

# **Beneath the Fear**

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**For Martin**

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## PROLOGUE

I had no recollection of falling asleep. Even less idea where I was ... or how I got there. However, instinct told me something was dreadfully wrong.

I tried to shake myself free from drowsiness, but sleep seemed reluctant to release me. I wanted to open my eyes, but the effort was too great. Around me, the sound of the sea began to lull me back to sleep, until a large wave suddenly broke beside me.

The sharp shock from its icy cold spray immediately forced air into my lungs, kick-starting my lethargic brain like an electrical charge. My eyes shot open. To my horror, I realised I was not only wedged tight between some rocks, but also soaking wet and up to my waist in seawater ... and it was rising.

At first, I hoped it was just another nightmare, the same recurring scenario that had haunted me so many times before ... except this time the dream was refusing to disappear. This time, the nightmare was actually real.

With panic and fear now jostling for supremacy, reality finally hit home. I was undeniably about to die.

# CHAPTER 1

## **Oxford: November 2018**

Wednesday, November 8, 2018. It was a date I would never forget.

Normally, I would have spent that fateful day working at home. As a freelance illustrator, I had recently acquired a new commission and the deadline was fast approaching. Instead, I gave in to one of my many self-centred whims and insisted my reluctant husband, Stephen, left his own artistic endeavours and went shopping with me. I knew I was being selfish, but back then I was a different person. Thanks to the indulgence of my parents, I expected everyone to pander to my wishes ... which they usually did.

Although both only twenty-six, we had already been married for three years. However, I was still basking in the warmth of newlywed bliss and was reluctant to relinquish it. Unfortunately, my selfishness was about to have dire consequences.

Initially, Stephen objected to leaving his work. However, used to getting my own way, he was no match for me. I gave him my cultivated, hurt expression.

“Surely, I’m worth at least one hour of your time, Stephen. After all, we’ve hardly seen each other recently. You’ve been shut up in that back room for weeks now, working on those paintings. Don’t you think it’s time you took a break and got some fresh air? Besides, I’m sure I read somewhere that neglect counts as wife abuse.”

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Stephen rolled his eyes and tried to object, but I was far too good at manipulation.

“I swear those paintings see more of you than I do. Maybe I should drape myself naked on the sofa, with a rose between my teeth.” I tossed my long blonde hair and struck a sexy model pose, flashing him a smouldering look with my blue eyes. “What do you think? At least I’d have your undivided attention while you painted me.”

To illustrate my point, I sidled up to him and slipped my arms around his neck, giving him my best pout.

Although he attempted a token display of resistance, it did not take long for Stephen to melt ... just as I knew he would. He had never been able to say no to my seductive ploys. It was a grossly unfair tactic, I know. However, it had never yet failed, so I constantly employed it.

“Oh, come on, Sam. Play fair. You know I can’t resist that look of yours, and I really need to get these paintings finished by the weekend. The exhibition is on Monday and I’ve still got two more to complete.” He gave a weary sigh and ran a hand through his dark, collar-length hair. I fluttered my eyelashes and kissed him softly on the lips. “Damn it, Sam. Okay, you win ... but I’ll have to work late tonight to catch up. Richard’s pulled a lot of strings to get me into the Ashmolean, so I don’t want to let him down. This could be my big break.”

Richard Anderson was a friend of Stephen’s from university. Now a successful art dealer, he was well connected in the art world and had arranged for Stephen to hold his first major exhibition in Oxford. He had also invited several foreign dealers to the show. Although Stephen was already beginning to make a name for himself in the UK, this could be his chance to obtain international acclaim. I was very proud of him ... but right now, I wanted to be his only focus of attention.

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“Oh well. If that’s the price I have to pay for your company, I’ll have to take it.” I gave a deep sigh, trying not to sound triumphant. “A couple of hours is better than nothing, I suppose.”

Allowing me to pull him into the hallway to get his coat, Stephen simply rolled his warm chocolate-brown eyes and laughed in resignation.

