Cruel Truth

Rachel Lynch is a million-copy bestselling author of crime fiction, best known for her gripping DI Kelly Porter series as well as several standalones and the Major Helen Scott military police thrillers. Born and raised in Cumbria, the haunting beauty of the Lake District seeps into every story she tells. After teaching history in London and living across the globe as an army wife, Rachel eventually returned to her greatest passion: writing. Travel and the shared human experience comprise the fabric of her work. She explores the darkest corners of humanity with empathy and edge, weaving gritty realism with unforgettable characters. Alongside multiple standalone novels, she now brings her stories to life in a whole new way, through her podcast *The Killer Storyteller: A Podcast with Rachel Lynch*, where she unpacks every twist and turn, book by book.

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CRUEL TRUTH



Penguin Random House

First published in the United Kingdom in 2026 by

Canelo Crime, an imprint of
Canelo Digital Publishing Limited,
20 Vauxhall Bridge Road,
London SW1V 2SA
United Kingdom

A Penguin Random House Company
The authorised representative in the EEA is Dorling Kindersley Verlag GmbH. Arnulfstr. 124, 80636 Munich, Germany

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A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN 9 781 83598 122 1

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Cover design by Jet Purdie

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Printed and bound in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, Elcograf S.p.A.

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1

I'd like to dedicate this book to the incredible cancer nurses at Elstree Cancer Centre, UK, for looking after me during the most challenging period of my life. When I was writing this book, I never imagined the subjects within would become such intimate parts of my own life and I'm profoundly awed by the work of scientists all over the world who continue to strive for ways to treat triple negative breast cancer.

Chapter 1

Sometimes the surface of the lake appeared more like glass than the finest tumbler of crystalware. Today was one of those days. It was so still that a summer pond-skater plonking its fat feet on the miniscule veneer could be spotted from metres away.

A waddling duck searched for discarded bread crusts from the tourists who'd sat all day at the nearby Faeryland café.

Surrounding the little inlet were undulations of fells, brown and purple from different heather species, as well as from the glaring rays of the burning sun, giving the impression that all moisture had been sucked from the land.

A ripple of movement sent swells towards a colourfully painted rowing boat which was face down at the water's edge, in the reeds, solitary in its misery.

The boats for rent were painted in bright hues of red, orange and green and they gleamed and boasted from the water's edge, all in a little row like Christmas decorations in a box. They were given names. *Theodosia*, *Romany*, *Sprite.*

This one was called *Water Nymph*.

The hills in the distance cocooned Grasmere inside its own suspended time and space. Stone walls and pathways looked like little scribbles across the fields, drawn by the hand of a child. The nearby café was closing for the day.

A grey squirrel darted from behind the *Water Nymph* suddenly but he hesitated. There was something unusual about the smell. The rodent sniffed and looked about warily. The aroma didn't belong near his favourite café, where the staff gave him bits of leftover cake and provided bowls of water. This was

his patch. He charmed the tourists as he nibbled the seeds he found on the ground after people had dropped local artisan bread covered in them. Sometimes he got too close, and he took treats straight out of the hand of a visitor.

He knew who to trust.

But whatever was under the *Water Nymph* wasn't part of the ordinary construct of a summer afternoon at the Faeryland café.

The day had been another scorcher. Grasmere had hosted crowds of people sharing picnics and frolicking in the water. A place Wordsworth called 'the loveliest spot that man hath ever found'. Rydal Water, next door, and the smaller sibling of the pair of lakes, was connected by a grassy vale ridge with a bridge and a forest, and was less busy, but then she was better at hiding.

The squirrel wasn't concerned with the weather, though, or the lay of the land. Despite having better shelter under the canopy of the Rydal woods, he preferred scavenging here. His main concern was just which intruder had disturbed his patch.

Until he found out, he decided to sit next to the *Water Nymph*, on guard because his innate sense of danger warned him that a predator had wandered into his territory.

