CATE RAY

THE YOUNGER WOMAN

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Set in Kingfisher by Becky Chilcott.

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Loose tongues are worse than wicked hands.

– PROVERB

PROLOGUE

Once she had made up her mind, there was no turning back – no mercy. Subtle attacks took as much strength as brutal ones, but were harder to prove. So she bided her time, looking for soft spots, weaknesses, waiting for the exact moment to strike. He never watched the news, so she knew about the heatwave long before he did. He had no idea it was forty degrees out, and accepted her invitation. It was hot, she said, but there was a fresh breeze, perfect for a run before the temperature really soared. The steep incline was not for the faint-hearted. People happening to look out their windows frowned at him as he soldiered on in the sweltering heat. She waited at the foot of the hill, bending over as though she had a stitch. Then she cupped her hands to her mouth. Later, a local resident said he'd heard her call out in concern. That wasn't true. It just looked like it.

Even if she had shouted at him to stop, he wouldn't have listened – not after the conversation they'd just had.

It was only as his legs buckled that she screamed. Running up the hill as fast as she could, she fell to her knees, crying out for help. A crowd gathered, an ambulance was called, but it was too late. His face was drenched in sweat, his lips were tinged blue – a corpse already.

The funny thing was his eyes were open, bulging, staring at her accusingly. Yet no one saw it that way, least of all her. She held his hand, cried, more than happy with her decision to kill him.

PART ONE

DIGGING FOR GOLD

1

HOW DID WE GET HERE – WHEN DID THINGS BECOME SO bad? There are so many triggers and alarm bells, I'm overheating with the effort of trying to pick just one. And now Alice is leaving and if I don't get a hold of myself, I'm going to miss it.

Alongside our car, a student is saying goodbye to her parents, tucking in her camisole. Fred is watching her, instead of Alice. And I'm watching Fred, instead of Alice.

She's at the door of her accommodation block, about to disappear inside. And then, suddenly, she falters, looking back at us, twisting her fingers together. She may as well be in pigtails and a gingham dress on her first day of school.

My seat belt snaps off. "Gabby . . ." Fred says.

I'm already halfway up the path, pulling her into my arms, inhaling her hair. Alice, sweet Alice.

I don't want her to leave me. That's the truth. I don't want her to leave me with her father. I can't bear it. Everything is heating, melting, as my entire system gives way to emotion.

And then I stop myself. I can't do this to her. I pull back, grasp her shoulders, my arms rigid like tent poles holding us together. "You're going to have a wonderful time, sweetheart. This is an exciting new adventure."

She's looking at me sceptically, but I don't so much as breathe. I can be a tower for her. It's only university; she'll be home again in ten weeks.

"Thanks," she says, her blue eyes filling, becoming sea-like. I see my mother in her then and remove my hands from her shoulders in case I'm gripping too hard. "I love you, Mum."

"And I love you too . . . Now, go." I give her a little pat, then watch as she keeps walking and this time she doesn't look back. I think I'm going to die as the door closes behind her, and then it's me standing there, faltering, looking behind me, twisting my fingers together. Except that it's not my parents I'm in turmoil about, but my husband. There's a huge distance between us, much further than the twenty steps it would take me to reach him. He's not even looking at me. His head is turned towards two attractive girls sitting underneath a tree. I could be setting off a distress flare and he wouldn't notice.

Gazing at the door that swallowed Alice, I consider following her, hiding inside the laundry room for a few weeks. And then Fred honks the car horn and reluctantly I take those steps back to him.

Inside the car, I sit with my bag on my lap, staring straight ahead. He knows not to say anything, starts the engine. I'm glad he's driving, leaving me free to sob until I'm as dry as a raisin. He's a steady driver, I'll give him that. We're at that stage after twenty-one years of marriage where I'm grateful for his practical skills. I'm sure he feels the same about me and my lasagne.

As we slowly pull away, everything becomes a blur through my tears. I don't know if it's my hormones, but I'm overwhelmed:

missing Alice, worrying about aging, wishing Fred wouldn't look at this collage of youth as though I'm the crusty glue underneath that no one sees.

I'm uncomfortably hot, even with the air conditioning on. It's very warm for September – shorts, strappy tops; a parade of gorgeousness. And just like me and my jumbled thoughts, Fred doesn't know which way to look.

Finally, as we pass through the entrance gates, he glances at me, patting my knee as though I'm man's best friend. "She'll be fine."

Our youngest has left home and that's all he can say. "Aren't you upset?" I stop crying for a moment, curious about his response.

"Of course." He doesn't take his eyes off the road. "But this was what you encouraged her to do, wasn't it? And she worked hard enough to get there. What's the point in being upset? We can't keep her tied up at home."

I don't know about that. If there were a sane way to do it, I'd probably give it a go.

I hiccup, gazing out the window, adding emotional detachment to the list of differences between us. Here I am, breaking my heart. And he's tapping the wheel to 'Summer Breeze', the salmon tint of his shirt making him seem pinker than he is. I bought that for him. And he needs a haircut. The ancient scar on his knee is shimmering where he's caught a tan from all the golf he's played this summer.

He's good for fifty-two – doesn't have to work as hard as I do to stay in shape, even though we're the same age, our birthdays only a week apart; both Taurus. I always thought this was nice,

but someone once said 'Two bulls in one house? Brave!' and it was one of those things that went around my head for longer than it should have.

I don't think of myself as a bull; sometimes I find it difficult to ask for what I need. And Fred is too tall for a bull. He's less goofy and cheeky now he's middle-aged, but every so often I see the old him – the way he was, with curls, John Lennon glasses. I start crying again. And this time, it's for us.