Because our flat was just off the busy St Cross Road, we decided to walk in the opposite direction, taking the more pleasant shortcut through the university grounds. With the main tourist season now over, it was still too early for people to be visiting the campus, and morning lectures had only just begun. Therefore, as we sauntered through the lanes, past the Radcliffe Camera in Radcliffe Square, the only people we encountered were a group of students – presumably on their way to the Bodleian library – and a few other locals, taking the same shortcut as ourselves. It was a rare treat as during the busy summer months the whole area was usually crawling with tourists.

As we turned right into the High Street and strolled leisurely towards the shops in Cornmarket Street, Stephen casually draped his arm across my shoulders. I in turn wrapped mine around his waist. I have no idea exactly what we were talking about, but I do know I was happy. After all, how could I not be. I had the perfect husband and a future to match. What more could I possibly want?

The last two weeks had been cold and wet, so it was a pleasure to finally see the sun, as it desperately attempted to break through the patchy cloudbank. However, despite the occasional warmth of its attempts, there was still a sharp nip in the air from the autumn breeze, so I was glad I had worn my thick coat.



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Sliding his arm down my back, Stephen gave my waist a playful squeeze. He looked down at me and smiled, his beautiful eyes melting my heart.

“Okay. So you were right ... again. I did need a break ... and, I have to admit, it’s a shame to waste such a lovely day.”

Unfortunately, that sentence – along with his warm smile and the loving look in his eyes – was about to become engraved on my heart for the rest of my life.

As we approached Lloyds Bank – an architecturally stunning building on the corner of Cornmarket Street – I was so busy admiring Stephen, the Securicor van pulling up outside did not even register. It was only when we got closer to the van that I noticed the helmeted guard who was now standing at the back.

Presumably about to make the usual morning cash delivery, I watched in amusement as the portly guard struggled to hoist the waistband of his black trousers up around his protruding stomach – its progress made awkward by the bulkiness of his black bulletproof vest. As he finally turned to pull the rear door open, I found myself thinking he seemed a tad unfit to be a security guard ... but then returned my attention to Stephen, admiring his much slimmer and healthier physique.

With the delivery being a regular occurrence, nobody else paid any attention to the van either, or indeed the black Audi A1 Sportback which had just pulled up across the street. We were all too wrapped up in our own small worlds.

It was a little after ten-thirty and the sun had finally broken through, spasmodically casting its rays along the street, as it played peek-a-boo amongst the clouds. Surprisingly bright for November, the glare began to make us squint, so we reached for our Ray-Bans. However, although it had started out as simply another average day, everything was about to change.

As we reached the van, all hell suddenly began to break loose,

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and in the proverbial blink of an eye, my perfect world fell apart forever. Neither it, nor I, would ever be the same again.

Two men in navy-blue boiler suits – both with balaclavas pulled firmly over their faces – suddenly jumped out of the Audi and ran towards the van. Shouting at the guard, they pointed their Beretta handguns directly at him. He immediately froze to the spot with his hands in the air. Seeing the guns, people began to scream and randomly scatter. Shocked and frightened to move, I clung to Stephen as chaos erupted around us.

Ignoring the shouts and screams, one of the robbers ran to the driver. Thrusting his gun through the open window, he pointed it straight at the man's face.

“Put your hands behind your head and lay face down on the steering wheel ... NOW! Move even an inch and you're dead.” Although I could not see the driver, I assumed he did not need to be told twice.

Meanwhile, at the rear of the van, the other robber was still holding the guard at gunpoint, only now he was demanding the cash box. Threatened with a gun in his face, the poor man had no choice but to obey. As we watched in stunned horror from the pavement, he picked up the box from inside the van and held it out.

Unfortunately, the sun – which had previously ducked behind a cloud – chose that moment to burst free again, bouncing a ray of sunshine off the glass of the bank window. As he reached for the box, the sudden glare temporarily blinded the guard's assailant, causing him to squint.

Suddenly finding his voice, Stephen yelled at me to get down. However, I was too terrified to obey, so he pushed me to the ground. Hearing the shout but still blinded by the glare, the robber panicked and instinctively fired in our direction ... two shots, followed by a third, echoing down the street. A stream of

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profanities filled the air, although I was not sure who they were aimed at.