A few flies landed on his face, just next to his nose. He twitched it to get rid of them, but they kept coming back. More numerous with each passing minute.

He moved away and realised that they were less interested in him and any spare crumbs he found for supper, courtesy of the day's customers, and far more interested in whatever was underneath the rowing boat.

Chapter 2

Kelly was about to add sugar to her espresso when news of a dead woman in Grasmere stirred Eden House to action. The red-stone four-storey house had once been a Victorian lodge for a well-to-do family, courtesy of Cumbrian slate. From the outside, the imposing address appeared regal and at ease, which was more than could be said for the top floor where Detective Inspector Kelly Porter ran the serious crime unit for North Lakes. Cumbria might be one of the largest counties in England but it didn't boast the most crime. The cities were welcome to their grim stats.

Dead bodies weren't welcome here.

However, they appeared nonetheless.

Details were sketchy. *Definitely* a homicide. 'Definitely' being a euphemism for a grisly scene. Young victim, no ID, underneath a boat at the Faeryland café, which was a shame because they'd all enjoyed coffee and cake there at one time or another, beside the lake, watching the ducks waddling ahead of their young, the reeds blowing in the wind, the lovely rowing boats bobbing up and down and causing ripples on the water, and the sun shining over Loughrigg beyond.

Back at the office, DS Dan Houghton screwed up his face, because the location jarred with the occasion. DC Emma Hide excused herself and Kelly thought she'd never seen her queasy before at the mention of a dead body. Her second-in-command, DS Kate Umshaw, said 'bugger me' and their newbie, DS Fin Maguire, pretended not to hear.

A corpse tossed aside in the reedy underbelly of one of the most beautiful lakes in the national park wasn't the early Monday evening they were hoping for. Kelly had imagined a jacket potato covered in oozy cheese, and an earthy glass of malbec to wash it down with. Perhaps a chat with her father and some special time with her daughter, who'd soon turn two years old. Lizzie was vocal and Kelly had encouraged it. She wanted to raise a girl who asked questions. Sometimes she reckoned the toddling tot would turn out to be a detective herself, though Kelly wouldn't recommend it. Cuts and budgets prevented satisfactory resolution for victims' families and it pained her to her core. She wanted more for her daughter.

It was difficult to believe Kelly had been the detective inspector for North Lakes for almost seven years now. She reflected on how much had happened in those short but long years back in her native Cumbria, and each time she did, her disbelief grew. Where had the time gone? She was a mother and a daughter. Bereaved. Responsible.

But was she enough?

After she finished stirring sugar into her coffee, she slugged it back too quickly, then gathered her things and prepared for a drive over to Grasmere.

Kate agreed to go with her.

Which reminded her that Lizzie was in good hands because her nanny, Millie, was Kate's daughter, and Kate was who she inherited her natural mother's intuition from. Kate Umshaw was Kelly's dependable right-hand woman. A solid pair of hands. If she mothered Millie like she investigated cases, then Lizzie's future was assured.

The others seemed relieved and went back to what they were doing. Days out with the boss were like a free go on a petrifying fairground ride; they could be fun but mostly they were unpleasant. But Kelly and Kate were similar in that they could shut off from the mayhem and use the opportunity to chat in the car to catch up on work and other things. After

the death of her mother, Wendy, Kelly had missed the input of a wiser, older influence. And her worries plagued her. Low-level anxiety seemed to sit constantly between her shoulders. It was as if everything she'd worked for was coming to an end. Could she work like she wasn't a parent? Could she parent like she didn't work? The constant tearing apart and cleaving of her parts took its toll. When she was at work she fretted over her daughter, and when she was at home, she thought she could be doing more to catch bastards.

She sighed, and the sound irritated her. She was never a whinger but lately she'd grown tired of bad people. Her stamina was waning, or was it more that she was getting bored of the same old tricks? People thought they could get away with heinous crimes and not be caught out. But they always were.