"She'll be okay, won't she?"

He looks at me. "Yes."

We don't say anything after that. I cry behind my shades all the way home, sucking my lip. It's seventy-nine miles from Exeter to Shelby. It will be longer for Alice by train – nearly four hours. I'll send her money so she can come home whenever she needs to.

What if she never needs to?

I hiccup again, but Fred doesn't notice. I told him I was going to be okay today and he's taken me at my word.

I've been dreading it. It was bad enough when Will left for Edinburgh. And now he has a girlfriend, Zara, who wears cut-off shorts with the pockets hanging out. She's lovely, very polite; but she's twenty and in love with my son and there's a tiny part of me that wishes she wasn't.

At home, I don't go straight inside but linger on the step, gazing at the baby oaks the children planted eight years ago when we moved in. The thing with trees is they stay where you put them.

Inside the house, it smells of Alice's perfume, which nearly sets me off again.

"Will you be okay if I do an hour's work?" Fred says, opening the door to the basement.

"Go ahead. I'm seeing Jam later."

He smiles. "Well, if she can't sort you out, then no one can."

But I wanted it to be you.

That's what I want to say. Yet it wouldn't sound right, not anymore. Too much has changed between us. There have been too many little betrayals, and some not-so-little ones.

"I'll give you a shout before I go," I say. "Would you like a coffee?"

"No, thanks," he calls out, already halfway down the stairs. The kitchen seems bigger than it was this morning, the breakfast bar stools painfully empty, Alice's cereal bowl in the sink; I might keep it there for a few days. Opening the fridge, I remove a pinot grigio, pour a glass, taking it outside with a jar of olives. A breeze is rustling the palm trees on the patio, fluttering the surface of the pool. I take a seat, a cardigan draped over my shoulders like some Hollywood star.

Sometimes it helps if I glamorise the situation, imagining myself delivering lines, acting out the pain on screen. Sometimes it doesn't. To be honest, I feel a bit silly.

I put my cardigan on properly, unscrewing the jar lid, chewing an olive, my eye drawn again to the oaks lining the border. They'll be beautiful this autumn. It seems cruel that children fly the nest to university as the leaves begin to fall. Why couldn't it be spring – give parents half a chance?

I take a long drink of wine, twisting to look up at Alice's turret.

She wanted a sea view when we moved in. Ten years old and she knew a premium room when she saw it. Suddenly, I want to be up there, to lie on her bed among her abandoned clothes and stuffed toys.

Upstairs, the room is surprisingly cool. I set the wine bottle on her dressing table, pouring myself another glass. "Well, cheers, baby girl."

Her bed looks inviting, despite the pile of ratty tracksuit bottoms. *Don't take those, Alice.*

I lie down, drawing my knees to my chest, hugging Big Bear, who smells of Alice's coconut shampoo. She still uses her bear as a pillow. I cry again, gazing at the photo stuck haphazardly on the wardrobe door: her and Will last year, by our pool, hands draped around each other.

My babies. Both gone.

*

I'm somewhere up high, on a clifftop, the sea crashing beneath me. It takes me a moment and then I remember that I've been here before, locked inside this ghastly dream, and then dread begins to drain through me because I know what's about to happen.

I wrestle to wake up, but can't. The rough gorse is grasping my ankles, locking me in place. I don't want to watch but have to, can't escape. He's there now, standing too close to the edge. Fred? Or Will? Don't let it be Will.

I writhe in panic, ripping my legs on the gorse. I call out, my voice lost against the roaring sea. *Get away from the edge! Get away from there!* I can't move or even turn my head away.

I know someone else is coming, can sense them drawing closer. I struggle again, screaming, as they shunt the man forwards over the treacherous edge.

I fight as hard as I can, my face wet with tears. And then I'm free.

*

Sitting up, I stare around me, the back of my hair wet with perspiration. Letting go of Big Bear, I gather the wine bottle and glass, tiptoeing from Alice's room. The house feels as empty and fragile as a greenhouse. Outside, the whisper of the sea sounds like passing traffic. I check the time on my phone: thirty minutes until I meet Jamillah.

In my en suite bathroom, I feel sick with fatigue. My tongue feels bulbous and there's a sleep line running all the way from my cheek to my chest, as though I'm a cardboard cutout that's been folded in two, ready to lie flat for the night.

I put on some make-up, fix up my hair, but that seems to accentuate my eyes – the fact that they're puffy, swollen – so I let it down again, telling myself that this is as good as it's going to get. I choose a T-shirt, jeans, and then head downstairs, knocking on Fred's cave door.

It smells of computer – that hot wire smell. "I'm off."

He looks up, removes his glasses, rubs the bridge of his nose. "Is it that time already?"

I nod. "There's pasta salad in the fridge."

"Thanks, my love." He frowns at me. "You all right? You look a bit . . ."

"I dozed off. And I had that nightmare again."

"It's okay. Everything's fine. I'm here. You'll always have me." He smiles, puts his glasses back on, focusing on the screen again. He works a lot of hours these days, more than he used to, but then so do I.

He's perfectly right though. The kids fly in and out like swallows, but good old Fred will always be here.

"See you later," I say.

As I go down the driveway to the side gate, I check my phone to see if Alice has messaged. She hasn't. I wonder what she's doing. I think about texting her, but don't. It's not going to help her let go, move on.

It's a ten-minute walk to the seafront. I don't see anyone as I go. My thoughts swirl, froth about, and by the time I enter the bar, I know I'm going to have to tell Jam what I finally admitted to myself today about Fred: I absolutely hate him.