DATE NIGHT

SAMANTHA HAYES

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PROLOGUE

Now

I stare at my hands, head hanging down, as I sit in the back of the police car. There's dried blood under my nails. Little dark crescents. I ball up my fingers, burying them in my lap with my wrists clamped together, glancing back at the cottage as the engine starts. An officer sits beside me.

Did I lock the door? Turn off the lights? Should I have left a note?

Back soon, darling. xx

Perhaps in twenty years.

'Belt on,' the officer beside me says, tugging on the strap. I nod, feeling like a naughty child. No, worse than that. *Way* worse. But how do I convince them that they're wrong about me?

I cover my face, screwing up my eyes. Then, without thinking, one of my fingers slips inside my mouth – a habit Sean chastises me about – with the other cuffed hand following. Our first Christmas together, he got me a voucher for a manicure at the salon in the expensive spa hotel nearby. A lovely thought, except he didn't hide his disappointment when I returned with beautifully filed and painted *short* nails. He'd been expecting – hoping for – acrylic talons. *Like Natalie*, I couldn't help thinking.

'But I can't work if they're long,' I'd told him, kissing him. He didn't complain after that.

I taste blood. Metallic and raw as the congealed crescent under my nail dissolves on my tongue. First finger, second finger, ring finger… I swallow down the retch, licking my lips, praying there's no trace on my mouth as the car bumps along the lane away from our cottage, past The Green with its stone memorial already adorned with an early poppy wreath. *More blood*, I think, as my eyes meet the stares of several locals huddled for a chat, the red a shocking flash behind them as they watch me pass. I recognise their faces, which isn't unusual in Great Lyne. Everyone knows everyone. The picture-perfect scenery blurs behind them as I stare at their faces – a mouth gaping, a neck craning, eyebrows raised that Libby Randell is being taken away in a police car, its yellow and blue neon markings bright in the half-light of the dreary day. Tongues will be wagging, gossip rife in the local pub, the village store, the primary school playground. An ending after the weeks of suspense.

Did she do it? What happened? Who'd have thought?…

It's what the village wanted, after all – a conclusion. The weight of not knowing had been pressing down like a looming storm these last few weeks, shrouding day-to-day life.

It was bound to break. Just not in the way anyone expected.

But relief is relief. People just want to get on with their lives, will accept whatever provides closure. And, of course, everyone had their suspicions – me included.

Perhaps she took off somewhere and killed herself – she always seemed unstable… Or the mother could be to blame, or her father (they were having problems, you know), or maybe she's run away and will turn up homeless in London. She could have had an accident and no one's found her body yet… Those poor parents. And poor Libby and Sean… Such a nice couple. Such a nice family.

And poor *Sasha*…

Everyone forgets poor Sasha.
No one knows what happened that night.

We're out of the village now. The comforting familiarity of its honey-stone cottages, the lanes where I've either walked or driven every day for the last seven years, is several miles behind us, replaced by fields and farm buildings and, soon enough, the A44. As I stare at a passing sign, I realise they're taking me to Oxford.

'Will I be gone long?' I ask the officer beside me. Her posture tells me she's poised, ready for action should I try to escape – her shoulders tensed, her left hand on the seat between us, her fingers splayed. I've seen her around these last few weeks, along with all the others – some in uniform, some not. The activity has come and gone in waves, the accompanying gossip trailing in the wake of the police presence. I'm hardly a flight risk, I think, in my mom jeans and one of Sean's old sweatshirts with stains down the front. I'd shoved my feet into my old gardening Crocs when they cuffed me and took me away – not fleeing-the-police footwear.

But then, I have nothing to flee from, I tell myself. We've all had to make statements over the last three weeks. I'll answer their questions (probably the same ones yet again), clear up any misunderstanding and ask them to let me go. I've only made a brief start on tonight's dinner party and probably won't be back in time to finish it now. I hang my head as I imagine my clients waiting for me later, their concern turning to disappointment and anger as they realise I've let them down.

'That depends,' the officer says, reminding me that I asked her a question.

I give a little nod, chewing on the fingers of my left hand now, sucking out the blood – gnawing, biting, cleaning. The officer driving, Detective Inspector Jones, is early-fifties, non-uniform,

with a square, set jaw covered in a salt-and-pepper beard. His eyes flick to the rear-view mirror every few seconds – not so much checking the traffic behind, but rather checking me. I try not to meet his stares.

