The Woman Who Wrote In Green Ink

Sheena Billett

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Book Cover by Kostis Pavlou

Published 2023

For all those whose stories have yet to be told

Chapter One

Amber studied the neat, slanted handwriting and wondered. She carefully turned the pages of the old exercise books where this unknown person from the past had poured out her heart in green ink, here and there, dates, places and first names – signposts for Amber to imagine some vague context. Even though she was drawn to the story they might reveal, she replaced the books back on the table and moved on, feeling vaguely embarrassed and uncomfortable at prying into someone else's private life and innermost thoughts. It seemed wrong that something so personal was on public display for anyone to pick up and casually flick through.

Glancing at her watch, she saw she still had ten minutes to kill before her meeting with Alan. Her heart thumped and beat like a drum in her head when she thought about it. Even though she had been the one to ask for the meeting, Alan had dictated where they met and at what time and Amber could feel the inevitable sense of humiliation already mounting. To distract herself from thoughts of the impending conversation, she wandered aimlessly on through the cluttered shelves and tables, imagining the homes that had housed all these items before they'd ended up here – abandoned and unwanted. At some point this gaudy dinner service had been someone's pride and joy. Maybe a wedding present, it had once been at

the centre of many family celebrations. She imagined Christmases where a large, happy family crowded around the table, eating off these very plates. Or maybe she was being too romantic. Perhaps, instead, it had witnessed a loveless marriage, the crockery all too soon packed away, never serving the purpose it had been designed for. The dormant journalist in Amber was still curious, still drawn to interesting stories.

She approached a collection of clocks, hearing them before she saw them. Once she was amongst them, the sinister rhythm of the ticking was deafening. Like a giant time bomb. For one panic-filled moment, she felt imprisoned, almost hypnotised by the wall of jagged sound. Her nerves already frayed, she jumped as a cuckoo clock broke the spell, bursting from its wooden home in a frenzy of calls, echoed by the other clocks in a seemingly endless series of chimes and calls.

Hastily retracing her steps, Amber found herself drawn back to the table where the exercise books lay in the neat pile, just as she had left them. She wondered how long they had waited there, and who could have given them away. Some kind of house clearance, maybe? She imagined a middle-aged next of kin, tasked with the job of clearing out an elderly relative's belongings, impatiently sorting and discarding everything that had been the very fabric of this woman's life – Amber felt instinctively that this writer was a woman. Or even worse, some unfeeling, impersonal, house clearance company, throwing things into a skip without even examining them, only looking for items of value. Her work at the charity shop had heightened Amber's awareness of the detritus of other people's lives – items that had been precious to one person, seen as nothing by those who followed, even family members. Sometimes, especially a family member. Precious possessions bundled into black bags 'for the charity shop' or 'maybe this

might be worth something, we'll take it to that collectibles place.' Maybe this was what we all came to in the end.

Taking a breath and turning her attention away from morbid thoughts, Amber picked up the first book, and held it, unopened between her hands. Somehow, someone had felt these books were important enough to keep from the throw-away pile, even if they hadn't cared enough to read the careful, green handwriting for themselves. Amber opened the book and read the first entry:

5 November

I don't know why I'm writing this, as I'm pretty sure no one will ever read it, but I just need to get everything down on paper. We have been so happy, Jamie and I, and I am so lucky that he chose to marry me of all people. Our friends call us the Golden Couple. There was never anything golden about me before Jamie, though. None of the boys at school, or at university gave me a second glance. I guess I was the typical bookish girl – always reading – I even had the glasses to complete the look. But when I met Jamie, something of his 'goldenness' rubbed off on me. I lost the glasses, and found that I enjoyed parties and dancing, after all. He was so patient. It was as if he enjoyed seeing me blossom, even if it was in his own reflection.

Something about that last phrase caused a tingle of unease to creep across Amber's scalp. But she told herself that the atmosphere in the centre was making her morbid. That, and her already heightened anxiety about Alan. She needed to get outside, back into the real world. But the pull of a connection with this woman from the past was suddenly powerful and Amber knew she had to rescue her from this dark, and slightly damp place. She needed to find out what story was contained in the green ink – if there was one. Instinct told her there was something. Guessing that quite a bit of time had

passed since the clock orchestra had signalled the half hour, Amber checked her watch again and realised she only had ten minutes to get to the Bell.

