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THE GIRL NEXT DOOR

One little lie
just became deadly...

PHOEBE MORGAN

Phoebe Morgan

**The Girl Next Door: a gripping
and twisty psychological
thriller you don't want to miss!**

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PHOEBE MORGAN is an author and editor. She studied English at Leeds University after growing up in the Suffolk countryside. She has previously worked as a journalist and now edits crime and women's fiction for a publishing house during the day, and writes her own books in the evenings. She lives in London and you can follow her on Twitter [@Phoebe A Morgan](#), or visit her website at www.phoebemorganauthor.com for tips on writing and publishing. Her debut novel, *The Doll House*, was a #1 ebook bestseller. *The Girl Next Door* is her second psychological thriller.

The Girl Next Door

Phoebe Morgan



ONE PLACE. MANY STORIES

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Praise for Phoebe Morgan

‘A real page-turner, I loved this story.’

B A Paris, bestselling author of Behind Closed Doors

‘Tense, suspenseful and unsettling!’

Lisa Hall, bestselling author of Between You and Me

‘Unsettling, insightful, evocative and poignant, Morgan’s writing is both delicate and devastating.’

Helen Fields, author of Perfect Remains

‘A brilliantly creepy and insightfully written debut. I tore through it.’

Gillian McAllister, Sunday Times bestselling author of Everything But the Truth

‘Totally engrossing from start to finish. A clever, clever book.’

Amanda Robson, author of Obsession

‘Morgan’s intense prose grips and thrills from the first page... a terrific debut.’

S. R. Masters, author of The Killer You Know

‘Atmospheric, dark and haunting, I could not put this book down.’

Caroline Mitchell, USA Today bestselling author

‘Deliciously creepy, genuinely unnerving and incredibly confident, *The Doll House* is the stellar first outing of a major new voice.’

Catherine Ryan Howard, author of Distress Signals

‘Unnerving and spine-chilling.’

Mel Sherratt, million-copy bestselling author

For my family, and for Alex.

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Clare

Monday 4th February, 7.00 a.m.

I'm not coming home tonight. The thought hits me as soon as I wake up, fizzing excitedly inside my brain, like one of those sherbets Mum used to buy me from miserable Ruby's corner shop. I won't be sleeping in this bed, I won't be wearing these red and white pyjamas, I won't be by myself.

It's so cold outside; I can see misted condensation on the windows of our house and the room has a filmy, damp feel because Ian's so bloody tight about the heating. Under the duvet, I wiggle my toes to warm up and reach an arm out for my iPhone, on charge by the side of the bed like it always is. Three new messages – two from Lauren, and one from him. The smile cracks open my face as I read it, and I feel a little shiver of anticipation run through me. Today's the day. I have been keeping my secret to myself all weekend, but tonight, I'm going to tell him. He's waited long enough.

'Clare? Are you out of bed yet?'

Mum's calling me from downstairs, I can hear Ian thudding around, making too much noise as he always does. Their bedroom is down the corridor from mine, but I never go in there. I hear the shower spray on, the sound of water hitting tiles, then his whistling begins – out of tune, like always. It'll be like this until the front door slams and he goes to work; until then, the house is full of his loud voice and Mum's anxious fussing. I've got an alarm, of course, but she insists on shouting for me every morning as though I'm six, not sixteen. Reluctantly, I swing my legs over the edge of the bed, wincing as the freezing floorboards touch my feet. My phone, still in my hand, vibrates again and I feel another bubble of excitement, deep in my stomach. Just the day to get through and then it'll be time. I can't wait to see his face.

[Chapter One](#)

Jane

Monday 4th February, 7.45 p.m.

I'm sitting in the window with a glass of cool white wine, watching as one by one, the lights in the house next door to ours flicker on. It's dark outside, the February night giving nothing away, and the Edwards' house glows against the gloom. Their walls are cream – not a colour I'd choose – and their front garden runs down to the road, parallel to ours. Inside, I imagine their house to be a mirror image of my own: four spacious bedrooms, a wide, gleaming kitchen, beams that date from the fifteenth century framing the stairway. I've never been inside, not properly, but everybody knows our properties are the most sought-after in the town – the biggest, the most expensive, the ones they all want.

There's a creaking sound from upstairs – my husband Jack, moving around in our room, loosening his tie, the clunk of his shoes dropping onto the floor of the wardrobe. He's been drinking tonight – the open bottle of whiskey sits on the counter, sticky drops spilling onto the surface.

Quietly, so as not to wake the children, I stand, move away from the window and begin clearing it up, putting the bottle back in the cupboard, wiping the little circle of stain off the marble countertop. Wiping away the evidence of the night, of the things he said to me that I want to forget. I'm good at forgetting. Blanking the slate. Practice makes perfect, after all.

The house is tidy and still. The bunch of lilies Jack bought me last week stand stiff on the windowsill, their large pink petals overseeing the room. Apology flowers. I could open up a florist, if it wasn't such a tacky idea.

There's a sound outside and, curious, I move to the front window, lift the thick, dove-grey curtain to one side so that I can see the Edwards' front garden. Their porch light has come on, lighting up the gravel driveway, the edge of their garage on the far side, and the stone bird bath at the front, frozen over in the February chill. I've always thought a birdbath was a little too much, but each to their own. Rachel Edwards' tastes have never quite aligned with mine.

We've never been close, Rachel and I. Not particularly. I tried, of course. When she and her first husband Mark moved in a few years ago, I went round with a bottle of wine – white, expensive. It was hot, July, and I imagined us sitting out in the back garden together, me filling her in about who's who in the town, her nodding along admiringly when I showed her the wisteria that climbs up our back wall, the pretty garden furniture that sits around the chineneas on the large flagged patio. I thought we'd be friends as well as neighbours. I pictured her looking at me and Jack wistfully, envying us even – popping round for dinner, exclaiming at the shine of the kitchen, running a hand over the beautiful silver candlesticks when she thought I wasn't looking. We'd laugh together about the goings-on at the school, the lascivious husbands in the town, the children. She'd join our book club, maybe even the PTA. We'd swap recipes, babysitter numbers; shoes, at a push.

But we didn't do any of those things. She took the wine from me, naturally, but her expression was closed, cold even. My first thought was that she was very beautiful; the ice queen next door.

'My husband's inside,' she'd said, 'we're just about to have dinner, so... Perhaps I can pop round another time?'

Behind her, I caught a glimpse of her daughter, Clare – she looked about the same age as my eldest son, Harry. I saw the flash of blonde hair, the long legs as she stood still on the stairs, watching her mother. She never did pop round, of course. For weeks afterwards I felt hurt by it, and then I felt irritated. Did she think she was too good for us? The other women told me not to worry, that we didn't need her in our little mothers' group anyway. 'You can't force it,' my friend Sandra said. Over time, I let it go. Well, sort of.

When Mark died, I went round to see Rachel, tried again. I thought she must be terribly lonely, rattling around in that big house, just her and Clare. But even then, there remained a distance between us, a bridge I couldn't quite cross. Something odd in her smile.

And then, of course, she met Ian. Husband number two. After that, I stopped trying altogether.

I see Clare every now and then, grown even prettier in the last few years. Jack thinks I don't notice the way his eyes follow her as she walks by, but I do. I notice everything.

I hear footsteps on the gravel, and recoil from the window as a figure appears, striding purposely towards our front door. I open it before they can knock, thinking of my younger children, Finn and Sophie, tucked away upstairs, dreaming, oblivious.

Rachel is standing on our doorstep, but she doesn't look like Rachel. Her eyes are wide, her hair all over her face, whipped by the wind.

'Jane,' she says, 'I'm sorry to bother you, I just—' She's peering around me, her eyes darting into our porch, where our coats are hanging neatly on the ornate black pegs. My Barbour, Jack's winter coat, Harry's scruffy hoodie that I wish he'd get rid of. Finn and Sophie's little duffels, red

and blue with wooden toggles up the front. Our perfect little family. The thought makes me smile. It's so far from the truth.

'Have you seen Clare? Is she here?'

I stare at her, taken aback. Clare is sixteen, a pupil at Ashdon Secondary. The year below Harry, Year Eleven. I see her in the mornings, leaving for school, wearing one of those silky black rucksacks with impractically thin straps. She can't possibly get all her books in there.

Like I said, we don't mix with the Edwards much. I don't know Clare well at all.

'Jane?' Rachel's voice is desperate, panicked.

'No!' I say, 'no, Rachel, I'm sorry, I haven't. Why would she be here?'

She lets out a moan, almost animalistic. There are tears forming in her eyes, threatening to spill down her cheeks. For a moment, I almost feel a flicker of satisfaction at seeing the icy mask melt, then squash the thought down immediately. Just because she's never been neighbourly doesn't mean I have to be the same.

'She's not with Harry or something?'

I stare at her. My son is out, a post-match pizza night with the boys from his football team. He took Sophie and Finn to school today for me; the night out is his reward. If I'm honest, I've always thought he might have a bit of a crush on Clare, like father like son, but as far as I know she's never given him the time of day. Not that he'd tell me if she had, I suppose. His main communication these days is through grunts.

'No,' I say, 'no, she isn't with Harry.'

Her breath comes fast, panting, panicked. 'Do you want to come inside?' I ask quickly. 'I can get you a drink, you can tell me what's happened.'

She shakes her head, and I feel momentarily put out. Most people in Ashdon would kill to see inside our house: the expensive furnishings, the artwork, the effortless sense of style that money makes so easy. Well, it's not totally effortless, of course. Not without its sacrifices.

'We can't find her,' she says, 'she didn't come home from school. Oh God, Jane, she's disappeared. She's gone.'

I stare at her, trying to comprehend what she's saying. 'What? I'm sure she's just with a friend,' I say, putting a hand on her arm as she stands at the door, feeling her shake beneath my fingers.

'No,' she says, 'no. I've called them all. Ian's been up and down the high street, looking for her. She's normally home by four thirty, school gets out just after four. We can't get hold of her on the mobile, we've tried and tried and it goes to voicemail. It's almost eight o'clock.' She's clenching and unclenching her fists, blinking too much, trying to control the panic. I don't know what to do.

'Shall I come round?' I ask. 'The kids are asleep anyway, Harry's not here, and Jack's upstairs.' If she thinks it odd that my husband hasn't come down, she doesn't say anything.

'Rachel!' There's a shout – Ian, the aforementioned hubby number two. He appears in my doorway, a large, oversized iPhone in his hand. His face is red, he looks a bit out of breath. He's a big man, ex-army, or so people say. Works in the City, takes the train to Liverpool Street most mornings. I know because I see him through the window. He runs his own business, engineering, something like that. Always a jovial tie. I've heard him shouting at Clare in the evenings; I can never make out what he's saying. I suppose it must be hard, being second best. I know I wouldn't like it.

'The police are on their way,' he says, and at this Rachel breaks down, her body curling into his, his arms reaching out to stroke her back.

'If there's anything I can do,' I say, and he nods at me gratefully over his wife's head. I can see the fear in his own eyes, and feel momentarily surprised. It takes a lot to unsettle a military man. Unless he knows more than he's letting on. He never did get on well with Clare.

[Chapter Two](#)

DS Madeline Shaw

Monday 4th February, 7.45 p.m.

‘It’s my stepdaughter, Clare. She hasn’t come home from school.’

The call comes in to Chelmsford Police Station just after 7.45 p.m. on Monday night. The team are polishing off a tin of Quality Street left over from Christmas; DS Ben Moore is hoovering up the strawberry creams while DS Madeline Shaw targets the caramels. It’s the DCI who answers the phone, holds up a hand to silence the room.

When she sees the look on Rob Sturgeon’s face, Madeline picks up the handset, presses the pads to her ears. Ian Edwards’ voice is gruff, but she can hear the urgency in it that he’s trying to control. Immediately, she knows who he is – the Edwards family live in Ashdon, in one of the big detached houses off Ash Road. His wife Rachel works at the estate agency in Saffron Walden. She’s got one child from her first marriage: Clare. Madeline lives three streets away from her: they are practically neighbours.

‘She’s normally home long before now, school finishes at ten past four,’ Ian says, his words coming fast. ‘I’m afraid my wife is getting a bit worried.’ A pause. ‘We both are.’ DS Moore is making a face, delving back into the chocolate, but Madeline listens carefully. The DCI is asking questions, his voice calm – how old is Clare, when did you last see her, when did you last hear from her.

