

THE  
**FAKE  
WIFE**

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ORION

# **PART ONE**

*The sudden vanishing of Olive Anderson*



# 1

The woman at the table was one of the most beautiful that Olive had ever seen. She was tall and slim, and her sapphire eyes were ringed in thick black lashes, below brows so perfect they could have been painted on with the finest of brushes. They hadn't been, Olive saw as she drew closer; they were real. Red lips formed a deep Cupid's bow.

In Olive's brief absence from the dining room, the place had filled, become both hotter and louder. Several Christmas parties had arrived. That shouldn't have been a problem, she'd saved herself a seat before nipping out, except . . .

. . . Her seat had been taken by a woman she'd never seen before.

'I think you're at my table,' she said, in a firm voice, one that brooked no nonsense, but smiling as she did so.

The intruder was a little older than Olive, maybe around thirty-eight. Her crew-cut hair was black and looked as though it might curl if allowed to grow; yes, it definitely would, because a few longer strands had formed a perfect circle high on her brow. She wore a sweater the colour of her eyes and, even in midwinter, her skin had the healthy, tanned glow of someone who worked outside. She smelled of cold air. Her eyes met Olive's and two horizontal lines appeared above those exquisite brows.

She said, 'Your table?'

Olive caught a glance flicking her way, someone nearby sensing confrontation, and felt her own chest tighten.

'I left my coat on the seat.' She lowered her eyes to the chair the woman was sitting on. 'That seat.'

The corners of the stranger's mouth drooped as she twisted round. Her movements exaggerated, she leaned out to look at the floor, under the table, giving Olive a chance to see the skintight denim jeans on very long legs and brown leather cowboy boots. She'd be pushing six foot tall when she stood.

She glanced back up at Olive with a sparkle in her eyes, that could have been mischief, or spite, and said, 'Are you sure?'

Fair play, there was no sign of Olive's coat, but she certainly wasn't wearing it and there was no way she'd have crossed the car park from the annexe without it. The bitch had hidden her coat so she could nab the last free table.

'Here you go, madam. Sorry you had to wait so long. I had to fetch a new bottle from the cellar.' The waiter had arrived like vindication from above. Putting a large glass of red wine down, he pulled out the spare chair, gesturing to Olive to sit. 'Allow me,' he said.

Olive allowed him, glad that she'd showered and changed after the drive over, that she looked OK, because the woman across the table oozed confidence like cheese seeping out of a toasted sandwich. As Olive sat, she felt her foot brush one of the cowboy boots and pulled it away sharply.

'And I moved your coat, hope that's OK,' the waiter went on. 'It fell off the chair and I didn't want anyone standing on it. It's hanging beside the bar, I can fetch it if you like.'

'No, that's fine, thank you.' Olive's eyes didn't leave those of the woman across the table. She let her eyebrows rise, waiting for an apology, which didn't come.

'And for you, madam?' the waiter asked.

'Scotch and soda,' the woman replied, her eyes holding fast to Olive's. 'Easy on the ice.'

The waiter either wasn't noticing or choosing to ignore the tension between the two of them. 'Plenty of that outside, I know what you mean,' he said. 'Are you both ready to order?'

Olive noticed then that menus had arrived while she'd been away. Blue-sweater woman picked up the nearest and passed it back

to the waiter. 'Rib-eye, please. Rare. Side order of extra chips. No mushrooms, I'm allergic to fungi.'

'Not a problem. And for you, madam?'

'I'm not . . .' Olive began. *I'm not with this woman*, she'd been on the point of saying, but a sudden movement held her back.

The woman opposite had propped her left elbow on the table, cradling the side of her face with her forefinger and thumb, making her wedding band very visible. Her blue eyes seemed to darken, to become the colour of slate, as she glanced down at Olive's left hand, at the ring that, even after six months, Olive was still acutely conscious of, and it could be her imagination, or the wine she'd already drunk in her room, but was there something of a question in the way those blue eyes met hers? Even, perhaps, an invitation?

' . . . I'm not quite sure,' Olive went on. 'What's the vegan option?'

If the waiter was sensing something odd, his voice gave nothing away. 'It's a roasted pumpkin risotto with caramelised onions. Highly recommended.'

Olive wasn't vegan; she wasn't sure why she'd even asked.

'I'll have the rib-eye too, plenty of mushrooms.' She handed back the menu.

'And a large bottle of mineral water,' the woman across the table said. 'My wife has an early start.'