With my cheek close to the pavement, I tilted my head slightly and glanced up, just in time to see the guard take full advantage of the distraction. Swinging the heavy cash box forward, he knocked the gun from his attacker's hand. Taken by surprise, the man automatically turned his back on the guard while he desperately searched for his Beretta. Wasting no time, the guard hurled his hefty weight at the man's back, yanking his balaclava off in the struggle and exposing his face.

From my prostrate position on the pavement, I watched helplessly as the robber went crashing down from the force of the attack. Unfortunately, before the guard had a chance to kick the gun away, the robber managed to grab it. Swinging his arm around, he took a wild shot at the guard, who reeled backwards, clutching his abdomen. Blood began to ooze through his fingers as he fell to the ground. Unlucky for him, it appeared the bullet had found the only exposed area ... his protruding stomach at the bottom of the bulletproof vest.

Realising everything had gone horribly wrong, the robber quickly scrambled to his feet. Snatching up the box, he called to his partner as he ran back towards the waiting Audi and jumped inside. The other gunman immediately followed. Diving into the back of the car, he was instantly thrown against his accomplice as the masked driver floored the accelerator, leaving the rear door swinging open on its hinges. While the struggling gunman tried to pull the door shut, the car rounded the corner with a screech of tyres and shot down St Aldates, leaving devastation in its wake.

People were screaming around us in shock. A woman, wearing what looked like a nurse's uniform beneath her open coat, rushed to the guard to try and help him, while a shopper –

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attempting to comfort his distraught wife – hurriedly pulled out his mobile phone and called for the police and an ambulance. The driver of the Securicor van was also now running to the rear to check on his colleague.

In the midst of all this pandemonium, I suddenly realised I was still sprawled on the pavement with Stephen partially on top of me. Wriggling free, I pushed myself to my knees and rubbed his arm, asking if he was okay. It was only then I noticed the pool of blood gradually spreading over the pavement beneath him.

Without thinking, I instinctively shook him, repeatedly shouting his name with increasing desperation ... but there was no response. His eyes simply stared vacantly past me. And then it hit me like an express train. My perfect husband was dead.

As I gazed in confusion at the blood coating my hands, I thought I heard someone screaming hysterically in my ear, before realising the screams were coming from me.

## CHAPTER 2

### **Banbury: February 2019**

I never really noticed the ticking of a clock before. A familiar sound, it was simply part of the background of my everyday environment. Today, however, it was as if someone had wired the clock to an amplifier.

Surrounded by total silence, and with nothing to dilute it, the persistent ticking reverberated around the inside of my angry head until I thought it would explode. Its incessant rhythmic beat a constant reminder of the endless time I had yet to endure.

I was sitting opposite Dr Anna Musgrove in her small but comfortable therapy room. Despite its compact size, it was light and airy, with a window overlooking a pleasant garden. Normally a blaze of colour in the summer months, its flowerbeds now lay dormant, patiently awaiting the warmth of spring.

Dr Musgrove was a petite, middle-aged woman with a kind, sympathetic face. Her grey hair was short and neatly cut, and her warm hazel eyes were now studying me intensely from behind a pair of frameless glasses. She was patiently waiting for me to start the conversation.

It was not my idea to be there. To me, it was a pointless exercise. Unless she was going to miraculously bring Stephen back to life, as far as I was concerned, we were just going around in circles. Determined to register my disapproval, I had therefore spent the last half an hour sitting in silence while staring at my

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hands ... listening to the ticking of that damn clock. The anger I felt trapped inside me was desperate for an outlet ... a physical presence on which to vent it. Right now, Dr Musgrove was a convenient target.

Three months had passed since Stephen's murder and I still could not make sense of his death. All I knew was, despite all my carefully orchestrated plans, the love of my life had been cruelly snatched away and I had no idea what to do about it.

For several weeks after the robbery, it was impossible to close my eyes without seeing Stephen's blood-soaked body lying on the ground in front of me. Eventually, too terrified to close them at all, sleep had become an elusive luxury. As a result, I now felt constantly drained of energy, adding fuel to my growing anger.

The effort of having to continually block out the painful details of a day I did not want to remember – but, equally, could never forget – was no help either, especially as Stephen's killer was apparently still at large. However, at the end of the day, it was of no consequence. The fact still remained, my husband was dead, and I now faced a lifetime of loneliness and despair.

