One big day. Even bigger secrets...



# The Perfect Wedding

TESS MACKEY

# The Perfect Wedding

Tess Mackey




*OceanofPDF.com*

# Copyright

AVON a divsion of
HarperCollins*Publishers* Ltd
1 London Bridge Street
London SE1 9GF

www.harpercollins.co.uk

First published by HarperCollins*Publishers* Ltd 2026

Copyright © Tess James-Mackey 2026

Cover photographs: © Abigail Miles/Arcangel Images and © Mark Fearon/Arcangel Images (staircase)

Tess James-Mackey asserts the moral right to be identified as the author of this work.

A catalogue copy of this book is available from the British Library.

This novel is entirely a work of fiction. The names, characters and incidents portrayed in it are the work of the author’s imagination. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events or localities is entirely coincidental.

Without limiting the exclusive rights of any author, contributor or the publisher of this publication, any unauthorized use of this publication to train generative artificial intelligence (AI) technologies is expressly prohibited. HarperCollins also exercise their rights under Article 4(3) of the Digital Single Market Directive 2019/790 and expressly reserve this publication from the text and data mining exception.

All rights reserved under International and Pan-American Copyright Conventions. By payment of the required fees, you have been granted the non-exclusive, non-transferable right to access and read the text of this e-book on screen. No part of this text may be reproduced, transmitted, downloaded, decompiled, reverse engineered, or stored in or introduced into any information storage and retrieval system, in any form or by any means, whether electronic or mechanical, now known or hereinafter invented, without the express written permission of HarperCollins.

Source ISBN: 9780008810719
eBook Edition © May 2026 ISBN: 9780008810726
Version: 2026-04-20

*OceanofPDF.com*

# Note to Readers

This ebook contains the following accessibility features which, if supported by your device, can be accessed via your ereader/accessibility settings:

Change of font size and line height
Change of background and font colours
Change of font
Change justification
Text to speech

Page numbers taken from the following print edition: ISBN 9780008810719

*OceanofPDF.com*

# Dedication

*For my best friend, Emily*

*OceanofPDF.com*

# Contents

Cover
Title Page
Copyright
Note to Readers
Dedication
Prologue

Chapter 1
Chapter 2
Chapter 3
Chapter 4
Chapter 5
Chapter 6
Chapter 7
Chapter 8
Chapter 9
Chapter 10
Chapter 11
Chapter 12
Chapter 13
Chapter 14
Chapter 15
Chapter 16
Chapter 17
Chapter 18
Chapter 19
Chapter 20
Chapter 21
Chapter 22
Chapter 23
Chapter 24
Chapter 25

Chapter 26
Chapter 27
Chapter 28
Chapter 29
Chapter 30
Chapter 31
Chapter 32
Chapter 33
Chapter 34
Chapter 35
Chapter 36
Chapter 37
Chapter 38
Chapter 39
Chapter 40
Chapter 41
Chapter 42
Chapter 43
Chapter 44
Chapter 45
Chapter 46
Chapter 47
Chapter 48
Chapter 49
Chapter 50
Chapter 51
Chapter 52
Chapter 53
Chapter 54

Epilogue
Acknowledgements
Keep Reading
About the Author
About the Publisher

*OceanofPDF.com*

# Prologue

Sunlight creeps into the room through the huge bay windows. The birds are singing – I can see swallows darting past, busy building nests in the eaves. In the distance, the huge oak trees that line the perimeter of the manicured lawns sway gently in the breeze.

It's a beautiful morning.

There's a single shoe on the floor beneath the windowsill. It's filthy – dried mud stains the sleek satin finish, and the heel is ragged. But through the grime, the crystal embellishment on the strap glistens in the sunlight.

Memories of the wedding day tighten like a fist around my heart. I suddenly want to be out of the structured lingerie that clamps my chest, but I can't remember how to take it off and claw ineffectively at the clasp.

I gasp at a sudden pain, and gaze down at my hands. My fingers are bloody stumps. Fragments of torn nail remain, clinging to the nail beds.

I follow the trail of blood, because there's more … more than could have come from my nails alone. It's smeared across my hands, my arms, and … oh god, I can *smell* it.

But it doesn't stop there. The dress – the perfect, pristine wedding dress discarded on the floor is no longer a subtle shade of ivory. It's red.

*OceanofPDF.com*

## CHAPTER 1

# The Bride

4 June

**9 a.m.**

I can’t get out.

I can’t see, can’t breathe, can’t move. I’m stood upright, but there’s something surrounding me on all sides. I push my hands out, searching for an escape from this nightmare, but it’s everywhere – a dense heaviness that yields when I touch it, but won’t release me.

There isn’t enough air in here, and my heart races as I take shallow, ineffective breaths. The hot closeness sends rivulets of sweat trickling down by body.

I should have known I’d never escape.

My limbs thrash, more urgent now. There must be a way, there must be a gap, a tiny sliver of light I can force my body through. But the more I struggle, the more whatever is keeping me trapped seems to cling to me, rushing back towards my body as I fling it away. It won’t let me go.

I cry out, but the noise is muffled by the thick folds of material draping over me. I bite back the urge to scream, sure the fabric will fill my mouth and force its way down my throat if I do. The heel of my hand collides with something hard, and I wince, snatching it back to my chest.

An image of a coffin lined with plush material bursts into my thoughts.

I fight harder, finding the solidity again. I pound against it, hammering my fists as hard as I can through the pull of the material.

*Let me out.*

Through my panic, the distant, logical part of my brain registers something. The object I’m slamming my hands into doesn’t sound like wood. It makes the chiming echo of something hitting glass.

A window.

*No.* I won't go back there.

I open my eyes. I *am* at a window. But it's not *the* window. This window is huge, ornate, and overlooking a garden so vast I can only begin to guess where its boundary ends.

Grantham Hall.

Realization dawns on me, and a flush of embarrassment rushes up my neck and into my face. I wasn't being smothered, or imprisoned. I'm not back in the room that caused these episodes of senseless terror. It was an anxiety attack, clutching me in its grip before I'd fully woken. And I'd fled to the window, become entangled in the heavy, floor-length curtains, and lost all sense of reality in my panic.

I lean my head against the cool glass, willing my heart to accept that I am not in fact in terrible danger. That I'm not back there, and I never will be again.

I'm free. I'm safe.

And today, I'm getting married.

But the past is never far away, and a bolt of pain shoots down my leg from my spine and back again, sending the left side of my body into spasm. *You'll never escape*, it hisses as it sets my nerve endings on fire. *You'll always be scared. You'll always be running.*

I clench my teeth together and will the pain to pass, but know it won't, not until I've taken my medication. I force myself to focus on what I can see in a desperate bid to distract myself from what I can feel, and stare down at the sunken lawn striped with closely mown grass and surrounded by ancient oaks and bright pink rhododendrons. Below my room is the courtyard where we'll have the drinks reception in a few short hours, not a single pebble out of place. The grounds feel almost too neat. I can imagine the gardeners being instructed to cut back the plants that dared grow in a slightly different direction than desired, wrenching out wildflowers at the root and taking a chainsaw to the trees that had become unsightly in their old age.

Grantham Hall is striking; there's no arguing with that. But I'd wanted to elope – somewhere remote. Maybe a quick dash to the registry office followed by a trip to the Norwegian fjords, or Iceland, or somewhere where I wouldn't spend the day wilting under the gaze of a hundred guests I barely know.

But Daniel's parents had insisted on a *proper* wedding. Well, his mother had. Peter and Shirley Green had just about accepted that their only child was marrying a strange, shy woman with no family, who seemed to appear from nowhere and bewitch him – again, according to his mother. But they (she) absolutely drew the line at the idea of a wedding that didn't heavily involve them. Her.

So they decided to foot the bill for a lavish event at Grantham Hall. Daniel had protested, weakly, insisting that the huge, sprawling estate wasn't really *us*. But the gift had been given – no returns. So we'd played our part, we'd been grateful, we'd done as we were told.

My painted toes clench, curling into the thick carpet and disappearing. Why I needed a pedicure for today I still don't understand – no one will see my feet. But it was all part of the bridal package at the salon – the preening and the primping and the making sure everything is *just perfect*.

I need to get ready, but the terror of my nightmare lingers. Usually, Daniel manages to coax me out of whatever horror I'm reliving before I stagger out of bed and towards the nearest escape route. I'd insisted I'd be fine alone tonight – there was no way I'd be waking up on the morning of my wedding plagued by thoughts of my past.

I was wrong.

But it doesn't have to be this way. I curl my hands and press my acrylic nails into my palms. I can be happy – I know I can, because I *have* been happy in the last four years. I've managed to fight the fear that the people I care about will be snatched away from me because I don't deserve the life I've created for myself. I have friends, hobbies, a home, security, and freedom. I even have a dog – Buddy has been a firm part of our little family ever since I realized a sixty-kilogram rottweiler could be just the thing I needed to help me sleep at night.

I retreat from the window and push the heavy curtains away, the feeling of being suffocated inside the plush material still creeping at my edges.

The bridal suite is huge and ornate. A king-size four-poster bed sits in the centre of the room, the covers thrown back from where I must have thrashed my way out of bed earlier this morning. It's clear every detail has been thought of: the giant dressing table, the three chaise longues, and a mirror big enough to capture the full extent of even the most extravagant of wedding gowns.

Soon, the room will be filled with people who love me. Or at least like me, I hope. The thought fills me with a warmth that makes my clenched toes release before they cramp.

And afterwards …

After the day, the ceremony, the dinner, the dancing, and all the hundreds of other carefully planned moments are over, Daniel will be here.

He’ll be here, and everything will be perfect.

*OceanofPDF.com*

## CHAPTER 2

# The Groom

4 June

**9.30 a.m.**

I overdid it last night.

I groan and cover my eyes with my arm. *You really, really overdid it.*

My tongue tastes like I spent the evening licking booze off a filthy floor, but I don't remember getting *that* messy. It was just a standard night with the boys. Few beers, few shots, few bare-arsed laps around the hotel grounds for J when he lost a bet.

It's huge, this place. It used to be a country estate for some boring spinsters who wanted to hide away from the world with their books and their horses. I can't think of anything worse, myself. But Grantham Hall is so big that it has space for all of our guests, and can hold multiple weddings on the same day, somehow avoiding them overlapping at all.

Most of our guests stayed last night too, so we could make a proper sesh of it. When I'd said goodnight, she'd reminded me to be sensible, like I was her son, not her fiancé. But I'm a grown man, and if I want a drink with the lads the night before the big day, I'll have a bloody drink. Not that I told her that, of course.

And now the big day is here.

I groan at the thought of shaving, getting my suit on, making small talk with relatives I couldn't give a toss about. I wish I could go back to sleep, but nausea won't let me. Swallowing is painful, but I'm already fantasizing about hair of the dog. That'll sort me out. How long will I have to wait? It's not even ten a.m., but there are no rules about drinking on your wedding day, are there?

I'll find the lads after breakfast. Lee has a cool box full of beer in his room. At least, it was full last night – he might be slightly low on supplies this morning. I'll go to the shop if necessary – I've got bugger all else to do in the hours before the ceremony. It's not like I've spent hundreds of pounds on hair and makeup and all the other stuff she'll be doing in the bridal suite.

I stretch my arms above my head and roll my eyes at the ridiculous tattoo that encircles my wrist like a bracelet of regret. *Magaluf Crew 2k13 #Bantz.* I can barely remember getting it done, but the photos show I clearly thought it was an amazing idea at three a.m. on a boozy holiday.

I kick the duvet onto the floor and roll out of the sweat patch I've left in the bed. There's a spot of blood on my pillow the same size as a pound coin. Where the fuck did that come from? I don't remember injuring myself last night. Chances are, I've woken up with a fat zit on the end of my nose that's exploded all over the sheets.

A knock at the door draws my attention away from the mysterious blood. Maybe the boys have woken up craving a beer too, and we won't bother with breakfast first.

The room sways a bit as I heave myself out of bed. Possibly still drunk.

I stagger to the door and pull it open without checking who's waiting outside. My eyebrows shoot up when I see who it is.

Maybe I'll have something to fill my morning with after all.

But the surprise is quickly replaced by fear. What the hell is she doing here? We said it was over, we said—

"Morning," she says with an impish smile that she knows I'm powerless to resist.

"You're not supposed—" I start, but she silences me by stepping into the room and closing the door behind her.

Since when has she given a shit about what she's supposed to do?

She stands there, quiet, a coy smile on her plump lips. She's wearing blue silk pyjamas, and her nipples point at me through the material.

"We can't," I say, but my voice comes out weak and pathetic.

She steps towards me and runs a long fake nail around the waistband of my boxers. "I missed you," she murmurs.

I lick my lips, already thinking about it, already knowing what choice I'll make.

Just one more time. Maybe it will make things feel more final – a kind of … farewell fu—

She stands on tiptoes and runs her tongue over my lips, and all pretence of weighing up my options vanishes in an instant because it's just me, and her, and there's no room for thought, no room for guilt. She wraps her legs around me and I stagger, nearly collapsing onto the thick carpet.

"Fucking hell, watch ou—"

Once again I'm silenced, this time by her hand plunging down the front of my boxers.

"Sit down," she says, and I obey, as always.

She drops to the floor, and I run my fingers through her thick blonde hair.

There's writing on the back of her silk pyjamas, and it strikes me, not for the first time, what a fucking cliché this is. But it's hard to care, with her lips around me and her head bobbing back and forth as though she's enjoying it just as much as I am.

*Maid of honour.*

# Transcript of interview

5 June

**In attendance – Inspector Chandra (IC), Femi Brown, server (FB)**

IC – Can you tell me what role you fulfilled during yesterday's wedding?
FB – Sorry … role?
IC – What were you employed to do? What was your job?
FB – Oh! Right, sorry. I was just a server.
IC – And what did that entail?
FB – Um, being a server?
IC – Can you be more specific?
FB – Serving drinks at the reception, waiting tables. Um, clearing up afterwards. That kind of thing.
IC – How long have you been in the role?
FB – How long have I worked at Grantham Hall? Just a few months – since wedding season started in April.
IC – And this is your first year working there?
FB – Yeah. Last too. [laughter]
IC – Oh yes? Why last?
FB – [pause] You serious?
IC – Yes.
FB – Well, would you want to work there, after everything that happened yesterday?

*OceanofPDF.com*

## CHAPTER 3

# The Bride

4 June

**9.30 a.m.**

I make my way towards the bathroom. My thoughts are full of him, the look on his face when I walk down the aisle towards him … the smile on his lips when he removes my dress tonight.

I catch my reflection as I pass the huge mirror above the dressing table. I walk with the usual stiff-legged gait that takes me a few hours and more than a few painkillers to banish. I'm wearing silk pyjamas, and I wince as I remember the word scrawled in bold calligraphy across the back. *Bride.*

A bit tacky for my taste, but my bridesmaids had insisted that if you couldn't wear cringey silk pyjamas on your wedding day, then when could you?

I tip my pills into my hand and wash them down with a swig of water, before trying out a tentative smile in the mirror. It's beginning to look, and even feel, convincing. But I can't stare at my reflection for too long – the whisper of self-loathing is never far away, the voice insisting I'm hideous, useless.

*Stop.*

My maid of honour's voice inside my head stops the spiral of despair. For the four years Emily and I have known each other, she's tried to convince me that I'm worth something. She's supported me in every way possible – financially, practically, emotionally.

There's a knock at my door, and I turn, startled. We agreed ten a.m., and it's only half nine. I was hoping to shower first – to have a last half-hour alone before opening my doors to the bubbling excitement of my bridal party.

I pad across the plush carpet, wincing as a bolt of pain fires down my leg. I open the door. It isn't Emily. It's a man. Short, stocky, with a bald head that's slightly sunburnt. His suit is black and ill-fitting over his beer belly. A diamond stud glints in his earlobe. He stares at me, and I shrink backwards, using the door to shield the pyjamas that suddenly feel like they cling to my body in a way that I don't want this stranger to see.

He doesn't move. Just stands there, staring. He raises his eyebrows expectantly and bobs slightly on his shiny black shoes. I notice something hung over his shoulder, a black bag.

Christ, I'm an idiot.

"Oh," I say, the penny finally dropping. "You're the photographer."

Another eyebrow lift from the photographer, whose name I've completely forgotten.

The heat on my face is intensifying. Why isn't he saying anything? And what is he doing here? The ceremony isn't until two p.m. – he can't possibly …

He interrupts my thoughts by raising his camera, pointing the lens at me, and taking a photo. I'm momentarily blinded by the flash, and in the time it takes me to recover, he's stepped around me and into the bridal suite.

"Where's the dress then?" he asks brusquely, his small eyes searching and landing on the underwear I kicked off last night and haven't yet tidied away.

"Uh," I reply as I dart forward to scoop them off the floor.

He smirks at my discomfort, and suddenly I want this man out of my room.

I channel Emily, who has been insisting I learn to stand up for myself ever since we met. "Sorry, what is it you need? The ceremony isn't until—"

"Two. I know," he replies flatly, still scanning the room as though I'm the least important thing in here. "They're always at two. I'm here to get all the pre-shots. Shoes, dress, bridesmaids getting ready."

He smirks again, and I try not to shudder as I think about what he must be picturing.

I didn't choose this man. I've never even spoken to him – he came with the venue, a non-negotiable element of the package apparently. In fact, most of this day had been non-negotiable. The flowers, the food, the DJ – all provided. At first, I'd been relieved not to have to plan any of it myself – I was a reluctant bride and having to decide what kind of napkin fold I

wanted might have just tipped me over the edge. But now, with this slimy, stale-smelling man in my room, I wish we'd been allowed a little more autonomy.

He takes another photo, this time of my unmade bed. Surely that isn't one of the traditional pre-wedding shots?

"Look …" I say, desperate to achieve the right balance of assertive and inoffensive so he will listen to me but not be pissed off.

"Mick," he interjects.

"Yes, sorry, Mick – I think it might be better if you come back a bit later, if that's OK? It's just … I still need to have a shower, and …" my bravado deserts me under his gaze, which is mildly amused.

He holds his thick hands up, defending himself from an attack I don't feel I made. "All right, all right. Not a problem – you only needed to say."

He backs out of the room as though retreating from a lion's den. I bite back the need to apologize, and resist slamming the door behind him.

