The Rich

Rachel Lynch grew up in Cumbria and has written a million-copy bestselling crime series set in the lakes and fells of her childhood, starring Detective Kelly Porter. She previously taught History and travelled the globe with her Army Officer husband, before having children and starting a new career in personal training and sports therapy. Writing from her home in Hertfordshire is now her full-time job, and this is her first standalone psychological thriller.

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THE RICH

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CANELO

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Prologue

Her face was the most perfect tone of ivory, a bride's dress from long ago. Untouched, with a timeless beauty. One longed to reach out and stroke it, like the soft fabric of a doll belonging to a child. A temporary desire, thought better of.

In her stillness, she was a pristine specimen of human engineering. The clavicle – a master lever – joined her appendages, which swung at the perimeter, to her heart at the centre. Her décolletage was clean, as if recently washed and tended to: such a delicate veil of silk protecting the organs within.

She groaned. She was still alive.

A lightning bolt of fear. Something must be done. A line, once crossed, is a thing of the past. The job needed finishing. Something heavy would do it.

Searching around underneath the body prompted a fit of coughing and spluttering, jerking the woman's body back and forth.

Focus.

The night was warm and sticky. Perfect for lovers looking for a secret place to hide their trysts. But this corner of the field was dead as the blackest night, only the slow ambling river showed signs of movement. Away in the distance sat a row of thatched-roofed cottages behind the Red Hen gastropub, which was bidding goodnight

to its last customers. Life floated across the field from the tastefully modernised beer garden surrounded by twinkling lights. It was a venue for weddings, for the privileged few who could afford to love so richly. It had reinvented itself from old-school watering hole to niche on-trend establishment, attracting a clientele untouched by misfortune. Enough money bought immunity from reality. But there were no guests over here, paying or otherwise, except the odd mosquito; small native ones, and distant cousins of the fat bloodsuckers that caused such misery far from these shores.

Finally, a wheel wrench. It was heavy and lethal. Hopefully.

At least her eyes were closed. It was a small mercy not to have to stare at those deep hazelnut spheres that performed magic tricks on every man they turned towards. Distant recollections of a science lesson at school. The dissection of a cow's eye. Staring, mahogany discs, asking endless questions, full of accusations of inhumanity.

Held tightly, the wrench transferred its terrifying power to the wielder.

The woman lifted an arm feebly, as if knowing what was coming next, begging the question of whether slaughtered animals did the same in their final moments. Did they plead with their executioner for clemency? We all do what it takes to survive.

The wrench came up and down, slamming into her skull. Three times.

It was over.

Two fingers to the perfect neck confirmed life extinct. Her beautiful body, preened and pampered with privilege, was empty now. The blood was surprisingly oily. A bottle of bleach, packed in haste after the accident,

now performed its one meaningful task in life: to wash away inconvenient impurities. It squirted over her body, and inside the crevices that any decent forensic detective might focus on. Her clothes, the blanket she lay on, her phone and the detritus from the boot were all piled into black bags. The body itself wasn't heavy. Her pride outweighed her flesh and bones. She was easily flopped over the riverbank, hastily smothered with branches.

It was a stretch of the river Cam that, in summer, was heavily overgrown, and whiffed of sewage. The locals had a petition about it.

Oh my, not Cambridge?

It would take days before she was discovered. The killer wasn't concerned about being exposed.

Chapter 1

My iPhone alarm brings about a feeling of dread and disappointment every morning at six a.m. Jeremy is fast asleep next to me and I can smell last night's booze sweating out of every pore. Where I once propped myself up on an elbow and peered at him lovingly, I now roll over to a shell of a man whose wasted and swollen body lies motionless and loveless on his side of the bed where it dropped last night, or sometime this morning. I can almost see the cloud of chemicals escaping his oily skin via his liver and kidneys, and the very sight of him makes me gag.

I slip into my morning routine as Jeremy remains oblivious, and the sounds of my toothbrush and the shower do not wake him. The mirror only signals back to me the face of somebody he used to love, so I don't look in it.

Marriage, like a yawning canyon, echoes with isolation and desolation, and I push it to the back of my mind, where it is safe from searching questions. I'm tempted to welcome hope, in all its disguises, tricking me into believing that he'll work today, or do something useful, but I'm no longer a girl who hangs on to such folly.

Jeremy has been writing a thesis for twenty years, without putting anything down on paper. The big publishing deal, and the trappings of fame it would bring, are all illusions, stuck in Jeremy's head behind the fug of

a hangover and under the cover of a duvet. I fund his habit, like a brazen enabler. Functioning alcoholism costs money.

I believed in him for half of my life.

The bathroom floor is cold underfoot, but it's what I need to wake up, that, and the sound of my children – teenagers now – downstairs, fixing themselves breakfast and chattering about YouTube or TikTok. Theirs are the sounds of life, unlike the murmurs of Jeremy's bodily functions as he rolls over and farts, putting me off breakfast.

I put my faith in make-up, as if it can save me, as well as distinct pieces of expensive jewellery, and a lovingly laid out couture suit. I rub Barbara Sturm lotion into my skin and I feel like a real woman again. There is no limit to what I would spend on camouflage cream.

Despite my presence and the noise of my efforts, Jeremy slumbers on, and I consider the wisdom of slamming the bedroom door behind me, just to interrupt his fitful rest. I decide against it. I'm not a child, and I have a job to do. But I do leave his wine glass on his bedside cabinet, knowing that it will compound his shame when he finally wakes. Sometimes the truth is left discarded for all to see, and sometimes it needs planting.