I had no interest in the reality of a life that pointlessly continued around me ... one without Stephen. To acknowledge it would mean accepting I would never see him again ... and I was by no means ready to do that. However, it was not a point of view shared by my psychotherapist, who wanted me to do exactly that.

With my head bowed and my face seeking refuge behind my long, cascading hair, I sneaked a peek at Dr Musgrove through my fringe, wondering what she thought about while waiting for me to bare my soul. Probably mundane things ... like what she was going to cook for her husband that evening. A sudden pang of resentment gripped me at the thought of her still having a

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husband to go home to, while I would never see mine again. I stifled a sob.

Dr Musgrove gave a discreet cough, obviously impatient to start the session. It was her practice to wait for me to begin the conversation. Unfortunately for her, it was mine to resist.

Bored with the stalemate, I glanced at the clock. I still had twenty minutes left of this mental torture. Deciding I needed to speed things up a bit, I struggled to find something to say. My mind, however, was in no mood to cooperate, so I gave up. Instead, I allowed my thoughts to drift back to the day Stephen and I first met – at St John's College, Oxford.

University had simply been the next logical step in my carefully scheduled life, and I was brimming with confidence. I had my entire future mapped out, and when I first laid eyes on Stephen Copeland – his dark, tousled hair ruffling around his handsome face as he sauntered across the windy stone courtyard on his way to the art department – I knew exactly who I was going to share that future with.

Back then, I had no doubt whatsoever that everything would happen exactly as I envisaged. Now, for the first time ever, I had no idea what I was going to do tomorrow, let alone how I was going to get through the rest of my life.

Snapped back to the present by this depressing fact, I realised Dr Musgrove was still waiting for me to begin. I found her patient and condescending smile suddenly irritating. What possible good did she think she was doing? From where I was sitting, it was simply an ordeal destined to waste both our time and was surprised she had not yet come to the same conclusion.

My parents, however, were adamant therapy was the panacea to all my emotional problems ... but I knew the real truth. They were desperate to get their daughter back at all costs and were willing to subject me to whatever procedure they felt necessary

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in order to reach that goal. The first step towards this non-negotiable ambition was their insistence on me returning to the family home in Banbury.

At first, I had resented their intrusion into my grief. However, when reporters started to turn up outside my Oxford flat – continually harassing me throughout the day – I reluctantly felt grateful for my parents' intervention.

Thanks to Richard Anderson's publicity campaign, Stephen had become known as 'a rising new art talent', cut down in his prime by an unknown assailant. Smelling a story, the press began to make it impossible for me to leave the flat without being accosted. Richard's insistence on going ahead with a posthumous exhibition of Stephen's work had done little to help, only serving to increase their interest in me. If my parents had not dragged me back to Banbury, the press would probably still be there now.

Dr Musgrove once again interrupted my thoughts.

"Would you like a glass of water, Samantha?" She picked up the water jug from the low table between us and hovered it over an empty glass. I politely mumbled a refusal and returned to my daydreaming.

Towards the end of November, after I had returned to Banbury, DI Nigel Featherstone – the officer in charge of the investigation – made several visits to the house, together with one of his team. Although I knew he was only doing his job, his persistent questions still felt intrusive.

While I sat fidgeting and biting my nails, my parents – positioned either side of me on the sofa like a pair of guard dogs – glared at Featherstone, daring him to upset me. He tactfully ignored them and continued with his questions, convinced there must be at least one useful detail I could give him about the robbery. After all, he pointed out, I had only been a few feet



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away from the van and must have had a clear view of Stephen's killer. His apparent insensitivity instantly annoyed me.

"I'm sorry but I was a bit distracted at the time," I retorted, a sarcastic tone evident in my voice. "You see, my husband had just been shot ... in case you'd forgotten." Featherstone gave me a patient smile and patted my hand. I felt my parents bristle.

"I appreciate this is distressing for you, Mrs Copeland, and I'm sorry I have to keep pressing you for answers, but I'm simply trying to find the guy who killed your husband ... which, I'm afraid, means asking difficult questions. I simply want to be sure there's nothing you might have forgotten. As you yourself just said, you were under a lot of stress at the time, so it would be totally understandable."