At the counter she waited, trying to conceal her impatience, while an elderly man, apparently an ancient and integral part of the musty establishment, took time and great care in finding the right sized paper and then meticulously wrapping the books, finishing up with string, tied in a careful knot. Amber wished she didn't care about being late for Alan, but the knot of anxiety remained stubbornly tight in her stomach.

'I can't stand all that awful Sellotape or, even worse, plastic bags. These books deserve better than that.' He shuddered.

Amber forced a smile, and even in her haste to get away found herself asking, 'Do you know where they came from?'

'No, my dear. I'm afraid they just came in with a job-lot of books from a house clearance company.' He peered at her through milk-bottle lenses. 'But I couldn't throw them away. I knew someone would come for them sooner or later. Here you go.' And he handed over the package with care, as if it contained something fragile.

'Thank you.'

As she reached the door, Amber turned back. 'If you can find out anything about where they came from, I'd be grateful.'

The man nodded. 'Maybe you'll find the answers in the books themselves.'

Outside, the afternoon July sunshine was bright and Amber had to blink several times. She took out her phone and realised she was now late for her meeting with Alan. Hurrying to the Bell Hotel, she put all thoughts of the green-ink writer to the back of her mind. She needed to focus now. The next hour or so would be crucial.



Alan rose to greet Amber as she hurried across the lobby, his bespoke suit immaculate, and hand-made shoes speaking of understated luxury.

'I'm so sorry, Alan, I got waylaid in the collectibles centre up the road.' She brushed her hair off her face with both hands and sat down, taking a steadying breath.

'I've ordered us coffee and scones if that's all right with you.'

'Yes, great. I mean... Thank you.'

'Still interested in poking about in other people's lives, I see.' then?'

Amber didn't respond as the coffee and scones arrived.

Alan studied her with his green eyes. 'So, how are you, Amber?'

'I'm good thank you, and you're looking well, Alan.'

'I do my best to keep in shape,' he replied, a hint of smugness in his tone. He buttered a scone and took a sip of coffee before sitting back in the chair, legs crossed. His thick, sandy coloured hair, now peppered with grey was expensively styled and waved.

Amber selected a scone and cut it in half, helping herself to a generous portion of jam. If ever she'd needed a sugar rush, it was now.

'How are Ben and Sam?' he asked.

'Good. Thank you. They're both doing well at school.' But Alan already knew that, she reminded herself, having been her father's eyes and ears for many years.

Just as she had taken a bite of the jam-laden scone, Alan changed tack, wrong footing her, by becoming suddenly business-like.

'Right, enough of the pleasantries, let's get down to business, shall we?'

Amber swallowed a large lump of scone, feeling it lodge in her throat. She took a deep breath, willing herself to be calm, unable to speak for a few seconds.

'Maybe a sip of coffee would help?' Alan spoke solicitously, a thin veneer over his enjoyment of her discomfort.

Ignoring him, Amber said, 'I need your help.'

'Oh, well, if it's about money, you could have just called me, Amber.'

He let the silence lengthen. 'Or is one of the boys in some kind of trouble?'

'I want to find Peter.' Amber blurted it out before she lost her nerve.

Alan buttered the other half of the scone and took another sip of coffee. He took a bite, chewing thoughtfully before swallowing.

Amber took a sip of coffee and willed herself to be calm.

'What if Peter doesn't want to be found?' he said eventually

'I just need to know. I need to know where he is and if he's okay.'

When Alan didn't respond, Amber continued, 'Come on, Alan. You're the family solicitor, you can find out things.'

'Yes, I *can* "find out things" as you put it, but there's always a chance you might not like what you find out.'

'I'm happy to take that risk. Peter needs to know he's still part of the family – part of me.'

'After all this time? Really?' Alan made a contemptuous sound, something between a sigh and a laugh. 'I'm sure any wish to be part of your family shrivelled and died years ago.'

Amber hoped the inner flinch at that barb hadn't shown on her face. Alan was right. How could she have left it so long? She should have reached out to Peter long before this.

'I'm assuming your father doesn't know about all this.'

Amber shifted uncomfortably in the chair.

'I thought not.'

Amber took a few more nervous gulps of coffee and crumbled her scone onto the plate, her sugar craving long gone. Alan was still able to make her feel as if she was eleven years old, even after all this time. Maybe it was because he'd known her all her life, and in his head she'd never grown up. Was that what happened when, as an adult, you'd known people almost all their lives? You always saw them as permanent children?