‘We’ve tried her phone, dozens of times now,’ Ian says. ‘It’s just going to voicemail. It’s not like her to do this—’ He breaks off.

Madeline is about to chip in, to tell Mr Edwards that she can come round – after all, she’ll be going home anyway – but the door to the MIT room swings open and Lorna Campbell pops her head round the door, her coat on even though she normally works until eleven.

‘Detective Shaw?’

Madeline slips off her headset. ‘Everything okay?’

Lorna raises her eyebrows at the team. ‘Report just in of a body found in Ashdon, in the field at the back that borders Acre Lane. Female victim. Guy called Nathan Warren phoned it in, says he was out walking, stumbled across her. You ready?’

The DCI’s face changes. Wordlessly, Madeline follows Lorna outside.

The girl is lying on her back in Sorrow’s Meadow. In the summer, despite its miserable name, the field is full of buttercups, bright yellow flowers shining in the sun, but in the winter it’s dark and barren. Clare Edwards’ golden hair is fanned out around her head like a halo, blood is soaking into the frosty grass around her skull. Madeline’s torch beam picks out the places where it’s already darkened, highlights the silvery trail of saliva that has frozen on the girl’s cheek. It’s freezing, minus two. She’s in her school uniform: jumper and skirt, a scarf and a little blue puffer coat over the top.

‘Call forensics,’ Madeline tells Lorna, her breath misting the air, little white ghosts forming above the body.

‘They’re on the way already,’ Lorna says, ‘the DCI too.’

‘Clare,’ Madeline says aloud, but it’s pointless; when she bends to touch the girl’s neck, her gloved fingers meet ice-cold skin, no hint of a pulse. For a moment, the policewoman looks away. She’s never had a case where she knew the victim before, even though her interaction with Clare Edwards has only been brief. A school assembly last December; Madeline had been called in by the head to do a routine safety chat. Clare had approached her afterwards, wanted to know more about her job, a career in the police. It had surprised her, at the time. Now, it makes her feel sick. Clare’s future is gone, over before it began.

The forensic team arrive and begin sealing off the area, their white suits bright in the darkness. Gently, Madeline lifts the blonde hair, exposing the wound at the back of Clare’s head.

‘She looks so young,’ Lorna mutters quietly, and Madeline nods.

The torchlight lands on her rucksack, a black faux-leather bag, thin straps. Inside are a pile of school books; her name is all over everything, the neat blue handwriting re-emphasising Clare’s youth.

'No mobile phone.' Lorna hands her Clare's wallet – a purple zip-up from Accessorize. Carefully, Madeline thumbs through her cards: her provisional driver's licence, a Nando's loyalty card, plus an old Waterstones receipt, long out of date.

'Shaw. I've been on the phone to her mother. Fill me in.'

DCI Rob Sturgeon appears at her side; quickly, Madeline begins sliding the exercise books into evidence bags, turns to face him.

'Have you told her yet?'

He shakes his head. 'No, not until we've formally ID'd. Shit.' He runs a hand through his hair. 'Is Alex here?'

They both look around, and spot DS Alex Faulkner a few metres away, talking to one of the forensics team.

'Faulkner!'

At the DCI's shout, Alex heads over, the expression on his face grim.

'Looks like someone's repeatedly slammed her against the ground,' he says, nodding to Madeline. 'Back of her head's not a pretty sight.'

There is a blue ink stain all over Clare's left hand, and her unpainted fingernails are dirty, from where she's presumably clawed at the ground.

'You don't think there was a weapon?' the DCI says, and Alex shakes his head. 'Doesn't look like it to me.'

'Suggests unplanned, then,' Madeline adds, and he nods.

'Quite possibly. Fit of anger, perhaps. Crime of passion.' There's a pause. 'We'll be testing for rape, of course.' He swallows, spreads his hands in the semi-darkness. 'Or else it *was* planned, and our killer just decided to cut out the middle man. Less evidence that way.'

'Someone who trusts their own strength, in that case,' Rob says. The guys are placing markers on the frosty ground, marking the places Clare's blood has spilled. *Trusts their own strength*, Madeline thinks. Nine times out of ten it's a man.

'You said Nathan Warren phoned it in?' she asks Lorna, frowning.

'Yes, that's right,' Lorna says, and catching the expression on her colleague's face, 'd'you know him?'

'Yes,' Madeline says slowly, stepping to one side as they begin to erect a little white tent over her body, looking out to where the stile leads to the footpath down to the town centre, 'I do know him. I know exactly who he is.'

Clare Edwards is pronounced dead at 8.45 p.m. Madeline closes her eyes, just briefly, remembering the day Clare spoke to her at the school, their conversation in one of the empty classrooms, the curiosity in her eyes as she asked Madeline what being a police officer was really like. How can that girl be lying here on the floor, pale and lifeless? The two images will not connect in her brain.

'I want you with me, Shaw,' the DCI says, breaking the memory. 'Let's get this over with, for God's sake. Keep the tent up,' he barks, his eyes scanning the meadow, 'we don't want anyone seeing this.' Gloved hands are combing the ground for her phone, lights are picking out the spots of blood in amongst the leaves. The blood on her head is darker now, dry and blackening. Madeline's mind is already on Mr and Mrs Edwards, knocking on their front door, ready to deliver them the worst news of their lives.

'We can walk there,' she says at last, 'it's only ten minutes.'

'Right,' Rob says, 'Campbell, Faulkner – update me soon as you can. Send a car after us to the house, we'll need a family liaison officer. I want everyone on this. Jesus, sixteen. The press'll have a bloody field day.'

Madeline leads the way, back across Sorrow's Meadow, out of the wooded area and down Acre Lane towards where Ashdon High Street meets the river. The small town is quiet; it's a Monday

night. Driving through, you'd have seen nothing, heard nothing. The Edwards house looms in front of them, one of a pair set back slightly from the road, and the DCI puts his hand on her arm at the edge of their drive: a gravel affair, primroses either side, stiff with the cold. There's a bird bath to the left, frozen solid in the February air. Madeline looks to the house next door, separated from the Edwards' by a thin grass strip. Lights off, except for one. The Goodwins' place. Both houses are huge in comparison to Madeline's; security systems glow in the darkness. Behind the garage doors lurk expensive, silent cars.

'Just the basics for now,' Rob says, 'until we have the full picture.'

'Are we mentioning Nathan Warren?'

Madeline's question goes unanswered; the door opens before either of them can even knock and then there they are, framed before the police in the bright light of the house, Rachel Edwards and her husband Ian. Rachel looks like Clare – that same striking face, beautiful without needing to try. They recognise her from the town; she can see the flash of hope on their faces. Madeline steps forward.

'Mr and Mrs Edwards. This is DCI Rob Sturgeon, my colleague at Chelmsford Police Force. We have news on your daughter. May we come in?'

Chapter Three

Jane

Monday 4th February, 9.00 p.m.

The curtain is thick and warm between my fingers from my vantage point at the living-room window. The minute I closed the door on Rachel and Ian, I texted Harry to come home, my fingers fumbling slightly in my haste. I wish I hadn't had the glass of wine earlier, wish my mind was clearer, sharper, ready to help the neighbours. There is no sign yet of the police. What's taking them so long?

What's happened, Harry replied, *why do you need me home?* I told him to use the back door, to be as quick as he could. I want all my children under my roof, where I can see them.

As I wait for him at the window, blue lights spill suddenly across the pavement, illuminating our house in their morbid glow. My heart thuds. *It might be good news*, I think. But nobody comes to start a search party; I don't hear the whirr of helicopters out looking. Just two detectives crunching up the drive, followed by a third woman who quickly gets out of the police car. Then the slam of the Edwards' front door, the flicker of lights in their living room. Still, I think to myself, you never know. I keep telling myself that, although my insides feel cold. Eventually, when there is no sign of further movement, I draw the curtains, blocking the police car out, then check on Sophie and Finn in their beds, listen to their breathing for a full minute. My babies. I don't go into the master bedroom; Jack has closed the door. I don't want to disturb him now, there is no point. My husband doesn't take well to being disturbed.

'Mum?' I jump at Harry's voice; the gruffness of it always surprises me now; how quickly he has lost the boyish tones of his youth. Still only seventeen, he looms above me in the corridor. He must have come up the stairs behind me, his socked feet soundless on the thick white carpet.

'I didn't hear you come in,' I say, gesturing to him to come back downstairs, away from the rest of our sleeping family.

Downstairs, I lock all the doors and windows, check them twice as Harry fetches a glass of water from the sink, drinks it greedily in exactly the same way he did as a ten-year-old.

'What's going on?' he says, 'I saw the police car outside.'

'Nothing,' I say quickly, 'false alarm next door. Something to do with their security system.' There is no point worrying him, not now, not when I don't know the full story. The houses down this end of the town are used to things like this; we have state-of-the-art security systems now which, despite their cost, are triggered unnecessarily more often than not. A small irritation of the rich. My son doesn't think anything of it.

I watch Harry closely as he pulls open the fridge door, scans the shelves.

'Didn't you just have a pizza?' I say lightly, placing my hand on the small of his back, and he turns round, gives me a rare grin.

'Well, yeah. But you wanted me home before I could finish the second. What was up?'

'Oh,' I say, 'it was when next door's alarm first went off. I thought it was the real thing. Didn't want to be alone, as it were.' One of the houses across the way was burgled last year; two men in balaclavas. It's the only crime I've ever heard of in Ashdon. Bad things don't tend to happen here.

He frowns. 'Dad not in?'

I pause, a micro-second. 'He's asleep, came home with a bit of a headache, poor thing.'

My son grunts, having already lost interest in favour of leftover pasta in the fridge. My eyes flit over the half-drunk bottle of white wine next to it, but I make myself turn away, tell Harry I'm going up to get some sleep. I avert my eyes from the windows, not wanting to see what may or may not be unfolding next door.

When I go into our master bedroom, Jack is asleep, his familiar body curled in an S shape, his dark hair vivid on the pillow. I stare at my husband for a full two minutes before climbing in next to him. The scent of whiskey on his breath makes me feel sick. *He didn't mean it*, I keep telling myself, *it was the heat of the moment. That's all*. After a while, I put in my earbuds, turn my face into the duvet. I can't help Rachel Edwards now. The police are next door, they are doing their job. I think back to what Jack told me when we first moved to Ashdon. *You will love it here*. A gorgeous little town in rural Essex. A place where bad things don't happen. A place to fix our marriage.

I fall asleep with both sets of fingers crossed for Clare.

Chapter Four

Jane

Tuesday 5th February

The morning dawns grey and cold, and there is a second when I forget the events of last night, think only of the soft pillow beneath my head and the brushed cotton sheets beneath my body. *Only the best for my wife*, Jack had said, presenting them to me on moving day, as though Egyptian fabric could make up for the broken rib he'd inflicted on me in our old house. He'd pleaded with me over that one, and I knew why – if it went on his record, he'd never practise as a GP again. So it didn't, and here we are. I am still the doctor's wife. My children have two parents, a happy home. We all make sacrifices, and besides, the sheets are beautiful. I run my hand over them, soft and cool beneath my fingers. The room is very still; Jack is already up.

Then I remember, and it hits me: *Clare didn't come home from school*. Immediately, I am up out of bed, racing into my children's bedrooms, flicking on the lights. I am met with a grunt from Harry, the duvet yanked up over his head, the smell of teenage boy permeating everything. Finn and Sophie are the opposite – already awake and crowing in delight at the sight of me, their little fingers reaching out for a morning kiss.

I decide to go to the Edwards' house this morning, just after I've taken the children to school. Harry likes walking by himself nowadays, usually leaves before us, just after Jack. I suppose you don't need your mum holding your hand at seventeen. I cannot concentrate on making breakfast; my hands shake slightly as I pour milk onto the children's cereal, my eyes darting constantly to the window as though expecting to see Clare waving at me through the glass. But the street is silent, the same as it always is. I allow myself a flicker of hope. Rachel will probably ring any minute, I think, although I don't think she's ever picked up the phone to me in her life; she'll ring me and tell me it was all a false alarm, and we'll laugh about what a nightmare teenagers can be, how they'll turn us grey before we know it.