I could see my lack of cooperation was a source of immense frustration to Featherstone, even though he tried not to convey it. As nobody else had come forward as a witness, he was obviously pinning his hopes on me. However, he was not the one breaking down in tears at the very thought of that day. Although I wanted Stephen's killer caught, the police would have to wait until I was good and ready.

Undeterred, Featherstone proceeded to fill me in as to the investigation so far ... probably hoping something would click. I admired his optimism.

"I thought you might like to know, Mrs Copeland, we've arrested the man who shot the guard ... Bill Harman. Fortunately, the incident at the back of the van was caught on one of the two CCTV cameras outside the bank, so it didn't take us long to track him down. We recognised him, you see. Let's just say he's a regular guest at Her Majesty's pleasure. We also have enough forensic evidence to place him at the scene of the crime.

"However, the ballistics report shows the fatal shot that

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killed your husband didn't come from Harman's direction. Therefore, it must have come from the other gunman who, unfortunately, is still at large as we have nothing as yet to help us identify him. I'm afraid the camera that should have been able to record activity on the driver's side was out of action that day and he was just out of range of the other one. That's why I need your help. You're the only one who had a clear view of him."

Pointing out the small detail of him wearing a balaclava, I once again apologised for my inability to help. Quickly changing the subject, I asked about the injured guard. I was pleased to learn he was out of danger. Apparently, he had been lucky. The bullet had managed to avoid hitting any vital organs. Ironically, it seemed being overweight might have helped to save his life.

"I understand he's had extensive surgery," Featherstone continued. "However, the doctors seem pleased with his progress. He's adamant he can positively ID Harman, so at least we should be able to satisfy the CPS with regards to him. But as Harman refuses to give us the name of his accomplice, you are still possibly our only chance of catching him."

Despite the pangs of guilt, I stood my ground and continued to plead ignorance. However, now that Featherstone had introduced the notion of the lethal bullet coming from another gun, something about the other gunman had started to niggle at the back of my mind. Unfortunately, I was too emotionally drained to pay it any heed.

Finally accepting defeat for the time being, Featherstone gave me one last hopeful look, before he and his colleague followed my father to the front door and left.

The ticking of Dr Musgrove's clock suddenly seemed to grow louder, once again dragging me back to the present. Clearing her throat, she leaned slightly forward in her padded chair. There was a gentle swish of nylon against nylon as she

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crossed her legs. It was the only other sound in the room willing to challenge that infernal clock. She rested her hands on her knee. Suddenly feeling awkward, I shifted my own position. Despite numerous visits, I was still reluctant to open up to her. Today was no exception.

Avoiding eye contact with Dr Musgrove, I contemplated how I had managed to sink so low as to need the services of a therapist. It made me realise how detached I had become from reality.

Stephen's death had left me completely numb. Finding myself a widow so early in my marriage was definitely not part of my agenda, so I refused to believe it. Unfortunately, with the arrival of Christmas came the reminder Stephen was no longer there to share it, forcing me to face up to my loss.

Having somehow managed to survive the festive season, the day after we finally lowered Stephen's coffin into the ground and said our goodbyes, I sank into a deep state of depression. Unable to prevent it, I withdrew into myself. It was as if I had temporarily checked out of my body, leaving behind the shell of some nondescript, inanimate object.

Taking to my bed, I steadfastly refused to eat. My long-suffering mother, however, was just as stubborn, and continued with her attempts to feed me. However, every time she held out one of the many bowls of soup she persisted in making for me, I merely rolled over onto my side, turning my face to the wall. I just wanted her – and everyone else – to leave me alone with my misery.

Eventually, realising I was not taking the antidepressants he had prescribed – and fearing I was heading for a complete nervous breakdown – the family doctor admitted me to a psychiatric ward at the local hospital, where I stayed for three weeks while they monitored my medication. Finally, I was

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discharged into the care of my over-protective family and referred to Dr Musgrove, where, twice a week, I religiously turned up for therapy. This was my eighth session and I was yet to discover its benefits.

Deciding I had been silent long enough, Dr Musgrove waved her own principles aside and gave up the waiting game. Sighing, she finally initiated the conversation.