He stops in the corridor, and I pray he isn't going to insist on staying after all. "I'll go and take some photos of the groom until you're ready," he says. "Which room is he in?"

"Room four-four-four," I blurt, without thinking.

The photographer nods, and leaves. I'm left with a feeling of relief that he's gone, and guilt that I've sent him to Daniel to deal with.

*OceanofPDF.com*

## CHAPTER 4

# The Groom

4 June

**10 a.m.**

Another knock at the door.

"Fuck's sake," I mutter, glancing around and wondering where the best place to hide a bridesmaid is.

It'll be one of the lads, coming to collect me for that morning pint I'd been craving. They know about us, of course they do. The elbows in my ribs whenever she enters a room, the comments about her body followed by grins in my direction – they're evidence enough. And I can see it in their eyes – the awe, the envy. I'm the guy who has it all.

It made me feel fucking awesome at first.

But the closer we got to the wedding day, the more the feeling of invincibility turned to fear of being caught, and now … now I don't know how I feel.

She's still kneeling, looking up at me with a full face of makeup on – I don't think I've ever seen her without it. She doesn't look concerned – she never has seemed scared that we'll be caught. Everything is a game to her, I realize. Everything is *fun*. She's been like that since we first dated, back when we were teenagers – it was always her with the ideas, her who seemed to thrive off breaking the rules.

She hasn't changed.

But I try to tell myself that *I* have – I'm getting *married*. And the last thing I need is one of my groomsmen walking in on us in the act. Especially Lee – that idiot gets so slack jawed when he's drunk that he'd spill his own secrets if it got him a little kudos among the lads.

Another knock. “Stay there,” I whisper, pointing at the floor. “Don’t move – I’ll get rid of them.”

She makes the sign of an X over her heart. I tuck myself back in and try to ignore the way she licks her lips.

I open the door a crack. It’s not my mates. It’s some bald guy with a fat gut. And before I can register what’s going on, he peers around me and into the room.

His eyes widen as he clocks her, waiting on the floor.

A smile stretches his fleshy lips into a grin. “Naughty boy,” he leers, still watching her, a greedy expression on his blotchy face.

Who the hell is this guy? My heart feels like it’s about to explode, and my head scrambles as I try to decide what to do. Slam the door in his face? Invite him in? Am I going to have to murder this prick?

“I’m Mick,” he says, sticking out a pudgy hand.

I take it, wincing as he crushes my fingers. His palm is sweaty.

“Photographer,” he explains. His tongue darts out to catch a bead of sweat off his top lip.

*Oh Christ.*

“Don’t worry,” he chuckles, catching my horror. “I won’t tell a soul.”

But his words don’t bring me any comfort because he’s still here, and he’s seen. Jesus Christ, *he’s seen*. He continues to stare past me and into the room and I’m surprised by my instinct to block his view and protect her from his greedy, wandering eyes.

But I can’t move … can’t risk getting on the wrong side of him.

“You won’t tell?” I ask, finally managing to speak as the relief of his promise registers.

“’Course not. And I won’t capture this moment as part of the photography package either.” He pats his camera case and laughs at his own hilarity. I weakly chuckle along with him, my heart still in overdrive. “As tempting as it might be.”

We’ve had some close shaves before, but this is the first time we’ve been caught in the act. I glance over my shoulder, but she still looks unconcerned. Doesn’t she care what this would do to her best mate?

“Although …” the photographer begins, and my panic, which had begun to subside, dials up a notch. Is he going to want something in return for his silence? He leans forward and murmurs out of the corner of his mouth,

“Although, it’ll be difficult to resist talking about this down the pub. Bloody legendary, mate.”

He’s holding out his hand again, and I shake it once more, wishing I could feel as good about all of this as he clearly does.

“I’ll be back in half an hour for some shots of you getting ready,” he says, the grin never leaving his face, his diamond earring twinkling. “Should give you enough time?”

I nod, nauseated.

With one last appreciative glance over my shoulder, he waddles away down the corridor.

I slowly close the door behind him and rest my head against it for a moment, willing my heart to return to normal.

That was close. Too close.

# Transcript of interview

5 June

**In attendance – Inspector Chandra (IC), Róisín Murphy, Chief Events Coordinator (RM)**

IC – Can you tell me what role you fulfilled during yesterday's wedding?
RM – I'm the Chief Events Coordinator for Grantham Hall. I arrange, organize, and facilitate all events, ensuring every detail is perfectly planned, and the day itself goes off without a hitch.
IC – When you say events, is it mainly weddings you hold here?
RM – Yes. Grantham Hall is the perfect, romantic setting for celebrations of love. We have a long history of running ceremonies here and are confident we have a well-thought-out package that will suit all couples. People who choose to get married here can rest assured that every last detail will be taken care of, from the flowers, the service staff, the schedule, the food—
IC – Yesterday's celebration didn't exactly go to plan though, did it?
RM – If you're suggesting that the appalling events of yesterday are anything to do with Grantham Hall, I suggest you think again before we get our legal team invol—
IC – No need for that. I'm just trying to determine the events that led up to the eventual phone call to 999. Were you aware of anything untoward going on?
RM – The petty issues between wedding guests are not of our concern.
IC – Petty? Is what happened last night something you would consider a petty issue between guests?
RM – Look, inspector. Weddings are messy. They just are. Even if the ceremony goes smoothly, in my experience, the reception is never, ever without drama. Whether that's fistfights between feuding family members, broken ankles on the dancefloor, or even the groom leaving halfway through the night without his wife – there is *always* drama.
IC – And what was last night's drama?
RM – [pause] Honestly? I was hoping you'd tell me.

OceanofPDF.com

## CHAPTER 5

# The Bride

4 June

**10 a.m.**

The anxiety I'd managed to momentarily shake off has returned full force, plunging its fist into my chest and shaking my heart. I close my eyes and lean against the door of the bridal suite, glad the photographer has gone, but feeling awful for sending him to Daniel.

He'll probably be with his friends, trying to relax before the day starts. I try to picture him. Is he as ruffled as me? Doubtful – he's the calm one, the voice of reason to my catastrophizing. Maybe he'll be glad to welcome the photographer – he's always been so friendly. It will probably be a much more upbeat atmosphere in his room, compared to the cold reception I'd given him.

I will my heart to stop juddering and making me feel nauseous. But I can't stop replaying the scene in my head. How could I have handled it differently? How could I have avoided …

*No.*

I can't do this. Not today.

I can't fall into the trap of agonizing over something from the past. I can't change it.

A hard, sharp knock on the door makes me gasp. I feel its impact in the back of my head, and my heart is off again, racing and insisting I flee.

Is the photographer back?

I peer through the peephole this time, not wanting to be caught unawares again. But it's not him – it's Nina and Sammi, my bridesmaids, and I sigh with relief. They look far away in the warped image through the eyehole,

but I can see they're in their matching silk pyjamas, arms linked, giddy and giggling already.

Nina and Sammi were already inseparable when I started my position at the estate agents they'd worked at since leaving school. It had been strange at first, for a myriad of reasons. To be working at all was the most overwhelming aspect, let alone adapting to a role I had no experience in.

I quickly moved my way up the ranks, once I'd understood my job mainly involved smiling as I opened doors for enthusiastic couples to look around their potential new home. I didn't have to do much – their eyes were already clouded with, often misplaced, optimism. I tried to remember if I'd felt as excited when moving into my own flat aged eighteen, sure that my life was about to start.

Nina is taller, dark-haired and athletically built, not that she does any physical activity other than lifting a happy-hour cocktail to her mouth after work. She can be blunt to the point of rudeness, but her heart is in the right place. Sammi, on the other hand, is as sweet-natured as she looks – bottle blonde and voluptuous, but also adorable – like a sexy hamster, according to Emily. Both bridesmaids are busty from boob jobs they got in Turkey, and both deeply tanned from frequent lunchbreak sunbed trips.

Nina shrugs at something Sammi has said, and Sammi mirrors her movement. I have no idea whether they do this intentionally as part of their double act, but it comes across as so natural that I suspect its subconscious.

My heart rate has calmed, and I silently thank the girls for the distraction their presence has brought before they've even entered the room.

I open the door and smile at them.

"Oh, my god, we thought you were dead!" Sammi gasps, her words tumbling out in one breath in a Black Country accent. I'm the only one in the office without one – yet another thing that marks me as not quite being part of the group.

"Or done a runner!" Nina adds, widening her eyes apologetically as Sammi nudges her in the ribs.

I bristle. Had they been talking about me, suggesting that I wouldn't go through with today?

Well, I'll have to make sure they put that idea out of their heads. I may not be overjoyed about the wedding day itself, but I couldn't be happier about agreeing to spend the rest of my life with Daniel.

“You’re not freaking out about the hairdresser, are you?” Nina asks as she bustles into the room.

I frown. “The hair—?”

“Nina!” Sammi scolds, closing the door behind her. “Emily said not to tell her!”

“Tell me what?”

Sammi sighs apologetically. “You’re not to worry, but the hairdresser has cancelled.” She must see the alarm in my face as she quickly adds, “But Emily is confident that she can do hair and makeup for all of us.”

It’s fine, I try to assure myself. It’s not like I care about any of this anyway – I’ve not exactly agonized over the details that brides apparently lose sleep over. It’s more the lack of control that’s leaving me unsettled – the feeling that I’m being swept along with the relentless flow of the day, powerless to escape the current.

“You OK, hun?” Sammi asks, peering anxiously at me.

“Sorry,” I say, glad to hear the tremble has gone from my voice. “I was __”

“Shitting yourself?” Nina suggests. “I was a bridesmaid for my cousin last year, and no joke, she literally spent the entire morning on the toilet. She couldn’t even manage to drink any of the prosecco.”

“Bet you did though,” Sammi chirps with a grin.

Nina waggles her eyebrows roguishly and I can’t help but smile – Nina is an expert when it comes to having a good time, especially when alcohol is involved. She fishes around in the tote bag slung over her shoulder, producing two bottles of fizz. “This is just to get us started – Emily has some posher stuff.”

I return their smiles, knowing that their idea of ‘posher stuff’ was the eight-quid bottle of own-brand prosecco, instead of the six.

Not that it matters, of course. Even if I could tell the difference between the truly fancy wine and the bottom-shelf variety, I’m not a big drinker. It tends to … amplify things. Things I certainly don’t need to be any louder.

“So, have you?” Nina asks.

I blink slowly at her, trying to keep up through the fog that has settled in my head since waking this morning. I need to take my pills – that will help. Wait … I frown as I look towards the dressing table and my medicine bag. Have I already taken them?

Nina leans forward and whispers conspiratorially down my ear, loud enough for Sammi to hear, and likely anyone else who happens to be within a mile radius. “Have you got the runs?”

I snort, and the sudden burst of happiness banishes the lingering anxiety. My smile is finally genuine, and I feel overwhelmingly grateful for the two bubbly, sweet women stood before me, pink and lovely in their matching pyjamas.

“Not yet, luckily,” I tell her, then hesitate before adding, “but my heart has been threatening to explode out of my mouth since I woke up.”

“You’re bound to feel nervous,” Sammi soothes in her squeaky voice.

“Yeah,” Nina agrees, as she grips the prosecco bottle between her knees. “Be something seriously wrong with your relationship if you weren’t!”

I try to puzzle out the logic of her words but am distracted by her attempts to prise the stubborn cork out of the bottle as it slips on the silky material of her pyjamas.

“Come … on … you … piece … of …” She grunts, until the cork finally gives with an unenthusiastic pop.

“Oh,” I say, suddenly remembering. “Wait – Emily got us glasses.”

I search through the various bags and boxes in the corner of the bridal suite. She’s taken care of so many things – so many special touches that I hadn’t considered for a second. I’ve only been to one wedding in my life, when I was seven years old. And I wasn’t exactly concentrating on the finer details at that time.

“Here!” I say, triumphantly, as I locate the champagne flutes. Emily had made sure our names were engraved on each one.

Louise, Nina, Sammi, Emily.

Where *is* Emily?

I hand Sammi the glasses for Nina to pour the golden liquid into, and glance up at the clock. Half past ten.

Emily is late, which isn’t unusual, to be fair. She’s always perfectly made up – skin spot-free and smooth, hair voluminous, makeup flawless. And all this preparation takes her longer than she expects every single time, despite her never leaving the house without completing her routine.

But to be late *today* … She’s supposed to be doing makeup for all four of us and has lectured Nina and Sammi endlessly on how important it is that they be in the bridal suite for ten, or we’d run out of time.

I distractedly accept my glass of prosecco from Sammi and frown at the clock. The feeling that had lightened the weight on my shoulders when Nina and Sammi had arrived is fading, and I wonder where Emily could possibly be.

*OceanofPDF.com*

## CHAPTER 6

# The Groom

4 June

**10.30 a.m.**

After the initial rush, the fear of being discovered, and the adrenaline that followed when I realized I was still safe … I'm exhausted. I can feel my body getting heavier as I sink deeper into the soft mattress. I'll close my eyes, just for a little while.

But then there's a movement in the bed beside me, a heel digging into my leg. And just like that, the fear returns – the certainty I am about to be discovered, and everything I've built will come crashing down around me.

"Get out," I say, sitting up and pulling my body away from her.

She mumbles sleepily, still wearing those goddamn pyjamas that shove the wrongness of what we're doing in my face. Maid of honour. Maid of fucking honour … *Jesus.*

"Huh?" she says, turning to look at me. Her lipstick has smeared across her cheek.

"I said, get out. Now."

Her eyes narrow, and her irises disappear beneath the thick canopy of her false lashes. "You don't have to be such an arsehole, you know."

My bravado wilts beneath her glare. "I'm sorry," I mumble, and just like that, we're fourteen again.

She's never been someone you'd dare get on the wrong side of. That's partly what I found so intoxicating about being in a relationship with her back then – the way the other lads would look at me, as though I were a cowboy who'd managed to tame the wild horse they'd all had their eye on.

"You must be nervous," she murmurs as she softens and strokes the side of my head, right where she knows I like it. "Are you OK?" she asks.

I shake my head. No. I'm not. How could I possibly be OK?

Her nails trace the tattoo around my wrist. An innocent gesture in itself, but I know with her, nothing is innocent. I know this is her reminding me that she was there when I got the tattoo, and she'll be there tomorrow, and the next day, and the next. It was her who convinced me to get the bloody thing, in fact. Just another way of reminding me that there's no hoop I won't jump through if it's her holding it in front of me.

"This can't happen again," I say as I half-heartedly shrug her hand off.

The look she gives me makes me feel like a child who's promising he'll never forget his homework again, when we both know that I will.

Because, really, it never actually ended, did it? From the moment I saw her on our first day of secondary school, to the fumbled groping in the back of the cinema, to her eventually breaking my heart, and now, to whatever the hell this is – it's always been there, this … *thing* between us.

But I mean it this time. It's my *wedding day*. If this comes out now, it isn't just shouting and a messy breakup. It's lawyers and negotiations and money. And stress. I don't think I can take any more stress – I'll be dead from a heart attack before I hit thirty-five.

So this has to be the end, doesn't it?

# Transcript of interview

5 June

**In attendance – Inspector Chandra (IC), Femi Brown, server (FB)**

IC – Was there anything that stood out to you about yesterday?
FB – Stood out? Like …?
IC – Anything unusual. Anything that made you wonder if there was something sinister going on.
IC – For the purpose of the tape, the interviewee shrugged in response to the question. Femi, please can you remember to speak your replies?
FB – Oh, yeah, sorry. Um, no, I don't think there was anything weird. It was just a standard Saturday during wedding season, you know?
IC – Can you elaborate?
FB – I just mean … they're all the same – the weddings. They always follow the same format – bride's breakfast tray at twelve p.m., ceremony at two p.m., photos at two thirty. It's managed so carefully that the guests from the different weddings shouldn't even cross paths.
IC – And yesterday followed the same set structure as all the others?
FB – Yeah, as far as I'm aware. Just the same old day. Even if everything that happened hadn't happened, I don't know if I could cope working another season next year – it's like being stuck in a time warp, reliving the same day over and over.
IC – And nothing about this particular day drew your attention?
FB – [pause] I dunno … I suppose …
IC – Go on.
FB – The bride. There was definitely something up with the bride.

*OceanofPDF.com*

## CHAPTER 7

# The Bride

4 June

**10.30 a.m.**

My brain takes me through a series of horrible scenarios, all of them involving Emily hurt in some way.

Has she died in her sleep from an undiagnosed medical condition? Perhaps she fell down the stairs as she made her way up to the bridal suite, her arms laden with all the equipment she'd need to do our hair and makeup. Oh god … if something's happened to her, I don't know how I'll cope, how I'll carry on.

Emily is the reason I'm here, the reason I had a chance to start again. Literally picking me up off the pavement and taking me home like some kind of stray, injured, flea-ridden street cat.

"Louise?" Sammi asks softly.

Nina and Sammi are watching me carefully, faces creased with concern. They're used to this – me freezing, with what Emily has told me is a look of sheer terror on my face. It freaked them out at first, and Sammi had asked if I was a psychic who could see impending doom, or perhaps ghosts casually wandering through the estate agent's office.

"Sorry – miles away." I shake my head, attempting a smile. "I just need my medicine, that's all."

I reach for the bag of pills on the dressing table and frown at the contents. *Have* I already taken them this morning? I remember sipping out of the bottle of hotel water, but that could have been last night. There's no use counting them to see if any are missing – I've been overdosing lately anyway due to a flare-up, likely caused by wedding stress.

I shrug, and knock two painkillers back, plus two diazepam. If that doesn't smooth the edges, then I've no hope.

"Is it bad at the moment?" Sammi asks.

I smile bravely. "No, no, I'm fine."

She smiles back, but I can tell she's not convinced. They've seen my pain at work – the tight way I perch on the edge of my chair, my teeth pressed firmly together. Just as I'm sitting now, I realize.

"Have a drink," Nina suggests, and gently pushes my glass upwards, towards my mouth.

The bubbles tingle my tongue, and I try not to pull a face at the artificial sweetness of the cheap prosecco. But as soon as the liquid passes down my throat, I feel its relaxing effects, and sigh. Nina smiles at me knowingly.

"Emily's late," I say.