Jack was bleary-eyed when he left for the surgery. He tossed and turned a lot in the night; I kept still, like a board. I hesitated a minute before going next door, but I could hardly leave things as they were last night, could I? For all I knew, Clare could've been tucked up in bed by then, sleeping

off a hangover. I didn't hear anything with my earbuds in. Like I said, I still thought it might be okay, even then.

The air feels strange inside the Edwards' porch – stiff with shock. I notice Clare's trainers on the shoe rack, just inside the front door – black with pink stripes. For a moment, I think she must be home safe and sound and feel a huge wave of relief, the tension lifting out of my body, just for a second. Ian is the one who comes out to speak to me, his voice hushed.

'Rachel's not in a state to speak, Jane,' he says. 'They found our Clare last night.' *Found.*

She's not his Clare, not really, she's Mark's daughter. There were lots of whispers when Rachel remarried; people saying it was too soon, inappropriate. Mark died of lung cancer about three years ago.

I feel my face changing as he tells me, the shock seeping into my skin.

'I'm so sorry,' I say, 'I'm so sorry, Ian.' The words seem inadequate, inarticulate.

He stares at me. He looks as if he hasn't slept and his breath smells faintly of alcohol – not that I can blame him for that.

'Do they know what happened?' I ask, biting my lip, and that's when he tells me, the words pouring out of him like poison. She was found by Nathan Warren, the man who lives down by the river. She was wearing her school uniform, he says. They think someone attacked her, bashed her head repeatedly against the ground. She was alone. It was minus two. The police have closed off Sorrow's Meadow. A family liaison officer is in the kitchen as we speak.

I shudder, try not to let him see. Sorrow's Meadow runs across the back of Ashdon, surrounding us all, trapping us in. I used to take Sophie there sometimes, let her play in the flowers. I can't imagine I'll be doing that any more. And Nathan Warren – the name makes the hairs on the back of my neck stand up. Everyone knows Nathan – he lives alone, in his mother's old house, used to have a job as a caretaker up at the school. Apparently they let him go a few years ago after one of the mothers complained about him. Said he'd followed her daughter back from school. Nothing ever came of it though, as far as I know. It was all before our time. Hearsay. And hearsay can be dangerous, destructive.

I wonder if Ian and Rachel know about it, if the police have a record. Nausea runs through me, and for a horrible moment I panic that I am going to be sick, right on their doorstep. I imagine the vomit splashing onto Clare's trainers.

'Please,' I say to Ian, 'let me know if there's anything I can do. For either of you. We're just next door. We're here for you.'

He nods, his mouth a tight line. A woman appears behind him – young, short brown hair. Not exactly pretty, but she has kind eyes.

'This is Theresa,' Ian says, 'she's our support officer.'

'Family liaison,' Theresa says, stretching out a hand for me to shake. 'And you are?'

I don't like her tone. 'I'm Jane Goodwin,' I say, 'I live next door.'

She smiles at me, and immediately, I feel as though I've probably imagined the odd tone. 'The Edwards are lucky to have good neighbours,' she says to me in a low voice. 'It's times like this when communities can really pull together.'

'Of course,' I say to her, 'my husband and I will do anything we can to help.'

I think of myself tucked up in bed last night, crossing my fingers for poor Clare. It was no good, of course. She was probably already dead.

The police haven't spoken to us yet, though I imagine they'll come knocking. The news spread like wildfire today – everyone was talking about it at the school pick-up. No one's using the word murder, not yet, but no one thinks it was an accident either.

'I heard it was Nathan Warren that found her,' Tricia hissed at me this afternoon, as we stood by the school gates. 'I wonder what the police make of that. D'you remember that fuss a few years back, when he lost his job at the school?'

I nod. I always felt a bit sorry for him; people said he'd had an accident a couple of years ago, that it had affected his mind a bit. *He was painting the roof for his mother*, Sandra had told me, *fell off the ladder, hit his head on the stone*. But other people insist he's never been right, that there's something more sinister about him. *The way he looks at you*, one of the mothers had said once, *I wouldn't want him alone with my daughter, put it that way*.

I didn't want to let the children out of my sight today, wanted to wrap my arms around them and never let go. But Jack said we had to carry on as normal, not panic until they release more information. I didn't like the way he looked at me when he said it, like I was paranoid, overprotective.

Thank God it didn't take long to find her, at least, I said to Jack when he got home this afternoon, but he didn't reply. He said he'd had a hard day at the surgery. I told him it was okay, that I understood he was tired, that I knew he hadn't meant what he said last night. I wondered if he'd forgotten, even, in all the drama over Clare.

Harry was horribly shocked at the news; I spoke to him as soon as he got in from school.

'I'm so sorry, darling,' I said to him, 'I know this must be a dreadful shock, her being around your age. The police are doing everything they can.' His face went completely white; I got him a chocolate biscuit from the cupboard, usually reserved for special occasions. The last thing I need is multiple trips to the dentist. I put a hand on his arm but he shrugged away from me, took himself off upstairs.

'Let him be for a bit,' Jack said to me, 'he'll come around.'

I stared after Harry, wondering. My son has become closed off to me these last few months; he mentions school friends, but never girls. *It's normal for teenage boys to be private*, Tricia told me a few weeks ago, *you probably wouldn't want to know what goes on inside his mind anyway!* She'd laughed, like it was a joke. But I do want to know. I want to know everything.

[Chapter Five](#)

Jane

Tuesday 5th February

We sit at my friend Sandra's kitchen table, all of us on our third glass of wine, red for them, white for me. Easier to clean. I'm considerate like that. She texted Tricia and I this evening, wanting an emergency wine night. *I think we're all in shock*, her message said, *come to mine for seven?*

'You'll be good for Daddy, won't you?' I said to the children before leaving the house, hugging their little bodies tight to my chest. I didn't want to leave them, but Jack told me to go, and something in his eyes made me put on my coat, grab my handbag, close the front door tightly behind me. My rib twinged a bit as I walked the ten minutes to Sandra's house, a semi-detached place with lavender borders leading up to the front door. In the summer, the smell of them is lovely; now, they are sorrowful-looking husks, scentless and dead.

My hand is underneath Sandra's; she grabbed it as she was talking, wanting the comfort even though I know part of her loves this gossip, despite the morbidity of what's happened. Our wedding rings chink against each other. Tricia tops up our glasses, although we've had too much already. Everyone drinks more these days, even the PTA. It takes the edge off.

'This used to be a safe place,' Sandra is saying drunkenly, her lips blackened from the drink. Another reason I chose white. Moving her hand from mine, she clutches at her skinny chest, her palm smacking the centre, where people think their heart must be. They're wrong, obviously, usually by a good few inches. That's what Jack says, anyway.

'My heart,' she says, 'it feels like it's breaking for that little girl. Is that silly? But it really does.'

'I know,' I say. I thought this *was* a safe town, a nice place, a community of do-gooders. It's how my husband sold it to me. A home for us, for our little family. *You will love it here*, he said, his lips curving into mine. A memory comes to me, of just before we moved: the steep drop of the staircase in our old house, the spirals in the ceiling above my head as I lay on my back, my rib broken and bruised. The way they looked at me in the hospital, before I smoothed it all away.

'Tell us again how it happened, Mrs Goodwin,' they'd said to me, and I watched as the nurses looked at my husband, their eyes slightly narrowed, their pens poised above my notes.

'Perhaps you'd feel more comfortable without Mr Goodwin in the room?' one of them had suggested to me, but Jack was standing by her side and so I shook my head no, told them I was fine.

'I slipped,' I said, 'I slipped and fell as I was carrying the children's washing upstairs. Roll on the day they can do their own laundry!' The youngest nurse had laughed at that, smiled at me kindly, adjusted my pillows. I could almost sense the goodness radiating out from her, the purity. I wanted to be like that too. For just a brief moment when Jack went to the bathroom, I wanted to reach out to grab her arm, tell her the truth. But I thought of the children, their little eyes blinking up at me, and I didn't.

A fresh start, he said on the drive home from the hospital, *for both of us*. Shortly after, we moved here.

Sandra takes another sip of wine, shoves a handful of Kettle Chips into her mouth. The gesture smudges her lipstick a bit, but no one says anything.

'I can't imagine how you're feeling, Jane,' she says, 'her being next door to you guys.' She gives a little shiver. 'You can't believe it, can you?' She lowers her voice, looks at me and Tricia, her eyes darkening just a little. 'You don't think – well, you don't think the obvious, do you?' She's almost whispering now, and I know what she's going to say even before she opens her mouth, her white teeth flashing in the kitchen light. She uses strips to whiten them; I've seen them in her bathroom. £19.99 for a pack, bright white teeth for a lifetime. 'You don't think she was *raped*?'

The word changes the atmosphere in the room, as though the walls are tightening slightly, hemming us in. I put a hand to my throat, thinking of Clare's long legs, of my son's eyes on her golden blonde hair.

'I think we ought to let the police be the judge of that,' I say, 'but I hope to God she wasn't.'

'It would be a motive though, wouldn't it?' Sandra presses on, oblivious to my discomfort. Rather than reply, I take another sip of wine, press my hand to my stomach, feel it rumble with hunger. We haven't eaten dinner. Liquid calories.

'I know what you mean,' Tricia chips in, eyes gleaming with the promise of more gossip. 'It does seem odd, doesn't it, for someone to target her like that, without a reason?' She shivers. 'And Nathan Warren being the one to find her – well, it doesn't exactly inspire confidence, does it? Poor, poor Rachel. And after losing Mark, too.' She pauses. 'I hope she isn't thinking anything stupid.'

'I took her a lasagne round this afternoon, after the police left,' I say, and the women nod appreciatively. I did *think* about taking her one, which is almost the same thing. The curtains on Rachel and Ian's bedroom window were pulled tight when I left to come to Sandra's; I couldn't see inside. Their bedroom faces into our bathroom; when I'm in the shower, I can see the full sweep of their bed, their his and hers wardrobe, the suit Ian hangs up before a big meeting in the city. They can't see me, I don't think. Anyway, a lasagne might have disturbed them. Overstepped the mark.

'You're such a good neighbour, Jane,' Sandra says, hiccupping as she takes another sip of wine, and I smile, look away. Her house is a mess; kids' toys clutter the floor.

'We'll get through this,' Tricia says, nodding decisively, the effect ruined only slightly when a spill of wine slops from her glass, splashing onto her expensive cream blouse. 'We all will. This town needs to stick together. We're a team.'

The clock on the mantelpiece chimes – it's an old-fashioned one, like my grandmother would own. Sandra never did have much style.

'I'd better get going,' I say, 'Jack will be waiting.' I glance at my watch, feel a rush of anxiety as I picture him looking at his phone for messages, annoyed now that I'm later than I said. Opening a beer, the soft click of the bottle cap releasing. *Jack's lucky to have you*, an old friend said to me once. How true those words are now.

'Oh, send our love,' the women say, almost in a chorus, and I nod, start gathering my bag.

‘Ooh!’ Tricia says as I’m nearly at the front door, ‘I almost forgot to say, because of Clare. But did you hear about Lindsay Stevens, from the Close?’ She lowers her voice, even though we’re the only ones in the house apart from Sandra’s kids upstairs. ‘Apparently, her *divorce* papers came through. Supposedly she’s devastated.’

‘Goodness,’ I say, trying to look shocked, arranging my face into an expression somewhere between sympathy and sadness. ‘That’s awful.’

Tricia nods. ‘I thought I’d bake something for her, drop it round next week.’ She looks at me expectantly.

‘I’ll help,’ I say, just in time, and she beams at me, gives my arm a little squeeze.

‘Thanks, Jane, you’re a star. See you tomorrow for pick-up time! And get home safe, won’t you? Text us when you get in. God, I won’t sleep properly until we know who did that to Clare.’ She looks worried, and I feel a sudden chill which I push away. It’s a ten-minute walk home, and besides, I’ve been through worse.

I shut the door quietly behind me, thinking about Lindsay. I can’t tell them how I really feel about her divorce. I can’t tell them that deep down, part of me is jealous. It’s too soon for them to know the truth.