“The last time we spoke, Samantha, you told me you felt guilty about Stephen’s death. Could you elaborate on that notion please?”

Staring down at my hands, I recalled my last session, during which – in a rare moment of cooperation – I told her about the pale, lifeless face I saw reflected in my mirror each morning; its blue eyes dull and vacant. A complete stranger to me, it continually held my gaze. The accusation in its expression was hard to miss. “Stephen was only there because of you,” the reflection seemed to be saying. “Therefore, you only have yourself to blame.” I had to agree. It did have a point.

“Of course I feel guilty,” I snapped, embarrassed she had chosen to bring it up. “He was only there because of me. He didn’t want to go shopping that morning. If I hadn’t been so selfish in wanting my own way, he’d have carried on painting ... and would still be alive now.”

I thumped my knees with my fists and tried to control the tears forming in my eyes. It felt good to relieve some of the anger, however futile. Dr Musgrove adjusted her glasses, giving me another patronising smile. I wondered how many other similar tales of self-pity she had listened to in this office.

“You know that’s simply not true, Samantha. It’s what they call survivor’s guilt and is very common in traumatic situations such as yours. You must try to dismiss that thought from your mind and accept there was nothing you could have done to

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prevent Stephen's tragic death. It was simply fate—"

"Oh, was it?" I snapped, glad at last to have a palpable target. "Well then maybe fate should be the one put on trial for Stephen's murder ... because right now it feels as if nobody is going to be punished for it."

I jumped up from my chair, tears streaming down my cheeks as I stormed towards the door. Dr Musgrove sank back in her chair and sighed as she watched me yank open the door and disappear into the corridor. She was used to my outbursts. Every session so far had ended this way. However, she would not have to witness it again. This time I would not be returning.

At some point during the past hour, a small voice had gradually begun to filter through to the logical part of my brain. If I allowed all this destructive anger to swallow me up, I would be letting Stephen down. Having lost his parents in a car crash, I was the only family he had left to remember him, and the thought of him being forgotten was unbearable.

Spending an hour in almost total silence – twice a week – struggling to describe my feelings while a kindly psychotherapist pandered to my self-pity, was serving no purpose at all. Being with my doting family was just as bad. It simply made it far too easy for me to retreat within myself and wallow in my own self-imposed guilt. Therefore, there really was only one solution.

To get any kind of justice for Stephen, I needed to get my life back on track and face up to reality. That meant getting as far away as possible from my current surroundings ... and I needed to do it as soon as possible.

## CHAPTER 3

### **Banbury to Dynnargh, Cornwall: February 2019**

At the end of February – four days after my decision to leave – my bags were packed, and I was ready to head for the West Country. It was early on a Sunday morning and as I walked down the path to the car, my anxious mother followed behind me, firing objections in quick succession like a machine gun.

Having already voiced her disapproval the whole of the previous day, she was now determined to make one final attempt to change my mind before I set off for Cornwall.

“This really isn’t a good idea, Samantha. After everything you’ve been through, it’s far too soon to be cutting yourself off from your family. You really should wait a few more weeks and give the therapy a chance to work. I’m sure Dr Musgrove will be only too pleased to see you again. Tell her, John.” She glared at my father, who had also been dragged from his bed to back her up.

By now my mother had reached the car and was hovering by the driver’s door. My father gave me a sympathetic look and rolled his eyes, slowly shaking his head in seasoned tolerance as he loaded my bags into the boot. Frustrated by his lack of support, my mother tried again.

“I don’t think you realise how ill you’ve been, Samantha. What if you have a relapse with nobody there to help you? Have you thought about that?” She crossed her arms and huffed. My father sighed and closed the boot.

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“She’s a grown woman, Paula. She’ll be fine. It’s six o’clock on a Sunday morning. The roads will be fairly quiet for most of the trip and Samantha has her computer with her. There’s Wi-Fi at the cottage, so you can email or Skype each other whenever you want. So, for heaven’s sake dear, stop worrying and let the poor girl go.”

My father’s voice of reason momentarily seemed to do the trick, but I knew his capitulation was only a front. He had already made his opinion clear to me in his study the night before. However, his concerns were more about the police. He was adamant I should not let them pressurise me into getting involved unnecessarily. They were bound to catch Stephen’s killer eventually, so I should just let them do their job.