"She'll be here," Sammi says and her round cheeks dimple as she smiles reassuringly.

"She better be – I need someone to fix this shit-show!" Nina exclaims, tugging a ratty extension.

Emily left the estate agents we work in a year ago to start her own hair-and-makeup business and now travels all over the country making bridal parties look as glamorous as her. I was so proud of her for turning her skills into a successful business – she's truly amazing at what she does.

But god I miss her. She works weekends and evenings, while I work nine to five in the office – we have to arrange to meet each other weeks in advance. When we first became friends, not only did I live and work with her, we spent just about every waking minute together. It was hard enough when I moved out and into my own place with Daniel, so when she left the estate agents, I wanted to cling to her in the same way I had when she'd first scooped me up off the pavement, all those years ago.

"Please try not to stress, Louise," Sammi says and rubs my arm soothingly. "Today is going to be amazing. Let us do the stressing for you – that's what we're here for. Right, Nina?"

"Absolutely." Nina nods, looking more serious than I've ever seen her. "I'll go and find Emily right now, in fact."

She takes a deep swig of her prosecco, pausing before returning for a second gulp that empties the flute. I wince, imagining the bubbles that must be stinging her nose, but she doesn't even grimace as she places her glass on the windowsill.

“You two stay here and do yoga or something – calming thoughts and all that.” She stomps towards the door, and adds, “Think of Daniel.”

Nina and Sammi’s expressions soften in the mushy way they always do when Daniel is the topic of conversation. All three of my bridesmaids regularly talk about how lucky I am to have found him, when men are generally trash, in their experience. They are all single at the moment – Emily is far too busy with her new career to even entertain the idea of dating. Sammi is still licking her wounds from being cheated on by someone she thought might be marriage material, and Nina has been fixated on Daniel’s best friend, John, for a year now, still clinging to the hope that there could be something between them.

The door closes behind Nina with a soft click, and Sammi lifts a Bluetooth speaker out of her bag. “Let’s have some chill stuff on to start with,” she suggests as she scrolls through her playlist. “Nina will probably hijack it and turn this room into Ibiza when she gets back, so we should make the most of a bit of peace and quiet while we can!”

I smile gratefully at Sammi. She’s overlooked at work – small and blonde with a squeaky voice that makes her seem sixteen rather than twenty-six, management don’t take her seriously. But she’s unbelievably empathetic, and sometimes I worry she can see my secrets without me having to breathe a word of them.

The music helps. Chilled trance tunes make me think of lounging by a pool in the sun. Not that I’ve ever been on a girls’ holiday. Or any holiday that required me to have a passport.

“Sit,” Sammi says, patting the empty side of the chaise longue she has made herself comfortable on.

I do as I’m instructed, despite feeling like I don’t have time for relaxing. The ceremony is in less than four hours, and none of us have even started getting ready. The idea of everyone’s eyes on me as I walk down the aisle already makes my stomach plunge, and being late and keeping everyone waiting would make the situation even worse.

“What’s worrying you?” Sammi asks gently, her light blue eyes locked on mine. “Apart from Emily being late.”

I open my mouth to tell her that nothing’s worrying me, that I’m absolutely fine, just normal wedding jitters. But as practised as I am at glossing over things and skirting around the subject, I hate the idea of lying to Sammi’s face in such an intimate moment.

“I’m scared—” I begin, then pause, trying to understand exactly what it is I’m scared of. Sammi waits patiently. “I’m scared of it being taken away,” I finally say. “Of it … not being real.”

“Has Daniel ever done anything to make you feel like he might not be genuine?” Sammi asks, cocking her head slightly.

“No,” I reply instantly, guilt yet again coursing through my veins. “No, Daniel’s amazing. It’s just …” I gnaw on my bottom lip and drop my gaze to my lap. “It’s just, I can’t believe I’m allowed to feel this happy. I never thought I would get here, not after—”

There’s a loud clatter at the door, and I whip my head around to see Nina kicking it open, dragging a trolley loaded with boxes behind her and swearing loudly. “Found her! Jesus Christ, do you really need this much stuff?”

I smile, relief washing my fear away as Emily comes into the bridal suite after Nina, flustered and struggling under her bags, but here.

Everything is going to be OK.

*OceanofPDF.com*

## CHAPTER 8

# The Groom

4 June

**11 a.m.**

I turn the shower to cold just before getting out. My stomach clenches and my heart jolts in protest, but it's meant to be good for you – I saw it on some SAS survival programme.

I feel properly awake now. Once I have the room to myself, I make a coffee with two sachets of instant granules. It tastes like tar, but my head is clear and my hangover kept at bay.

And I'm sure of myself now. This was the last time. I know I've said it a thousand times before, but this time, I mean it. The sex was like drawing a line in the sand – saying goodbye to my old life. From now on, I'm going to settle down. I'm going to be a good husband.

This is it. All the preparation, the ridiculous promotional dance video for the venue that they insisted we be part of, the months of planning endless, unimportant details – suits, music choices, table plans – the list goes on and on, when really, everyone knows that a wedding is just a glorified piss-up. No one actually gives a shit if the bouquet matches the bunting on the cake table, or whatever.

As long as the bar is open and full, there's enough wine on the tables, and the music keeps going till late, then everyone will be happy.

I tie the towel around my waist and wonder what I'm supposed to wear. Three hours to go – is it too early to get the suit on? I pick my gold bracelet up off the bedside table and fasten it around my wrist, over the tattoo – that's as good a place to start as any. It was a gift from the missus – she'll notice if I don't wear it.

There’s a knock at the door, and this time, the sound doesn’t set my teeth on edge. I already know who it is – I can hear J’s high-pitched shriek of laughter, a sound that should not belong to a six-foot-five man.

“Wahey!” my groomsmen chorus as I pull the door open. Lee instantly lunges for my towel, yanks it off, and whips my naked arse with it.

I manage to wrestle it back off him and hide what’s left of my dignity, grinning as the five of them tumble into the room. No … six.

The fucking photographer is with them.

My good mood sours, and I eyeball him. Has the slimy git kept his word?

He smiles at me in a way that makes my skin crawl, then winks, reminding me that he *knows*.

He raises his camera and clicks. Where the hell will that shot end up – me, barely covering myself with a towel and staring down the lens like it’s the barrel of a gun?

He holds power over me. I know it, he knows it, and if I don’t handle this right, everyone at the wedding will know it.

I’d best keep him on my side.

“Beer?” I ask, flipping the lid of Lee’s cool box open and bending to fish out a beer with one hand, the other keeping hold of my towel. I offer it to the photographer.

“Nice one,” he grins, his fleshy fingers curling around the neck of the bottle.

I nod, my meaning clear. We have an understanding.

He returns my nod, and I can relax again.

“This is it!” J crows, slapping me on the back.

“Your last day of freedom,” Mark adds, gloomily. We all laugh – he got married at twenty-two and has been depressed about it ever since.

“Hope you made the most of it,” Lee murmurs in a way I suspect was supposed to be discreet but was loud and clear to everyone in the room.

“Oh, he did,” the photographer says.

My groomsmen turn to him, as though surprised to see him in the room with us. I want to punch him in his stupid, pudgy face. What is he playing at, grinning in a way that makes it very fucking obvious what he’s implying?

To my relief, no one says anything, but I notice smirks and nods of approval. Lee clinks my bottle with his and nudges me in the ribs.

I can’t help it – the smug feeling that swells in my chest and makes me stand just that bit taller. All these men, looking at me like I’m, well, their *hero*.

It’s never going to happen again, but that doesn’t mean I can’t enjoy the moment.

This is going to be the best day of my life.

# Transcript of interview

5 June

**In attendance – Inspector Chandra (IC), Samantha Higgins, bridesmaid (SH)**

IC – Hello, Samantha, thank you for speaking with us.
SH – You can call me Sammi, if you want. I don't mind, but that's what most people call me.
IC – OK, Sammi. I'm sorry to call you in so soon, but we wanted to get everyone's version of events as soon as possible.
SH – I haven't even had a chance to get out of my dress yet.
IC – We'll try not to keep you for too long.
SH – Are you interviewing everyone like this? Everyone who went to the wedding?
IC – For now, we're speaking to staff, and the guests who were involved with what happened.
SH – Right. OK, I guess that's me then.
IC – I'd like to start at the beginning – can you take us through the day, from your perspective?
SH – I guess so, but I don't actually know that much. Only what I saw. And I don't even know how much of that is true.
IC – What makes you doubt what you saw is the truth?
SH – It's just … everything was confusing, you know? So much happened, and I was with Louise at the start. But then it all got messy and I didn't see much, only heard stuff.
IC – OK, for now, we'll just stick with what you experienced directly. Let's try to avoid speculating on anything you might have picked up on since last night – anything you might have heard people talking about.
SH – I'll try. I'm so tired though – can I not get changed first? I need a shower, I need— [inaudible]
IC – It's OK, Sammi. There's no rush, but we really do need to speak to you now, whilst the memories are still fresh.

SH – [muffled crying] I'll try.
IC – Let's start with how long you've known Louise, and what your relationship with her is like.
SH – It's good. I mean, I thought it was. But now, it's like—
IC – Yes?
SH – Well, you think you know someone. Until you find out you knew nothing about them at all, not really.

*OceanofPDF.com*

## CHAPTER 9

# The Bride

4 June

**11 a.m.**

“I am so sorry.” Emily puffs as she tugs her suitcase into the bridal suite after her. “I thought I’d get ready before coming, so that was at least one less person to sort. And … well.”

She straightens, and gestures to herself, acknowledging her terrible timekeeping with a self-deprecating grimace. But I don’t see the flaw she’s so aware of herself.

I just see my best friend.

Her makeup is radiant, and she’s slicked her hair into a messy yet elegant bun at the side of her head. She’s wearing her matching silk pyjamas.

I step forward and fling my arms around her, catching her startled expression before my chin is resting on her shoulder. I’m not usually the hugging type.

But seeing her here, looking so beautiful yet so sorry for being late and making me worry – it brings home just how lucky I am to have her.

And god, she does look beautiful. I’m used to the way she can transform her face with the right shades of makeup in the right places, creating soft dewy looks for the day, and dramatic fierce looks for night-time. She’s a true master at her art, and generous with it – when we met, I was embarrassed to admit I didn’t own a single item of makeup and wouldn’t know how to apply it if I did. So she’d asked if I’d like to see how I felt wearing it, then applied bronzer and highlighter to my cheekbones until I found a face that fit. Then she’d taught me how to do it myself.

“You OK, chick?” she murmurs, patting my back with her one free hand. Her perfume is strong and sweet.

“Sorry.” I laugh, finally releasing her.

She looks touched by my unexpected affection, and I blush at the sudden realization that everyone is watching me. I’d better get used to that today.

“Sorry,” I repeat. “Just glad you’re here.”

A wide grin spreads Emily’s mauve lips wide. “Bloody hell, I’m not that late! And I can’t believe you sent Nina to find me – I found *her*, walking back and forth down a corridor with no idea which direction she’d come from.”

Nina nods and widens her eyes. She’s somehow managed to top her glass up already. “This place is ridiculous, honestly – an absolute maze. I hope someone is going to come and find us to take us to the ceremony room, ’cause we don’t stand a chance on our own.”

We laugh, but she’s right. Even after spending a night here, I still have no bearings. I feel like I’ve been swallowed by the sprawling manor house and will never find my way out. And even if I did, I’d have acres of manicured lawns and ancient forests to trek through before reaching a road.

I’d read the hotel information booklet in the early hours of the morning, when sleep had felt more and more like an impossibility. Originally Georgian, Grantham Hall has been improved and extended over the years – on two occasions requiring a complete rebuild after burning to the ground. It’s had the effect of making it disjointed and illogical – there’s no knowing which corridor will lead to which part of the building, and the fact there are still discreet servant passageways snaking through the walls just adds to the confusion. I’m still not sure what I think about the venue, but it never really felt like I had a say in the matter.

Once it had been confirmed that we would be having a *proper* wedding, as Shirley called it, the venue selection had commenced. Grantham Hall was the first, and only, location we visited.

Shirley came too, of course. She seemed very chummy with the events manager who showed us around, and Daniel admitted that they were old friends. The fact made me feel somehow betrayed, as though Grantham Hall had already been chosen for the big day behind my back. Which, of course, it had.

As we’d driven through the gatehouse, I’d nodded and smiled enthusiastically from where I sat in the back of the car, behind Shirley. Sure, I didn’t exactly feel at home here, but it was big, at least – I hate confined spaces, which would hardly be an issue here.

The hall was giant, overwhelming, and nothing like the intimate, romantic venue I'd pictured Daniel and I declaring our undying love for each other in. And as we were shown around by the stern manager, I noticed something behind the apparent grandeur of the estate, something that hinted of a quick fix to modernise the building, rather than the careful work it probably needed. There was black mould creeping at the corners, paint flaking over damp patches on the walls, and I'd almost fallen through a rotting trapdoor that led to the sprawling cellars beneath the building.

The whole place gave me the creeps. But I didn't care enough to complain – I just cared about keeping Shirley happy. Happy mother, happy son, and hopefully … happy marriage. We were shown room after room, each bigger and grander than the last. We could have our pick of the multiple ceremony rooms, depending on the size of the guest list.

"Oh, we'll need the biggest one," Shirley had quickly confirmed. "At least a hundred guests, and that's just from our side!"

She'd added her tinkering laugh that I'd feebly joined in with. She knew full well there would be no 'my side' to make up the numbers.

Daniel squeezed my hand and smiled sympathetically at me, the way he always did when his mother made one of her passive-aggressive jabs. But I found myself wishing that just once he'd do more than secretly show his support, and actually say something in my defence.

But that's unreasonable of me. I of all people know how hard it is to confront your parents with the truth.

None of the ominous feeling Grantham Hall had first given me was evident in the bridal suite though, especially now it was full of the shrill chattering of my bridesmaids. I used to feel jealous of their easy friendship, the way they were so similar – their accents, their taste in music, their sense of humour. I felt like a drab grey pigeon among a flock of colourful canaries.

But the clink of Emily's champagne flute against mine reminds me of what they've been telling me for years – I'm one of them. I belong here.

"Right," Emily says suddenly. "We need to get ready!"

She places her champagne flute on the mantelpiece and puts her hands on my shoulders, gently guiding me towards the dressing table and pressing me down into the chair. Nina and Sammi sit on the chaise longue, the bottle of prosecco on the table between them.

Emily opens one of her suitcases, revealing rows upon rows of perfectly organized powders and creams. After priming my face, she selects a foundation without hesitation. “This is your shade,” she says, remembering from the many times she’s done this for me before.

I close my eyes and enjoy the touch of the foundation brush on my skin.

It’s nice, being able to sit and listen to the other three chat, with an excuse not to attempt to join in – every time I move, Emily swats me gently on the back of my hand with the brush, telling me to keep still.

“What’s his type though, Louise?” Nina asks, again. “Like, what have his exes been like?”

I raise my eyebrows at her in the mirror as Emily blends bronzer from my jawline into my neck, reminding her that I can’t talk.

Nina slumps, frustrated. She’d been obsessing about Daniel’s best man, John, ever since they briefly hooked up a year ago. It’s not like Nina to be afraid of going after what she wants, but there’s something about John that makes her hesitant.

I can see why. John is classically good looking – tall, slim, good hair. But there’s something off about him – a kind of cold detachment. And he clearly dislikes me and has done ever since I came into Daniel’s life. The animosity coming from both his mother and his best friend has made our relationship difficult to navigate.

Emily thinks John might not hate me at all, but might in fact be in love with me.

I definitely don’t believe that – love isn’t the silent sneer that sits on John’s lip whenever I enter a room, or the judgemental snort when a joke goes over my head. Although I suppose I’ve not historically understood what love should look like.

“Maybe …” Sammi says hesitantly. “Maybe John isn’t right for you, Nina.”

I watch Nina without moving my head. She chews the inside of her lip, uncharacteristically gloomy. “He said he liked me though,” she insists. “When we slept together that night – he said he’d never felt like that about anyone. But since then, I never know if he’s going to be all over me, or act like I don’t exist.”

Emily makes a tiny noise in her throat and cocks an eyebrow at me without the other two seeing. She’s as protective over me as my dog, Buddy, is, and has come close to having a word with John about his weird

attitude towards me more than once, only backing down when I begged her not to cause a scene. I give Emily a tiny nod – I don't like the idea of Nina going after him either.

I close my eyes as Emily neatens the edges of my winged eyeliner. I've finally found the quiet life I've dreamt of for so long. Shirley and John's passive-aggressive jabs at me are hardly anything to get worked up about. I'm so, so lucky to be here – am I really going to warn John to stop stringing Nina along and risk sabotaging everything I have?

I already know that I won't.

"You're done," Emily whispers.

I keep my eyes closed for a moment longer, preparing myself for what I'll see in the mirror, and praying I like it. It had taken me a long time to see myself as anything other than a disgusting waste of space. And sometimes that feeling returns with a rush, overriding all the work I've done to convince myself that I'm worth something.

I open my eyes.

Emily has done it again. Where I looked tired and tight-faced just two hours ago, I now look bright and sparkling. My eyes are wide and innocent, framed by a pair of subtle false eyelashes. The sun filters through the windows and catches the shimmer of highlighter on my cheekbones as I turn my head from one side to the other.

"Happy?" Emily asks, and I raise my eyes from my own reflection to see her smiling down at me, her own eyes wet with emotion.

"*Thank you*."

"Right then, hair next!" she replies, the moment only allowing a fleeting pause in the proceedings. I can see the stress brimming beneath her careful composure – she's worried we're going to run out of time.

I think of Shirley, and shudder at the idea of her coming to collect us, furious with me for delaying the ceremony. God forbid I do anything to ruin *her* day.

Emily isn't quite so gentle when she does my hair, but I try not to wince as she twirls and twists my curls, digging pins into my scalp to keep them in place. She accompanied me to the hairdressers for the trial, so she saw how it was done, but still – I'm amazed by her ability to recreate it without hesitation. And before I know it, I'm staring at the finished article.

"It's perfect," I say, and I mean it.

Emily gives my shoulders a brief squeeze before calling Nina to take my seat. I rise, feeling slightly light-headed and realizing the breakfast tray promised by the venue hasn't arrived. I doubt I'd have been able to eat anything anyway, but I'm not sure I'll make it down the aisle with just a glass of prosecco in my stomach.