I walk home, down the quiet road, using the light on my new iPhone to check the ground in front of me, even though I know the small pavements like the back of my hand. I pass the schools on the right, the primary and secondary next to each other, encouraging all our children to stay just five feet from home for the entirety of their young lives, and my torch-light catches the whips of yellow ribbon tied to the row of saplings outside, hastily erected today after the news about Clare came out. Sadness spreads fast. Quickly, I move the beam away and stumble slightly. I’m drunker than I thought.

The Edwards’ house is lit up, lights blazing. As I get closer, my heart starts to jump in my chest. There are cars outside: two police, one black. Can’t really pass all this off to Harry as a security breach again. It won’t be long before the journalists descend. I shudder at the thought, thinking of the horror of last night. I think of my daughter Sophie, the sweet pink pout of her lips, the way her little white socks slip down her ankles. If anything happened to her, I’d die. She’s our only girl, though I always wanted more. I don’t have a sister, and Jack never speaks to his older sister Katherine – but we ended up with two boys. Not that I’d change Harry and Finn now, not for the world. Well. I might make Harry a touch more communicative. A touch less interested in blondes.

I walk quickly past the Edwards’ house, keeping my head down, not checking to see if there’s anyone sitting inside the parked cars. My keys are cold in my hand. I press the metal into my palm, harder and harder until it hurts. Our front door is heavy, a wooden slab framed by a thatched roof. If there was a fire, we’d all be up in smoke. Maybe that would be a good thing. He’s suggested it more than once. Shouted it, in fact. Luckily the children had Harry Potter on, the audiobook blasting into their little ears. Drowning out Daddy. I suppose Harry might have heard.

Inside our house, I press my back against the door, force myself to take deep breaths. Harry is home tonight; his huge black trainers are discarded inside the front hallway. I bend to pick them up, stack them neatly on the shoe rack, wanting to create a sense of order to ease my jumbled mind. I hope he’s feeling better. It’s horribly unsettling, having this happen so close to home. I know it’s awful, I know I should be focused on our neighbours and their grief, but selfishly, I don’t want the police sniffing around my family, prising apart the cracks in my marriage. Things can still change, any day now. He is usually sorry. So, so sorry. And the bruises fade fast, after all. There’s never been any point getting anyone else involved. Not at this stage.

Jack is sitting up in our living room, just as I pictured him, his legs stretched out on the large grey sofa that cost us over three grand. *Three grand*, I wanted to say to him, *three grand would’ve sent Sophie to the private school in Saffron Walden*. The 52-inch television screen is flickering in front of him, the volume down low. He puts a finger to his lips as he sees me. My stomach clenches.

'The kids are asleep. Well, Harry's on the Xbox, I think, in his room. But Sophie and Finn went down over an hour ago.' He's staring at me. Unblinking.

'Thank you,' I say robotically, moving through the room to the kitchen, the spaces joined together by the dark beamed archway. I stand at the sink, run a glass of cold water. The basin is deep, the gold tap high above it. Modern. Trendy. The kitchen faces the Edwards' house. I wonder if Jack has been watching too.

'Were the children alright?' I ask.

'Fine,' he says, 'Sophie wanted a story, Finn wanted more juice. Harry grunted at me. Nothing too strenuous.'

I can't work out what mood he's in. Words hang between us, all the things we're not saying.

He gestures to me and I wobble towards him, fingers clamped around the water glass. He smiles up at me, puckers his mouth into the kissy shape that used to mean he wanted sex, and I grip the glass even tighter and purse my lips back at him, trying for a moment to recreate the old magic.

Later. I've swept up the broken glass, keeping a sliver wrapped in kitchen paper, up where the matches are kept so the kids don't get hold of it. Just in case. I have these little weapons hidden around the house – break in case of emergency. The knife slipped between the top row of paperbacks in our room, third from the left, next to *Wolf Hall*. The envelope of twenties nestled in with the cookbooks. My escape routes, such as they are. He doesn't know, I don't think.

In bed, we turn towards each other; I've brushed my teeth, he hasn't. I can still taste the slight fug of alcohol on my tongue, feel the beat of my heart in my ears. I picture Rachel and Ian lying in bed next door; I can't imagine they're asleep either. Maybe they're not even in, maybe they're down at the police station already. Perhaps the police are searching the house. I think of them thumbing through Clare's things, their eyes taking in every little detail. I've watched too much CSI.

'How were the PTA girls?' Jack asks, and I half smile in spite of myself. Girls. We're forty-five.

'Lindsay's divorce papers came through,' I tell him, 'Tricia spilled her wine. Sandra says her heart hurts.'

'That's impossible,' he says, and I roll my eyes in the darkness. Always the doctor. 'Why's she getting a divorce?'

I shift onto my back. The white curtain brushes my arm, ghostly in the darkness. We're trying so hard to be normal that it hurts. 'I didn't get to find out.'

I can almost feel the twist of his smirk, although his lips are barely an outline.

'Lucky her.'

There's a pause.

'Jane,' he says then, 'about last night...'

I wait. I suppose I'm waiting for an apology, but this time, one doesn't come.

I wish I could barricade the downy pillows between us, protect myself in my sleep. I want to talk more about Clare but I can't; instead I stare at the wall and think of my children, of their sweet, chubby little faces, their sweeping dark eyelashes, the soft inhale and exhale of their breath in the next room. I think of Harry, his teenage body sprawled out underneath the duvet, the smattering of newly acquired stubble on his jawline. My babies.

I don't fall asleep until Jack does. I'm too frightened.

[Chapter Six](#)

DS Madeline Shaw

Tuesday 5th February

Ashdon is a small town, population 3,193. The town sign sits in the centre, opposite the primary and secondary schools and beside the River Bourne. On it are three farmers, a sheep, and a strangely oversized ear of corn. The town has a doctor's surgery, a pub and a church, a newsagent, a ceramics place and a lot of middle-class mums. It is not the kind of town where bad things happen, and the death of Clare Edwards comes as a horrible shock.

Madeline has lived in the town for just over eighteen months. When the DCI formally assigns her to work underneath him on the Clare Edwards case, she is drinking coffee at her desk, black for the calories, and playing back the recording of Nathan Warren's phone call, made to Lorna after he came across Clare's body. She knows about the allegation made against him a few years ago, the report of him following a girl home from school, and has already asked Ben Moore about it. DS Moore had shrugged, waved a hand in the air.

'If you want my honest opinion, it was all nonsense,' he said. 'The people of Ashdon, well, the impression I get is that they don't like anyone who's not like *them*. The woman whose daughter it was never pressed charges; some people said she was making it up because she was pissed off at the school about something. They moved not long after, over to Saffron Walden.'

Madeline had nodded, noted it all down just in case.

'I want you on this, Shaw,' the DCI says now, 'you know the town, you know the people. You've got the edge.' He looks at her, eyes narrowed. 'Don't let me down, Madeline.'

She grits her teeth; not likely. She's spent the night thinking about the look on Rachel's face when they told them the news; the sound of the woman's knees hitting the floor, the way her husband's arms wrapped around her tiny waist. In her experience, the family is never quite as innocent as they look, but these two are doing a good job so far of convincing her otherwise.

'I'm so very sorry for your loss,' she told them both, the words sounding wooden in her mouth. She handed them the list of Clare's personal items, the ones they have had to take in for evidence. Clare's watch, the hair tie from around her wrist, her school things and her purse.

'We are still looking for Clare's phone,' Madeline told the parents. 'We're working on the assumption that whoever attacked Clare took it with them.'

'Can't you trace it?' Rachel asked, her breath ragged, snotty.

'My team are working on that,' the DCI said, 'and we'll be looking at the phone records too – finding out who Clare had been speaking to recently, eliminating people from our enquiries.'

Both of them looked back down at the list.

'And her necklace?' Rachel had asked, touching a hand to her own throat, grasping at her neck as though she'd like to snap it in two. Ian reached up, clasped her hand in his and pulled it gently back towards the table.

The police exchanged glances. 'Necklace?'

'For her sixteenth,' Ian said. 'We gave it to her as a birthday present. It was only two weeks ago, 14th of January. A gold one, a locket with her name on.'

Madeline thought back to the sight of their daughter on the ground, her blonde hair shining in the light of the torch. Feeling for a pulse at Clare's neck. There was no necklace.

'Is there any chance your guys could have missed it?' Ian said, looking between them, colour rising a little in his face.

'No,' Madeline said, 'that's extremely unlikely. Everything that was recovered from the scene is on this list.'

'But we'll double check,' Rob added, just as Rachel began to sob again, the sound echoing around the kitchen.

'She's a good girl,' her stepdad kept saying, over and over again as the police stood to leave, the breakfast things still piled up by the kitchen sink, a stack of Clare's clothing freshly washed on one of the chairs. 'She's a good girl, our Clare.'

'We'll be in touch,' Madeline had said, 'as soon as we can be, Mr and Mrs Edwards. We'll be back first thing tomorrow.'

But she'd checked the list this morning, rang the pathologist to check there was nothing else with the body. No necklace. No phone.

The two of them spend the morning searching the Edwards' house from top to bottom. The parents don't look any better than they did yesterday – there's a bottle of wine by the front door,

empty, and another half full on the windowsill. Someone's already left a bunch of bedraggled-looking flowers on the lawn outside, red roses, no note.

Rob and Madeline go upstairs, leaving Rachel and Ian sitting downstairs with Theresa, the family liaison officer who arrived just as they were leaving last night. She's nice, is Theresa, Madeline likes her. Nice but new, good at making tea. Madeline has told her to let the police know how the Edwards are together, what they say in the privacy of their own home. Theresa looked at Madeline like she'd said something awful.

'You don't suspect them?'

'Theresa,' she'd said, 'in a case like this, we can't rule anyone out.'

Ian Edwards has told them that both he and his wife were home that afternoon, that he'd left work early with the plan of taking Rachel out for dinner. Rachel had confirmed that she'd been back from her job at Saffron Walden Estate Agency by four, following a viewing of a house in Little Chesterford, eight miles west of Ashdon. The couple had met back at home.

'The family who viewed the house weren't interested,' she'd said between sobs. 'They didn't stay long, you can check.'

'We will,' the DCI said, his voice deliberately neutral.

Clare's bedroom is tidy, everything in its place – pale pink duvet, wardrobe full of clothes. Madeline runs her hand through the hangers, her gloved fingers brushing over Clare's dresses and cardis. Her eyes scan the bookshelves, the bedside table with its cluster of hair ties and roll-on deodorant. There's a pile of jewellery, stud earrings and a silver charm bracelet, but no sign of the gold locket necklace. There's a string of photos dangling from the mirror – black and white polaroids of two girls sticking their tongues out. One of them is Clare. Not recognising the other girl, Madeline gently tugs the strip of photos and holds it in her gloved hand. Two sets of bright eyes stare out at her.

'She was just a child,' Madeline says aloud. The DCI doesn't reply.

'No photos of her father,' Madeline says, gesturing around the room. There are none downstairs either; Mark is absent from the house altogether. Instead, Ian's face beams down at them, his arms around Rachel and Clare. The replacement.

'Odd,' Rob says, 'to have none whatsoever.'

There's nothing in Clare's bedroom to suggest anything untoward, but they photograph the entire room just in case, bundle her still-winking silver laptop into an evidence bag. Back downstairs, Theresa hands out fresh mugs of tea.

Madeline shows the parents the photograph of Clare and the other girl.

'Lauren,' Rachel says immediately, 'she's Clare's best friend.'

Madeline nods. 'Thank you – we'll need to speak to her, to find out if she knew any more about Clare's movements on the fourth. Can I take a last name, please?'

'Oldbury, Lauren Oldbury,' the mother says, her voice cracking a little. Her face is very pale, her lips look almost bloodless.

'Mind if I keep this?' Madeline asks, the photograph of the girls between her fingers. Both parents shake their heads mutely, their eyes fixed on the static face of their daughter.

'Mr and Mrs Edwards,' the DCI says, 'I'm sorry to ask this, but we're going to need you to formally identify Clare's body.' He glances at Madeline. 'One of my officers will accompany you this afternoon.'

Rachel lets out a little moan. Her hair is lank, hanging limply onto her collar; she's wearing the same clothes she was in last night. Ian nods, sets his lips together in a hard, straight line. Ex-army; Lorna's looking into the files. There is something about him that doesn't fit with this house; he is the third wheel, the cuckoo in the nest, the second husband, no matter what story the photos try to tell. Madeline wonders how Clare felt about the marriage. Whether she had much of a choice.