Seeing that my mother was wavering, I realised if I stayed any longer, she would find another reason for me not to go. Worse still, I might even start to listen to her. Better to leave quickly before she changed my mind.

I had chosen Cornwall as a retreat because my godmother, Martha Williams – a close friend of my mother – owned two holiday cottages there, in the small coastal village of Dynnargh. Meaning ‘welcome’ in Cornish, Dynnargh was a tiny, quiet hamlet halfway between St Austell and Mevagissey. It was also my father’s favourite getaway destination.

A journalist for the Banbury Guardian, he wrote novels in his spare time and maintained the peaceful surroundings and refreshing sea air at Dynnargh worked wonders for his creativity. For my mother and I, it was simply a beautiful spot for a holiday. Full of fond memories, I now felt myself drawn towards it, like a child reaching for a comfort blanket.

Keen to get going before my mother could think of another objection, I hugged both my parents and quickly slipped behind the wheel of my light-grey Peugeot 107. As I clicked my seatbelt

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into place and started the engine, my mother began to cry. Taking that as my cue to leave, I gave them a quick wave over my shoulder and drove away.

My father's traffic prediction proved to be correct. The roads were indeed quiet. Reaching the M5 in no time at all, I filtered onto the motorway and headed towards Exeter. As the miles rolled by the soothing classical music wafting from my CD player began to wash over me, creating some mental distance from the nightmare I was hopefully leaving behind.

After three hours of driving, I desperately needed a comfort stop so I decided to break my journey at Okehampton. Apart from needing a loo, the castle there would be a good spot to enjoy the picnic my mother had prepared.

Knowing it would be closed for the winter, when I finally arrived at the castle I parked in the small layby opposite the entrance. From there I could still see the ruins, spread out like jagged teeth against the skyline, with their grey stones reflecting the low, late winter sun.

Admiring the view, I unpacked my lunch and settled down to eat.

Swallowing the last mouthful of a ham sandwich, I picked up a tissue and wiped the crumbs from my mouth. Through the open car window, all I could hear was the solitary sound of rustling leaves, as the branches of the surrounding trees swayed gently in the wind. Without all the tourists milling around the castle grounds, the whole place was deserted.

I leaned back against the car seat and closed my eyes, taking a deep breath as I tried to empty my mind. A memory slipped unbidden into my thoughts ... that of a warm, lazy afternoon. I was sitting on a blanket by the river, wrapped in Stephen's warm arms as we enjoyed a similar picnic. Just as quickly, however, the



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idyllic image disappeared, only to be replaced by the familiar one of Stephen's prostrate body.

I gasped and quickly wiped away the welling tears, hastily screwing the lid back onto my flask. Determined not to break down, I scooped up the remains of my sandwich wrappings and stuffed everything back into the bag, tossing it onto the rear seat. This was not a good start. I had not even reached Cornwall and already I was beginning to doubt the wisdom of my decision. Maybe my mother was right after all.

In a desperate attempt to expel the image and pull myself together, I started the car and turned up the volume on my CD player.

As I rejoined the A30, I began to wonder if I was simply fooling myself. Maybe the whole getting away thing was simply a tragic delusion ... a way of running but not escaping.

With the benefit of hindsight, I now realise it was at that point I should have listened to my instincts ... and turned back.

## CHAPTER 4

### **Dynnargh, Cornwall: February 2019**

By the time I pulled into the driveway of the attractive stone cottage in Dynnargh, the winter sun had just begun to set. As it bade a last farewell to the day through the gaps in the gently swaying trees, its rays cast dancing mottled shadows onto the white walls of the building.

Tired after the long drive, I unclicked my seatbelt and slid out of the car, rolling my aching shoulder blades to relieve the stiffness. As I stood listening to the peaceful quiet – broken only by the evening breeze rustling through the trees, and the occasional cry of seagulls down by the sea – it was comforting to discover nothing had changed. After all these years, the place had lost none of its charm. With its thatched roof and slightly peeling paintwork, it steadfastly remained quintessentially English.