Criminals were idiots, she thought, and it buoyed her. She felt momentary gratification that with her father's help, they usually caught their perp. He was the chief coroner for the northwest of England and he carried his experience on practised shoulders.

Nobody was above the law.

But the feeling of confidence was fleeting as the realisation that an innocent woman had been killed sobered her senses and she remembered where she was going.

Apparently, the body had lain in the reed bed all day. The gorgeous little café at the water's edge had operated throughout the morning and afternoon as normal. Boats had been rowed; bathers had frolicked, and people came and went.

Nobody knew that a body had accompanied them there.

It was the smell that alerted them in the end.

Carrion.

It stung the nostrils and signalled to all animals that something rotten was amongst the living and didn't belong.

A few tourists had gotten a whiff of the effluvium and complained. A waitress had gone to investigate and got the shock of her life.

Maybe it was a deer? Or even a dog?

The poor sod who'd followed the pungency with her nose had found out the true terror of discovering a dead body. It wasn't pretty, or clinical, or matter of fact.

It was repulsive.

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The sun was still high in the sky when they pulled out of Eden House staff carpark to head to Grasmere. They'd stop in Glenridding for a couple of coffees and head over Kirkstone Pass. In the tiny hiking hamlet of Glenridding, walkers were coming home from the fells and Kelly gazed across at the Ullswater Way. It stretched all the way along the south coast of the majestic lake, and one could start at either end. Kelly's favourite was to start at Pooley Bridge and end up in Patterdale. Another mile along the lake and Glenridding pier marked the end of a very long walk. Plenty of visitors underestimated the puff needed to make it from one end to the other free from sunburn, blisters and fatigue.

She smiled at Kate, who walked back to the car with the drinks and got in. They'd discussed the dead woman all the way from Penrith.

'I almost bought some cigarettes. Did you know they were over twenty pounds a packet?'

Kelly smiled. 'You're doing well. Don't give in now. I remember how hard it is to give up. Just think of all the money you're saving.'

'And not giving the government in tax,' Kate added.

'Exactly.'

Kelly pulled away after Kate had steadied the hot drinks in the holders.

The road to Kirkstone Pass was predictably busy for mid-July but it was such a pleasant drive that Kelly didn't mind.

'Did you return Johnny's call?' Kate asked.

They'd been chatting about Kelly's ex, and Lizzie's dad.

'No. I'll leave it a couple of days. I think he's climbing in Scotland. I need to get my head around it all,' Kelly said.

Break-ups were always painful but this one seemed to have scarred Kelly deeply. She knew Kate missed him almost as much as she did. But the worst part was that it had been her decision.

Kate stared out of the window.

'What's your instinct telling you?' Kate asked.

Kelly might have told anyone else to fuck off and mind their own business, but not Kate. They'd been through too much together.

Johnny had texted her out of the blue to tell her about his settlement with his ex-wife. They'd finally divorced and had divided their capital fairly. Johnny had been left with more cash than he thought, but he was still in debt.

He was sorry.

He was always sorry.

'What about Fin?' Kate asked.

Kelly gripped the wheel.

'Jesus, Kate, I should have brought somebody else. I'm not in the mood to examine the men in my life. Your turn, any action recently?'

Kate smiled and sipped her coffee. 'Not likely.' She'd split with a long-term partner recently too. They were both single and pretending to be independent warriors in no need of a bloke. 'I know you too well, Kelly Porter. Come on. What's on your mind?'

Kelly stared out of the front windscreen and pretended to concentrate on the road. Then she gave in.

'I've thought about moving Fin on, you know, getting him out of the office. I told him it's over, I just can't work with somebody I'm sleeping with, it's distracting, and I haven't got time.'

'Or, you could just be honest and admit he was just a plaything all along. You needed to get over Johnny, and now you've had some space, and another bloke to keep you entertained, it's time to think about what you really want.'

Kelly nodded to herself, but Kate saw it too.

'It's been fun,' Kelly said.