'Thank you,' Ian says, and the DCI nods.

'We'll send a car.'

Madeline clears her throat.

'Mr and Mrs Edwards, as you know, we have reason to believe that your daughter's death was suspicious, and in light of this I have to ask you: do you know anyone, local or otherwise, who might have reason to cause harm to her? Or failing that, to you?'

Rachel's face is anguished; tears begin to slip down her cheeks, sliding into the tracks that are already there, white against her day-old foundation. Madeline watches her. The mother without a child. Bereft.

'No,' she whispers, 'there's no one. She's sixteen, she's my baby, she's never done anything wrong, never—' She breaks off, and Ian puts an arm round her, the gesture protective. The police watch them both, noting the dynamic between them.

'What about you, Mr Edwards?' Madeline asks. 'Is there anything that comes to mind? Anything about her actions in the last few days, any behaviour that was out of the ordinary?'

The glance between them is fast, but the DCI's eyes narrow a little and Madeline tilts her head to one side.

'No,' Ian says, 'no, nothing. She was a good girl, detective. Like I said last night. Everyone liked her.'

They wait a moment, but Rachel continues to cry, and Theresa comes forward, places a box of tissues on the table.

'Alright,' the DCI says, 'thank you both for your time.' They get to their feet, and Madeline feels in her pocket, hands Rachel her card.

'If you think of anything that might help,' she says, 'you call me, anytime. Day or night. This is my direct line.' Rachel's eyes flash up at her, glassy with tears, but she swallows hard and nods. They watch as Ian closes his hand over his wife's, Madeline's card disappearing from sight.

As the police crunch back down their drive, Rob looks at Madeline.

'What d'you think?'

She takes a deep breath. She doesn't know the Edwards well – she tends to keep herself to herself in Ashdon, as much as she can, anyway. Rachel's not part of the mum chums – Jane Goodwin and the like – but Madeline has seen her a few times with Ian, having a Chardonnay in the Rose and Crown pub of a Sunday afternoon. She sells glossy new homes to moderately wealthy clients in Saffron Walden by day, and she was bereaved a few years ago – Mark, lung cancer. They have an old coroner's report on him somewhere. She remarried relatively fast.

'I don't know,' she says at last, 'but I want a background check on them both, and their alibis checked for that afternoon. And I want to talk to Lauren Oldbury. Clare was sixteen – at that age, you tell your friends much more than you tell your parents.'

The DCI glances at his watch. 'Quick sandwich before we talk to Nathan Warren?'

Madeline makes a face. 'Only sandwich you'll get round here is from Walker's corner shop, and trust me, you'd really rather not.'

Nathan Warren sits in interview room three at Chelmsford Station, his hands splayed on the table, his big brown eyes darting around the room like a trapped animal.

Madeline slides into the seat opposite him, hands him a cup of filter coffee and pours them all a glass of water. The DCI winces as Nathan's hand grips the polystyrene cup too hard, splashing liquid onto the grey-coated table.

'Sorry,' he says immediately, stuttering slightly, and Madeline grabs a couple of paper towels from the corner of the room, dabs up the mess.

Nathan Warren has been standing on Ashdon High Street corner nearly every day for the past eighteen months. He's been a part of the town for as long as anyone there can remember – he used to be the school caretaker, and before that he delivered the paper, the *Essex Gazette*, popping it through the inhabitants' letterboxes (usually late, but no one ever complained). Most of the time now, no one knows *what* he does. Madeline has seen him wandering around on the green before, sometimes

wearing a hi-vis jacket. There's a traffic cone he moves around, left over from an old accident – the council turned a blind eye to it, figured it gave him something to do. Kept him out of trouble, and the police have never bothered to get involved. Until now, that is.

'Thanks for coming in, Nathan,' Madeline begins, smiling at him. The nastier women in this town say he's '*simple, not all there*,' but she is reserving judgement until they know the full story. People are capable of one hell of a performance when they want to be.

'I know you already gave a statement to DS Campbell on Monday, Nathan, but we wanted to run through a few things with you, if that's alright.'

He doesn't speak, just stares at them both, one hand anxiously clenching and unclenching.

'Where were you on the afternoon of Monday the 4th of February, Nathan?' the DCI snaps, and Nathan visibly blanches.

'I was at home,' he mutters, 'just at home.'

'Can anyone verify that?'

The police already know that they can't – Nathan lives alone, in the house his mother left him when she died five years ago. As far as they know, he has no other family.

'Nathan,' Madeline says gently, casting a look at Rob, 'it would help us if you could walk us through that afternoon – what you did, up to and after finding Clare Edwards in Sorrow's Meadow.'

He scratches behind one ear, the movement fast, sharp.

'I was home,' he says again, 'and then I went for a walk.'

'And what time was this?'

He looks panicked, and Madeline shifts her wrist slightly, allowing the watch face to point in his direction, wondering if he struggles with the time. The pathologist thinks Clare died some time between 5 and 7 p.m.

'About seven,' he says then, nodding as though pleased that he's remembered, 'after the news finished. I always walk around up there, I like the flowers.'

'There *are* no flowers in February, Mr Warren,' the DCI says, and Madeline presses her lips together, takes a deep breath. She can't shake the feeling that she'd be handling this better on her own.

'Okay Nathan,' she says, 'so you went for a walk. And did you see anyone else while you were walking?'

He shakes his head.

'Just me.'

'And you saw Clare lying on the ground?'

He nods, looks away from them, starts jiggling his left leg underneath the table. He's a big man; his hands are like spades. They know that Clare weighed around eight stone – she'd have gone down like a feather if someone of his size was involved.

'And what did you do when you saw her?'

He looks back at them, and his eyes look sad, huge in his face. His skin is very pale, but his lips are full, like those of a child.

'Told her to wake up,' he mumbles, 'but she wouldn't.'

'And did you touch her?'

'No, no, no,' he says, and he starts shaking his head then, quickly from side to side, too fast.

'There's no need to be upset, Nathan,' Madeline says firmly, 'we're just trying to establish the events in the run-up to Clare's death. You've been very helpful.'

The DCI exhales.

'Are you sure you didn't touch her, Nathan?' he asks, leaning forward slightly in his chair, lacing his hands together on the table. His wedding ring glints in the overhead lights and Madeline feels a bite of dislike. Just because Rob Sturgeon wants this case cut and dried as quickly as possible doesn't mean they can go pinning it on Nathan.

He doesn't answer.

'I'll tell you what I think, shall I Nathan?' the DCI says softly. 'I think you might've followed Clare Edwards when she came out of school. I think you tried to talk to her. I think that when she didn't give you what you wanted, you didn't like it. You pushed her. And then you panicked.' A pause. 'It wouldn't be the first time you'd followed a girl home from school, would it?'

Madeline feels a flash of anger – the DCI has no right to bring up an old, and possibly false, allegation. They need to show Nathan Warren that they're on his side. In her experience, people don't tend to talk much otherwise.

He's shaking his head even faster, putting his hands to his ears as if horrified by what they're suggesting.

'No,' he says, 'no! I didn't touch her, I didn't touch her.' He looks frightened, murmurs something else under his breath.

Madeline leans forward. 'What was that, Nathan?'

'She was pretty,' he says, without looking at them, and Madeline feels a jolt of unease.

The DCI is glowering. 'Yes,' he says, 'she was a pretty girl, wasn't she, Nathan? Did you like that about her?'

Nathan gives a little moan. He glances at Madeline as if for help, and she puts a hand on Rob's arm, wanting him to calm down.

'Is it possible you were in Sorrow's Meadow a bit earlier than you thought, Nathan?' she asks him. 'If you tell us, we'll be able to help you. If you don't, things might get harder.' A pause. He just keeps shaking his head, back and forth like one of those toys people put in the backseat of cars. Madeline resists the sudden urge to reach out, tap him on the top of the head with her pencil to see if his head will bob the other way. They are not getting anywhere today.

'Let's pick this up at another time, sir,' Madeline says quietly.

Rob glares back at her, but she meets his gaze head-on. As they exit the room, she thinks once more of Ian, covering his wife's hand, putting his arm around her waist. People can put on one hell of a performance. It is too soon to know who to trust.

Chapter Seven

Clare

Monday 4th February, 8.00 a.m.

Mum has made crumpets with butter for breakfast and I eat quickly, eager to get out of the cold house and let the day begin. I know I should tell Ian and Mum that I'll be staying at Lauren's or something tonight, but they'll have a go at me and I just can't face it today. Yesterday's argument was bad enough. I'll text Mum later on, when it's too late for them to stop me.

'Have a good day today, Clare,' Mum says as I eat the last bit of my crumpet and swallow more tea, feeling it burn my tongue because I've drunk it too fast. I nod.

'I've washed your blue coat and your black skirt,' she says, pointing to the pile of washing on one of the kitchen chairs, 'in case you wanted to wear that this week. I know it's your favourite. And I got the stain off the coat.'

'Thanks,' I mutter. I can feel Mum watching me, feel her eyes burning into my face. She probably feels bad for yesterday, but that's tough luck.

'You have a good day too,' I say, a bit reluctantly, and at that moment Ian comes in, whistling in that annoying way he does first thing in the morning, a repetitive, grating tune that now pops into my head at random times throughout the day. His hair is still a bit wet from the shower and little droplets of water glisten in his beard.

'Morning, my two lovely girls!' he says cheerfully, shoving a piece of toast in his mouth and pulling open the fridge. I stiffen, push my chair back and reach for my blue puffer coat from the pile of washing, shrugging it on.

'I've got to get to school.'

Ian pauses at the fridge; I see Mum looking at him, her expression almost pleading. The fridge door swings shut and Ian clears his throat, swallows down a mouthful of peanut butter toast, and looks at me.

'Listen, before you go, Clare – I'm – well, we're sorry for what happened yesterday. Us rowing with you about the exams. Your mum and I talked and, well, we think we've probably been pushing you a bit too hard, love. It's a stressful time, isn't it, and we know you're doing your best.' He stops for a second, then opens his mouth as though about to say something else. I can see peanut butter clinging to his teeth.

'We are sorry, Clare,' Mum chips in, and I stare at them, surprised by this sudden show of togetherness. My tongue still feels weird, like sandpaper where the hot tea has burned it.

'Don't worry about it,' I say at last, wanting the moment to be over. Ian looks visibly relieved, a smile breaking out on his large face.

'That's our girl,' he says, and to my horror he pulls me towards him, gives me an awkward half hug, my face pressing up against his shirt, my gold necklace pushing into the dip in my neck as I'm crushed against him. He smells of Mum's new shower gel that she got for Christmas, and too much Lynx. I want him off me.

'Be good, Clare,' Mum says, and I breathe a sigh of relief when Ian releases me and turns back to the fridge, his already-short attention span reduced even further by the lure of bacon.

Quietly, I let myself out of the front door, take a deep gulp of air. At least they've apologised. Sort of.

I close the garden gate behind me and shove my hands in my pockets, ignoring a WhatsApp from Lauren asking if I've done our English homework. She'll be panicking, she always does, but I'll just let her copy mine. I pull my hat down over my long blonde hair, hoping it won't look too flattened by the time I get there, then set off down Ash Road towards school. It's only a ten-minute walk. I can never decide whether I like the claustrophobia of this town – I've lived here ever since I can remember, since Mum and Dad left London for somewhere smaller, quieter, safer. You'll love it here, Dad said. They certainly got what they wanted – nothing dangerous has ever happened in the history of this place. Other than what went on within the four walls of our house, of course, but no one talks about that. Especially not my mum.

Chapter Eight

Jane

Wednesday 6th February

'Can we have porridge the way Dad makes it next time?' Sophie, my daughter, is pouting, her spoon halfway to her mouth like Goldilocks caught in the act. The bowl I've made her for breakfast is almost untouched – I make it with water, Jack makes it with full-fat milk. You'd think a doctor would know the dangers of cholesterol, but there you go.