I took a deep breath and let out a long sigh. Although my initial bravado had begun to wane, I consoled myself with the fact that, at least here, I would not have to listen to other people's misguided advice. How I chose to deal with my grief would be entirely up to me.

Martha had told me the key to the cottage would be underneath one of the flowerpots on the doorstep, the thought of which horrified me. Accustomed to a high degree of security awareness in Oxford, it seemed an extremely unwise practice to me. However, despite my concerns, Martha was unperturbed.

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“The place is perfectly safe, Sam. It’s a very secluded village. Strangers hardly ever venture there, especially out of season. Some of the older locals never even lock their doors. It’s Cornwall, not Chicago.”

I ignored her mockery and agreed to take her word for it, but to me it was still an alien concept.

As I walked up the pathway towards the faded-red front door, a rogue gust of wind hit me sideways. I gave an involuntary shiver. I was still only wearing the light jacket I had chosen to drive in, so I quickly located the Yale key and unlocked the door.

Inside, the entrance hall was quite small. In front of me, a steep flight of stairs led to the floor above. At the bottom of the stairs, on either side of the hall, were two doors. A row of coat hooks hung on the narrow strip of wall to the left, while a framed sepia photograph of Dynnargh – taken some time at the beginning of the last century – adorned the right. The picture was slightly askew, so I automatically straightened it.

Opening the door to my left, I stepped into the small, cosy lounge. The room had hardly changed although, as an adult, it now felt much smaller.

Apart from a new three-piece-suite – which had replaced the old chintz one – and the addition of a flat-screened television in the corner, all the furniture was reassuringly the same. Even the ring mark from a hot mug – a result of my childish carelessness – was still evident on the surface of the wooden coffee table. I remembered how this apparently outrageous crime had embarrassed my horrified mother for weeks.

Looking around, I noticed other changes too. The flowery wallpaper had been replaced by magnolia paint, and the cottage now seemed to have central heating. From the warmth of the room, it had obviously been switched on in anticipation of my arrival.

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Returning to the entrance hall, I opened the other door. It was the dining room, where my father chose to write during our visits. Although the room was attractive, I decided I would be far more comfortable eating my meal off a tray, curled up on the sofa in front of the television. After all, I was not planning on entertaining.

Returning to the lounge, I found a welcome note on the coffee table from Martha's daughter, Suzy. She lived nearby in St Austell and acted as housekeeper for both of Martha's cottages. I was to contact her if I needed anything. To stress the point, she had written her telephone number at the bottom of the note, along with a smiley face and an 'x'.

As I read her familiar scrawl, Suzy's happy, freckled face and unruly, curly auburn hair popped into my mind. We had grown up together as children but had lost touch after I went to university. Having once been so close, it was something I always regretted, even though we were like chalk and cheese. It was good to know she was close by. Whatever I might be telling myself now, it was quite possible I may need a shoulder to cry on before long.

Determined to push all negative thoughts aside, I retrieved my luggage from the car – together with a bag of shopping I had bought in Okehampton – and prepared to make myself at home for the evening. However, while I ate my bowl of pasta – washed down with a glass of wine – I could feel the doubts beginning to creep to the fore.

Fortunately, when my eyes began to feel heavy and I started to yawn, all thoughts were superseded by those of bed. Willingly conceding defeat, I headed upstairs, hoping for a good night's sleep.

I decided to use the larger of the two bedrooms, as the other one was quite small. Although it had been fine when I was a

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child, with the sloping roof and single bed, it now felt cramped.

The rear bedroom window overlooked the back garden, which was now bathed in a shimmery glow from the full moon. It looked quite magical. Smiling, I started to pull the curtains. A sudden movement near the corner of the L-shaped building caught my attention, so I stopped and peered through the glass. I was convinced I had seen someone dart across the lawn, but as I scanned the garden, I realised there was nobody there.

Great. Now I was hallucinating.

Feeling stupid, I swished the curtains together, changed into my nightie, and walked into the bathroom to clean my teeth. Giving in to flights of fancy was not conducive to a successful recovery, I told myself sharply as I climbed into bed.

Luckily, I did not have time to worry about it. As soon as my head hit the pillow, exhaustion claimed me, and I promptly slipped into a deep sleep.