As if responding to my thoughts, there's a soft knock on the door. I think of the photographer, and pause to look through the peephole before answering, not wanting to be caught unawares again.

But it's just a girl, dressed in a formal black-and-white server outfit and carrying a covered silver platter. I open the door and show her towards the low table in front of the chaise longue. She leaves without looking me in the eye or responding to my thank-yous.

"Oh, my god, I'm starving," Sammi exclaims, rubbing her hands together at the sight of the platter. "Do you mind?"

"Go for it." I smile, gesturing for her to remove the silver lid.

A jug of orange juice, a pot of coffee, a plate of croissants, a bowl of yoghurt and fresh strawberries. But the food barely registers, as my eyes are drawn to the item that has been placed to the left of the cutlery – a single red rose.

I flinch, and gasp as a flash of pain radiates from my lower back and down to my toes. My eyes lock on to the flower, the perfect scarlet petals, the thorns sharp enough to cut.

"No," I breathe.

Sammi, who had been about to claim a croissant, withdraws her hand uncertainly and looks up at me.

This can't be happening. Not here, not today, of all days.

The pain is blinding – white-hot and shooting up and down my sciatic nerve. Even now, I can't escape the agony inflicted on me back then, back when I was Hannah Goodfellow, not Louise Jones.

I should have known I couldn't run forever.

*OceanofPDF.com*

## CHAPTER 10

# The Groom

4 June

**12.15 p.m.**

Mick is grating on me.

He's always there, lurking with that shit-eating smile spread across his fat face, taking endless photos of god knows what. What are we going to do with a picture of my shoes before my feet are even in them – frame it?

We're still in my hotel room, standing around, drinking. By the time we get to the ceremony room, we're going to be struggling to stay upright.

I try not to wince as there's another click in my face – a close-up of me licking flakes of pastry off my lips, for Christ's sake. I need to keep Mick on my side, but there's a limit, and I'm coming close to choking him to death by ramming a croissant down his throat.

The breakfast platter arrived a little while ago. I was disappointed to see a pile of pastries and fruit and the other random things women like to eat in the morning. I'd kill for a bacon sandwich, especially now I'm three beers down.

But the breakfast choices are one of the many, many things that come as standard with the wedding package. We barely had a say over any of it. Not that I gave a shit. I had enough on my plate without adding menu options and flower choices to it.

"All right, mate?" J asks, clapping me on the shoulder and making me slosh beer out of my bottle.

"Yeah, sound," I reply.

He's a strange one, J. My best mate since we were kids – the clown of the group, always up for a sesh, always the one to do whatever it takes to make everyone laugh. But there's something else there, something that I

think I might be the only one to see. He's deeper than the jokes, the daft behaviour. He notices things.

I return his slap on the shoulder, grateful for him always having my back. He must have known about my cheating since the start but has never breathed a word or even hinted that he knows what I've been up to. Not like Lee and the others, with their nudges and winks that they barely bother to hide even when we're around my wife-to-be. Not like Mick the bloody photographer with his threatening, knowing smirk.

No, J's a true mate – the kind of guy you'd want on your side when the shit hits the fan.

I just have to hope that nothing happens today to put that to the test.

# Transcript of interview

5 June

**In attendance – Inspector Chandra (IC), Femi Brown, server (FB)**

IC – You said there was something up with the bride in the wedding you worked on yesterday. Did you have many interactions with her throughout the day?
FB – Not really. Just the usual.
IC – And what is the usual?
FB – Um … It's hard to remember the specifics. I do pretty much exactly the same thing every wedding. Like I said – they all follow the same formula. I feel like a robot, programmed to hit certain markers at exactly the same time every wedding. Like, we leave the kitchen with the breakfast trays at exactly eleven fifty so we're waiting outside the bride and groom's rooms and can knock on the doors at exactly twelve p.m. Though really, it's hardly a breakfast tray at that time is it? They must be half starved by the time we feed them, not that I'd dare suggest we change anything about that – nothing changes around here, ever.
IC – OK, let's start at the beginning. Do you remember the first time you saw Louise Jones, the bride?
FB – Right, yeah. I, um, I took her the breakfast tray. At twelve p.m. sharp.
IC – And how did she seem?
FB – Normal at first, I suppose. Kind of flustered, but they usually are in the morning.
IC – There was nothing that struck you as odd?
FB – Well, when I left after giving her the tray, I heard this noise.
IC – What kind of noise?
FB – At first I thought it was laughter, but, I dunno … then it kind of started to sound like screaming.

*OceanofPDF.com*

## CHAPTER 11

# The Bride

4 June

**12 p.m.**

“What is it, Louise?” Emily asks.

I can see the panic I’m feeling reflected on her face as she scans me up and down. She’s looking for injuries, I realize – surely only physical pain could have caused such an extreme reaction?

I’m still holding the silver lid of the platter, and I drop it as though burnt. It lands on the thick carpet with a muffled thud. Nina leaps to her feet and backs away from the breakfast tray, her eyes darting back and forth. She has a deep phobia of spiders, I remember. The poor girl probably thinks I’d seen something horrible in the tray and dropped the lid in shock.

Before I can stifle it, a bubble of laughter ripples up my throat and bursts out of my mouth. The other three are staring now, unable to hide their concern. It makes me laugh harder.

But clearly, my laughter doesn’t come as a relief, as their expressions now look fearful. The noise I’m making barely sounds like laughter, I realize dully. But I’m powerless to stop the choking, gasping noises.

“Lou—” Emily begins, taking a tentative step towards me.

But I hold a hand out to stop her, the other moving to cover my mouth. My eyes bulge in panic. I’m going to be sick.

Her eyebrows shoot up as she realizes, and she moves to my side, placing her hands on my shoulders and rushing me towards the bathroom. I lunge through the door, the vomit spraying from behind my hand and most of it landing in the sink, thank god.

I lean forward, bracing myself against the cold white porcelain, retching with a ferocity that makes my entire body ache. There’s no let up until I feel

the burn of acid in my throat, and I'm dry heaving so violently that my stomach feels as though it is turning inside out.

I barely register Emily's hand on my back.

Finally empty, I remain hunched over the sink, breathing heavily. My lips are tingling, and snot runs out of my nose, making it difficult to breathe. I sniff, and taste bile.

Emily still doesn't speak, and I'm grateful. I'm not ready to move, to acknowledge what I've just seen.

The rose.

God, just the thought of it makes my insides twist with terror again, and I groan, scared of vomiting again when I have absolutely nothing left to purge.

"Is she …?" a faint voice asks timidly though the bathroom door – I can't tell if it's Nina or Sammi. I close my eyes, mortified. What must they think of me?

"She's fine," Emily replies. Her hand is slowly rubbing my back now. "She's going to be fine. Just give us a minute."

I feel her shift to close the bathroom door, and add, presumably so I won't hear, "You two get started with your makeup, OK?"

The door closes with a soft click, and Emily's hand leaves my back. The absence of her touch makes me want to cry out. I need her comforting presence, need her to promise it's going to be OK.

"Here," she says softly, and presses a wad of toilet roll into my palm.

I straighten gingerly, wiping my chin with a trembling hand before folding it and rubbing the tears away. I remember too late – my makeup. I widen my eyes at Emily as the tissue comes back black with mascara.

"Don't worry about it for a second," she says firmly.

I slump to sit on the toilet lid, wretchedness overwhelming me. Not only have I ruined the makeup Emily spent the last forty minutes working on, I've taken her skills away from Nina and Sammi. This whole morning has been ruined, because of me.

Because of a *flower.*

I see petals dropping one by one off a wilted rose and the pain flashes through my back again. The roses always came after the pain.

I snap my eyes open again to banish the image. Emily is watching me, waiting.

"The rose," I rasp, feeling its thorns in my throat.

Emily squats in front of me, her hands on my silk knees. She looks beautiful, but worried.

"I'm so sorry," she whispers, tears shining in her eyes. "I told them – I *told them*, no fucking roses. But—"

The muscle in her jaw clenches – a telltale sign that her temper is rising and someone will get their arse handed to them for their mistake.

She knows what roses do to me – she saw it first hand when she brought a bunch home when we lived together. They were just supposed to decorate the flat, not send her new lodger into a fit of hysterics.

But she never knew *why*. I never told her where I'd come from … what I'd run from. There are bits she knows about – the chronic pain, the nightmares, the general struggle to function as a normal human being. She's a little more insistent than Daniel in trying to coax information out of me – she doesn't think it's healthy, keeping it all bottled up like that.

But I didn't want to talk about it. I was free now. I was someone else – a whole new person with a new identity. Why would I want to go back to the place I'd risked my life to escape?

I agreed to go to the doctor though, when the pain became so unbearable I couldn't sit for more than five minutes at work. It enraged me – the fact the pain was somehow getting worse years after the damage had been done.

The doctor must have been troubled by my mind as well as my back, as she prescribed various other medications and insisted that even if I wouldn't accept counselling sessions, she wanted me to return every month so she could check in with me. I've become a pro at saying just the right words to make her believe I don't need further intervention, but do need to leave with a bag full of pills to smooth my frayed edges.

I think of the pills now, nestled in their packets. If I took more, would they dull the panic fluttering inside my skull, insisting the rose was more than a mistake?

"What if it's a message?" I blurt, unable to keep the fear contained any longer.

Emily's face is thoughtful, and she asks slowly, "A message from someone in your past?"

I nod.

Emily doesn't respond for a moment and I can tell she's humouring me – letting me be heard, instead of shutting my fears down without considering them first. "Do you think it's more likely that the venue puts one on every

breakfast platter for their brides as a special touch? I emailed the events manager to ask them not to feature roses at any point during the day, but, well – they run a lot of weddings here. They probably just forgot."

She gives an understanding shrug, but I'm sure she'll be giving the events manager an earful for the cock-up before the day is over.

But that's all it is. A rose for every bride. A symbol of love, nothing more.

My racing heart finally accepts that I'm not in danger, and as the fear retreats a notch, mortification rushes in to take its place.

"Oh god," I mumble into my hands as I bow my head and cover my face. "I'm so embarrassed."

"Hey," Emily says, her hands tightening on my knees. "You have absolutely nothing to be embarrassed about. Whatever the rose means to you is clearly not a little thing, and one day maybe you'll be ready to tell me more about it. But please, *please*, don't feel bad about your reaction to it."

I peek from behind my hands and see her staring at me with fierce intensity. I'm filled with the certainty that if I was right about the rose, and it really had been a sick message from my past, Emily would defend me with her dying breath.

I place my hands on top of hers, and whisper, "Thank you."

"I'm here for you, no matter what, you know that, right?" she replies, her eye contact unwavering.

I nod, yet again wondering what I did to deserve such a good friend.

"How about you take a few minutes, have a shower? Then we can start again?"

"Yes," I say, buoyed by the prospect of hot water stinging my skin. God, I hope I haven't completely messed the morning up – despite Emily's calm exterior, she must be worried about getting us all ready in time.

She stands and winces as the blood rushes back into her legs. I bite back another apology she'll only tell me off for making.

"Have you had your medicine?" she asks.

I'd been embarrassed about the pills at first and tried to keep them hidden. But Emily had insisted there was no shame – we all needed a little help sometimes.

"No," I say, the lie slipping easily over my tongue. "No, not yet."

“I’ll get them for you,” she says, and returns with four pills of various sizes.

I smile gratefully as she tips them into my hand.

“I’ll get rid of the rose,” she says. “And I’ll make sure the hotel don’t sprinkle petals on the bed for tonight.”

She grins, and I manage to laugh, despite my horror at the thought of returning to the room to find rose petals scattered over the white sheets like splashes of blood. She pauses as she goes to step out of the bathroom door, and points at my hand. “Don’t forget to take those.”

I nod and dutifully swallow the handful of pills in one.

*OceanofPDF.com*

## CHAPTER 12

# The Groom

4 June

**1.30 p.m.**

God, I look sharp. Top hat and tails – I went for the whole lot. When else could you do it, if not on your wedding day? Sure, the lads had a laugh when I appeared dressed to the nines, but I know I look the bollocks.

The photographer has been here most of the morning. I don't know why he hasn't spent more time in the bridal suite, but should probably be glad he's been here, where I can keep an eye on him and make sure he isn't off running his mouth.

"Half an hour to go, boys!" he yells, like he's one of us.

Half an hour? Nerves suddenly swoop in and make the room feel too hot, too small with all these bodies filling it up. I grab another beer from Lee's cool box.

It's not the stress of the day that's making me nervous. I don't care about standing up in front of people and repeating a few lines. I've never minded being the centre of attention – I'm not blind to the fact that I'm the one the lads gravitate towards, the one they look up to, the one they respect.

No, it's not the wedding that worries me. It's what comes after – the marriage.

Our relationship is comfortable. It's easy – I don't have to do much to keep her happy. There's nothing wrong with it. But … I'm not sure if there's anything *right* with it either.

I can't really remember proposing. I was drunk, and fed up of the constant *When are you going to tie the knot?* comments from her mates. So I popped the question, in the *pub*, for god's sake. She had to remind me that we were engaged when I woke up with a raging hangover the next morning.

I don’t know why the enormity of what we’re about to do has suddenly hit me, now of all times. This is legal. It’s *binding*.

J has clocked the sweat on my upper lip and raises his eyebrows. As always, he seems to know what I’m thinking before I’ve even registered it myself. I know what he’d say if we weren’t in a room full of people – you don’t have to do this, you could fuck off out of here right now.

I swig from my bottle and swallow a burp.

“You’ll have to get that lasered off once you’re married, mate!” Lee crows, gesturing at the tattoo on my wrist, which has reared its ugly head from beneath my cuff. “You won’t be one of the crew once you’re a kept man!”

I’m saved from having to respond to the jeers that follow his statement by a reedy, female voice. “The groom, please?” Someone has opened the door and there’s a woman peering around it, narrow eyes scanning the room.

“Here he is!” Lee shouts and shoves me forward to the cheers of the others. All except J, I notice, who is still watching me silently.

I try to figure out who this woman is, and for a stupid moment I wonder if the boys have organized a striptease for me, before realizing that it would be a bit much just before the ceremony. Plus, she’s fucking ancient.

I stumble forward, slightly unsteady on my feet. Nothing to do with the beers though – it’s the new shoes that are already pinching my toes like mad.

“We need to run through a few questions before the ceremony,” she says, beckoning me out of the room with a jerk of her head.

“Yeah, like whether it’s too late to call it off!” one of the lads shouts from behind.

I try to return their laughter as I close the door behind me, but my smile feels forced in front of the thought now churning around my head.

*Is* it too late?

# Transcript of interview

5 June

**In attendance – Inspector Chandra (IC), Samantha Higgins, bridesmaid (SH)**

IC – Did Louise say why she was so upset by the breakfast tray?
SH – No. At first, I thought it was because I tried to eat her favourite pastry. [laughter] But no, that's not like Louise – she's the kind of person who'd do anything for anyone, you know?
IC – So she got upset, but didn't want to talk about it with her bridesmaids?
SH – She got so upset that she threw up. And she'd only talk to Emily.
IC – Her maid of honour?
SH – Yeah. Emily is the only person Louise will talk to about stuff. I never really understood how they met, but I know Louise felt totally indebted to her.
IC – How so?
SH – Well, it was Emily who introduced Louise to Daniel. She seemed to know they'd be perfect together. But there was more to it than that – I think it's something to do with whatever happened in Louise's life before she moved here.
IC – And do you know anything about Louise's history?
SH – No, nothing. Only that …
IC – Go on?
SH – Well, whatever she'd been through had left her popping all sorts of prescription drugs.
IC – Oh yes?
SH – Shit, I don't know if that's relevant or not. It's not like she was out of control, or anything. Just that, she seemed … I don't know. Kind of, um, like, she needed them?
IC – Like she was addicted to them?
SH – Well, yeah, I suppose. But look, I don't see how that's relevant to anything.
IC – Thank you, Sammi. Let's move on—

SH – It’s not, is it? Relevant I mean?
IC – Let’s circle back to Louise’s relationship with her maid of honour, Emily. You mentioned Louise feeling indebted to Emily – what exactly made you think that?
SH – She just acted like Emily was some kind of … I don’t know, maybe that’s not fair.
IC – Go on.
SH – [pause] Like she was some kind of hero.

*OceanofPDF.com*

## CHAPTER 13

# The Bride

4 June

**1.50 p.m.**

"You're ready."

This time, I don't open my eyes. Emily has redone my makeup after I washed the last attempt away in the shower. She deftly twisted and pinned my hair into the informal updo we'd practised.

"Do you mind turning the mirror away?" I ask, trying to find the words to explain. "I don't want to see it yet … I want to wait, if that's OK?"

I can hear the momentary hesitation in Emily's voice before she says, "OK."

Is she worried I'm about to freak out again, like I did over a single, innocent rose? I reach out, eyes still closed, and find her hand. I squeeze. "I'm OK," I murmur. "I just … I want to see it all at once this time – with the dress."

She squeezes back and I can picture her tender smile. I'm finally acting how a proper bride should – full of anticipation and excited to create those special moments some women dream of their entire lives.

And I'm not even faking it. I *am* excited. It was almost as if I needed the surge of adrenaline and fear to be expelled from my body before I could relax into the day and enjoy it for what it's supposed to be – a celebration of my and Daniel's love.

The scraping sound of the mirror being rotated away from me across the table has stopped, and I carefully open my eyes, the weight of the false lashes requiring more effort than usual.

Nina and Sammi have got changed while I was having my makeup done. In matching floaty dresses of dusky pink, they look stunning. The

bridesmaids' dresses were one of the few things I'd insisted on choosing and Shirley had begrudgingly agreed, though she had tried to force hideous ruffled pieces on me more than once.

The dress has softened Nina's usually severe angles, though when she grins she looks anything but demure. Sammi looks angelic and serene, like a Grecian goddess. I can't wait to see how Emily looks, when she finally gets a second to get changed. She's been running around sorting us, well, me, out all morning. Thank god she did her own hair and makeup before coming up to the bridal suite.

Someone knocks at the door, and Nina rushes to open it. She wobbles slightly, and I smile – hopefully the girls have had enough prosecco to make their morning somewhat enjoyable, even if the backing track was me sobbing in the shower.