'Next time,' I say, using a damp J-cloth to blot the orange juice that Finn has spilled on the table. My eyes prick from tiredness, my mouth feels dry from last night's wine with the PTA girls. I checked my phone every time I woke up in the night, shading it from Jack's eyes, wanting to see if they'd made any arrests for Clare Edwards. The news is sparse, the details vague. I've set an alert for it on my phone, so that if anything new comes in I'll see it straight away. I can't bear the thought of being separated from my children today. Not when this has happened next door. I want to lock the front door, tuck them up in their beds and throw away the key.

I can't stop myself from glancing at the window, at the painted cream walls of the Edwards house. When I had a shower this morning, I wiped the steam from the glass and looked across the gap that separates our houses. Their bedroom curtains were open, but neither of them were in bed. As I watched, I saw Ian enter the room, go over to the wardrobe. I shifted slightly, making sure he couldn't see me. I only had a towel on. Water was dripping down my neck. He bent down, took something out and slipped it into his pocket. Then he left the room. I waited a few seconds, but he didn't come back.

Downstairs, everything is silent. The family liaison officer is still there, or at least her car is. Their kitchen curtains are open too and I notice there are wine bottles on the windowsill. An oddly neat row of them, three empty, one half full. The recycling men come on Wednesdays. Theresa ought to have put them outside, really.

Behind me, I hear my husband coming down the stairs. I turn back to the hob, where the remainder of the porridge is bubbling over, waiting for Harry. He's going to be late for school.

'What's that I hear about the best porridge in the world?' Jack says, entering the room dressed for work: blue shirt, the cufflinks I bought him last Christmas. Little crossed ribbons; the silver glints in the light filtering through the kitchen window. He's doing the false voice he uses for the kids. I look behind him for Harry, but there's no sign of my elder son.

Jack kisses me on the cheek, takes a sip from the cup of coffee I proffer. The mug says: 'Best hubby in the world.' A cruel joke, courtesy of Hallmark. Sophie is beaming, and I reach out to touch her hair, feel the soft brown curls of it underneath my palm. The curls were a surprise when they came; my own hair hangs straight down my back, or it used to when I was younger. Now it sits on my shoulders, trimmed once a month at Trudie's Salon in the town. The name makes me shudder every time I go in; the epitome of parochial.

The toaster pings and I flip the bread onto a plate for my husband, watch as he spreads it with too much butter. He won't put on weight, he never does.

'What are you up to today?' Jack asks me, pulling a silly face at Finn, and I take a deep breath, steel myself.

'The usual, Jack. You don't need to worry.'

He doesn't reply. We both know that second sentence is a lie. The only person who needs to worry is me, as long as I'm married to him.

'Where's Harry?' I ask, and Jack shrugs.

'Coming down, I guess.'

I go to the foot of the stairs, place my hand on the bannister. 'Harry!' As I stand there I think of how many times I have done this, the familiarity of it. Rachel will never call for Clare again, never feel the frustration that comes with having a teenager in the house, never sigh and look at her watch as the breakfast goes cold.

'Harry!'

'Coming, I'm coming.' I hear him before I see him, and then he is there; my boy, his black hair hanging scruffily down towards his shirt collar, the smell of Lynx Africa emanating towards me. His school bag trails behind him, bumping on each stair until he's in front of me. His skin is pale, his eyes look a little bloodshot.

'Darling,' I say, reaching out before I can stop myself, running my hand along his jaw and straightening his collar, 'how are you feeling today?' I can see the expression hidden beneath his features; I saw the way he used to look at Clare. He shifts away from me, just a little, the movement as hurtful as it always is. It's not that we don't get along, Harry and I, it's that we've stopped knowing each other, somewhere along the way. But he's my firstborn, my surprise baby, born years before the others, when Jack and I were young.

Tying us together.

'I'm fine,' he mutters, not meeting my eye.

'Breakfast is ready,' I say, for want of anything else, and he finally looks at me, nods.

'Thanks, Mum.' I watch as his school bag drops to the floor and he lopez into the kitchen, hear the squeal of Sophie as she sees him. He's good with her, and with Finn. It's us he's grown distant from, me and Jack.

As he pulls out a chair at the table, I see his eyes flicker to the window, to where the Edwards house stands silently in the cold February light. He stares for one second, two, then his gaze moves away.

After breakfast, Harry leaves, headphones in as always, bag slung across his right shoulder. On the doorstep, I catch him, my hand on the sleeve of his blazer.

‘Harry,’ I say, ‘be careful, won’t you?’

My eyes lock onto his. The moment hangs between us, and suddenly I feel foolish. He is seventeen – but then I remind myself that Clare was sixteen, on the cusp of adulthood too. Age isn’t always a protection.

‘Of course,’ he says, ‘I’m always careful, Mum.’ A half smile, blink and you’d miss it. ‘Don’t worry.’

He closes the front door behind him and I watch him cross the street through the window, his cheeks immediately beginning to redden in the cold air. The sky is grey, giving nothing away. As I watch, a car pulls up beside him, then swings left, coming to a stop outside next door.

‘Mummy!’ Finn calls behind me, pulling my attention away, ‘I can’t find my shoes.’

Ten minutes later, and we are finally ready to go. Sophie and Finn are bundled up like two little snowmen, their reading folders clasped tightly in their hands. Jack is still sitting at the kitchen table; I glance at my watch. He should have left fifteen minutes ago.

‘Jack,’ I say, ‘you’ll be late.’

My husband’s gaze doesn’t move, his eyes focused on the now-congealing bowls of porridge that I’ve yet to clear up. Sophie is staring at me, confused. Quickly, I pull my face into a smile and blow a kiss at Jack, making a loud smacking sound which makes the children laugh.

‘Say bye bye to Daddy!’ I say, and we all wave at him, two snowmen and a wife.

Turning away from him, I step outside, a child in each hand, and that’s when I see them: the flowers. They’re on the ground outside the Edwards house, lining the front of their lawn. Pink flowers, red flowers, yellow flowers, wrapped in cellophane, handwritten notes damp in the morning chill. Overseeing them all is a large teddy bear, grotesque and unseeing. Glassy eyes stare blankly into mine.

Quickly, I pull the children across the road, just as a blue van slows down in front of us and pulls up alongside the car I saw. Both are emblazoned with the words *ITV News*. I swallow. It hasn’t taken long.

‘Mummy?’ Sophie says, catching the expression on my face, but I quickly bend down and wrap her scarf around her even more tightly, re-do her zipper so that it’s right up to the chin, blocking her view of the Edwards’ front lawn. Finn isn’t concentrating, he’s fiddling with something in his pocket. I hurry them down the road towards the school, trying desperately not to look back over my shoulder. Our feet slide a little on the pavements; they should have gritted the roads again, it’s cold enough.

For the next ten minutes, I listen to Sophie chatter about her art class, soaking up her innocence, her total obliviousness to the fact that a dead teenager has been found not five minutes from where we’re standing. She loves art, it’s her favourite subject. Like mother, like daughter. On Mondays I wash her uniform in a hot spin; there is always paint on her shirt. I’d complain to the teacher, but I don’t want to draw attention to us. Not anymore. I saw the way the headteacher looked at me when I had to cancel the PTA dinner last month; the concern in her eyes, the questions about life at home. I guess walking into a door doesn’t quite cut it these days.

‘Jane!’ Sandra grabs my arm after I’ve waved goodbye to the children. She’s wearing a thick woollen scarf and too much mascara, and her nose is red in the cold. She leans close to me. ‘Have you seen the news vans? One drove right past our house this morning. That’ll be it now, it’ll be everywhere.’ She shivers, stamps her feet on the ground in an attempt to warm them up. ‘God, imagine, Ashdon on TV. Well, we’ve all seen the way they cover cases like this, they’re like vultures, aren’t they?’ She eyes me beadily. ‘Your house might be on the news too. Or at least in the frame.’

‘Sandra,’ I say to her, ‘don’t tell me you’re jealous of that.’

She looks admonished. I put a hand on her arm. ‘Don’t think about it, not for now anyway. News coverage might help the police, help them catch whoever did it.’

'You're right,' she says, her face brightening, 'you're right, Jane. God, I hope they catch him soon. Has your Harry heard anything more? The older ones must be devastated.'

'No,' I say, 'Harry didn't really know Clare very well.' My throat tightens, ever so slightly.

'Book club this week?' Sandra says, changing the subject, and I pause, then nod.

'We ought to keep going, keep a sense of normality,' she says, 'perhaps we could do it at yours? I've almost finished the Zadie Smith.'

Before I can answer, she's waving her gloved fingers at me, then turning to go. I stare after her for a moment, watching her slightly stocky frame make its way across the tarmac, stopping to talk to other mothers on the way. The book club invitation will have made its way through half the town by the time she's finished. Sandra knows everything about everyone, or she thinks she does, anyway.

I move away from the school, tucking the strands of hair that have escaped from my scarf back inside the soft grey material. It's cashmere; Jack bought it for me last Christmas. *For the one I love*, it said on the gift tag. I put the tag in my bedside drawer, along with the dried rose he gave me when we first started dating, and the faded yellow boarding pass from our honeymoon in Thailand. I look at them sometimes, my little mementoes, to remind myself of his love. Sometimes it's hard to remember. I didn't put the hospital tag in there; I cut it off my wrist the day after the incident on the stairs and buried it in an old handbag, stuffed at the very back of our wardrobe. Some mementoes aren't worth looking at.

I pull out my phone as I walk back down the high street, send Jack a text. *Off to work. See you tonight.* A pause. *Love you.* I keep it on vibrate, in case he replies, but although the little tick tells me he's read it, the phone stays resolutely silent and still.

When I get into work five minutes later, Karen, my boss-stroke-colleague, is on the phone. Her voice is sombre and her face looks serious, but despite that, I feel it – the wash of freedom that comes when I am here, in this light-filled shop, away from my husband, away from the house. We're a tiny little place, selling ceramics and cards mainly; I only took the job part-time because it gave me something to do. I used to work in advertising, back when I lived in London, before the children and Jack, and part of me has always craved that creativity. Sometimes I think of myself, sitting in a London boardroom, MacBook in front of me, and I don't recognise myself at all. They say marriage and kids don't have to change you: whoever said that is a liar. I'd say a broken rib changes a lot of things.

It wasn't always like this in the beginning, Jack and I. When I met him, I was won over. Jack, for me, presented a life I never thought I could have: money, stability, the house and kids, all in one fell swoop. And for a while, it was perfect. Better than perfect. We were obsessed with each other; I was his little project, the girl he took on and made good. And like any good subject, I rose to the challenge. Made myself into the woman he wanted. Before long, you couldn't even see the divide between who I was and who I am now. And if it's up to me, I'll keep it that way. No matter what.

That's all I'm trying to do.

'Morning!' Karen mouths at me, still on the phone, and I wave my fingers at her, unwrap my scarf from around my neck and hang it on the peg. There's a small studio-cum-office at the back where Karen and I work, and everything we make is placed at the front of the shop. Art as therapy; I thought something like this would help me deal with life at home and it does, sometimes. The kettle bubbles happily and I tune the radio as I get my teacup down from the shelf: a painted ceramic mug Sophie and Jack made me for Mother's Day last year. Wobbly hearts adorn the sides and my own heart stretches.

I make coffee. When I first met Jack, he warned me off it, well they all did there, told me about what it does to your heart rate, your nervous system, your cortisone levels. But he breaks his own rules now. I can break them too.

'Sorry about that, Jane,' Karen says when she hangs up the phone. The shop belongs to her, and we rub along together, although I find it hard to get as stressed out about ceramics as she does. Most

of our income comes from Jack, these days. Good old Jack, Jack the doctor, Jack the breadwinner. The old rhyme goes through my head, *Jack be nimble, Jack be quick*. There's nothing fairy tale about our marriage. *But it's what I wanted*, I remind myself. *What I still want, even now*.

I settle down next to Karen, power up my computer. The screensaver flickers on: Finn and Sophie on the beach, Harry pulling a silly face behind them; our holiday in Cornwall last year that ended in one of the worst fights Jack and I have ever had. I can't even remember what started it now. In the photo, Sophie has ice cream around her mouth. Bright yellow; quickly, I click onto one of my latest designs, feel a bubble of relief as it replaces the image on the screen.

'No worries,' I say to Karen, taking a sip of caffeine – it's too hot, it burns my tongue. Burning off the wine from last night. I feel it again: the impact of the glass, the hideous sadness when I saw the bruise this morning. Purple, the colour of heather. It'll be green soon.

