Lovereading.co.uk

Immoral

Brian Freeman

Published by Headline

Extract

All text is copyright of the author

This opening extract is exclusive to Love**reading**.
Please print off and read at your leisure.

One

Jonathan Stride felt like a ghost, bathed in the white spotlights that illuminated the bridge.

Below him, muddy brown swells flooded into the canal, spewing waves over the concrete piers and swallowing the spray in eight-foot troughs. The water tumbled over itself, squeezing from the violent lake to the placid inner harbor. At the end of the piers, where ships navigated the canal as delicately as thread through a needle, twin lighthouses flashed revolving beams of green and red.

The bridge felt like a living thing. As cars sped onto the platform, a whine filled the air, like the buzz of hornets. The honeycomb sidewalk vibrated, quivering under his feet. Stride glanced upward, as he imagined Rachel would have done, at the criss-cross scissors of steel towering above his head. The barely perceptible sway unsettled him and made him dizzy.

He was doing what he always did – putting himself inside the mind of the victim, seeing the world through her eyes. Rachel had been here on Friday night, alone on the bridge. After that, no one knew.

Stride turned his attention to the two teenagers who stood with him, impatiently stamping their feet

against the cold. 'Where was she when you first saw her?' he asked.

The boy, Kevin, extracted a beefy hand from his pocket. His third finger sported an oversized onyx high school ring. He tapped the three inches of wet steel railing. 'Right here, Lieutenant. She was balanced on top of the railing. Arms stretched out. Sort of like Christ.' He closed his eyes, tilted his chin toward heaven, and extended his arms with his palms upward. 'Like this.'

Stride frowned. It had been a bleak October, with angry swoops of wind and sleet raining like bullets from the night sky. He couldn't imagine anyone climbing on top of the railing that night without falling.

Kevin seemed to read his mind. 'She was really graceful. Like a dancer.'

Stride peered over the railing. The narrow canal was deep enough to grant passage to giant freighters weighted down with bellies of iron ore. It could suck a body down in its wicked undertow and not let go.

'What the hell was she doing up there?' Stride asked.

The other teenager, Sally, spoke for the first time. Her voice was crabbed. 'It was a stunt, like everything else she did. She wanted attention.'

Kevin opened his mouth to complain, but closed it again. Stride got the feeling this was an old argument between them. He noticed that Sally had her arm slung through Kevin's, and she tugged the boy a little closer when she talked.

'So what did you do?' Stride asked.

'I ran up here on the bridge,' Kevin said. 'I helped her down.'

Stride watched Sally's mouth pucker unhappily as Kevin described the rescue.

'Tell me about Rachel,' Stride told Kevin.

'We grew up together. Next-door neighbors. Then her mom married Mr Stoner and they moved uptown.'

'What does she look like?'

'Well, uh, pretty,' Kevin said nervously, shooting a quick glance at Sally.

Sally rolled her eyes. 'She was beautiful, OK? Long black hair. Slim, tall. The whole package. And a bigger slut you're not likely to find.'

'Sally!' Kevin protested.

'It's true, and you know it. After Friday? You know it.'

Sally turned her face away from Kevin, although she didn't let go of his arm. Stride watched the girl's jaw set in an angry line, her lips pinched together. Sally had a rounded face, with a messy pile of chestnut curls tumbling to her shoulders and blowing across her flushed cheeks. In her tight blue jeans and red parka, she was a pretty young girl. But no one would describe her as beautiful. Not a stunner. Not like Rachel.

'What happened on Friday?' Stride asked. He knew what Deputy Chief Kinnick had told him on the phone two hours ago: Rachel hadn't been home since Friday. She was missing. Gone. *Just like Kerry.*

'Well, she sort of came on to me,' Kevin said grudgingly.

'Right in front of me!' Sally snapped. 'Fucking bitch.'

Kevin's eyebrows furled together like a yellow caterpillar. 'Stop it, don't talk about her like that.'

Stride held up one hand, silencing the argument. He reached inside his faded leather jacket and pulled out a pack of cigarettes that he had wedged into the pocket of his flannel shirt. He studied the pack with

weary disgust, then lit a cigarette and took a long drag. Smoke curled out of his mouth and formed a cloud in front of his face. He felt his lungs contract. Stride tossed the rest of the pack into the canal, where the red package swirled like a dot of blood and then was swept under the bridge.

'Back up,' he said. 'Kevin, give me the whole story, short and sweet, OK?'

Kevin rubbed his hand across his scalp until his blond hair stood up like naked winter trees. He squared his shoulders, which were broad and muscular. A football player.

'Rachel called me on my cell phone on Friday night and said we should come hang out with her in Canal Park,' Kevin said. 'It was about eight thirty, I guess. A shitty night, the park was almost empty. When we spotted Rachel, she was on the railing, playing around. So we ran up on the bridge to get her off there.'

'Then what?' Stride asked.

Kevin pointed to the opposite side of the bridge, to the peninsula that stretched like a narrow finger with Lake Superior on one side and Duluth harbor on the other. Stride had lived there most of his life, watching the ore ships shoulder out to sea.

'The three of us wandered down to the beach. We talked about school stuff.'