A shrewd-looking woman stands outside the bridal suite with a folder clasped against her chest like she's expecting to shield bullets with it. Her beady eyes scan around the room in a way that reminds me of Shirley, and I try not to shudder.

Her gaze settles on me, and she flinches. Maybe I should have checked my reflection after all.

"I'm the registrar," she announces. "You're the bride?"

"Um, yes," I reply.

Her barely visible eyebrows shoot up and disappear beneath her fringe. "It's …" she shifts her folder and tugs the sleeve of her trouser suit away from her watch. "It's one-fifty p.m."

"Yes." I nod, still not understanding the panic in her eyes.

"We still need to conduct the interview, and you're not even dressed!"

I blink stupidly at her. Interview? What interview? I think back to the tedious morning Daniel and I had spent in the registry office in our local town, submitting our notice of marriage. We'd had to answer question after question about each other, and I'd been terrified of getting them wrong, but more terrified that Daniel would realize he knew nothing about me and call the whole thing off.

The questions had been straightforward though, and were more focused on our families than our relationship. Daniel had held my hand to stop it from shaking when I confirmed the names of my parents.

"It won't take me a minute," I splutter at the registrar, reeling at the prospect of more questions, more reminders of people I really don't want to

think about today.

I hurry towards the corner of the room, anxiety gnawing at my stomach. The dress is hanging off the wardrobe door, still in its cover. Apparently, Mick the photographer had returned while I was in the shower, keen to take the obligatory shots of the dress before I was in it, my shoes, me gazing dreamily out of the window as Emily fixed my hair.

Emily assured me that he had been easy to get rid of once he'd realized the strange wailing coming from the bathroom was me. She confirmed that he gave her the same icky feeling I'd got from him and his roaming eyes, and I think the entire bridal party was relieved to see the back of him. I can live without photos of us getting ready – I'll just have to make sure there are some of the four of us together later on.

I reach up to unzip the dress bag, first checking my hands are clean – a makeup stain on the dress before I even put it on wouldn't be ideal. The zip glides downwards smoothly, despite my trembling fingers.

And there it is. The only other thing that was 100 per cent my decision, with the input of my bridesmaids, of course.

White enough to appease Shirley, but bohemian and elegant without being fussy. A simple embroidered bodice and a flowing train.

It only takes a moment for Emily to help me into it, and I try to ignore the registrar tapping her shoe on the carpet as I dress.

"You look perfect," Emily says as she stands back to take in the whole picture. I glance at Nina and Sammi, who nod their agreement, both of them blinking tears back so furiously that it's a wonder I can't feel a breeze from their lashes.

"Are you ready to look?" Emily asks.

The registrar audibly tuts and glances at her watch, and Emily's jaw tightens in a familiar way that tells me she's struggling to contain her irritation. I appreciate her not popping off at the registrar, who could be the difference between a lovely, romantic ceremony, and a seriously frosty one.

I turn towards the full-length mirror. I'm so surprised by the feeling that hits me that I nearly burst into tears and ruin Emily's hard work, yet again. I never thought I'd be moved by the sight of myself in a dress – finding the right one had been stressful rather than emotional. I hated the way I looked in all of them, the wrinkles of skin by my armpits, the moles on my arms, the curve of my lower stomach. The endless flaws that I'd been taught to loathe.

But seeing myself now does something – it makes me think of what Daniel will see when he looks at me. And, I think … I think picturing myself through his eyes makes me like myself for the first time in—

Well, ever.

"Right, are we ready?" the registrar barks, unable to hold back any longer.

But even her impatience can't ruin this moment, and I respond to her glare with a smile. "Ready."

"Come with me," she says, turning on her low heel.

I hesitate. Where is she taking me?

"We have to be alone for the interview," she explains when she realizes I'm not following. "For legal reasons."

"Right," I say, the brief feeling of wellness evaporating.

I avoid the eye contact of everyone in the room as I pop an assortment of pills out of their packets, swallow them dry, grab my bouquet, and hurry out of the room after the registrar.

It's probably for the best that we don't do this in front of the girls. Emily knows that I was Hannah, not Louise, when we met. She was the one who helped me change my name once I'd made it clear I could never go home again. And there are certain things I had to share with Daniel in the run-up to the wedding – my parents' names for instance – that I would prefer not to tell Nina and Sammi. It would raise too many questions.

Proving I was right to be concerned, the registrar goes straight into the sensitive information the second the door closes behind us. "Full name Louise Jones, changed by deed poll?"

I swallow and confirm my details as she reads them from a form.

"Father – Roy Goodfellow, retired police officer?"

"Yes." This is the information I gave them at the notice of marriage interview, I realize. Are we just going to go over the same things again? I'd rather not have the last conversation before entering the next chapter of my life be focused on one I had literally changed my identity to escape.

"And mother – Leslie Goodfellow, teacher?"

I'm powerless to the shudder that runs up my spine at the mention of her name. The image of my mother bursts into my mind so violently that I feel like she's here, lurking in the corner, willing me not to *show her up*. She was so concerned with keeping up appearances – her greatest fear, apart from guests discussing the cleanliness of her house behind her back, was

being the subject of gossip, although she willingly took part in it when it was focused on someone else.

So when I started behaving in a way that invited speculation, she desperately tried to convince me to be better, to stop being such a recluse, to put a little makeup on, to stop acting in such a strange, detached way.

She had never been interested in the reasons behind why I had become a shell of my former self, only that I got over it, pronto.

"Is that correct?" the registrar presses.

I blink at her. I've forgotten the question.

"Is your mother a teacher?" she repeats, not even trying to keep the impatience out of her voice.

"Yes," I say, although I have no idea if she will have retired by now. She certainly seemed like she'd keep going for a while longer when I last saw her, four years ago. I can't imagine my mother filling her days with golf and afternoons at the pub, like my father did once he reached the early retirement age of police officers.

My fingers tighten around the bouquet as nausea swamps my stomach. The thought of my dad at the pub, laughing and drinking while—

"Right, if you could just sign here and confirm all the details are correct, then we can get on with it."

I take the pen, grateful for the distraction, but irritated by this formality. I've been doing so well. I'd stopped thinking about the past and was focusing on a future with Daniel. And now this woman and her clipboard have created a sour taste in my mouth that I am scared I won't be rid of before the ceremony.

"We're already late," she mutters, the stress coming off in waves. I can see the time on her watch – 14.01. Hardly catastrophic. "Let's get a move on."

She steps briskly around me and opens the door to the bridal suite, shouting into the room, "Come on, ladies!"

Emily hastily slips her feet into her shoes, and I snigger as Nina downs the rest of her prosecco like a pelican swallowing a fish, before jogging out of the room to join us in the corridor.

They're nervous too, I realize, as my bridesmaids clutch their bouquets of lilies in front of them like pink shields from the gazes of the guests. Strangely, the thought calms me – they're here because of me … *for* me. Maybe I can be the one who makes this moment special for all of us.

I reach for their hands, ignoring the poisonous glares of the registrar. We stand in a circle of sisterhood, and I hope they can see how much they mean to me.

“Thank you,” I breathe. “Let’s do this.”

*OceanofPDF.com*

## CHAPTER 14

# The Groom

4 June

**1.50 p.m.**

The nerves haven't left. They've got worse, in fact. Cold feet giving me fucking frostbite.

We're downstairs in the entrance hall now, mingling with the guests, being forced to listen to the same shit from different people over and over again:

"I bet you're excited."

"I bet you can't wait to see her."

"I bet you're looking forward to a drink."

I don't tell them I'm already six beers down.

I'm sweating as I squeeze between guests, wanting to find my groomsmen and escape the endless small talk. It's twenty-six degrees outside – far too hot for a full suit. Everyone is speaking in hushed voices, as though we're in a church that cares about the sanctity of marriage and not a manor-turned-hotel that only cares about taking our cash.

"Hello, darling."

It's my mum. The sight of her turns my agitation into full-blown dread. I've always been able to put on a front, plaster a smile on my face, and convince people that everything's just bloody brilliant. I've been doing it for the majority of my relationship with my soon-to-be-wife.

But not my mum. We've always been close – she practically raised me alone. She's always been there for me, always known when I'm hurting … when I'm keeping something from her. I can't lie to my mum, and if she asks me, Christ, if she even looks at me in that patient, knowing way of hers…

“Hi, Mum,” I say. My voice sounds like it’s been strangled out of me.

She’s wearing a proper mother-of-the-groom outfit – a peach dress suit that is genuinely the most hideous thing I’ve ever seen.

She must see it in my face, just as J did – that thing I’m feeling that I can’t even give a name to myself yet, because her face softens with worry, and she says, “Are you sure about this?”

I close my eyes. *For god’s sake.*

I’m about to get married, literally, in the next few minutes I’ll be *getting married*.

I laugh, but nothing’s funny. Nothing’s funny at all. “Bit bloody late for that, Mum.”

She rubs my arm sympathetically, unable to hide the flicker of disapproval as my shirt tugs upwards and she eyes my tattoo. “It’s never too late, darling.”

*Isn’t it?* The suggestion that I don’t have to go through with this, that I can leave right now without the judgement of both J and my mum – two of the most important people in my life – makes my legs twitch. I look at the huge closed doors behind me. They lead outside, away from this wedding, away from this marriage.

I twist my bracelet around my wrist and turn away from the whispering guests. Jesus, why is she only just saying this to me now? Why not months ago, no, *years* ago?

“Ladies and gentlemen,” a voice booms, and I turn my attention away from the doors, which are looking more tempting by the second. J is standing in the entrance to the ceremony room with his arms spread wide, loving his moment in the spotlight. “It’s time to take your seats.”

# Transcript of interview

5 June

**In attendance – Inspector Chandra (IC), Femi Brown, server (FB)**

IC – Other than the reaction to the breakfast tray, what exactly led you to believe there was something wrong with the bride?
FB – I dunno … she was … kind of jittery, you know?
IC – Is that not normal – wedding-day jitters?
FB – Oh yeah, for sure. You see it all the time – usually from the groom though to be honest. But this time, it was the bride who looked like she was going to leg it.
IC – What made you think that?
FB – She was just all over the place. She was late to the ceremony, which is a big no-no. Especially on days where there's multiple weddings happening at once – they have to be perfectly on time, otherwise there's a risk of the guests crossing paths and even guests getting herded into a different ceremony room and sitting through the wrong wedding.
IC – Is it that strange – a bride being a bit late?
FB – Well, I guess not. But it wasn't just that. It was the way she was acting, too. During the ceremony, I have to wait outside the door to close it once the bridal party are all in. So I get to listen in to what they're saying when they're waiting for their cue. Usually it's boring rubbish about how fast they should walk to make sure the bride arrives at the front at the right part of the song.
IC – But this time?
FB – I dunno … It wasn't so much what was said. It was more the way she was.
IC – Which was how?
FB – I feel bad saying this, but she was going from all woozy and stoned looking to like she'd been electrocuted, and then back again – all within a few seconds. It was like, well, like she was off her tits on something stronger than prosecco.

IC – Drugs?

FB – I dunno – I'm not exactly an expert. But, you know, it's not every wedding where the staff take bets on whether the bride is going to do a runner before the night is over.

*OceanofPDF.com*

## CHAPTER 15

# The Bride

4 June

**2.05 p.m.**

"The guests are seated."

"Oh god," I say, widening my eyes at the registrar. "Really?"

"Well, yes," she replies, and I can see a muscle in her jaw tensing. "Technically, the ceremony should have started five minutes ago."

Emily steps neatly in front of the registrar, and I'm staring at a face full of excitement, rather than sour disapproval. "This is it. You ready?"

I swallow, and wish I felt excited myself, instead of sick.

But this is normal, I assure myself, just as my bridesmaids have insisted all morning. It's normal to feel like this on your wedding day. It isn't a sign of impending doom.

"I think so," I breathe, glad my stomach is empty from my earlier vomiting session – at least the threat of throwing up again won't have to be something to contend with as I walk down the aisle.

"I'll be waiting at the front," the registrar explains. "I assume you've rehearsed your walk?"

I stare at her blankly.

Emily swoops in to save me, yet again. "Yep – we're all good. Thanks!"

The registrar sniffs, and her eyes flit to the empty space beside me. A space that should be filled by my father, walking me down the aisle.

I'm tempted to tell her that the bastard has already given me away once, and I'll be damned if I let him do it again.

"Well, you may begin your procession once the appropriate point in your entry song is reached." She turns smartly on her heel and enters the

ceremony room, leaving the doors open behind her. I catch a glimpse of the back of a few heads before I duck back out of sight.

"Procession?" I hiss to the bridesmaids. "Rehearsed our walk – what is she talking about?"

"Don't panic," Emily insists, though she's failing to hide her own surprise.

How had none of us thought of this? I'd been so focused on the ceremony itself that I'd barely considered getting down the aisle, with the exception of making sure I didn't trip over my train and land flat on my face.

"You have a song – Green Day, right?"

I nod, smiling at the memory of Daniel playing me all his favourite songs, his eyes brightening with joy whenever he found one I liked.

"Right, so all we need to do is walk down the aisle in whatever order you choose. And slowly – we have to go slow and hold the flowers down so they can see the dresses. Oh, and you come a little later than us, so we're not all bunched up in a group."

Thank god Emily has been to enough weddings as part of her job to know how this is supposed to work. It doesn't sound too complicated – we only have to walk about twenty metres; how wrong can it go? The registrar gave me a dose of anxiety for no reason at all.

"But …" Sammi starts, then twists her mouth and bites her bottom lip. Her eyes flit between me and Emily.

"What is it?" I press.

She looks at Emily again, as though seeking approval for potentially rocking the boat. "It's just … do you mind? Walking alone, I mean?"

I blink, and the song starts.

'Time of Your Life' by Green Day plays, and my racing heart is soothed by the elegant swooping of the violins. I remember the day Daniel played it for me on his acoustic guitar, his voice so gentle that it healed my bruised heart, just a little.

"Oh god, we have to go." Nina gasps and takes a lurching step forward.

Emily's hand darts out to stop her, and Nina stares at her in surprise.

"They can wait," Emily says simply. She turns her focus back to me. "How do you feel about it?"

For a moment, I think she's asking me how I feel about the wedding – whether I want to go through with it. Then I realize she's talking about my

father, or rather, my lack of father.

I attempt a flippant shrug, but my stomach is clenching unpleasantly. I don't want to think about him. But how can I not? Instead of thinking about Daniel as I walk towards him, I'll be thinking about my dad. I'll be imagining my hand linking through his huge arm. I'll be remembering the pained expression on his face the last time I saw him.

And then the whole day will be sullied by the thought of my absent father.

"Well, there's not much I can do about it now, is there?" I shrug again. The movement feels jerky and awkward. "He's not here."

"Well …" Emily says softly, and I widen my eyes.

She hasn't … she *wouldn't*. She may not know the details, but she knows I wasn't lying face down on a pavement with no shoes on for no reason. She knows I wasn't running from nothing. She must know that I haven't made contact with either of my parents for the last four years for a damn good reason.

She wouldn't track my father down and invite him to my wedding … *would she?*

I'm filled with the certainty that he's standing behind me, his huge, hulking form blocking out the light. My heart doubles in speed as all my senses come to life, insisting danger is here. I fight it, forcing myself to tap into the diazepam wooziness and making my eyelids droop so I'm not staring at my best friend like a startled deer.

*Breathe. Feel nothing.*

The song has nearly reached the chorus.

Emily is still staring at me. "I just mean, that if you want …" She pauses, uncharacteristically unsure of herself. "If you want, I could walk you down the aisle?"

OceanofPDF.com

## CHAPTER 16

# The Groom

4 June

**2.10 p.m.**

Oh god, they're coming.

Our song is playing, and it hurls me back to the first time we listened to it together. It should make me feel nostalgic, excited, in love … shouldn't it?

But I don't. I don't feel any of those things.

The attention of the guests flits between me and the door at the back of the room. I suddenly hate every last one of them and the way they stare at my face, as though searching for emotion, greedy for tears.

They might get what they wished for – I can feel the pressure building behind my eyes. *Get it together.* I turn away from the procession that's inching its way closer and catch J's eye. His gaze reflects the panic bubbling within me.

Surely, surely *now* it's too late?

# Transcript of interview

5 June

**In attendance – Inspector Chandra (IC), Femi Brown, server (FB)**

IC – Do you remember every wedding you've worked at?
FB – Not really – I liked looking at the dresses and makeup and stuff at first, but now they all feel the same. Róisín insists on them all following exactly the same structure, so the couple can't really add their own flair to the day, you know?
IC – Róisín Murphy, the wedding planner?
FB – Chief Events Coordinator. Sorry – that's what she likes to be called. Are you speaking to her too?
IC – We will be, yes. Was there anything about yesterday's wedding that felt different?
FB – No, I don't think so. Not at first, anyway.
IC – Other than the bride, did you notice any of the other guests behaving oddly?
FB – I dunno, the groom seemed OK. He was dead nice, actually – you notice the nice ones. He was friendly and actually acknowledged the staff – it's amazing how invisible you become the second you put a white shirt and black trousers on. [long pause] There was the best man …
IC – Yes?
FB – I mean, this isn't, like, evidence or anything. But he didn't seem too keen on the bride.
IC – How so?
FB – Well, when I closed the doors behind the bridal procession, he caught my attention, and—
IC – Yes?
FB – He looked at her like he wanted her dead.

*OceanofPDF.com*

## CHAPTER 17

# The Bride

4 June

**2.10 p.m.**

Nina goes first. Sammi makes to set off straight away after her, but Emily reaches out to tug her back.

"Wait," she mouths. "Don't rush."

Sammi looks alarmed by the widening gap between her and Nina, who has now disappeared into the ceremony room. And I share her concern – if we don't hurry, the song will have finished by the time I make my entrance.

The registrar must be losing her mind.

"OK," Emily finally whispers, giving Sammi the nod. "But slowly!"

Sammi follows Nina, her body rigid with the effort of resisting sprinting up the aisle after her best friend.

It's quiet in the hallway now that it's just Emily and me. After the frenzy of getting ready, and the lengthy sobbing break in the middle of it, the moment of peace is welcome. I'm almost tempted to stay here, to plant my feet and insist that I've done enough and I can't go any further.