As if to confirm this, Alan sighed the sort of sigh that is used to placate a difficult child, bringing Amber back to the moment. 'I'll make a few initial enquiries and put out a few feelers, but that's all. You need to talk to your father before I can do anything else. And I have a feeling that he's not ready to welcome his prodigal son with the fatted calf anytime soon.'

Amber willed herself not to be intimidated. Looking Alan in the eye, she retorted, 'Everyone deserves a second chance, Alan. We were only fifteen when everything happened – we're forty now. And he's my twin.'

Alan sighed and pushed the plate away. 'Exactly. It's all water under the bridge. Your mother died twenty-five years ago. Why you want to rake everything up now, is beyond me. You don't seem to have been bothered about Peter before now. Why the sudden interest?'

He fixed her with an intense gaze, the green eyes almost hypnotic, as Amber clenched her hands in her lap at Alan's casual use of her brother's name. On the rare occasions the subject had arisen – with less and less frequency over the years – her father had referred to Peter as 'your brother,' as if depriving him of any existence in his own right.

Alan cocked his head to one side, obviously expecting an answer.

'I... Sam is the same age as Peter was when our mother died, and I just...' Amber tailed off, not really knowing the answer to the question herself, just knowing that, somehow, the time was right.

Alan finished his coffee, replacing the cup carefully in the saucer. 'I'll see what I can do, but you need to speak to your father.' He leaned forwards. 'And be careful what you wish for.' Having fixed her with another long gaze, he languidly rose from the chair in a seamless movement.

'I'll be in touch.'

Once he had disappeared from sight, Amber released a long breath and sat back in the chair, closing her eyes. After a few minutes, when her heartbeat had steadied, she tuned into the afternoon-tea chatter around her and wondered if anyone else was stepping out into the unknown today, starting down a road that might change their life for ever. She doubted it. From the snippets she heard, most seemed to be able to talk and gossip about brothers, aunts, parents and weddings, and even funerals, with casual ease.

'You should have seen her! You'd think someone would have told her that hat did nothing for her.'

'And who was that plus one with her this time?'

'I know, she comes to every wedding with a different man. And boy does she know how to knock it back!'

'She still knows how to have a good time though.'

The last speaker had sounded wistful.

Amber had never been to a family wedding, except her own of course, where most of the guests had been friends and business contacts of her father and Cam – maybe to make up for the lack of relatives. No one else had a fragmented family like hers, it seemed. Just her and her father, and did they even count as a family? But she had Cam and the boys, she reminded herself. What more did she want? These days,

however, her father saw more of her husband than he did Amber, and any messages were communicated via Cam. She was going to need to steel herself for the encounter to come. Her wish to find Peter couldn't be relayed via her husband.

'Are you alright, madam?'

Amber jumped at the voice beside her.

'Yes, I'm fine. Thank you.'

'Just taking a moment?' The waiter gave her an understanding look.

Amber saw from his name badge that he was called Dean and was touched by his kindness. 'Yes. Just taking a moment,' she echoed, smiling at him.

Amber left the Bell feeling out of sorts, annoyed and irritated with herself. What had she been thinking? She had a family, of course she did. She had Cam and the boys. Encounters with Alan, which fortunately were few and far between these days, always left her with this hollowed out feeling, as if somehow he was able to take her views and concerns and scoop them out of her and throw them away like so much rubbish. And even now, as an adult, she didn't know how to stop it happening.

Chapter Two

Amber got home to an empty house and poured herself a large glass of wine. Cam had texted to say he would be late in from work... again, and the boys had obviously been and gone judging by the depleted state of the fridge. She wanted to put all thoughts of her father, Alan and Peter from her mind and immerse herself in something else – someone else's life for a bit. Amber painstakingly undid the knots in the string and carefully unwrapped the notebooks, laying them out on the table, all three of them. Green exercise books, just like the ones Amber remembered all too well from school. The covers gave nothing away other than dates: November 1978; December 1978; January 1979. She took a sip of wine, and reached for November 1978, continuing from where she'd left off:

Something isn't right – I can't put my finger on it, but I feel uneasy. I've racked my brains to think when I first felt like this... Was it when he refused to speak to me for an hour after his parents came round last week? At the time I thought it was because they'd irritated him. Teasing him about having a posh wife. He doesn't have a good relationship with them, and I was uncomfortable. His father never seems to know when to stop and his mother just laughs at everything or agrees with whatever Jamie and her husband say. I think we were both

relieved when they'd gone, but Jamie wouldn't talk about it however much I tried to get him to open up. I should know by now that any time spent with his parents seems to wind him up. But now I'm wondering...was it something I said or did? I've tried to go back over the evening but I can't think of anything.