The waiter's eyes flicked from one woman to the other in sudden interest, before he gave a half-smile and walked away.

Silence for a second, then another. Olive opened her mouth to say, *What the hell are you playing at*, and nothing came out.

'So, how was your day?' the woman asked. 'You look tense.'

The mysterious intruder wasn't going to quit the table, that much was obvious. And hadn't Olive left it too late to ask the waiter to find her another? Especially when she'd just allowed herself to be addressed as this woman's wife?

'Everything go as planned?' the woman prompted.

It was unlikely the hotel had another table; there probably wasn't another table in the entire town, not so close to Christmas. She was paying twice the usual price for her room, and she'd been half

tempted not to bother, but the thought of another night at home, of another night pretending to be pleased to see Michael, no, that simply wasn't—

'Planet earth to my wife.' The woman with sapphire eyes smiled at her own joke and a dimple appeared in her left cheek.

So, it all came down to this: was a lonely dinner in a crowded, pre-Christmas hotel really what Olive wanted right now?

'Carlisle was nice, as always,' she said. 'Lancaster not so much. The drive over here was pretty hairy. I think the entire north of England might be closed to traffic before the weekend's done.'

She waited for the woman to ask her what she did, to seek details, the customary dance of strangers. Except they weren't strangers, not in this odd game she'd been invited to play. They were married.

'How about you,' she asked, before adding a tentative, 'darling,' for good measure. It sounded odd and forced on her tongue. Her new companion was better at this than she.

That companion sighed, even managed to look bored. 'Hartlepool's a month behind, usual trouble with the lads at Darlington. On the other hand, they passed the health and safety inspection.'

She was in construction, a surveyor or site manager. Assuming, of course, that she was telling the truth.

'The llamas got out again,' she went on. 'I'm going to have to talk to Jim about putting a taller fence up.'

Maybe this whole evening was to be played out in some odd fantasy land. Perhaps Olive herself should pretend to be a brain surgeon or an astronaut, because if you were going to play the game, you might as well play it properly.

A picture flashed into her head: Michael in the study at home, working his way through an endless list of constituency emails, grimacing when a noisy quarrel erupted elsewhere in the house, checking Find My Friends to make sure she'd arrived safely, worried about her being away in such awful weather. One of Michael's pet subjects was the dangers of northern winters.

What on earth was she doing playing games?

Her phone beeped, a message coming in. She glanced down, but it wasn't Michael, only a reminder from her gym that her subscription needed renewing. In the meantime, they were talking – about llamas.

'How far did they get?' Olive asked as the waiter returned with a single shot of whisky on a silver tray.

'Three miles down the road before a motorist called the police. Thanks.' The woman cradled the drink in the palm of her right hand. 'The lads from the farm rounded them up and herded them back.'

So now they were a married couple with pet llamas. Olive felt an unfamiliar tickle in her stomach, the start of an urge to laugh. 'Are they OK?' she asked.

The stranger scratched the back of her head and took a mouthful of Scotch. 'They're fine, let's not talk about the llamas. What are you upset about?'

'I'm not upset.'

The woman leaned closer. Olive caught a whiff of the outdoors again and, beneath it, something like pomegranate, or maybe sandalwood, but faded, as though she'd come straight from work, without showering or changing.

'This is me you're talking to.' The woman put her drink down but missed the coaster because she didn't break eye contact, not even for a split second. 'You're clenching your teeth, your shoulders are up round your ears and you're biting your nails again.'

Olive glanced down; her nails were a mess. As for the rest, well, it was hardly surprising she was uptight given the turn her evening was taking. Maybe it was time to bring this to an end. She could get room service, call Michael, force herself back to normality.

As though sensing her pulling away, the woman leaned in closer until Olive could smell the whisky on her breath. To anyone watching, the interplay would look intimate, familiar, the interaction of two people who knew each other inside out.

'Hey.' The woman's voice was too low to carry beyond the circle of the small table. 'There's only one reason we booked into a hotel



so close to home.’ She glanced around the noisy room and grimaced. ‘This close to Christmas.’

For a second, Olive was on the brink of panic. This woman knew where she lived. No, that was impossible, she’d made a lucky guess based on the trace of north-east in Olive’s voice.

‘Remind me,’ she challenged.

‘To talk.’ The stranger relaxed back and picked up her glass again. ‘Permission to rant, babe. Pretend I’m your best mate. Let me hear it, nothing out of bounds.’