Emily holds her arm open for me to link through. Her skin is soft and comforting.

I take a breath and remember why I'm here. It's not about the guests, the registrar's timetable, or the mother-in-law's scrutiny. And it sure as hell isn't about my past. It's about me and Daniel, and our future together.

We start walking.

Oh god, we really are nearly out of song – I recognise the crescendo of the final chorus and try not to think about the embarrassment of it stopping before I've even entered the ceremony room.

Emily must sense my trepidation, as she tightens her elbow to give my arm more support. We step through the open doorway.

The ceremony room we chose was the least ornate of the three options we were given, but is now crammed full of garish, bright pink flowers. There's the sound of shuffling and shifting fabric as a hundred people turn in their seats to look. I'm sure I hear an intake of breath – are they surprised to see me being walked down the aisle by my maid of honour, or surprised I showed up at all?

I spot a few friendly faces – some colleagues from the estate agents, a couple of women from my book group. But it's mainly Daniel's friends and family that make up the guestlist. People I barely know, though, I suppose that could be said of everyone in my life.

I focus on placing one foot in front of the other. All I need to do is walk down a red carpet, stop at the end, repeat some words, and then I can relax.

But it's difficult with my knees trembling as though I'm walking to my death, not the start of the rest of my life. My eyes scan the guests, and the movement makes my head swim. I feel light-headed, and I think of all the pills I've taken today. It's not uncommon for me to take more than my prescribed dose, to top myself up when things start getting a bit too much. But this morning, I'm pretty sure I took a *lot* more.

I threw them up though, I try to reassure myself. But did I take more afterwards? Probably. Definitely. Yes, even if I can't specifically remember it, I absolutely would have taken more, terrified of having lost them down the sink. And I haven't eaten – that can't be helping. What if I've taken more than I can handle? What if I faint at the altar? What if I don't even make it to the altar?

The aisle feels ridiculously long, and I can feel Emily resisting my attempts to speed up. I still can't see Daniel through the bodies – he must be standing slightly to the side, shielded by his groomsmen.

John is staring, his trademark lip curl in place as his eyes travel the length of my body. What goes through his mind when he looks at me? What have I done to deserve his disdain? My chin wobbles, and for a moment, I swear his expression softens into something closer to, what – compassion? Regret? Whatever it is, it changes his face completely, making him look young and open and like someone I could be friends with, if he'd just—

But no, his eyes have narrowed again, his lips thinning as he holds himself ramrod straight, as though braced for my arrival.

I don’t want to walk towards John and his hostility. I want Daniel. Isn’t he supposed to step out and turn around, so he can watch me walking towards him?

Is he even there?

The thought makes me stumble, but Emily holds me firmly. “Nearly there,” she breathes, so softly I wonder if she said it out loud, or if she’s somehow whispering to my soul.

And then I see him. He rotates from where he had been stood at the front and faces me. Emotion judders in my chest as I take him in. He looks wonderful, in a simple navy suit with a lily peeking through his breast pocket – I’ve never seen him look so smart. But nervous too – I’m sure I can see him shaking from here.

I smile – he’s probably been just as jittery as I have all morning.

We’re in this together, feeling the same way. All the anxiety, the doubts, the fear that this day was some kind of sick trick and wouldn’t ever be allowed to go ahead – it all melts away. Because Daniel is here, waiting for me. Waiting for me to be his wife.

As I relax, I feel the tension flow out of Emily. She holds me a little more loosely – perhaps no longer worried I might fall. Or run.

We’re nearly at the front, and I realize Daniel isn’t just trembling – he’s crying. Proper, ugly, gulping tears that are a good impression of my earlier shower scene. I want to run to him, but there are only a few more steps to go, so I force myself to be patient.

The idea that he loves me enough to cry with happiness fills my heart with joy, and I find myself smiling so widely that my cheeks ache.

I spot Shirley as I approach. She’s sat next to Daniel’s ever-silent father, who has barely looked up from his newspaper in the three years I’ve known him. Neither of them look remotely moved by Daniel’s open display of emotion. In fact, Shirley looks like someone just did a turd in her lace-rimmed hat. I stifle a smirk, surprised that her reaction to my arrival doesn’t trigger the wave of self-consciousness any interaction with her usually brings. But I don’t care what she thinks of me, not today. Because Daniel is happy to see me – that much is evident by the shaky smile beneath his wet cheeks.

We reach the front, and just in time – the song has finished. Emily kisses me on the cheek, and whispers in my ear, “You deserve this.”

I smile at her, my own tears threatening to spill over now. She takes my bouquet before sitting next to Nina and Sammi, who are shedding their own tears as they watch us. And then it's just me and Daniel. And one hundred guests, plus a sour-faced registrar. But I don't see them, I just see him.

He's still shaking, and I want to reach out to grasp his hand. But I realize I don't know the etiquette – there was no rehearsal, like you see them do in American films. Are we allowed to touch, before we're married?

I shake the ridiculous thought from my head. We've lived together for three years – of course we can touch each other. His hands are slick with sweat, but his shaking stills a little once my fingers curl around his.

The ceremony is quick and unromantic, at odds with his heartfelt proposal. But I don't mind. I'm not sure our registrar has it in her to make it heartfelt and moving, even if I were the perfect, punctual bride. We decided not to have readings – Daniel said he didn't want to draw things out, but I suspect it was to save me the awkwardness of having to ask someone from my very limited pool of guests.

And before I know it, a ring has been slid onto my finger, and we're bending over the forms to sign our names.

The guests clap and cheer, and I try not to wonder how many of them are genuinely happy for us. I resist the urge to check if Shirley and John are joining in.

My paranoia is extinguished by Daniel's lips on mine, soft, gentle, patient. His kisses still surprise me, even after three years of knowing them.

I blush as the clapping intensifies, feeling exposed in front of all these people. But I let the air out of my chest and close my eyes, focusing on my husband.

My *husband*. We did it. We *did it*, and everything is going to be OK. No more running, no more fear. Just us, together, as it should be.

*OceanofPDF.com*

## CHAPTER 18

# The Groom

4 June

**2.30 p.m.**

That's it then. It's official.

Our guests are clapping, cheering … lying. How many of them know what I've done? Their secrecy felt like support once, like mates who have my back, who would be on my side no matter what.

But now it makes me feel sick. Now that I'm staring into the face of my wife – the woman I've lied to, am still lying to, and let's face it, will continue to lie to.

I need another drink.

We walk down the aisle and I plaster a smile to my face, even when I nearly trip over her huge, bejewelled dress. It must look genuine, as the guests return it, still clapping, still cheering.

I think back to all the chances, all the moments I've had today where I could have put a stop to this, could have told the truth.

But what even is the truth? How can I admit it, when I don't even understand my own feelings?

"Wait!"

My blood turns to ice. It looks like someone has decided to take matters into their own hands. Why didn't they do it before it was too late, when the registrar asked if anyone objected to our union? Is my infidelity going to be exposed right here, in front of everyone? But why now? And who—?

The photographer. He's appeared out of nowhere, blocking the aisle and our exit. I consider running forward and knocking him out before he can run his mouth.

“Give her a kiss then!” he hollers, and the penny drops. He’s not about to reveal what he caught me doing that morning. He’s just here for a photo. But I can see the twinkle in his eye, the way he licks his lips as though he’s savouring my secret and it’s bloody delicious.

I’m still considering punching him.

But then she – *my wife* – tugs expectantly on my arm.

She puckers her lips.

So I kiss her.

“Give it some welly, lad!” the photographer shouts. “I know you’ve got it in you!”

I tense and open my eyes, wondering if she’s questioning what his words mean. But she’s practically delirious with happiness and wraps her hand around the back of my neck.

So I kiss her harder, pushing her backwards and catching her so she’s leant over, nearly touching the floor.

A cheer erupts from the guests, and I pray this photo isn’t selected to be on our wall at home. Because I know that whenever I look at it, all I’ll see is the shame running through me as I pretend to love my wife.

# Transcript of interview

5 June

**In attendance – Inspector Chandra (IC), Samantha Higgins, bridesmaid (SH)**

IC – Do you know what the pills Louise takes are?
SH – Painkillers, for her back.
IC – She has a bad back?
SH – Yeah, really bad. I don't know why, exactly. Only that I see her proper grimace in pain sometimes. She never makes a sound though – always keeps the pain in, keeps it secret.
IC – And those are the pills she seemed dependent on?
SH – Well, yeah, but there's some kind of psychology-psychologi— Something to help her head, too. I don't know what to call them.
IC – Anti-depressants?
SH – I don't know what they are. She seems kind of woozy after taking them though – like they must have an instant effect on her. But she needs them – they take the edge off.
IC – Did she seem more on edge than usual yesterday?
SH – Well, yeah, but you know – she was getting married.
IC – I understand. And what was the general mood like throughout the day?
SH – Mood? I don't—
IC – Was it a happy day? Was there any tension, that you could pick up on?
SH – [pause] I don't know, it's hard to say – I was so focused on Louise and keeping her calm, and the schedule was so tight – it felt like there was barely a second to breathe. But I think it was happy? Louise was happy, once she got past the upset with the breakfast tray. She was excited to be getting her fresh start, to be marrying the man she loves.
IC – It's OK, Sammi, take your time. Would you like a tissue?
SH – [muffled crying] Thank you. I'm sorry, it's just so horrible. I can't believe how the day ended – it was supposed to be perfect.

OceanofPDF.com

## CHAPTER 19

# The Bride

4 June

**2.35 p.m.**

I hate having my photo taken. Even after the confidence Emily and her makeup tuition has given me, I will never be able to look at a picture of myself and see past the cutting, hurtful words that were said to me over and over again when I was just a teenager.

But I could hardly insist on a no-photo rule at a wedding, especially one so heavily governed by Daniel's mother. And, surprisingly, I find I don't actually mind the endless clicking from the photographer's camera.

I don't think there's much I *would* object to in this moment of happiness. My face aches with an unfamiliar smile that I can't subdue, even if I wanted to. I can see my joy reflected in Daniel's face as he holds my hand and leads me out of the ceremony room.

I try not to look at Mick, the man behind the camera. The sight of him still stirs a faint ripple of repulsion in my stomach, which feels somewhat unreasonable – he hasn't actually done anything to deserve my animosity. I concentrate on Daniel instead, and the rest of it – the noise, the guests, the memories – they all melt away.

"You head into that room," Mick tells us, gesturing at a door just off the entrance hall. "I'll get the guests organized for a confetti shot."

Mick trots away, a dribble of sweat running down the back of his bald head. I'd been hoping that things would be more relaxed, now the ceremony is over, but Mick's urgency suggests we're still on a tight schedule. We do as we're told and duck into a cosy room lined with dark panels and bookshelves.

Daniel still hasn't let go of my hand.

“We did it,” he says, smiling at me with what feels like a mixture of pride and relief.

Did he wonder if I’d make it down the aisle? I squeeze his hands and hope the stress of an unpredictable bride hadn’t been too taxing on him. I won’t tell him about the rose, not now.

There’s a bottle of champagne in an ice bucket and two glasses on a side table. Daniel pours us a glass each, and I wonder if it’s wise for me to drink after the earlier dizziness possibly caused by overdoing my medication. But I feel OK now … I think. Still light-headed, but in a giddy kind of way, rather in a way that serves as a warning that I’m about to pass out. I clink my glass against Daniel’s, take a sip, and widen my eyes as the bubbles tingle on my tongue, somehow smooth despite their fizz. It’s delicious, especially in comparison to the lukewarm prosecco that rushed up my throat and into the sink earlier this morning.

Daniel hasn’t stopped gazing at me, and I blush. “Mrs Green,” he says, unable to contain his grin.

I blink at him. I hadn’t agreed to change my name. In fact, I was almost certain I wouldn’t. I’d been through one name change already, only four years ago. And my new name fit. It was chosen by me, to take forward into my new life.

I’m not sure how I feel about a new name. But, I try to tell myself, it’s not the same as going back … back to being Hannah.

Daniel, astute as ever, notices my discomfort and quickly adds, “Only if you decide to change it! All that matters is we’re husband and wife now, right?”

I try to smile reassuringly, but my head is swimming again, helped along by the champagne. I should tell him about the pills, but I don’t want to worry him. God knows he’s had to deal with enough of my peculiarities over the years – I don’t want to add an accidental overdose on our wedding day to the list.

Daniel looks concerned, and I notice his hands are still trembling. I’m swamped with guilt for the umpteenth time in our relationship – what if he deserves a nice, normal girl? What if—?

He draws closer and plants a gentle kiss on my forehead. “Are you OK?” he asks, and I push the nervousness away, firmly. Daniel cares about me. He chose *me*.

“Yes,” I tell him, truthfully. I rise up on my tiptoes to kiss him, and a rush of desire flushes up my entire body. I press myself into him.

“Woah,” he laughs, grasping my upper arms and holding me back, away from his lips. “Steady – my mother’s out there!”

I smile tightly, wishing he hadn’t inserted her image into this moment.

The door bursts open, and I realize he had a point about not getting too carried away – none of this day is private.

“Oy, oy,” the photographer says, winking at Daniel in a way that makes him squirm. “Keep it in your pants till later, ay? Ready for the big shot?” He winks again, still only addressing Daniel. It makes me feel cheap.

“Yes,” Daniel replies smartly, removing his hands from my arms as though burnt. “Let’s go!”

He marches away from me and I resist the urge to reach for his hand again. I don’t want to be clingy, as much as I long to wrap my arm through his and feel his steady body against mine – I want Daniel to enjoy this day without having to look out for me.

But he must sense something, as he pauses before reaching the door and waits for me. “He’s a bit of a prick, isn’t he?” he murmurs as his hand wraps around mine.

“Just a bit,” I reply, glad we’re on the same wavelength and he – my *husband* – feels it too.

We exit the room and follow the photographer towards the main doors leading outside from the roomy entrance hall.

“Wait there till I give the signal!” Mick shouts over his shoulder as he hurries outside in front of us. He looks ruffled now – no longer the smirking, somewhat slimy man I’d briefly met this morning. His neck glistens with perspiration as he trots away, his camera bumping against his hip.

There’s confetti on the floor already, the breeze making it flutter into the hallway. Perhaps the other couple getting married here today have just had their confetti shot. God, is Mick the photographer for both weddings? No wonder he’s dripping with sweat.

All our guests are there, forming a corridor of chattering colour and ridiculous hats. Shirley’s friends from the golf club have all been invited, at her insistence, and there seem to be about twenty identical women with garish-coloured fascinators tickling the noses of anyone unfortunate enough to be stood near them.

“On the count of three, throw the confetti,” Mick shouts at the guests, before turning to us and saying, “When I say one, you two start walking.”

Daniel and I glance at each other and try to gauge whether we’ve understood his instructions, but we have no time to digest them, as he’s already counting.

We step forwards.

The sun is dazzling after the dark wooden panels of the side room, and I try not to squint as confetti rains down on us. I laugh as Daniel gets the bulk of it showered over his head. He spits paper petals out of his mouth as the guests cheer and clap.

Mick *click click clicks* and then he’s off, dashing around the corner of the building. I guess I was right about him covering more than one event today.

I’m glad he’s gone – I can finally enjoy being here, in the sunshine, with the people I love. I search the crowd, keen to see my bridesmaids and show them that I’m OK, I’m happy now, largely because of their support.

But I don’t see Emily, or Nina, or Sammi. Because my eyes are drawn to the figure of a man, huge and imposing, standing on the outskirts of the group. A man I thought I would never see again.

My father.

*OceanofPDF.com*

## CHAPTER 20

# The Groom

4 June

**2.45 p.m.**

I tug my collar as our guests gather round, keen to chat. There's confetti down my shirt and it's itchy as hell. J lobbed a balled-up handful of it straight into my face – that'll look great in the photos.

I'd never felt more claustrophobic – walking through a tunnel of people, all prepared to throw things at us. Jesus, how did that become a way to celebrate getting married? I'd kept my frankly award-worthy smile spread across my face as we walked – it's got me this far.

I just hope no one puts their hand against my chest, because my pounding heart will surely give me away.

Give *what* away though? I'm still not sure. I still don't understand what it is I'm feeling, so I wouldn't be able to put it into words, even if I did decide to finally admit the truth.

At least I can have another drink now – I'd wanted to stay in that side room and finish the whole bottle of champagne, but of course Mick had to put a stop to that – even now the important bit is done, we're still on the hotel's tight schedule. We'd originally asked for a one p.m. ceremony, but the events manager insisted that all their weddings follow the same timings. Production-line weddings, how romantic.

I nod along to the conversation around me, still pulling at my collar, which feels like it's been getting tighter and tighter throughout the day. A few more beers might calm me down, might make me realize that nothing's changed, not really. We're still the same couple – a piece of paper doesn't change that.

If anything, it means I'm more likely to be forgiven if she ever finds out. She's always hated admin, and I imagine getting divorced is a right faff.

Everyone is circling us, staring, grinning, and the conversations stall. I smile sheepishly back, feeling like an exhibit in a zoo. What do they want? I'm not about to make a bloody speech standing out here in the blazing sun, sweat trickling down my neck and turning the confetti into pulp.

A horde of servers appear – white shirts and black trousers, flutes of champagne balancing precariously on their trays. Not my drink of choice, but at this point, I'll take anything. I unlink our arms and feel relieved to be free from her touch for the first time since we said "I do".

I leave her making small talk with our guests and step towards the closest server – an annoyingly good-looking bloke with an easy smile.

"Escaping the old ball and chain already!" one of the groomsmen shouts over the chattering of the guests, and I force a laugh.

The server holds his tray towards me. "Maybe you should take a couple," he suggests, raising his eyebrows and flashing that smooth smile again.

"Yeah," I say, distractedly. "I s'pose I should get one for the missus."

But the server laughs softly. "Not for her – for you. You look like you need it."

I look at him, searching for hidden meaning beneath his words. But he just smiles, and I grin back, relieved to have found one of the few people here today who doesn't know about my infidelity.

"Nice one, mate," I nod, and reach for another glass.

"No time for that!" the photographer says, appearing like he's just spawned out of the fucking ground. "Photos!"

He takes the glasses out of my hands and puts them back on the tray. Once again, I have to resist the urge to hammer my fist into his face.