This is *me*! I want to scream. Just *me*! I'm a mum, a wife, a daughter-in-law, a best friend. Aged thirty-nine with a four-year-old child, a husband, my own business, a stepson and a cat. I've got good friends, I'm well liked, I do Pilates and pay my taxes on time. I keep our cottage nice, drive an average car, and sometimes we take weekend breaks to Polzeath because Sean and Dan – Sean's fifteen-year-old son, and the only reason he keeps in contact with Natalie, his first wife – like to surf together. My stomach lurches when I think of my husband's ex. Ever-present in our lives. Her demands affect all of us one way or another.

'Oh, *Alice*…' I whisper, suddenly remembering my daughter. My cuffed hands cover my face as I think where she is.

'Alice?' the officer beside me says.

'My… my little girl,' I reply, my voice wavering. My thoughts are all over the place. Finally, my head catches up with the panic in my heart. 'Marion…' I say, my lungs almost collapsing. *Thank God*.

'Marion?' the officer says again.

'My mother-in-law,' I add, knowing that Alice will be fine. Marion will bring her back home later. If she can't reach Sean or me, she'll get a little annoyed in that silent way of hers and go back to the farm, secretly pleased that she gets to spend more time with her granddaughter. Despite being tired these last few weeks, her health not the best, Marion will take delight in saving the day. And letting me know about it.

'Sorry,' I say, touching my forehead. 'I'm just a bit… thrown.' I glance across at the officer again, who stares ahead, a little pucker to her lips. 'It's just… it's just that I've never been arrested before.'

Let alone on suspicion of murder.

CHAPTER ONE

Before

'Come on, come *on*…' Libby said, her hand tapping the top of the kettle as she waited for it to boil on the hotplate. Sean passed behind her, his hands sliding across her waist as he reached down some mugs from the cupboard. Libby glanced at her watch.

'Mummy, can we get a kitten?' Alice asked, her feet kicking the table leg. 'And a tortoise?'

'A tortoise?' Libby replied with a smile, preoccupied with getting to the market early before all the good produce was gone. The new client was important and she needed to impress.

'No, Little Bean,' Sean added. 'We've got a cat already. And cats eat tortoises for breakfast, didn't you know?' He tickled her from behind, bending down to kiss her soft curls. 'Now, why don't you eat yours?'

'Because I don't like porridge. No one at playgroup has to eat it.'

'Here, have this, then,' Libby said, just wanting Alice to have something inside her before she went to Marion's. She slid her own untouched toast towards her and Alice leant forward, licking the jam and making an appreciative noise.

'What's the world coming to when a four-year-old turns her nose up at organic oats and honey, eh?' Sean said, laughing as he dragged a wooden chair out from under the table, its legs scraping on the quarry tiles. He sat down, taking the porridge for himself.

Libby laughed too, leaning against the worktop as she sipped her coffee, watching her little family – a look of disbelief in her eyes that they were actually hers. She was completely in love with them both. But her mind was really still on the lunch for twenty tomorrow. *A boardroom feast to impress* was the brief. She never usually got nervous, but this was a test run for a regular account. Weekly team meeting lunches, then, if that went well, catering for fifty at their monthly training events. She and Sean were OK for money – *just* – but she'd spent the best part of three years building up All Things Nice and wanted it to succeed. No, she *needed* it to succeed, what with the renovations having cost way more than anticipated. Besides, she liked that Sean was proud of her.

'Seeing as Mummy's a bit stressed today, Bean, why don't you paint her a picture at playgroup this afternoon?'

Libby made a noise in her throat, about to say something, but decided against it.

'I can paint at Nanny's house this morning,' Alice said matter-of-factly. 'She lets me make a mess anywhere I like and I don't even have to clear it up. *And* she gives me all the sweets that I want.' Her voice rose in a satisfied little squeak.

Sean and Libby caught each other's eyes. Libby was ever grateful to Marion, of course, for helping out – she couldn't manage without her. But sometimes Alice got away with things she didn't agree with. Libby knew biting her tongue was a small price to pay in return for free childcare.

'Are you on call tonight?' Libby asked. Sean had been doing more evening shifts lately.

''Fraid so,' he said. 'But I doubt it'll be busy.'