'She's a suck-up,' Sally interjected. 'She takes psychology and starts spouting all the teacher's theories on screwed-up families. She takes English, and the teacher's poetry is *so* wonderful. She takes math and grades papers after school.'

Stride silenced the girl with a stony stare. Sally pouted and tossed her hair defiantly. Stride nodded at Kevin to continue.

'Then we heard a ship's horn,' he said. 'Rachel

said she wanted to ride the bridge while it went up.'

'They don't let you do that,' Stride said.

'Yeah, but Rachel knows the bridge keeper. She and her dad used to hang out with him.'

'Her dad? You mean Graeme Stoner?'

Kevin shook his head. 'No, her real dad. Tommy.'

Stride nodded. 'Go on.'

'Well, we went back on the bridge, but Sally didn't want to do it. She kept going to the city side. But I didn't want Rachel up there by herself, so I stayed. And that's where – well, that's where she started making out with me.'

'She was playing games with you,' Sally said sharply.

Kevin shrugged. Stride watched Kevin tug at the collar around his thick neck and then caught a glimpse of the boy's eyes. Kevin wasn't going to say exactly what happened on the bridge, but he clearly was embarrassed and aroused thinking about it.

'We weren't up there very long,' Kevin said. 'Maybe ten minutes. When we got down, Sally – she wasn't . . .'

'I left,' Sally said. 'I went home.'

Kevin stuttered on his words. 'I'm really sorry, Sal.' He reached out a hand to brush her hair, but Sally twisted away.

Before Stride could cut short the latest spat, he heard his cell phone burping out a polyphonic rendition of Alan Jackson's 'Chattahoochee'. He dug the phone out of his pocket and recognized the number for Maggie Bei. He flipped it open.

'Yeah, Mags?'

'Bad news, boss. The media's got the story. They're crawling all over us.'

Stride scowled. 'Shit.' He took a few steps away from the two teenagers, noting that Sally began

hissing at Kevin as soon as he was out of earshot. 'Is Bird out there with the other jackals?' he asked.

'Oh, yeah. Leading the inquisition.'

'Well, for God's sake, don't talk to him. Don't let any reporters near the Stoners.'

'No problem, we're taped off.'

'Any other good news?' Stride asked.

'They're playing it like this is number two,' Maggie told him. 'First Kerry, now Rachel.'

'That figures. Well, I don't like déjà vu either. Look, I'll be there in twenty minutes, OK?'

Stride slapped the phone shut. He was impatient now. Things were already moving in a direction he didn't like. Having Rachel's disappearance splashed over the media changed the nature of the investigation. He needed the TV and newspapers to get the girl's face in front of the public, but he wanted to control the story, not have the story control him. That was impossible with Bird Finch asking questions.

'Keep going,' Stride urged Kevin.

'There's not much else,' Kevin said. 'Rachel said she was tired and wanted to go home. So I walked her to the Blood Bug.'

'The what?' Stride asked.

'Sorry. Rachel's car. A VW Beetle, OK? She called it the Blood Bug.'

'Why?'

Kevin's face was blank. 'Because it was red, I guess.'

'OK. You actually saw her drive off?'

'Yes.'

'Alone?'

'Sure.'

'And she specifically told you she was going home?'

'That's what she said.'

'Could she have been lying? Could she have had another date?'

Sally laughed cruelly. 'Sure, she could. Probably did.'

Stride turned his dark eyes on Sally again. She hooded her eyes and looked down at her shoes, her curls falling over her forehead. 'Do you know something, Sally?' Stride asked. 'Did you maybe go see Rachel and tell her to lay off Kevin here?'

'No!'

'Then who do you think Rachel would have gone to see?'

'It could have been anyone,' Sally said. 'She was a whore.'

'Stop it!' Kevin insisted.

'Both of you stop it,' Stride snapped. 'What was Rachel wearing that night?'

'Tight black jeans, the kind you need a knife to cut yourself out of,' Sally replied. 'And a white turtleneck.'

'Kevin, did you see anything in her car? Luggage? A backpack?'

'No, nothing like that.'

'You told Mr Stoner that she made a date with you.'

Kevin bit his lip. 'She asked if I wanted to see her on Saturday night. She said I could pick her up at seven, and we could go out. But she wasn't there.'

'It was a game to her,' Sally repeated. 'Did she tell you to call me on Saturday and lie to me? Because that's what you did.'

Stride knew he wasn't going to get any more out of these two tonight. 'Listen up, both of you. This isn't about who kissed who. A girl's missing. A friend of yours. I've got to go talk to her parents, who are

wondering if they're ever going to see their daughter again, OK? So think. Is there anything else you remember from Friday night? Anything Rachel did or said? Anything that might tell us where she went when she left here or who she might have seen?'

Kevin closed his eyes, as if he were really trying to remember. 'No, Lieutenant. There's nothing.'

Sally was sullen, and Stride wondered if she was hiding something. But she wasn't going to talk. 'I have no idea what happened to her,' Sally mumbled.

Stride nodded. 'All right, we'll be in touch.'

He took another glance out at the looming blackness of the lake, beyond the narrow canal. There was nothing to see. It was as empty and hollow as his world felt now. As he pushed past the two teenagers and headed to the parking lot, he felt it again. Déjà vu. It was an ugly memory.