"Follow me, young lovebirds," he says, and laughs like it's the funniest thing in the world.

# Transcript of interview

5 June

**In attendance – Inspector Chandra (IC), Róisín Murphy, Chief Events Coordinator (RM)**

IC – Do you do any kind of screening before booking events at Grantham Hall?
RM – Screening?
IC – Background checks of the couple, that kind of thing.
RM – No, inspector, we're a wedding venue, not MI6.
IC – So anyone could book a wedding here?
RM – Anyone with the funds, yes.
IC – And yesterday's wedding – were the clients known to you?
RC – Excuse me?
IC – Did you know the couples, or their families, prior to the wedding?
RC – [pause] Yes. I know the mother of the groom.
IC – How do you know her?
RC – We've been friends for a long time. Through golf.
IC – You play golf?
RC – No. Our husbands do.
IC – Would you say you're close?
RC – Not particularly. I didn't offer her son a discount, if that's what you're implying.
IC – I'm not implying anything, just trying to understand the various connections between people present at yesterday's celebration. And what about your staff?
RM – What about my staff?
IC – Do you run background checks on them?
RM – The staff I require are either trusted professionals, who we have been using at Grantham Hall for years, decades, even—
IC – What sort of trusted professionals are you referring to?
RM – Florists, chefs, photographers—
IC – Ah, yes. The photographer – I'd like to discuss him next.

OceanofPDF.com

## CHAPTER 21

# The Bride

4 June

**3 p.m.**

My father disappears the second I set eyes on him, swallowed by the surging mass of brightly coloured bodies.

What is he doing here? What does he want?

Servers carrying trays of canapés and flutes of champagne appear around us, sashaying through the huddles of guests. I look around urgently, trying to catch sight of my father. But I'm lost in the crowd, dodging drinks and finger food that smells strong enough to turn my stomach.

A few people I barely recognise wish me congratulations, but I swear their smiles are strained and their expressions judgemental. But I can't blame them – I know I'm coming across as rude and peculiar, my eyes never meeting theirs as I scan the crowd.

Then – *there* – I spot the back of my father's head. His bald spot has got bigger. My legs judder as though I've been hamstrung, but Daniel appears at my side and steadies me. "Careful!" He laughs, glancing down at my dress. But my train isn't the culprit, and Daniel has no idea that the burly man standing among the rest of our guests has the ability to ruin this day, to ruin everything.

"Right, follow me for photos."

I turn my head towards the voice, confused how Mick can be back already. His head is now an alarming shade of dark red, and I wonder if all the running back and forth is going to make him pass out. He sets off briskly, striding away from the house and into the grounds without checking if we're coming.

“Let’s get this over and done with,” Daniel suggests, leading me away from the crowd and after Mick.

I stumble forward – this time my train really is the reason for my wobbling legs. Daniel helps me gather up the heavy material so I can carry it in one hand, my bouquet clasped in the other. I twist my neck, searching for another glimpse of my father. How has such a large man managed to disappear?

“You OK?” Daniel asks, stopping us and waiting until he has my attention.

I hesitate. How can I tell him that my estranged father has turned up, uninvited, and I’m having to fight the impulse to sprint away from the hotel without looking back? I squeeze my eyes shut for a brief moment and think of Daniel’s shaking hands and the concern on his face when he looks at me. I know him well enough to be able to see the worry simmering beneath his smiles.

I don’t want to add this new concern to his plate.

“Yes,” I finally say, attempting a smile of my own despite the world swimming around me as I open my eyes. “Yes, sorry. It’s just—”

“A lot,” Daniel finishes, and squeezes my hands. His eyes are full of the understanding expression he’s worn ever since Emily first introduced us. Not for the first time, I wonder how much she told him about my history, or lack of it, before he decided to ask me out. “Don’t worry, it’s just us for a while now.”

“And Mick,” I mutter, glancing across the lawn to where the photographer has stopped, finally realizing we aren’t with him. He checks his watch and flaps his arms indignantly.

“And what would a romantic walk in the woods be without Mick the prick lurking in the shadows?” Daniel replies, and I snort, a rush of tension leaving my body.

I attempt to order my thoughts, to pin them down before they spiral and turn me into a trembling heap on the floor. My father is here. He’s here, and the thought makes me want to throw up the champagne. But … what does his being here actually mean? This is *my* wedding. He has no power here.

I let Daniel lead me forwards again, after Mick. The worry is still heavy in my stomach, but settled now, rather than the churning terror that had begun when I first saw my father.

We make our way across the lawn, Daniel slowing his pace to make sure I don't trip again. My heels are sinking into the soft turf, so I walk awkwardly on my toes. Mick takes a few snaps of us as we approach, and I try not to stare down the lens like I'm posing for a mugshot.

There's a couple in the distance – near an ornamental rose garden. They must be the bride and groom from the other wedding, waiting for Mick to return to them to finish their photoshoot. I allow myself one last look over my shoulder, towards Grantham Hall. The guests are dotted around, glasses in hand, enjoying the sunshine. Peals of laughter ripple across the grounds towards us.

I can't see my father, and for a moment, I wonder if I imagined him – a momentary hallucination triggered by a morning of stress. But I can't convince myself that he hadn't been there. He'd looked different – thinner, greyer, wearing a suit I didn't recognise. If he'd been conjured by my imagination, why wouldn't he have appeared as the same, imposing figure from my childhood?

We reach Mick, who is tapping his foot in the same exasperated way the registrar had. I wonder how many weddings it takes before you inevitably develop the impatient attitude that the staff involved in ours seemed to possess.

"Nice of you to join me," he says with a bark of laughter that doesn't warm his eyes.

I notice Daniel's jaw tighten, and suspect he is as keen for this photoshoot to be wrapped up as I am.

We're in the middle of the perfectly manicured lawn, and Mick instructs us to pose as he steps backwards, finding the right angle to capture the house in the background.

"Jesus Christ, you two, can you pose like you actually like each other?" Mick shouts, appearing from behind his viewfinder.

Daniel's hand tightens around mine in a rare display of annoyance. "I swear to god, this guy—"

"Forget him," I say, the words coming out so forcefully they're almost shouted.

Daniel raises his eyebrows, and I can't blame him – after years of trying to be invisible, I'm not prone to displays of emotion. But the injustice of Mick and my father – two men who weren't invited by us – potentially ruining today has stirred something in me.

I won’t let either of them destroy the moment of pure happiness I’d experienced as we’d walked out of Grantham Hall, husband and wife.

“We *do* love each other,” I say, firmly, holding Daniel’s gaze.

Daniel looks hesitant, perhaps unsettled by my assertiveness. But he eventually relaxes and smiles down at me, then lowers his lips to meet mine.

I sigh as we kiss and let everything else disappear.

*OceanofPDF.com*

## CHAPTER 22

# The Groom

4 June

**3.30 p.m.**

Jesus, how much longer is this going to take?

Photo after photo after photo, then standing around like twats waiting for Mick to photograph the other couple getting married today. Endless photos of us kissing, staring into each other's eyes, holding hands, smiling, frolicking in the fucking woods. It's too hot, and I still haven't had a drink. I can see the guests in the distance next to the house, chatting and eating and *drinking*.

But I keep doing as I'm told: keep smiling, keep kissing her. And I think it's working, because she looks genuinely in love when she gazes at me. Perhaps if I fake it for long enough, I'll feel it too.

"Left hand up a bit, next to her neck. Other hand around her waist, that's it," Mick says, micromanaging every aspect of the photo to ensure it will look as unnatural as possible.

"Try and look as though you're actually pleased to be here!" he says, for what must have been the tenth time since he dragged us away from the house and into the vast grounds.

I'm going to have to get out of this soon – I don't know how many fake smiles I have left. Maybe I can fake a heart attack instead, which wouldn't be that implausible with the way I'm feeling right now. My heart still hasn't calmed down, and it is so *hot*.

A burst of raucous laughter erupts from outside the house, and I glare jealously in its direction.

"Right, against that tree you two," he says, jogging over to the woods but somehow going slower than if he were to just walk.

“Press her against that trunk, like you were gonna, you know …” He winks at me, and my skin crawls.

I press my body against hers but let my eyes glaze over so I don’t actually have to look at her.

*Please let this be the last one.*

“Aaaaaaand …” Mick says, like a director in a Hollywood movie. “We’re done!”

The relief rushes out of me in a heavy sigh. Now, I can get a drink. But more importantly, I realize, appalled by the realization, I can get away from my wife.

# Transcript of interview

5th June

**In attendance – Inspector Chandra (IC), Róisín Murphy, Chief Events Coordinator (RM)**

IC – The photographer, Mick Evans, has he worked for you for a long time?
RM – Yes, Mick has been our designated photographer since the very beginning.
IC – The beginning?
RM – Since I started my role as Chief Events Coordinator and transformed the way weddings are run at Grantham Hall. I've known Mick for years – he's excellent at what he does, and we insist he photographs all our weddings. It prevents couples from bringing in their own people.
IC – Would that be a problem?
RM – It can be, yes, when you get people running around who don't know the layout of Grantham Hall, or how we operate. It can be very frustrating when they try to change things, put their own spin on the day, so to speak. That's why we've found it works best for everyone if we provide all the suppliers, then the couple can get on with enjoying the day without any of the stress of—
IC – You said you use trusted professionals who've been doing weddings here for years, but what about the service staff – do they tend to change more often? I spoke to Femi Brown earlier—
RM – I don't know who that is.
IC – Femi Brown, one of the servers.
RM – We have a lot of servers, inspector.
IC – And how are they hired?
RM – We advertise for staff at the start of each season.
IC – Through an agency?
RM – No, through word of mouth mainly. Grantham Hall is a prestigious venue – we never have a shortage of applicants.
IC – So anyone can apply?

RM – Anyone who can carry a tray of canapés without dropping it over the guests, yes.
IC – And what sort of checks do you do on these temporary staff?
RM – Excuse me?
IC – What sort of records do you hold on them – proof of identity, criminal records, et cetera?
RM – [pause] Look, inspector, I don't think you understand how this industry works. There are extremely high expectations on us – you don't get to the level of prestige we have here at Grantham Hall without a lot of work.
IC – I understand that.
RM – I'm not sure you do, or you'd understand that I can't possibly find the time to scrutinise the background of every single person we hire to do menial tasks such as hand out flutes of champagne every weekend for six months. All we're required to do is check they're eligible to work in the UK, which I do. So I haven't done anything wrong.
IC – I'm not accusing you of anything, Ms Murphy, otherwise you would have been arrested.
RM – Arrested!? I told you, I've done nothing wrong – nothing at all.
IC – The thing is, Ms Murphy, someone has. And we need to figure out how it could have been allowed to happen, if the planning and organization of the weddings is as meticulous as you claim.

*OceanofPDF.com*

## CHAPTER 23

# The Bride

4 June

**3.45 p.m.**

The photographer has finally got the shots he needs, and I sag with relief. The final photo had Daniel pressing me into a tree trunk as I gazed up at him – a somewhat threatening pose that I could tell Daniel felt uncomfortable with. But Mick clearly has a set repertoire of images that he insists on getting through with every couple, and we agreed so that we could get this part of the day over and done with.

"Well, thank god that's over," Daniel murmurs. I nod my agreement and wince as he helps me move away from the tree. My feet are killing me, and I'm fantasizing about sinking into a chair while being fed canapés.

Although, I realize with a fresh swoop of nausea, I'm not going to be eating anything, not for a while. The pills are churning in my stomach, confirming that I have, in fact, taken more than my prescribed dose today. I swallow bile and hope the chemical reaction from the combination of medicine, prosecco, stomach acid, and stress doesn't erupt out of my mouth at a critical moment.

We trudge back up towards the hotel, and my thoughts return to my father, not that they ever really left. Is he up there, waiting for me? God – is he mingling with the other guests? Introducing himself?

I feel the blood drain from my face at the thought of him meeting Daniel's mother.

"Group photos!" Mick yells as we arrive at the front of the house, where the guests are still clustered, their bodies and tongues looser now, thanks to the champagne.

"More photos?" I groan, looking imploringly at Daniel.

He sighs. “I know. But these ones will be fun! It’ll be our family—” He hesitates, realizing what he’s said. “I mean, our friends. It will be fun.”

I nod, exhausted, but appreciative of his attempts to be optimistic. Daniel’s ability to look on the bright side was one of the things that first attracted me to him.

“Bride’s family first!” Mick shouts, waving his hands impatiently at the guests.

Panic rises in my throat, and I scan the crowd. *Please don’t step forward. Please—*

No one moves, and the relief far outweighs the awkwardness of the staring, curious guests, who are surely wondering how it’s possible I don’t have a single family member at my own wedding.

“That’s us!”

My heart skips a beat before I realize it’s Emily who’s spoken. She marches towards me, Nina and Sammi trotting behind.

“I said family, love, not bridesmaids.” Mick speaks slowly as though he suspects Emily isn’t particularly bright. I hold my breath as I wait to see how she’ll react.

But she seems to have a good grasp on her temper today, as she doesn’t even glance at Mick, instead beaming at me. “We *are* her family,” she says, simply.

I catch Daniel giving her an appreciative smile, and despite the touching moment, I can’t help but feel a little embarrassed by the way everyone seems to be looking out for me, treating me like a china ornament that could shatter from the slightest pressure.

I recall the shower sobbing incident, and reason that I probably do need handling with care.

Everything about his day has put me so far out of my comfort zone that I’ve been constantly terrified of slipping up and allowing the real me, the broken me, to appear. From the tension of planning the wedding with Shirley’s heavy-handed influence, to the venue’s marketing video we were a reluctant part of.

We’re standing in the exact spot where the video was filmed now, I realize.

***One Year Ago***

Grantham Hall towers over us where we stand in the sunken lawn, surrounded by excitedly chattering couples. The grounds are immaculate and vibrant in the sunshine, and I can see the impressive appeal of the venue.

But its size and extravagance make me feel small and out of place. I squirm and tug at my T-shirt as it sticks to the clammy skin on my back. All the other women seem to have dressed up for the occasion, and I'm painfully aware of how drab I look.

My lack of sparkle doesn't stop Daniel from looking at me with undiluted affection in his warm brown eyes though, and I try to draw confidence from him. His hand is sweaty in mine, but he keeps hold of it, instinctively knowing that I need his steady touch. Without him gently holding me, the desire to sprint away from Grantham Hall could be impossible to resist.

It's a year until our June wedding, and we've somehow allowed ourselves to be roped into being a part of a promotional video for the venue. I'd tried to refuse, but Shirley had insisted – "How will it look if you don't do it? We'd seem so ungrateful."

I bit back my retort that the thousands of pounds we were paying Grantham Hall should be thanks enough.

At least Shirley isn't here today – she'd tried to move her monthly maintenance day at the beauty salon, but her usual therapist didn't have an opening for another week, and luckily for us, an overdue facial wasn't something Shirley was willing to accept.

"You OK, babe?" Daniel murmurs as we stand on the soft grass, waiting for the events manager to line everyone up according to the videographer's instructions.

"Yes, I'm great," I reply automatically. "You?"

Daniel smiles knowingly at me and presses his lips to my temple. "Sweating my arse off and looking forward to this being over and done with."

I return his smile, this simple interaction loosening the tight knot of anxiety in my chest. I can do this – it will be horribly cringeworthy, but it's worth it if it keeps the peace with the venue, and more importantly, Daniel's family.

"Aww, you two are so cute!" A woman croons from where she stands beside me. She's white, average build, brown hair, brown eyes, and wearing

a bright blue cocktail dress.

I feel my cheeks redden in response to her comment, to her noticing us.

"*He* never looks at me like that anymore," she says, nudging the man she's with in the ribs. She laughs, but I can sense the strain there – her laughter is too loud, too much. And the scowl on her fiancé's face deepens as he rubs his side.

But I don't have time to scrutinise him, as the woman is clearly intent on befriending me. "I'm Cara. How's your wedding planning going? I need to speak to the events manager after this to see if she'll let us choose our own cake design – I want a five-tier one, but the venue only provides a three tier. It's so stressful, isn't it? Even with the hotel supplying all the catering and other stuff, there's just so much to think about."

I blink at the rapid onslaught of information and wish it was Daniel standing beside her instead of me – he's an expert small-talker, but words stall and stagnate on my tongue.

"Um, yeah – it's OK. We've not really started yet," I offer.

Cara's eyes widen. "Oh, my god, don't leave it too late! You need to get your dress sorted pronto – the refittings can take ages! And I keep telling you to get your suit sorted, don't I?" Her elbow digs into her fiancé's ribs again, as though she's desperately trying to drag him into our conversation. He catches me eyeing the tattoo on his wrist and he stuffs his hands into his pockets and stares across the lawn, looking more like a bored teenager dragged here by his mother than an excited groom-to-be.

"You'll look gorgeous in any dress though, you jammy cow," Cara continues, as though we are now best friends after less than a minute of interaction. "Who have you got doing hair and makeup? And have you met the photographer? I was a bit pissed off that we had to take the venue's man – I wanted to get Charlotte Joplin, you know, from Beautiful Day Photography? But the venue insisted that we had to have their guy – Mick."

She continues to talk at me, asking endless questions without seeming to need me to actually answer them. I'm grateful for that, at least – the barrage of chatter is overwhelming, but at least I didn't have to participate.

Daniel is listening to Cara too, making noises in all the right places, ready to rescue me. I feel his hand tighten over mine as she gushes about how excited they are about their day and I suppress a smirk – her fiancé looks about as unexcited about the topic of floral arrangements as I feel.

“Have you learnt the moves?” she chirps once she’s run out of wedding details to scrutinise. “Isn’t it amazing that they’re doing this? They said it might go viral if we get it right!”

I’m saved having to answer by the events manager bellowing into a megaphone, telling us to prepare for the first take. I widen my eyes at Daniel – how many takes are they expecting to do?

Daniel gently uncurls his fingers from mine before waggling them in front of him. “Jazz hands ready?” he asks, with a grimace.

I reluctantly raise my own hands, noticing Cara having to forcibly yank her fiancé’s up into the starting position for the dance routine we’ve all learnt.

I take one last look at Daniel to remind myself why I’m doing this, and the events manager shouts, “Action!”