And wasn’t this exactly what Olive needed: a rant to a best mate? Except there was no way she could tell her real friends that all their warnings and misgivings had come a hundred-per-cent true, and that, six months into the marriage that everyone had advised against, she’d found herself in an impossible, miserable situation. No, what she needed was to vent to a perfect stranger whom she’d never see again after this evening.

She leaned close, grateful that she’d cleaned her teeth before coming down to dinner. ‘Your bloody mother-in-law,’ she hissed.

The puzzled frown appeared as expected and Olive waited for the stranger to question what must surely seem an odd choice of words. Instead, she pulled a face, sighed, and nodded her head in silent acknowledgement that, disloyal as it might be to admit it, Olive actually had a point. Bloody hell, she was good at this.

Olive wondered, briefly, if mentioning Gwendoline would act as a salutary reminder, dragging her back into her real life, the one with problems that had to be tackled, and realised she didn’t want to go back there, not yet.

‘What’s she done now?’ the woman asked.

A question almost impossible to answer. Being around the mother of Michael’s late wife was like death from a thousand small cuts. Little she did was enough to make a legitimate complaint, but her tactic of one microaggression on top of another, day after day, would wear anyone down: speaking over her; leaving her laundry on the line in the rain; losing messages from her friends, even her husband; slamming doors when she was sleeping after a night shift;

disapproving, loudly, of every TV show she chose to watch. So many to choose from.

‘She’s hiding my mail,’ Olive decided upon.

The stranger frowned. ‘She’s what?’

‘When something arrives for me, she hides it, holds on to it for several days and then it magically appears on the doormat as though it was delayed in the post.’

‘How do you know it wasn’t delayed in the post?’

‘Because it’s happening too often. Never anything by registered post, because that I could trace. I didn’t tell you this, but six of my birthday cards came late. And I know all six people didn’t post late. She wanted me to have a miserable day.’

Olive could hear her voice had grown louder; the events of her birthday still rankled. Actually, this was helping, like a bizarre form of therapy; it felt good to offload. She’d been holding too much back the last six months.

‘And the girls don’t help.’ Olive felt a head of steam building, as though now she’d started, it would be hard to stop.

‘They’re kids,’ the woman tried. ‘It hasn’t been easy for them either.’

Again, a lucky guess. This woman couldn’t know her step-daughters’ ages.

‘I get that. We knew that would be the case. And the girls alone I could deal with. They’re not bad kids, of course they’re not. But Gwendoline – I don’t know – it’s like she empowers them. They see her behaving badly and know they can get away with it too.’

The stranger’s face was completely serious now, the perfect listener.

‘And I’ve had it. Frankly, I don’t want to go home tomorrow.’

And wasn’t that the truth?

‘So, what do you want to happen?’ the woman asked. ‘What do you want me to do?’

Olive put her empty glass down. ‘There isn’t anything you can do, I know that. We’re stuck with this. I’m stuck with it.’

The waiter was approaching with their food.

'Rare rib-eye with mushrooms for you, Mrs Anderson.' The waiter had checked the hotel register to learn her name. It was a courteous enough gesture, but it meant the woman across the table now knew her name. 'And without for you, madam.'

'Looks great, thank you.' The fake wife was smiling up at the waiter.

'Anything else I can get you?' The waiter seemed to be lingering longer than was strictly necessary.

'We're good, thanks.'

'Enjoy.' The waiter flashed them both a smile, hovered for a second longer and then walked away.

'OK,' the stranger said.

'OK, what?'

She picked up her fork and speared a chip. 'OK, we'll move out. Whatever you want, you only have to say the word, you should know that.'

Olive felt a mirthless laugh on the brink of slipping out. Like the nightmare her life had become could be fixed that easily.

## 2

The first man in destroyed the front door. Built like a train, appearing every bit as unstoppable, he shouldered the enforcer and slung it. The crash shattered the silence of the night, and the festive wreath, an intricate spiral of Christmas roses, white thistles and eucalyptus, bounced in protest.

‘Armed police!’

‘Armed police. Stand clear!’

The enforcer crashed again, then a third time, not quite drowning out the yelling of over a dozen voices. Police raids were noisy affairs.

The oak panelling around the lock shattered and the door swung open. The second man, fully armed, went in like a bullet, knocking the wreath from its hook. He ran left. The third man followed, veering right. The room beyond was well lit, the entrance hall of a wealthy family home. Among those still waiting outside, hearts were thumping, adrenaline surging, every officer in the unit desperate to get in.