He'd said that last time but hadn't got in until after midnight. She decided not to say anything though, quickly loading the dishwasher with a few bits before dashing upstairs to gather Alice's stuff for the day. When she returned, she sent her daughter off to

clean her teeth, straddling Sean's legs as he sat on the chair. He put his hands on her hips as she leant forward to kiss him.

'Mmm, the porridge *is* good today,' Libby said with a wink, planting her lips on his again. The kiss was deep enough to last the day, yet light enough for each of them to be left wanting more later. 'Let's hope it's a quiet night at the practice, then,' she said, feeling her body stirring. She fancied him more now than she did when she first set eyes on him six years ago. Both on the mend from failed relationships, they were each other's balm from that first clichéd look across the crowded bar. Except it wasn't particularly crowded and not really a bar – rather the half-empty local pub a couple of villages along from here where Libby was meeting some girlfriends. She'd recognised him from the gym at the hotel where she was working at the time.

'Right, you,' she said, standing up when Alice returned. 'Coat and shoes on, and into the car.' She glanced out of the cottage's leaded front window to the scene beyond. The village green sparkled with a light frost, the footprints of early-morning walkers tracking across it. 'Quick, quick now as I'll need to de-ice the car.'

Alice gave Sean a big hug, virtually climbing on his back as he shrugged into his waxed jacket and tied up his boots. 'Right, I'm off to work,' he said, easing Alice off him. 'I'll be getting a lift back with Archie later,' he told Libby. 'I'm dropping the Land Rover at the garage at lunchtime to get the brakes looked at. It might be in for a couple of days, depending what parts need ordering. I'll have to use yours if there are evening call-outs.'

'No problem,' Libby said.

Sean gave them both another quick kiss, grabbing the lunch Libby had made for him and closing the latched front door behind him in a waft of chilly air.

'Mummy, I need a wee,' Alice said, jumping up and down.

'Hurry up then, sweetie,' Libby said. 'I'll be outside scraping the ice off the car. Don't forget to wash your hands,' she called

out as Alice trotted off. She pulled on her padded jacket, feeling in the pockets for her gloves. They weren't there so she went back upstairs to check another coat pocket. Warm clothes hadn't been necessary so far this autumn, but the last day or two the weather had been coming in from the north. She reckoned they'd have to start parking in the courtyard at the back of the cottage again. It was a squeeze to get both cars in, but at least it was sheltered from the weather and would make getting away in the mornings quicker.

Eventually she found her gloves and headed out to the car, seeing that Sean had already left. She plucked at the last one or two remaining geranium heads in the pots outside the front door, making a mental note to pick up some pansies or cyclamen at the fruit and veg market later.

Libby started the engine of the VW estate, turning up the fan and flicking on the heated rear window. She rummaged in the glove box, feeling around for the ice scraper, giving a quick glance to the open front door of the cottage for Alice. She gave a little smile – the thatched roof of the little porch canopy always reminded her of a neatly trimmed fringe and she and Alice had often joked about how the cottage had a friendly face. Sean hadn't long bought the place when they got together and they'd done lots to it over the last few years. It was definitely home. Definitely safe. The three of them. Maybe one day there would be four. She'd been dropping hints recently about trying for another.

'Come on, Bean,' Libby called out as she took to the windscreen with the scraper, stopping suddenly.

'Oh,' she said, noticing a piece of paper tucked beneath the driver's wiper. It wasn't a flyer or stuck down in the frost, so she assumed it must have been left some time this morning.

She pulled off her glove, lifting up the blade as the windscreen thawed from the heater. The paper was damp as she opened it – though she was more concerned with why Alice was taking so long inside than whatever had been left on her car.

'Alice? Chop-chop!' Libby called through the front door, putting the key in the lock. She opened up the piece of paper, seeing that there were just a few words written in blue biro, bleeding out from the damp.

She stared at it, her mouth opening, her eyes widening, unable to take in what she was reading. Then, when she glanced up at the door, her eyes grew even wider. The writing wasn't the only thing bleeding.

'Oh, *sweetie*,' Libby exclaimed when she saw Alice's nosebleed. Her lips and hands were scarlet. 'How did this happen?' She bent down, dropping the note to inspect her daughter.

She didn't know which was more disturbing – what was written on the paper or the sight of Alice's face.

As she pulled a tissue from her pocket, dabbing at the blood, she closed her eyes for a moment. But all she could see were those five words, etched into the back of her eyelids…

Sean is having an affair…