I close the door gently and make my way downstairs to the noise of my children, who lighten my step. My day will be filled with the minds of the broken and so I grab this opportunity to wrap myself in the clamour of the mundane and ordinary. I pick up the post and read my name: Doctor Alex Moore, MSc Hons, BSc Hons, PsyD… Those are the ones to ignore because they're usually trying to sell me something. I drop the letters casually on the kitchen counter and notice that there is

rotten fruit in the bowl. I'm irritated, but not surprised. I pick it out and throw it away.

James is eighteen and he knows everything; in fact, he gets a new tattoo when he learns a bit more. He smiles at me through a half-eaten croissant and he lets me hug him. He smells of aftershave and weed. His body is strong and soon he will be a man. I know he dabbles with banned substances and he's been out all night with a pal. Lydia is just a year behind him and is bulimic. She sips juice and shies away from my morning kiss. Her skin is pale and her eyes sunken: her body is pleading with all of us to nourish her. Ewan is my baby, at fifteen. He's on the verge of manhood: a torrid point in life where I'll have to pull away, but I don't want to. He watches over James's shoulder and his eyes widen as he figures out a joke. He gets beaten up at school and there's not a damn thing I can do about it. His shoulders don't sit as tall as his brother's and his smile is timid. He surprises easily and so I lay my hand upon his cheek gently and say good morning.

'Morning, Mum,' Ewan says, chomping on a banana.

'Where is it?' Lydia demands angrily.

There's an altercation in full swing, and Lydia's face is suddenly like thunder. There's nothing that can animate her quite like her brothers' quest to sabotage her sulking.

It's just another day, and this pleases me.

'Mum, he's got my eyeliner,' Lydia says in a pleading voice, appealing to me to make her brothers disappear, to solve all her problems. But I smirk at James, against my better judgement. He is a path forger, a trailblazer; fearless and autonomous, and possessed of an extra-terrestrial superpower called confidence, which eludes his sister. But my job is merely to stop them killing one another. The

years of instruction were lost a long time ago. They're fully formed humans now. Almost.

'Have you got her eyeliner?' I ask James.

'I only borrowed it!'

He ducks and dodges a croissant as it's launched in his direction by his sister.

'Lydia! Dear God, it's just an eyeliner!' I instantly regret losing my cool. I've diminished her in front of her brothers, but I can't take the words back. Lydia storms out of the kitchen and runs upstairs.

'Drama, drama!' James adds for good measure.

Now I am full of regret and go to the fridge to get milk for my coffee, but there is none left, just packets of food from Waitrose left untouched. The unwritten rule is that Jeremy sorts all of that out because I work full time. I add milk to the list of things I need to pick up on the way back from the office tonight, and I make my coffee black. It tastes bitter and disgusting and I crave the richness of something dairy to go in it. I skip breakfast, which is trendy these days because it's called fasting.

'You've got golf practice tonight,' I tell Ewan.

He looks forlorn. 'I'm going out,' he whines.

'You can go out after,' I tell him. 'What's this?' I distract them. They're playing cards while their phones churn away beside them.

'It's a magic trick,' says James.

'I know this, you've got the Jack behind your back,' I say.

'How did you know? Mum!'

I redeem myself. I'm Mum of the Year. Good at magic tricks.

Sun pierces the windows along the whole of the extension to the back of the house, and through the lanterns

straddling the roof. The rays are glorious and I turn my face to them, as if they'll help me through the day, or maybe they'll linger too long and give me skin cancer. One never knows on which side of chance one walks.

The pool man is here; I forgot it was Wednesday. Christ. I run upstairs to search for cash. Jeremy stirs and I remind him that I'm taking his car today. He needs to take mine to the carwash to be valeted, and go to the tip and get rid of the broken coat stand, which he denies having anything to do with. His blackouts are getting worse.

'I'll take the rubbish you have in your boot and sling it in the waste at work,' I tell him. He grunts.

I hate his car.

It's not that it doesn't work, or it's ugly or old. It's a beautiful car. But it's Jeremy's and it reminds me of him. There's always a bottle or two rolling around in there.

The pool man is pleased to see his cash on time, as usual. He's stripped to the waist, which is appropriate for the season but not necessarily the neighbourhood, and about twenty-five years old. He works out. His muscles are taut and his smile fresh. Something stirs inside me that has been dead for so long I can't remember the feeling. My eyes linger on his torso and they drift towards the point where his skin disappears into his shorts. I walk away. It's a little livener to get my day going.

'Lydia!' I scream through the kitchen and up the stairs.

She ignores me. The boys have disappeared. My children are constantly plugged into electronic equipment and it's a miracle I can communicate with them at all. I remember looking at my own mother and thinking her ancient because she'd never owned a pair of roller boots. Middle age assaults me with a deflationary slap. I'm no longer relevant.

I check my face one last time in the hall mirror. The hallway I rearranged just last week, which Jeremy didn't notice. The photograph of us as a family, smiling, happy and tanned, on Tony's yacht in the Bahamas, stares back at me from the table.

I grab my briefcase and then trot back to the kitchen for the shopping list.

'I'm gone!' I holler.

No reply.

'Lydia, don't forget your trip money!'

I recoil at the sound of my own screeching. It's exhausting, shaping children, and then realising that the effort was unrelenting and mostly pointless. The human brain is the most undeveloped organ in the body at birth. It's a blank canvas, ready to turn into a masterpiece or a catastrophe.

'You look lovely, Mum,' James says. He's followed me into the hall.

I blow him a kiss. His words linger in my head as I walk to Jeremy's car.