Every officer but one.

Noise levels grew.

‘Armed police, hands in the air!’

‘Armed police, show yourselves now!’

One officer had never done this before; one officer would have given anything to be back on traffic duty right now. He took a deep breath, the night air stinging his nostrils, and had a last look around at the winter night. On the chill breeze, he could detect a hint of salt from the North Sea and woodsmoke from a nearby farm. The house was on high ground, but few lights around him broke up

the darkness. The vast expanse of the North York Moors was a stone's throw away.

The fourth man in ran up the carved oak staircase.

The fifth man, the new guy, almost slid on the fallen Christmas wreath. One hand, slick with sweat, gripped the handle of the Heckler & Koch G36. The other held the barrel steady (more or less) as he caught his balance and stepped to one side. His task for the next few minutes was to guard the front door, make sure no one other than his fellow officers left the property.

Simple, he told himself. Nothing to it. Even he couldn't mess this up.

### 3

An hour after Olive had sat down, the nameless stranger was still exactly that. She hadn't offered her name. Her 'wife' would know it, of course, and if there was a way of subtly finding it out, Olive had yet to think of it.

'Tell me a secret,' that stranger said, when she'd eaten her food, and Olive had managed a little more than half hers, pushing the rest around in a vain attempt to make it look less than it was. Her stomach seemed to be signalling its own disapproval of what she was doing. On the other hand, the wine was slipping down well, so maybe her stomach was as conflicted as the rest of her.

'You know all my secrets,' Olive countered.

'Impossible.'

The woman reached out. Olive saw the hand – freckles breaking up the tan, rough skin around the fingertips – heading towards her face as though in slow motion. She watched it, mesmerised, like a small mammal faced with a swaying snake. Fingers brushed the side of Olive's face and a lock of hair was smoothed behind her ear; they lingered against her neck.

'I like your ears,' the woman said. 'They're sexy. But you know that.'

The room had grown hot, or so it seemed, and the dripping condensation on the dark windows reminded Olive uncomfortably of the rivulets of sweat that would insist on trickling down her back. She'd wanted for some time to take off her jacket but had been wary of the signal it would send. Undressing suggested relaxation, maybe even a desire to show off her body.

Her companion had no such inhibitions; the blue sweater had long since been hung over the back of her chair, revealing a tight black T-shirt. Trying hard not to look, Olive couldn't help but notice the full, high breasts and a small cockleshell tattoo on the woman's right shoulder.

She'd wanted to ask about it, had even come up with a form of words that wouldn't break the rules of the game: you never did tell me why you chose that particular tattoo? She held back, because remarking on this woman's body, acknowledging that she'd noticed it, felt like crossing a line.

She'd been deeply shocked to find herself wondering what those breasts would feel like in her hands.

'So, come on,' the stranger prompted. 'A secret.'

The skin of Olive's face and neck was still tingling. She said, 'If I do, will you tell me one of yours?'

The woman shrugged. 'Seems fair. You first.'

Where to begin? 'I hate the boat,' she said.

The woman's eyebrows rose again, feigning surprise, although Olive could have said anything: *I've worked for MI5 for years now, I seduced my maths teacher when I was sixteen*, and this stranger would have no idea whether it was true or not. It was significant, she knew, that she'd chosen to go with something true.

'I've been pretending for months,' she went on. 'Because I know how important it is to you, and how much it means to you that we can enjoy it together, but I'm shaking every time we go out. I feel sick, even when the water's what you call a millpond, and when it tips, when it does that thing you call keeling, or—'

'Heeling,' the stranger corrected, telling Olive that, whoever she was, she knew something about sailing. And also, possibly, that she too disliked it, because her eyes had grown colder and the lines of her jaw had hardened.

'I'm convinced we're going to capsize and that I'll drown, and I hate you then,' Olive went on. 'I hate you for believing me when I say I enjoy it, and I hate the girls for doing it all effortlessly, and I hate Gwen for constantly banging on about how good . . . well, you know.'

She didn't, she couldn't possibly, but – oh God – the relief at putting these feelings into words.

'This feels like something we should have talked about before,' the woman said.

And she was right; Olive had been keeping so much to herself, and her resentment was turning toxic, threatening everything.

'How could I tell you something that would make you love me less?' she said.

