to show they knew better, he guessed, especially when behind the wheel of a Porsche 911. Dan far preferred teaching women high performance driving because they didn't have the same type of ego and tended to brake when he told them to.

He made his way past a short queue of people at the 'cash only' checkout, wondering whether he should report Stella to the police. Ditching the trolley at the far end of the supermarket he headed for the exit. Aimee glanced up at him then back at the trolley. 'Daddy, you've forgotten the shopping.'

'I've got to make a phone call,' he told her. 'We'll get another reindeer when I'm through.'

'But we won't have anything to eat tonight.'

'We'll eat out.'

Her expression lifted. 'Can we go to Candy's?'

Candy's was her favourite café, which was currently decked out in carpets of fake snow and sleigh bells. The staff wore elves' outfits.

'Candy's it is.'

'Yay!' Aimee was leaping with excitement as they walked outside into a light drizzle. He helped put Aimee's hood up, and at the same time he heard Stella's voice, soft but insistent as she fell into step with them. Gritting his teeth, he tried to ignore her.

'Haven't you ever wondered why you're so secretive?' she asked. 'Why you have a great memory for faces? Why you can listen to three conversations at once without appearing to do so? Tell me, Dan, why do you always look for the exits when

you enter a room? Why do you hate sitting with your back to the window? And what about your job? Why do you think you chose performance driving? Not for the money, I'm sure. My guess is because it's the most exciting thing you could find to do.'

She glanced across at him but he refused to look at her. 'Tell me if I'm wrong,' she said. 'You like the flexibility of doing freelance work. You like not knowing what next week might bring. You also like being in demand and although you don't earn huge amounts of money, you don't earn peanuts either. But still. My bet would be that after five years of doing pretty much the same thing, you're bored rigid but daren't admit it. Least of all to your wife.'

Dan was gritting his teeth so hard he wondered why they didn't shatter. Keeping himself between Stella and Aimee, he said to his daughter, 'Keep hold of my hand, no matter what.'

'Yes, Daddy.' Aimee was staring across at Stella, wide-eyed.

'But should anything happen,' he continued, 'you run to Mummy at the hairdressers. You know where it is?'

'Yes.'

Reaching into his fleece pocket he brought out his mobile phone. Dialled 999.

'Which service do you require?' A woman answered promptly.

'Police,' Dan said.

'Putting you through.'

There was a click, then another woman said, 'Police. What is your emergency?'

'I have a woman here who is threatening me and my daughter, and I believe she is dangerous. I need the police immediately.'

'Where are you?'

Dan gave the dispatcher the details. Stella had fallen silent, but she was still walking alongside. Christ, he thought. She is definitely a hamper short of a picnic. He thought she'd vanish the second he called the police.

The dispatcher continued to ask questions.

'Has she hurt either of you?'

'Not yet.'

'Is she armed?'

'I think I saw a knife,' Dan said.

He hadn't seen anything of the sort but he wasn't going to mess around with Aimee here. He knew the police would prioritise his call now.

'I'm sending a car to you immediately. Please stay on the line.'

Dan strode out, wanting to get to Jenny, who would keep Aimee safe while he dealt with Stella.

'I know you want me out of here, Dan,' Stella said, 'but I can't leave. I'm sorry. This is bigger than both of us.'

Keeping the phone against his ear, Dan took a route through the car park that didn't go past his car. He didn't want Aimee to pick it out, show it to Stella.

'We just want to borrow you,' Stella said. 'For a day, maybe two. But no more, I promise. We simply want you to pretend your memory's coming back. That's all. I wish I could brief you properly, but I wasn't allowed to. Not until you're on board. All I can say is it's a black file.'

A minnow of memory darted through his mind but it was so fast he failed to catch it.

'Which means it's top-secret as well as extremely urgent. I'm truly sorry for being so cryptic but we couldn't think of another way. We'll pay you, of course, but then you're not particularly turned on by money, are you? And once we've completed the mission, you can go back to your normal life.' He felt more than saw her gaze intensify. 'But only if you want to, that is. You might find yourself tempted to do something a little more out of the ordinary afterwards.'

He led Aimee around the car park barrier. Jenny's hairdresser's was two hundred yards away, on the opposite side of the road. He didn't like bringing Stella into Jenny's proximity, but he didn't see he had a choice. Aimee was his priority.

Mr Forrester?

It was the dispatcher.

'Yes,' he said. 'Please tell the police to hurry.'

'They will be with you in two minutes.'

At the same moment, he heard a siren in the distance. Stella did nothing to indicate she heard it.

'Dan,' she said. 'You're not giving me anything to work with here. You're not giving me a chance. You're blocking me off. I can't let you do that.'

He kept his teeth gritted and didn't respond.

'You give me no choice.' Frustration laced her voice. 'I wasn't going to tell you this because I didn't want to destabilise you or cause you more pain. I was hoping you'd be intrigued enough to want to know more but it's obviously not enough. I know you won't believe what I'm going to say, but trust me, every word is true. It's up to you what you do with it.'

He tightened his hold on Aimee's hand. He was sweating, his heart knocking. Thank God, the siren was closing in. The police couldn't get here fast enough as far as he was concerned.

'Your son,' she said. 'Luke. He didn't die in a hit-and-run. Yes, he died in your arms, but he didn't die on Brick Lane as you've been told.'

His heart stopped.

Liquid ice poured through his veins.

She knew about Luke.

'You're not who you think you are, Dan. Your identity, your past, is a lie. Your entire family has been lying to you.'