Fin Maguire had moved to their team last year. Just as she was breaking up with Johnny. The timing sucked and it had been messy but now it was time to move on.

Again.

'He doesn't like Lizzie.'

'What?' Kate was indignant.

'I don't mean he actively dislikes her; I can just tell he's not that into babies. I get it. It's a drag. He's too young. He finds her boring, I can tell.'

'Fuck him, then,' Kate said.

Kelly laughed. She could almost see Kate dusting her hands without a side glance for proof.

'Johnny's still single,' Kate added.

'And how would you know?'

'Millie told me.'

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When they pulled into Grasmere, the roads were busy with travellers seeking food for the evening or returning from walks around the surrounding fells. They parked along the road and already they could see a small group had gathered outside the Faeryland café and the uniformed coppers were trying to maintain some kind of order.

A journalist snapped pictures of Kelly and Kate as they approached the entrance. Kelly put up her hand to hide her face. She hated attention, especially from the press.

Word had got out fast.

A dead body on the side of a lake was big news in Cumbria. Something about the beauty of the place being sullied with death encouraged armchair analysis from all corners of the villages in the park. Unsolicited theories were highly unwelcome by Kelly most of the time, but particularly right at the beginning of an investigation.

They dipped under the police tape and approached the witness.

The unfortunate waitress looked deathly pale. She was a small slip of a thing, as her mother Wendy would have said. Fragile. Breakable. Unreliable.

She'd been given strong coffee and the owner of the café sat with her. He was introduced to Kelly by a uniform, and she thanked him. She could see a SOCO had already begun her work. Scenes of crime officers were specialists in the layout of a moment in time, left forever behind as a reminder of what had gone before. Reading a scene was a science. It was mechanical, cold and clinical. Every aspect of expiry that could not be explained was dealt with in a dispassionate flurry of words and diagrams until they had all their information neatly expressed in a report. It was Kelly's job to bring the human touch to the inquiry. Interpretation was for the lead detective. Gathering information, submitting samples to labs, measuring blood spatter, taking fibres and putting them in plastic tubes, all of that was subsidiary to Kelly's central duty. She enjoyed doing all those things, and it satisfied her scientific brain, but the real work was in reading the hints and the character of a scene.

So, she stopped short of the witness and studied her for a split second.

The girl was probably in her twenties, and she looked terrified. People thought dead bodies were simply inanimate objects, devoid of all life, but they weren't; they were reminders of life itself and what had been lost. Kelly could tell just by looking at her that it would take her a long time to recover from what she'd witnessed here today.

Kelly smiled at her warmly and introduced herself to the owner.

She heard cameras clicking in the background and the waft of tarpaulin as a SOCO erected a barrier over the upturned rowing boat called the *Water Nymph*.

Kelly could tell Eric, the owner, was protective over his staff. He sat like a concerned parent and Kelly reassured him.

'She's been held here for two hours now,' he said.

'Andrea?' Kelly said the girl's name and she looked up. 'You've had a terrible shock. I know you've been here a long time, and you can go soon. I just wanted to go over the statement you gave to the first responders,' Kelly said. She sat down and waited for the girl to acknowledge her. Kelly smiled gently. She found situations like this a challenge. Dealing with the fallout of trauma wasn't the same as getting justice for it. It required a different skill set.

'Do you know her?' Kelly asked.

Andrea shook her head.

'Were you here all day?'

A nod.

'And did you see any suspicious activity around the boats?'

A shake of the head.

Kelly read her statement through.

'Did you notice anyone else over there today?'

Another shake.

Kelly changed tack and asked the waitress about her time working at the Faeryland café. It was a summer job. The girl was from Yorkshire and was saving money to go travelling with her friends before starting at university next year. Kelly knew this event would change the girl's outlook forever. It was her bet she'd cancel her plans and face months of therapy, thanks to a chance encounter with a woman she didn't even know.

Kelly thanked her and told her she could leave.

Then she made her way over to the SOCO.