The woman opened her mouth to utter some platitude that Olive really didn't want to hear right now.

'Your turn,' she said, to head her off.

The stranger took her time, and Olive had a moment to notice that the Christmas revellers around them were either quietening or drifting away. There was disco music playing somewhere in the hotel and many of the diners had gone in search of it. The room they'd left behind was littered with festive detritus: torn paper hats, streamers lying damp and limp across the paisley-patterned carpet, stained paper napkins, disembowelled crackers and Prosecco corks.

After more than a minute, when Olive was on the verge of prompting, the woman spoke.

'I planned this.'

Olive sat back, feeling her gaze hardening. So, the game was done.

'I saw you, when I came in, sitting alone. I watched you get up, go to the ladies', and I took my chance.'

'Why?' So, it hadn't been an honest mistake, followed by a harmless bit of devilment. This woman had planned it all, for some reason that wasn't yet clear but soon would be. And Olive had drunk far too much wine.

'Because seeing you was like someone had taken hold of my insides and given them a good twist,' the woman replied. 'And the strangest thought sprang into my head.'

*Don't ask her what it was. This has gone too far.*

'I thought to myself: *There she is. At last.*'

Olive was conscious of movement around them, of staff trying to clear the dining room, but her eyes couldn't leave those of the



woman across the table. She waited for the anger to come, for the indignation – who the hell did she think she was dealing with – and waited in vain.

‘Can I get you anything else?’ Their waiter was back.

Olive couldn’t speak. Her companion said, ‘Two brandies, please. We’ll take them to our room.’

‘Not a problem.’ The waiter left them.

‘Am I out of line?’ the woman asked.

Yes, way out of line. She was married, and what she had with Michael was far too important to put at risk now.

And yet, she was so very unhappy. And so very drunk. And this was feeling more and more like something – inevitable.

‘I’m in room seven,’ Olive said. ‘Across the courtyard.’

The other woman stood up. ‘I’ll get your coat.’

## 4

The woman who was nameless couldn't help glancing up at the sky as she and Olive stepped out into the sharp darkness. The cold seemed to leap inside her, like knives scraping the inside of her nostrils and the back of her throat. Another inch of snow had fallen while they'd been eating.

Close up, with her arm through Olive's to steady her on the treacherous ground, she could smell her perfume, something rich and sweet; Olive smelled like Christmas.

She couldn't believe how easy it had been. The plan, had Olive remained at her table, had been to approach apologetically, explaining that the restaurant was full, and would she mind terribly sharing. She had a book in her jacket pocket, one she knew – thank you, Facebook – that Olive had read and loved, had planned to pull it out, pretend to be engrossed, establish herself as polite, considerate, the very opposite of a threat.

The conversation would have begun tentatively, uncertainly. She'd have claimed to be a nurse herself, had worked hard on her backstory, to find common ground. Instead, Olive had got up to go to the ladies' and then a waiter had picked up her coat from the floor and removed it.

To the woman who was nameless, it had felt like the fates conspiring in her favour. She'd strode forward without thinking, settling herself in the opposite seat, taking several deep breaths to appear relaxed.

So easy. She'd guessed the Andersons were having problems – well, they would, in the circumstances – but the stuff had come

pouring out: bitterness, disappointment, frustration and, beneath it all, a deep loneliness.

She was a little taken aback by how much she was tempted to like Olive. Anderson's wife was gorgeous, of course, but she'd known that. She'd seen plenty of pictures of the two of them together. What she hadn't expected was the luminous quality of her skin, the light in her green eyes, the silky sheen on her hair. Even tired, even distressed, there was a quality about her.

It didn't make any difference. She'd hated Olive Anderson for too long to think of changing course now. Olive would get what was coming to her.

## 5

The man guarding the mansion's front door – Garry – could feel sweat running into his eyes. Knowing it would look like he was crying, he took one hand off the firearm to wipe it away.

The noise around him was close to deafening: the thunder of boots on stone, men yelling orders, a woman screaming. From outside came a sound like fireworks as distraction explosions went off. A bloke even bigger than he was stumbled on his way into the house and trod briefly on Garry's foot.

Garry didn't swear – he never swore – even hearing bad language made his skin crawl, but he bit his lip hard as real tears filled his eyes. The bloke strode off without apologising, without even looking round, and Garry could taste blood in his mouth.

Blood and tears. Appropriate.