Karen tuts. 'It was Beth again, calling from school. She didn't want to leave the house this morning – well, who can blame her! After the news. She's in the same year as Clare Edwards. That poor girl. It's just so awful. It feels like the whole town is in shock.' She frowns, rubs a hand across her eyes. I feel a stab of empathy, make a sympathetic noise in my throat. Beth is her daughter at the secondary school, sixteen last week. I helped decorate the birthday cake at work that afternoon, stabbing the little candles into the thick white icing.

'Actually,' I say, 'they live next door to us.'

The reaction is immediate. Karen gasps, her hands flying to her mouth, the silver band on her wedding finger glinting in the light.

'No! Jane! I didn't realise. I'm so sorry. I—'

I wave my hand in the air. 'No,' I say, 'really, it's fine, well, it isn't, but...' I pause. 'Obviously it's horrible, having it happen so close to home.'

Karen shudders; I can actually see the shiver going up her spine, snaking its way through her thin stripy shirt, across her narrow shoulder blades. 'I just can't believe it Jane, next door to you! In our town! Right after Christmas, too, who would do a thing like that? Beth says she was a pretty girl, was she? One of the popular crowd. Well, you can tell that from the photo. I expect it won't be long before it makes the nationals.'

She nods towards the town paper, splayed on the desk. *Schoolgirl found dead in Ashdon field*. Clare Edwards' blonde hair shines like a halo, her white teeth grin out at us, frozen in a smile. My eyes fill, and I look back at my screen.

'It's terrible,' I say, 'it's the very worst thing.'

I buy a paper of my own from Walker's corner shop on the way to get the children from school. I don't know why, but I want to read the details, pore over it all in my own home. I need to be alert, prepared – my children are the most important thing on the planet. I have to keep them safe. My heart thuds as I stare at the headlines – I can't believe it, I can't believe she's dead. One of our own. It fills me with horror. Ruby Walker smiles grimly at me from behind the counter. Leader of the local girl guides, most miserable woman on the planet. I've seen her lips move in prayer before, when she thinks no one's watching.

'Anything else?' she says, her face one of permanent despondency, and I grab two KitKats for Sophie and Finn, a Twix for Harry, and a bottle of wine for us. Jack likes Merlot; I like Sauvignon. The paper folds between my hands, hot with ink.

'Dreadful,' Ruby says, shaking her head at the figure on the front, and I nod, look away from her to the row of bright sweet wrappers. It is dreadful. We all know it is.

'You knew her, didn't you?' she says, staring at me. 'You and your husband. You must have.'

I clear my throat. There's something weird about the way she says 'husband', or am I imagining it? Half the mothers in this town are in love with Jack. I don't want to have to add miserable Ruby to the list. Although I suppose she's not exactly competition.

‘Not very well,’ I say, ‘the Edwards family kept themselves to themselves.’ I’m exhausted with saying the same thing.

‘How was Ray-of-Ruby?’ Jack will say to me later, and I’ll smile in spite of myself. It’s been our name for her since we moved to the town; in all this time she’s been nothing but a misery. Sophie will be going to Brownies soon, but I’ve told her she’s exempt from Guides. Karen says Beth used to hate it – endless knot tying, constant prayers about the end of the world. Some people thrive on disaster. Ruby is loving all of this drama.

At the school gates, I stand with the other mums on the verge of grass between the primary and the secondary. Harry doesn’t get out until ten past four, but I pick Finn and Sophie up at three thirty. I love seeing their little faces as they toddle towards me, love the moment I can envelop them in my arms again. Especially now, when tragedy is so close.

Both the schools are Church of England, of course. There’s a noticeboard pinned to the gates, and a new poster flaps in the wind. I lean forward, stare at the black font. The priest is doing a special service tomorrow night, in memory of Clare. *Please join us*, it says, *as Ashdon comes together in the face of adversity*. It must be the most excitement Pastor Michael’s had for ages.

Normally, the mums and I would grin at each other at a missive from the church, but today, you can almost sense the nerves, feel the shockwaves radiating around us all. Nothing like this has ever happened before. Not in Ashdon. Not next door. Briefly, I close my eyes, think back to that morning, the very last time I saw Clare. I watched as she left for school, slamming the front door behind her, or did I imagine the slam? Harry wasn’t down yet, Finn and Sophie were still brushing their teeth. Clare was early, earlier than normal. Her blonde hair shone in the February sun, the ends catching the light. Jack appeared behind me at the window, and I moved away. I wonder if her stepdad was watching her too. Whether she was aware of how men looked at her. Whether she looked at anyone in the same way.

I crouch down when I see Finn coming towards me, jolting me back to the sharp February afternoon. I open my arms for his warm little body, eager to have him back. He’s always at his most loving just after school. A reassuring trait. Sophie bobbles towards us and Sandra appears as if by magic at my side, smiling at me. I’ve only had a few hours respite. This is how it is in this town. She’s gripping her own daughter Natasha tightly by the hand.

‘Oof. Think the wine from last night is catching up on me, I feel a bit dreadful now. Thanks for coming though. How was work?’ She doesn’t pause for breath. ‘The girls are best friends this week!’ she mutters to me, and I nod in response. Sophie and Natasha have a love–hate relationship, it seems. As much as seven-year-olds can, anyway. I can see Tricia heading this way but I pretend not to notice, in case she remembers my promise to bake for getting-a-divorce-Lindsay. Quickly, I hustle the children towards me, grabbing reading folders and lunch boxes between my fingers. Nobody is sticking around much to talk today, all of us wanting to get home, wrap our children up in cotton wool, protect them from whatever horrible fate met poor Clare.

There’s a gaggle of us who usually walk down the main street, but we’re the ones who can veer off first. Our house is only ten minutes from the school, set back just slightly from the road, alongside the Edwards’. It’s pink in contrast to their cream, your typical cottage pink, with a neat black roundel on the front denoting the name. *Badger Sett*. Horribly, achingly, twee. Sometimes, I wonder what on earth I was thinking coming here. Especially now this has happened. Not that Jack would want to leave; his practice is here. This is, after all, our fresh start.

Finn’s little hand is clutched in mine as we trot away from the school. My heart is bumping in my chest, worrying about the pile of flowers and tributes building up on the Edwards’ lawn, how I’m going to shield it all from my children. Sandra walks beside us, Sophie and Natasha up ahead. My eyes remain fixed on Sophie’s purple backpack as Sandra lowers her voice.

‘Have you heard anything more today?’ she asks me. ‘Tricia was telling me that the police think someone hit her on the back of her head, must have come up to her from behind. Can you imagine?’

I shiver, and clutch Finn's hand a little tighter. The buttons on my blouse feel tight around my neck. I always dress conservatively these days. The doctor's wife.

'Have the police been round to yours yet?' Sandra asks. 'They must be going to. I bet they'll ask you all about it. Doesn't your kitchen window look into theirs?'

She knows it does. I almost want to laugh at how transparent she is.

'I've been in the shop,' I say, nodding my head in the direction of it. Everything in this town is so close together; it's a claustrophobic's nightmare.

'Tricia says they're sending DS Shaw round,' Sandra says, 'you know, going door to door. To see if anyone saw anything. And they've questioned Nathan Warren – well you'd have to, wouldn't you? I still think there's something not right about him. I mean, what was he doing, out *walking* at that time?' She sniffs and exhales, her breath misty in the cold air. 'They've already searched the Edwards' house apparently, one of the mums saw them coming out yesterday. Did you? You didn't say.' She goes on without waiting for an answer. 'Imagine someone riffling through all your things like that.' She makes a face. 'I wonder if they found anything. Rachel's so beautiful, of course, but you just never know, do you? I wonder what DS Shaw makes of her. Chalk and cheese, those two.'

DS Madeline Shaw – Ashdon's resident detective. She's lived here for the past couple of years, in a little house just up the hill, past the schools. We don't have much to do with each other – she's not exactly the book club and wine type. How strange it must be for her, having this kind of crime happen right on her doorstep. Or fortuitous, I suppose.

Ahead of me, Sophie's backpack bounces. Her hair glows in the sunlight and I feel a wave of sickness. Sandra must see the look on my face because she sighs, makes a tutting noise. I look down at the floor, my eyes scanning the pavement, the tap, tap, tap of our feet. Sandra's wearing those hideous Birkenstock boots; I've got my little black ones on, Russell and Bromley, last year.

'I know,' she says, 'the thought of it happening again... of it being one of our girls this time. It doesn't bear thinking about, does it? I can't abide violence.'

The shudder moves up my spine. Yellow flowers glisten behind my eyelids. The memory of the stairs in our old house, the way he pushed me, the pain in my ribs.

'No,' I tell her, 'neither can I.'

[Chapter Nine](#)

DS Madeline Shaw

Wednesday 6th February

'Madeline?'

The DCI is in front of her, his eyebrows raised. He's impatient; the story has been picked up by the tabloids, and the calls are beginning to come in thick and fast. Some journalist has dug out an old picture of Clare from her Facebook page: her posing on a beach in Barbados. The inset is Rachel and Ian, him in an England football shirt, grinning at the camera. *The grieving parents?* the caption says. And so it begins, he thinks.

'Have you got the pathology report in yet?'

'Yep. Fast-tracked it,' Madeline says, handing him the email that has just finished printing, 'just in from Christina.'

He scans it, his eyes moving so fast that he could be skim-reading.

'Cause of death identified as internal bleeding on the brain following a wound to the back of the head,' Madeline says, 'just what we thought at the time. Bruising to the shoulders, which makes sense if someone grabbed her. No signs of sexual assault. They've tested.' It was the first thing they'd looked at; without it, one obvious motivation is gone.

The DCI sighs. 'Well, at least that's something. Though we'd have stood more of a chance of getting the perpetrator's DNA if he'd fiddled with her. No obvious motivation, if you rule out rape.' He runs a hand through his hair, wincing as the phone begins to ring again. This always happens when

there is a crime of this nature – people coming forward with false leads, psychics, nutters wanting their five minutes of fame. The media make things worse; he wishes they didn't need them so much.

'We're testing her clothing for DNA; should be in in a few days. The only thing I'm sure of at the moment is that this wasn't an accident.' Madeline stands up, looks over Rob's shoulder and points to the pictures of the body, scanned in by Christina, the pathologist. 'Look at this. Someone had a hold of her – my bet is they slammed her head against the floor, or hit her from behind and then flipped her round onto her front. It wasn't done by an expert.'

'No,' he says, 'not exactly methodical.' The pair of them stare at the photos. There's another bruise too, further down Clare's arm, blossoming purple, edged with green.

'Where does the name come from?' Rob says suddenly, 'Sorrow's Meadow. Unusual.'

Madeline shakes her head. 'No one knows really. Ruby Walker the newsagent always insists it's to do with the river. The sorrow collects in one place and then the water flows it away, some rubbish like that.'

Rob grunts, stares back down at Clare's bruises. 'Right. And where are we with the door to doors? The neighbours?'

'I'm about to get going now with Lorna.'

'Make sure you speak to everyone,' he tells her, 'anyone who saw anything that night at all. Unusual cars, out-of-towners, anyone else out "walking".' He snorts derisively as he says this, still annoyed that he can't get more out of Nathan Warren. 'And Madeline,' he says, 'find out what people think of the parents.'

'Their alibis checked out to a point, sir,' she tells him. 'We've CCTV of Ian leaving Liverpool Street Station on the early train, and arriving into Audley End a little later, but we don't have anything placing him back home. In Rachel's case, the estate agency confirmed her viewing in Little Chesterford, but again, no way of telling exactly what she did afterwards.'

'So there's a pocket of time?' the DCI asks, frowning at her.

'Well, technically,' Madeline says, nodding. 'The time during which they say they were waiting for Clare to come home, leading into the time when Ian was supposedly out looking for her.' She shrugs. 'We've no reason to suspect that that's not true, though, have we?'

Rob is still staring at the photographs of Clare, his face unreadable. 'Get a sense from the neighbours anyway,' he says. 'Find out what they – Rachel and Ian – are really like. Little town like this, people might talk.'

DS Lorna Campbell keeps up a steady stream of chatter as she and Madeline drive towards Ashdon, telling Madeline about how she's just moved in with her boyfriend, how he worries about her working in the police.