Then the next thing was a few nights ago when I had marking to finish. He went up to bed without me, without even saying goodnight. I know he was still awake when I got into bed, even though he was pretending to be asleep

Looking back over what I've written it all seems so trivial and insignificant.

Maybe I'm overreacting. Maybe this is what marriage is like after a while.

Usually we have all the old gang around for a firework party. But not this year. Jamie says we can't afford it. I hate the sound of these fireworks tonight – they're like gunfire.

6 November

I was glad to get back to school today. I feel bad for saying it, but I feel uncomfortable at home at the moment. I'm hoping it's just a bad patch that will pass.

Several of the girls are off with the flu, so we read some poetry today.

12 November

I don't know what I was so worried about. Jamie's had a raise at work and he booked a surprise weekend in Tenby. The old Jamie is back and he made me feel so special. We had a wonderful time, just wandering around the harbour and the beach. There is something special about beaches out of season – something wild and wonderful, as if nature has reclaimed its own space again.

Amber turned the next few pages. There followed several entries about work and various pupils. Freya obviously cared

about them a great deal. Amber decided to call the anonymous writer, Freya. It didn't seem right that she didn't have a name.

The name of the school was never mentioned but Amber noticed that all the pupils Freya referred to were girls. So maybe it was an all-girls school. Amber continued to leaf through pages of work and socialising. Following the bonfire-night tension, they had obviously still met up with friends. It seemed that Freya's world had swung back on its axis and life had settled into some kind of normality.

Hearing keys in the front door, she closed the book, quickly, almost furtively, putting it on top of the neat pile on the table.

'Hello, babe. Everything okay?'

Amber didn't respond to Cam's cursory peck on the cheek. She wasn't going to ask him where he'd been. She would not be that wife. But she could smell the alcohol on his breath.

'What've you got here?' Cam picked up one of the exercise books, roughly flicking through the pages and carelessly throwing it back on the table.

'You shouldn't be driving if you're going to drink,' she said, replacing the book and getting up to put the kettle on.

'Oh for God's sake, it was only a quick one. Talking of quick ones, how about it, babe?' He put his arms around her waist and pulled her to him, pressing himself against her.

Amber turned away. 'Not when you've been drinking.'

'Okay, have it your own way.' He retreated to the lounge, turned on the TV and started watching the football.

Amber placed the mug of tea on the coffee table and perched on the edge of the settee beside him, willing herself to breathe. 'I met with Alan this afternoon.'

Cam looked at her. 'Oh? You didn't say anything.'

'You don't always tell me where you're going. Like this evening,' Amber said pointedly.

Cam didn't respond, turning back to the football.

'I've asked Alan to try and find Peter, I need to know where he is and if he's okay.' The words seemed to come out in a rush.

Once again, Cam didn't respond and Amber wondered if he'd heard her. 'Cam—'

'David's not going to like that,' Cam said abruptly without taking his eyes off the screen.

'I need to know where he is. He's my twin!'

'Don't rock the boat, Amber. That's all I'm saying. We need to keep your father on side while I'm launching the new company. You know that I need his financial backing and influence.' He turned to look at her. 'Think of someone apart from yourself for a change.' There was a hardness in his tone and Amber could see the tension in his clenched jaw. She decided to leave well alone. She had told him, that was the main thing.

Back in the kitchen, she was making a jam sandwich when Ben and Sam came home from the youth club they both went to on a Saturday night – although Ben was disparaging about it now.

'It's just for kids really, Mum. I'll be old enough to drink and have a proper night out soon.'

Sam scowled at the put-down and countered, 'Well it'll be much better when you're not there, cramping my style and putting me down all the time!'

Amber chose to not mention the fact that she knew that Ben and some of his friends had already made some experimental forays into one or two of the pubs in Willby. Vee from work had a friend who worked at the Queen's Head. Willby was a small place, and secrets were not kept for long.

Ben gave his brother a friendly punch and, grabbing a glass of cola, went to join Cam to watch the football, Sam following

suit, before Amber had chance to ask them how their days had been. The days when they'd come home from school clutching strange creations and bubbling with enthusiasm were long gone. Amber poured another glass of wine. Tucking the exercise books under her arm, carrying the jam sandwich on a plate with one hand and holding the wine glass in the other, she made her way upstairs.