The entire tactical team was inside now, even those who'd come in from the rear. The shouting continued, doors slammed open, the intimidating wall of sound deliberate, to frighten and cover the inhabitants of the house.

Not just the inhabitants.

Garry pressed himself up against the external wall, telling himself it would be over soon, that all he had to do was watch the door, and that nothing, nothing at all, could possibly go wrong.

## 6

Olive held on to the stranger's arm as they crossed the courtyard. The snow had settled and was already more than an inch deep. From the open window of the bar, a Christmas song blared out, the singer drowned by the drunken warbling of fifty off-key voices. As they passed close by, they walked through a bubble of warm, foetid air. Snowflakes fell into the glass Olive was carrying, melting on contact with the brandy.

She had a sense of events slipping out of her control, of being tossed on the wind of fate. She was drunk, of course, but not so drunk that she'd take a complete stranger to her room unwillingly. This was something else, something she hadn't experienced before. It was scary, and very exciting.

She used her key to open the annexe door and led the way to the end of the corridor. It took fifteen short paces and with each step she told herself it wasn't too late, she could apologise, say she'd changed her mind, had realised that this was the very worst idea in the world.

But Michael, the girls, the life she'd struggled with for six long months had faded in her mind, like a dream that slipped away upon waking, or a dim childhood memory, or an old sepia photograph. It didn't feel real anymore. This was real, the tall woman a half-step behind her, who'd caught her when she'd slipped in the snow just now, so quickly, so deftly, that not even their drinks had spilled.

Her room smelled like the stranger. Olive caught notes of sandalwood and paused in the doorway. It should be impossible that this woman's scent had leapt ahead of them, to claim the room as her own, just as she was claiming Olive now, coaxing her inside and

closing the door, easing off Olive's coat and letting it fall, taking hold of her hair and gently tilting her face up to her own.

'At last,' she murmured, as she bent and kissed her.

*So different*, was all Olive could think for those first few moments. Michael, who made love like an animal, would have grabbed her the minute they closed the door, pulling her face towards him, ripping clothes off, not caring if he damaged them. Michael would have poured the brandy over her naked body, making sure it slicked its way into all her intimate places, before licking it up. Michael fucked her like a porn star – fiercely, showily – withdrawing several times and manhandling her into yet another impossible position, before eventually, after thirty minutes or so, climaxing noisily.

Michael never cared who might hear him coming, not his daughters, not his late wife's mother, not the cows in the barn or the farmhands who lived half a mile down the lane.

This woman was the very opposite of Michael. She undressed Olive slowly, kissing every inch of skin she uncovered. This woman took her time, stepping back for long seconds to look at her, making Olive feel more than naked under the stranger's gaze.

This woman lifted her, putting her down gently on the bed, before pulling off her own clothes and lying beside her. Still she wanted nothing more than to look, to kiss Olive on the lips, to run her hand over Olive's flesh.

'So submissive,' she murmured into Olive's ear, and it stung. Michael's lovemaking made active participation on Olive's part close to impossible. He never let her take the lead, and somewhere along the line, she'd forgotten how.

This woman gave her plenty of time to change her mind; plenty of time to jump up, grab her coat and run from the room. This woman made it the last thing she wanted to do. By the time her fingers crept inside Olive, as slowly and gently as everything else she'd done, she'd stopped comparing her to Michael.

'Who are you?' she cried once, into the darkened room.

No reply came back.

# 7

The tactical team were still charging through the eighteenth-century coach house like two-legged rhinos, shiny-black and super-aggressive in full protective gear. Garry could hear boots pounding on the upper floor. The occupants of the house – at least two according to the intel, but it could be more hadn't been found.

The raid on the home of Howie Tricks – younger brother of Stevie Tricks, infamous head of a local gang of organised crime – had been planned for zero four hundred hours the following morning but brought forward after an adverse weather report. By four o'clock the next day, the road outside might not be passable, and Cleveland Police had a tight window to recover several million pounds' worth of stolen bullion and one very, very valuable ruby and diamond necklace recently lifted from Sotheby's – the infamous Ring of Blood and Tears.

Garry glanced at his watch. Eighteen minutes since the operation had begun and it felt like a whole lot longer. He wondered, not for the first time, what in the world had possessed him to train as an Authorised Firearms Officer.

## 8

The stranger seemed to sleep for a while. Olive lay beside her and waited for the shame to come, as it surely would. The madness was done, the lust sated. Her revenge on her husband, her kick-back at everything her life had become – because that’s what it had been, she knew that clearly now – was complete.