'He thinks I'll get shot or something,' she tells her, laughing nervously. She can only be in her late twenties, must be at least ten years younger than her superior. She's got a slight overbite and the movement is awkward, unattractive.

'You won't get shot in Ashdon,' Madeline says to Lorna, trying to reassure her, but then again none of them ever thought they'd find a dead body in Ashdon either, did they? They cannot be sure of anything at this stage. The DCI's words ring in her head as they drive. *So there's a pocket of time*, she thinks.

Chapter Ten

Jane

Wednesday 6th February

We're having dinner all together tonight – I've just set the table when Jack walks in, shrugging off his jacket, earlier than expected. Our eyes lock for a second and I know he's heard the news about the door to door enquiries, probably ten different versions from every patient he's seen today. The doctor's surgery is a great place for gossip; there's nothing people love more than offloading their woes in a quiet little room. I've been a tiny bit tense all evening, waiting to see if they knock on our

door. I've got long sleeves on, just in case, although I know that's not what Madeline Shaw will be looking for. Domestic don't seem to concern the constabulary these days. If they ever really did.

Finn wraps his arms around Jack's leg, hangs there like a small monkey, his feet suspended just above our shiny dining-room floor. His socks don't match: tiny elephants wave at red and blue stripes. Harry emerges as I'm plating up, blinking as though he's just made his way from a dark cave, which judging by the state of his bedroom last time I popped my head in, he probably has.

'How was your day, darling?' I ask Jack, keeping my voice light with an edge of warning: *yes, I've heard too, don't bring anything up right now*. We're trying not to talk about Clare Edwards in front of Sophie and Finn. They know now, of course – the school told them all this morning, the kiddie version, one classroom at a time, but they don't really understand. We all got a text message about it; the new way of communicating with parents, or so it seems. *Your child's well-being is of the utmost importance to us*, it said. Well that's good to know, I thought.

Sophie is mainly sad about the buttercup field, as she calls Sorrow's Meadow – we used to go there a lot on Saturdays, especially when she was younger. She liked to test us all, hold the flowers underneath our chins, reveal our culinary appetites. I've got a photograph of her with a buttercup crown twisted into her hair, smiling up at the camera – it used to be on the mantelpiece but I took it down before I went to bed last night. She looked too vulnerable, it made my head spin. Clare was someone's daughter too. Well, she was Rachel's. Beautiful Rachel Edwards. Perfect Rachel who thinks too highly of herself to ever attend our book clubs or wine evenings. The thought pops into my head before I can stop it, and I chastise myself. That happens sometimes.

'It was fine,' Jack says, going to the fridge. His eyes flick to the window, but the Edwards' curtains are closed tonight, the wine bottles hidden from view. I watch as he takes a brown bottle of beer from the side door, flicks off the top. It skitters across the work surface and I close my fingers around it before he can.

'Can I have—' Harry says, and I shake my head before he can finish the sentence.

'Not tonight, Harry,' I say, 'it's a school night.' We – or rather Jack – lets him have a beer sometimes, on special occasions only. I'm keen to keep it that way.

'How many people did you make better today, Daddy?' Finn asks, back in his seat at the table, head tilted back, trying to balance his dessert spoon on his nose. He fails; it clatters onto the table, clanging against his plate. Harry rolls his eyes.

Jack laughs, but it's mechanical, practised; it's not the warm chuckle he had when we met. It makes my stomach churn. 'Ooh, about five today. Careful with that spoon, buddy. You don't want to end up with bogeys in your pudding, do you?' He sniffs the air. 'Smells like Mummy's made apple pie.'

Of course I've made apple pie: it's Wednesday. God forbid I went off-piste.

Jack smiles at me. I smile back.

Sophie slides into the room, her socked feet skidding on the wooden floor. White with frills, matching. At least something's gone right. Her hands grab my waist and I lay my palm on her curly head.

'Careful, missy. We don't want any accidents. Have you washed your hands for dinner?'

Jack is religious about hygiene – we wash hands before and after eating, anti-bacterial gels dot the house. I flout the rules occasionally, but he's right about the children.

Sophie runs her hands under the tap as I finish serving up our meal – shepherd's pie with a side of green beans. Finn makes a face. Jack swigs his beer. The bottle's half empty already; I catch Harry eyeing it longingly.

'Beans are good for you,' Jack says, pre-empting Finn's complaint, and I breathe a sigh of relief. I am too tired to take this one on today. I need to save my energy for later, for when the children have gone to bed.

I want to ask Harry what they've said at the secondary school, how they're dealing with Clare's death, how *he* is dealing with it, but he's eating his dinner in near silence, one eye on his phone which sits on the table alongside us all.

'Shall I set a place for your iPhone next time?' I ask him when it vibrates yet again, the words coming out more snappily than I meant them. Jack frowns but Harry barely reacts, and somehow, it's worse than a retort. Since when have I become invisible?

'Harry,' Jack says, and finally our son looks up. 'Do as your mother says – no phones at the table please, mate.'

He slips it into the pocket of his trousers, but not before I see another eye roll. I feel a little bubble of frustration, then remember that Rachel Edwards will never see her daughter roll her eyes at her again. The thought silences me, and for a moment I lose myself, thinking of next door.

The food tastes funny in my mouth; no matter how hard I try, I'm not a good cook. Forks scrape rhythmically across the plates, white china from our wedding. I don't believe in saving things for special occasions, everything gets lumped in together in this house. Besides, I'm not sure our wedding is really something to celebrate any more. It doesn't feel much like it to me.

'Jane?' Jack is looking at me strangely, his eyes narrowed. 'Did you hear what Sophie said?'

'Hmm?'

Looking across at my daughter, I see her blue eyes are milky with tears. My heart drops.

'What's the matter, darling?'

Sophie whispers something, so soft that I can't hear it. Her head is bowed now, the ends of her curls dangerously close to the whipped peaks of mashed potato. I frown.

'Sophie?'

'A boy at school said there's a monster in the buttercup field,' she says, louder this time. Her little voice breaks, turns into a sob. 'He said he's been let out and he's coming back to get me.'

It's at that moment that the doorbell rings.

Jack and I go together, a united front, leaving Harry to put the television on for Sophie and Finn. I gesture to him to go into the back lounge, away from the front door. My heart's racing; I didn't even hear the car pull up.

DS Madeline Shaw has dark blonde hair that looks like it might grey soon, and lines on her face that suggest she doesn't bother with the rituals I subject my own skin to every night. Cleanse, tone, moisturise. *Repeat ad infinitum, Mrs Goodwin*. There's a younger woman with her, someone I've never seen before.

'Mr and Mrs Goodwin,' Madeline says, 'sorry to disturb your evening. This is DS Lorna Campbell from Chelmsford Police.' She gestures to her colleague and I extend my hand, careful to keep my arms covered. The latest bruises aren't a pretty sight. I can see Jack watching me, and I want to scream at him that the police have got bigger things to worry about than a less-than-perfect couple. They've got a dead girl, and that trumps us, doesn't it?

'I expect you've heard the news, Jane,' Madeline says, and I nod, bite my lip.

'Can I offer you some tea, officers? Would you like to come in?' I ask, but Madeline shakes her head, her ponytail flicking from side to side.

'We just need to check a couple of things with you both, please,' the other woman says, and Jack turns to her, all smiles, his handsome face shining in the half light spilling from our house. If I look right I can see the pile of flowers and teddies outside the Edwards' – it's doubled in size. Rachel and Ian have left it all in the cold. I wonder if it'll rain. There are more cars on the road now, their headlights highlighting the pavement; I can't see whether there are figures inside. Suddenly, I'm overcome by the desire to shut the front door, drag the curtains across the windows, hide us all away from the glare of the events unfolding next door.

‘Of course,’ Jack says to the policewoman, ‘anything you need. Jane and I were so devastated to hear the news. I think the whole town is still in shock. We’ve been looking out for Rachel and Ian, of course, but – well, we didn’t want to pry.’

If they’ve clocked how good-looking my husband is, neither of them show it yet.

‘Did either of you see anything or anyone out of the ordinary on the night of Monday the 4th?’ Madeline asks, her face serious. I wonder whether this is her first really big case here, whether she’s out to prove herself. God knows she doesn’t seem to have much of a personal life, from what I can gather. No kids. No partner. Maybe this is her chance to shine.

I shake my head, thinking back to that night, pushing away the more painful parts, Jack’s words. The way he looked at me, the disgust. *He didn’t really mean it.*

‘I didn’t, I’m afraid. My friend Sandra did the school run, took the kids to hers for an hour or two while I made dinner. Jack got home from the surgery just after five. I went to get Sophie and Finn. Then we were here all night.’ *Arguing.*

‘I’m a doctor,’ Jack interjects, mainly for Lorna’s benefit I think, but to her credit, her face doesn’t change at all. Most women go weak at the knees for a handsome doctor. I should know – I was one of them.

‘And your eldest son, Mrs Goodwin?’ Madeline asks, her face turned towards me. ‘Was he in all night with you both too?’

She’s smiling at me, her face open, calm. She may as well have *You can trust me* tattooed on her forehead.

‘Yes,’ I say quickly, ‘Harry was upstairs. He went out with some friends from the football team after school, but he was back early on.’ The image comes to my mind: a flash of blonde hair, my son’s eyes watching her from the window. I’m talking too fast.

The policewoman nods, makes a note in her pad. I don’t look at Jack.

‘And did you see Clare that day, Mr and Mrs Goodwin? Monday morning, around 8 a.m.? Her parents say she left for school after breakfast.’

‘I think I saw her leave at the usual time,’ I say slowly, ‘but she was in a hurry, going to school I suppose, like you say. I was busy with the children’s breakfast. You know how it is.’ Madeline nods at me and I look away; she obviously doesn’t. I see again the swing of Clare’s black rucksack as she walked down the front path, not knowing it would be the last time she ever would.

The younger woman is nodding along. I wonder how she sees me. A boring mother? A rich wife? Do I have the life she wants to emulate?

‘No unusual cars round here? No one hanging around the school that morning? You’re usually there, aren’t you Jane?’ Madeline asks, smiling at me. I try to think, although I know Sophie and Finn will be wanting a bedtime story round about now; I can almost feel their pull dragging me back inside the house. Jack’s presence beside me hums.

‘I didn’t see anyone,’ I say. ‘My eldest son took the little ones to school that day, as a favour to me. I’m sorry. I’m so sorry for her poor parents.’

‘Do you know them well?’ Madeline asks, focusing her gaze on me. ‘Ian and Rachel, I mean. Would you say you were friends?’

I shake my head. ‘I wouldn’t say we were close,’ I say, ‘I mean—’ I pause, glance next door. ‘I would have liked to be,’ I say at last, ‘but it never really happened.’

Beside me, Jack nods. ‘My wife’s pretty involved with the town,’ he says, with a little laugh. ‘PTA, book club, you name it. But some people don’t join in in quite the same way, I suppose.’ He looks down at me and I smile at him as he puts an arm around my waist.

The younger detective, Lorna, makes a note on her pad.

‘And did either of you see Mr or Mrs Edwards that afternoon?’

I frown, Jack’s arm still tight around me.

'I didn't notice,' I admit. 'I wouldn't normally pay attention – like I said, we weren't close or anything. Their cars came and went all the time, and their garage is around the other side – well, you'll have seen.'

Lorna nods. 'Thank you, Jane. And don't worry. We knew it was a long shot, coming down this end of the town, but we wanted to make sure we covered all bases, spoke to all the neighbours. We're hoping someone a bit closer to Sorrow's Meadow saw something.'

'Don't you live up near there?' Jack asks Madeline, and she nods, the ponytail bobbing again. Her face is pale, tired-looking. I wonder who looks after her, if anyone does. I want to ask her if they've got any leads, but I don't want to sound hysterical. I don't want Jack to laugh at me when we get behind closed doors.

'Yep. First major crime I've ever had on my doorstep. And yours, too.' She smiles grimly.

'We had word just now from your receptionist, Dr Goodwin,' Lorna says, clearing her throat before looking down at a notepad in her hand. 'Danielle Andrews. Saying she thinks she might've seen Nathan Warren that night, on her way home from work. He was the one who reported the body.' She pauses. 'Did you leave at a similar time? The meadow's not far from the surgery, is it?'

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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