Chewing on the sandwich and enjoying the comforting sweetness of the jam, washed down with crisp, white wine, Amber stretched her legs out on the bed and leant her head back against the headboard. Closing her eyes, she wondered if it really was the right time to open this particular can of worms – because she had to be realistic, as Alan had said, she might not like what she found out. Maybe she *was* being selfish...she knew how much this company launch meant to Cam, and how desperately he wanted to impress her father. Amber had known for some time that this need had nothing to do with her, that their marriage had simply been a convenient, though, enjoyable step towards fulfilling Cam's craving for wealth, prestige, and the power that came with it. It was what drove him, and he saw her father's approval and sponsorship as his golden ticket to success. Was she really prepared to get in the way of all this, just as Cam seemed to be on the brink of finding the pot of gold at the end of the rainbow? She was pretty sure that's how he saw it – the answer to all his dreams in a single business transaction. Had no one told him that when you got to the end of the rainbow, there was nothing there? That it was all an illusion?

Trying to shake off the sense of foreboding that was threatening to overwhelm her, Amber opened her eyes, finished the sandwich, and with the remainder of the glass of wine in one hand, opened the book to lose herself in Freya's world, once more.

15 November

I've discovered that the best thing about life at the moment is work. I love teaching the girls English and introducing them to new worlds and new ways of thinking. Miss Powell is not keen, she would rather we stuck to Shakespeare and Jane Austen, but I've persuaded her that the girls need a wider education if they're going to live in the modern world. We've started reading To Kill A Mocking Bird. The girls were shocked at first – this kind of writing was new to them, but now they love it – they can relate to it. Sandra said, 'It's like a film, miss, only in a book. I didn't know there were books like this.' I assured her there were many, many more books like this. I can't wait to introduce them to the girls.

Amber smiled, finishing her wine. A woman after her own heart. She wished Freya had been her English teacher, and not Miss 'Smelly' Smedley who had made them read Jane Eyre around the class while she sat and knitted – always the same yellow jumper which she never seemed to finish over the two years she had taught them. Amber remembered the sometimes audible sigh from the other girls as Pamela Bentley struggled over the words, taking an age to read her paragraph. Amber wondered what had happened to Pamela.

Despite Miss Smedley's best efforts, however, Amber had grown to love Jane Austen when she was at university and had reread her books many times.

Returning to Freya, Amber's breath caught in her throat as she read:

18 November

Last night we had a row and he threw me against the cupboard. I am stunned and the bruises on my arm prove that I didn't imagine it. This isn't the Jamie I knew – the fun-loving, carefree, daredevil Jamie I fell in love with. I'm so shocked that things have turned on their head so suddenly.

Amber put the book down, stunned. This wasn't the sort of story she'd had in mind and part of her didn't want to be an observer of Freya's distress. She leaned her head back and sighed, knowing that she would read on. How could she not?

Taking another sip of wine, she continued with a growing sense of dread:

I think I know why things have got worse though. He told me last night that he's lost his job, but that it wasn't his fault, that he's been framed. Apparently some money went missing. I said we should go to the police and get them to investigate. He looked at me as if I was mad and said that no one would believe him anyway. When I said we didn't need to worry because I could earn enough to tide us over, that's when he lost it... I was only trying to reassure him so that he didn't worry.

The writing was losing its neatness, and the last sentence was left hanging, without an ending. From downstairs, Amber heard the crowd roaring in the distance, as Cam, Ben and Sam, echoed the goal celebrations of United's win. She was still struggling to process what she'd just read, and scanned the entry again, several times. There was no doubt that something had happened on the 18th of November all those years ago. Something bad. She was beginning to sense and understand something of Freya's unhappiness and confusion, but Amber felt the gap of almost fifty years as an unbridgeable chasm, making it impossible for her to help Freya. Her own relationship with Cam was hardly the pinnacle of romance, she was under no illusions about that, but they rubbed along okay, and sometimes the old spark rekindled for a brief moment and Amber still felt the old attraction. She told herself, sternly, that things could be much worse. Closing the book, she placed it, with the others in the bottom drawer of her bedside cabinet. But she couldn't settle. It didn't seem right to shut Freya's pain and unhappiness in a drawer, so eventually she retrieved

the book and placed it under her pillow. It somehow seemed the right thing to do, even though she could imagine Cam's sarcastic comments if he knew.