Was this shame, this burning feeling in her chest, the sense that she was about to throw up?

Olive eased her way out of bed, fearful of disturbing the woman and at the same time knowing that soon she’d have to wake her and make her leave, because Michael would call early the next morning, and she absolutely could not talk to her husband with a naked woman in her bed. Michael used FaceTime; he would want a virtual tour of the room, demand to know what underwear she’d be wearing that day.

What the hell had she done?

Olive crept her way around discarded clothes, the overnight bag she hadn’t properly unpacked, and caught sight of her handbag by the door. She would hide that, in a moment. She couldn’t risk this woman finding out anything more about her. She had to remain the anonymous Mrs Anderson. She hadn’t even told the woman her first name.

In the bathroom, she used the loo, drank water from the tap, wiped the sweat from her body, but drew the line at the shower. A shower would wake the woman in the bedroom, and besides, the shower was for when she’d gone, when she could wash all trace of her away.



She shivered then, at a sudden flashback to the sex. The sex had been wonderful: soft, teasing, torturously slow, and a tiny, insane voice in her head urged her to slip back into the bedroom, climb between the sheets and have it all again.

Enough. She would wake the woman now, explain that she had to go, that there was no place for her in Olive's life. She'd understand. And she was married too.

She'd forgotten that. The stranger was married; she had as much to lose as Olive did. Relief washed over her.

Wrapping a towel around herself, she pulled the bathroom door open, not trying to be quiet, because it was time to wake up.

The overhead light in the bedroom was on. The woman was awake. Not only awake but fully dressed and zipping up Olive's overnight bag. She turned and seemed to take a deep breath before speaking.

'Get dressed,' she said. 'We're leaving.'

This was a different woman; and yet nothing had changed; she looked exactly the same.

'What?' Olive clutched the towel, grateful that she was wearing something at least. The other woman had even put on shoes, and this was a bit like one of those dreams when you suddenly find yourself naked in public.

Nothing had changed but the woman's eyes, that had grown cold and hard as flint.

And that laptop, open on top of the chest of drawers by the door, that wasn't Olive's. What was going on?

She was suddenly acutely conscious of the inside of her body, and it felt cold and heavy, like sodden clay.

'We're checking out.' The woman's cold eyes had grown shifty. 'Fetch anything you left in the bathroom and get dressed. Now, Olive.'

She'd used her name. Olive hadn't told the stranger her name. She was suddenly deeply afraid.

The woman said, 'I won't tell you again.'

Olive found her voice. 'I'm not going anywhere. Get out of here.'

The woman sighed and took one step to the laptop. She pressed the space bar and the screen sprang to life. A photograph appeared, taken in that very room, of the two of them. Kissing.

No, not a photograph, a video. Olive saw the information bar along the bottom of the screen. A video that was over twenty minutes long.

‘Some parts are a bit dark, but it’s reasonably clear the woman, naked for most of it, is you and that the person fucking you is not Michael Anderson, member of parliament for Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland.’

The room no longer felt over-bright; it was dimming around the edges.

‘Want to see a bit?’ the woman asked.

Olive shook her head, but the woman didn’t see and it probably wouldn’t have made any difference anyway. She fast-forwarded the footage to a little over halfway and pressed play.

The stranger’s head was between Olive’s legs, her long hands reaching up to cup Olive’s breasts. Olive’s legs were bent back so that her feet brushed the woman’s shoulders; her arms reached up to clutch the bedhead and her mouth was open in a silent cry.

‘There were three cameras,’ the woman told Olive. ‘Above the curtain rail, on the bedhead and behind the lamp on the chest of drawers. I broke into your room when you went down to dinner.’

That’s why the room had smelled of her. And she’d even warned Olive. *I planned this.*

‘I have you from every conceivable angle, Olive, and I’ve got to say, congrats on putting on a very good show.’

Olive rushed back into the bathroom, bending double over the loo as everything came pouring out. On her last heave, she realised the woman was right behind her.

‘You’ve got five minutes,’ she told Olive. ‘Get your clothes on, get every last thing packed and then we check out. At the front desk, we’ll explain that we have a family emergency and we have to leave immediately. You’ll pay the bill and then we’ll get in your car.’

Olive didn't move.

'Five minutes, Olive. Or this tape will be uploaded onto the internet.'