I didn’t watch the video back – seeing myself dancing would have only increased the self-loathing that I’d been working so hard to rid myself of. Daniel had though, and said he was surprised how slick it had looked, joking that he might take up salsa lessons at our local village hall. Cara, the friendly woman we’d danced beside, had tried to convince us to come to the pub with them afterwards, but Daniel had quickly made up an excuse when he’d seen the look on my face. Her fiancé had looked as relieved as I felt.

Our photo shoot continues, and as I smile dutifully and stand where instructed, I wonder how Cara is now. Happily married, and still enjoying the honeymoon period? Though, if the surly expression on her fiancé’s face was anything to go by, I doubt there was much of a honeymoon period.

As we pose for various photos, I keep my eye out for my father. But he seems to have disappeared, and I’m filled with a mixture of relief and worry. Surely he can’t have tracked me down and gate-crashed my wedding, only to slink off into the shadows and leave me wondering if I’d imagined his presence?

It’s time for photos with the groomsmen, and my smile is feeling more forced by the moment. It was difficult enough to feign happiness standing next to Daniel’s mother, whose body language screamed displeasure. But now John is beside me, his hands clasped tightly in front of him, his torso slightly rotated away from me as though he can’t bear the idea of us touching.

Mick shouts for us to get closer. John doesn't move, and I notice Daniel give him a nudge. I look away as they share a silent, tense moment of eye contact.

"Right, lads, let's have a shot of you picking her up!"

My eyes widen in alarm, and Daniel notices, thank god.

"Actually, Mick," he says, his tone friendly but firm. "I think we're done for now, mate. We need a drink and something to eat. Maybe some more shots later, yeah?"

Mick looks put out, clearly unused to having his agenda questioned. "What about the aerial shot of the whole wedding party? I'm going up there anyway to capture the other wedding. May as well do yours too."

Daniel looks over his shoulder at me and raises his eyebrows at me questioningly.

I'm still not used to being asked what I want, and I splutter for a second, trying to figure out what the right answer is, before remembering that it doesn't matter – saying the wrong thing doesn't have the consequences it used to.

"OK," I say, hoping to appease Mick and get him off our backs for a bit. "Sure, but then that's enough?"

I wish I'd sounded more commanding, but Daniel nods as though he's proud of me for finding my voice.

Mick tells the groomsmen to organize people and dashes off into the hotel. Daniel and my bridesmaids shout instructions while I stand quietly at the front, waiting for the hundred guests to find a place behind us.

It takes a surprising amount of time to get everyone standing close enough to each other to appear in the shot. Mick is dangling out of an upstairs window, bellowing at people to find a gap and look up at the camera.

And as I'm forcing my tired mouth into yet another smile, I feel a presence behind me. I don't need to turn to know who it is. Even now, I still recognise the shuffling movements and the sharp, masculine smell of my father.

His breath ruffles the curls on the base of my neck. "Congratulations, Hannah."

*OceanofPDF.com*

## CHAPTER 24

# The Groom

4 June

**4 p.m.**

The photos are never going to stop. Every time I think Mick's left us alone for good, he pops back up like a sweaty jack-in-the-box and announces some new ridiculous shot he needs to capture.

I want to refuse, want to stamp my foot like a toddler and say, "NO, I'm done with this bullshit."

But I don't, of course. I keep smiling, keep joking, keep doing as I'm told. I'm already fulfilling the role of dutiful husband, and I've only been married a couple of hours.

Only once does my mask slip – when a mass of blonde hair passes by so close that I could reach out and thread my fingers through it, pull her towards me and continue what we started this morning.

I check myself, but no one seems to have noticed me staring – they're all too busy laughing as they shuffle into place, loosened by the drinks they've been enjoying while we trudged around in the woods.

If I'd known so much of the day would be spent holding awkward poses and forcing strained smiles, I'd have suggested we elope.

As I stand impatiently waiting for the group shot to be taken, the familiar waft of sweet perfume fills my nostrils and I tense. We should have eloped for many reasons, and annoying photos should be the least of my concerns.

"Smile," she breathes in my ear, her fingers pinching my arse as she passes to take up her place as maid of honour, at the side of my wife.

My heart lurches. It's over. It was supposed to be *over*. She can't keep doing this – she knows the hold she has over me. She knows I'll come running the second she clicks her fingers.

My groomsmen shuffle into place next to me, and I hear the instruction repeated, in a deep voice this time. “Yeah, babe, *smile*.”

I look up sharply. J is grinning down at me, barely able to contain his amusement. I scowl – I expected better from him, but he’s fucking loving this. They all are, I realize. I can feel them, my mates, sniggering and revelling in my discomfort, my fear. They jostle around me, and J bumps my shoulder, still grinning, desperate to share a moment to acknowledge the secret.

But it isn’t *his* secret. It isn’t *his* head on the line. It isn’t his wife who will have her heart broken if this all comes out.

I glare at them – my mates, the guys who have been by my side since we were teenagers. We’re in our thirties, but we’re as pathetic as a gang of mischievous schoolboys, sniggering about a stink-bomb hidden under our teacher’s desk. I feel my bride link her arm through mine and I’m repulsed by us. By me.

J bumps me again, and I elbow him in the ribs, hard. That wipes the smile off his face, and he frowns, confused by the glare I give him.

I turn away from him and keep my eyes facing forward, my hands clasped tightly in front of my body, staring up at Mick and his bloody camera.

She rests her head on my shoulder and I kiss her hair, on autopilot. But the gesture isn’t meaningless. It’s over. The cheating is *over*. I can’t keep doing this to her, not anymore. She doesn’t deserve it.

Now, I just need to make sure the people who know about it keep their damn mouths shut.

# Transcript of interview

5 June

**In attendance – Inspector Chandra (IC), Femi Brown, server (FB)**

IC – Were the staff operating as usual yesterday?
FB – Yeah. Same staff as always – all the waiting staff are seasonal, and it was the first season for most of us. Can't imagine many want to return for a second season to work with Róisín. [pause] I suppose Carl leaving was unusual, but that was a while ago now.
IC – Carl?
FB – Yeah, a server. He's worked here for years. Really reliable guy. Then one day, a couple of months ago I think it was, he just didn't turn up to work. Róisín had a shitfit.
IC – Did you ever find out why he didn't turn up?
FB – Not from him – he wouldn't reply to any of our messages. But he posted photos of himself sunning it up in Spain, which was weird.
IC – Weird?
FB – Well, yeah. Carl was always going on about how broke he was. Then, suddenly, he was off on a flash holiday abroad?
IC – Was Carl replaced?
FB – Yeah. Roisin found a new guy straight away – he's been good, to be fair to him. Fits in really well with the team and picked the job up quickly. Oh, wait – you wanted to know about anything odd with the guests, too?
IC – Yes, is there something—
FB – The bride's father. He turned up uninvited – huge guy – hard to miss, you know? And yeah, the staff had a good gossip about that – imagine forgetting to invite your own dad to your wedding!

*OceanofPDF.com*

## CHAPTER 25

# The Bride

4 June

**4 p.m.**

*Hannah.*

The name feels like acid thrown in my face. How many times have I heard it, screamed at me, murmured in apology, whispered in threat?

I thought I'd left it behind. But it's back, making my neck bristle with goosebumps as it leaves my father's mouth.

*Hannah.*

I haven't taken a breath since he spoke, but I'm somehow still smiling for the camera. I can't move, I can't think, because I'm back *there*, sobbing, cowering, dreaming of escape.

"Everyone, cheer!" Mick yells from where he dangles precariously out of the upstairs window, camera in hand. For a sick moment, I will him to fall. His body crashing to the ground below will serve as a good enough distraction for me to make my escape.

But Daniel pulls my hand upwards and grins down at me, reminding me that … no … I don't *want* to escape. Standing beside him, his hand wrapped around mine – this is *my* place. This, right here, with him, *this* is the home I've made for myself, and I'm going to stay.

It's my father who needs to leave.

I return Daniel's smile, and if he senses any shift in my mood, he doesn't show it. He looks drunk with the euphoria of the day.

Good. I need to keep him distracted so I can get rid of my father.

"OK," Mick shouts. "All done!"

"Phew," Daniel says, mock-wiping sweat off his brow. "Some of it was fun, but I'm glad we can just go and enjoy ourselves now! Do you want a

drink?”

“N—” I begin, then rethink. “Yes, actually. That would be great. Can I have—” I search my mind for something Nina would order, and settle on, “An espresso martini please.”

Daniel raises his eyebrows, and I attempt a nonchalant shrug. “Could do with the coffee – didn’t get much sleep last night.”

He nods and places a gentle kiss on my forehead before heading off towards the house, his coat-tails flapping behind him. Hopefully my cocktail request and the number of people who will insist on congratulating him on the way to the bar will give me enough time to send the unwelcome visitor from my former life packing.

The crowd is dispersing, and the odd person takes the time to offer their well wishes, but the majority avoid my eye. Most of these people don’t know me, but they know and love Daniel, so make the effort to be polite. With the exception of his mother and his best man, who seem to be shooting me poisonous glances every time our eyes meet.

My father, once again, has disappeared. But I know this time that he won’t have gone far, not now he’s made himself known. I wait, trying to look relaxed and happy, just as a bride should.

“You OK?” Emily asks as she appears in front of me.

I nod, aiming a well-practised grin at her. “Yes, just a bit tired! You guys go on ahead and get a drink – I’ll meet you in there. I just need a moment.”

She nods, used to my introverted need for snatches of solitude. Nina and Sammi trot after her, keen to return to the canapés and alcohol.

When I’m sure no one is paying attention to me, I slip behind a dense hedgerow and wait.

The shade is a welcome respite from the bright sun, and I close my eyes for a second, glad to be away from the noise. I allow the smile to fall from my face for the first time in hours. My cheeks ache, and I massage them, run my tongue over my dry teeth, and prepare myself to say what I need to say.

But what exactly do I need to say?

My fingers pick at the ribbon that ties the stems of my bouquet together, and I wonder if I’ve made a terrible mistake. What if he can tell by my pupils that I’m under the influence of something? What if I’m not strong enough to confront him, to stand up to him and insist he hear me for the first time in my life?

I listen to the voices of the guests fade, until eventually, it's quiet.

There's the sound of shuffling feet and a throat being cleared. "Hannah?" he asks, softly.

I step from behind the hedge and force myself to look him in the eye. "That isn't my name. Not anymore."

At the sight of my father for the first time in four years, the fight rushes out of me. I'd been so prepared to be strong, to show him that I wasn't a scared little girl anymore, that he did me wrong. But he doesn't look like the man I left behind.

He looks old. Frail.

Dad always filled every room he entered, with his bulk, his booming voice, his expressive hand gestures, and his hearty laugh. But now, while he's still a big man, something within him has faded so much that he'd managed to sneak into the throngs of wedding guests, barely noticed even by me.

He's changed.

But so have I, I remind myself. I'm not his little girl anymore.

"Why are you here?" I ask, the question sounding harsher than I'd intended. I wanted to appear cool, indifferent. I know that any glimpse of emotion could be used against me. I never want to give anyone a reason to call me hysterical … not again.

He doesn't seem to be in a hurry to answer and stares down at his hands as they twist over each other. That's one thing that hasn't changed – towards the end, he could barely look me in the eye.

I've not asked the right question, I realize, as a flush of terror chills me. The why isn't as important as the how – how did he find me? I try to keep the fear off my face, which is building momentum as my mind scrambles through the ways I could have slipped up. I'd been so careful – changing my name, leaving no links to my previous life … telling no one.

"How did you find me?" I gasp.

Hannah Goodfellow doesn't exist anymore, she hasn't for four years. Louise Jones took her place, and she has been thriving in a way Hannah never could. The evidence that I haven't covered my tracks as well as I'd thought terrifies me.

My father squirms, and the strangeness of the gesture throws me. I don't think I've ever seen him be unsure of something in his life. "I …" he begins, talking to the grass instead of me. "I pulled some favours at work."

Of course. I should have known that even retirement wouldn't stop him from using his police privileges to track me down.

The injustice of it floods my body, and my fingers tighten into fists, transforming my fear into rage. How dare he? How *dare* he?

"That's illegal," I snap, unsure if it actually is, but certain that it should be. My father is, or was, a police officer, not a god. He shouldn't have access to records as sensitive as name changes, just because he bought someone at work a few pints once. He shouldn't have the power to find me, when I was so desperate to stay hidden.

He doesn't contradict me and shrinks even further into his oversized suit. "I didn't know what else to do," he mumbles.

I can think of a million things he *should* have done.

I take a slow, steadying breath and banish the pain back to the place I keep it locked away, deep in the pit of my stomach. There's no point dwelling on a past that I was powerless to control then and still can't change now.

"You shouldn't have come," I tell him, my voice controlled now. "You weren't invited."

He nods, snatching a glimpse of me and returning his gaze to the floor when all he finds in my face is hostility.

"He seems nice."

"He is," I snap. "He treats me like—" I stop, swallowing the word like a mouthful of sick. Like a *princess*.

No. I'm not a frilly, naive little princess. I don't need someone to look after me. I'm a grown woman, who has found a partner, an equal.

"He treats me how I deserve to be treated," I settle on.

Pride swells in my chest. I did it – I faced my father with confidence and poise. I didn't revert to the scared little girl I'd been when I'd last seen him, my body hurting all over, my heart breaking as he turned his back on me.

I'm shaking, but I feel strong. Maybe it's a good thing he turned up today – maybe this is the closure I needed to be able to truly get on with my life. Maybe now, I won't be so reliant on the pills to keep the nightmares at bay.

I wait for him to argue, to defend himself and remind me what a messed up, dysfunctional daughter I was. I'll be ready for it – I'll tell him he's wrong, that I didn't need his judgement, I need him to *believe* me.

But the excuses don’t come, and my eyes widen as I watch my father’s face crumple. He covers his wrinkled features with his large hands as he sobs, and I can just make out the words, “I’m glad. I’m so glad you’re happy.”

*OceanofPDF.com*

## CHAPTER 26

# The Groom

4 June

**4.30 p.m.**

*Finally.*

The cold beer flows down my throat and I almost groan with pleasure.

"Five quid please, mate," says the bartender, and I choke on the fizzy lager in my throat.

"You what?"

"Tab's run out." He shrugs.

I stare at him, wondering if this is what will finally break my resolve and lead me to punch someone. "I'm the groom," I tell him, slowly, because, clearly, he's a fucking moron.

But the smug, spotty little teenager shrugs, and I'm sure he's loving this. "Tab's run out," he repeats.

My fingers tighten around the neck of the bottle. I've been dragged around the estate for hours, being forced into stupid, embarrassing poses and practically dying of dehydration, all while the guests at *my* wedding drink the bar dry.

"I've got this," a voice says from the crowd of people behind me.

It's J, holding his card out. I sigh, realizing I'd have rather paid the five quid than feel indebted to him right now.

"Cheers," I mumble, and take another swig.

I rotate away from the bar and away from J, but his voice follows me. "You all right?"

"Bloody marvellous," I reply, staring at the dark wood panelling of the entrance hall. I think of how tempted I'd been by those huge, wooden doors a few hours ago.

Am I glad I didn’t run?

I don’t know. Despite my promise to end my infidelity, to dedicate myself to my new bride, I still can’t smile without it feeling forced and painful.

“You don’t seem all right.”

I twist the gold bracelet around my wrist and think back to the previous night, drinking with the lads. I’d been fine then – I’d been bloody ecstatic. Drunk, laughing, not a care in the world. What’s changed between then and now, to make me feel the weight of impending doom settling on my chest, making it hard to breathe?

My thumb finds the wedding band around my finger, and I turn it slowly.

I’ve been lying to myself. Pretending I can’t see it – the thing that’s making me want to run. I know exactly what it is, but I can’t voice it, can’t admit it, even to myself …

Because then what?

J’s hand lands on my shoulder and I look up at him. He gestures with his head towards a quiet corner of the hall, away from the bar and the chattering huddles of guests. I follow him reluctantly.

“You made it down the aisle then,” he says with a grin.

I tense. I don’t want to hear it. Right now, the endless banter is too much – I just want it to stop. I want everyone to fucking *stop*. Stop looking at me with their knowing smirks, stop dropping comments that hint that they could expose me if they wanted to.

I want this whole day to stop – *shit* – I just want to get out of here.

“I swear you twitched when the registrar asked if anyone had any objections,” J says with another nudge that sends a fresh wave of irritation through my entire body. “Imagine that – if you’d said, ‘Stop – I’m actually in love with—’”

“Don’t,” I snap, rounding on him, no longer seeing J as the mate who has my back, but a shit-stirring pain in my arse. “Just, for once in your life, shut the fuck up, will you?”

# Transcript of interview

5 June

**In attendance – Inspector Chandra (IC), Róisín Murphy, Chief Events Coordinator (RM)**

IC – What exactly is the cellar used for?
RM – It's a cellar.
IC – Please answer the question.
RM – [sigh] It's used for storage.
IC – What kind of things are stored down there?
RM – Old furniture, mainly.
IC – Furniture that is no longer used by the venue?
RM – Yes, hence why I referred to it as old.
IC – Why not just throw it out?
RM – Because most of it is in good condition.
IC – Then why remove it from the hall?
RM – I'm sorry, inspector, but what has furniture got to do with anything?
IC – I'm just trying to establish the function of the cellar.
RM – Right. Well, as far as I'm aware, it's full of furniture that became too dated for use in the hall.
IC – So it was put in the cellar, and just left?
RM – Yes – it's old furniture, not old members of staff. It's hardly getting lonely down there.
IC – So the cellar isn't used frequently?
RM – No.
IC – Who has access to it?
RM – Anyone who can figure out how to open a trapdoor.
IC – So it isn't off limits to guests?
RM – [pause] That's not what I meant. Of course it's off limits to guests.
IC – So it's locked? There are signs warning people not to go down there? [pause]
IC – Ms Murphy?

OceanofPDF.com

## CHAPTER 27

# The Bride

4 June

**4.35 p.m.**

I don't know what to do. My instincts tell me to place my hand on my father's shaking shoulders and tell him that it's OK, that I forgive him.

But that would be a lie.

Because I don't forgive him. How could I? Despite all I'd been through, his betrayal was the thing that made me consider never getting up again when I collapsed onto that pavement, the burning sun hot on my back. I'd *begged* him to listen to me.

*"Calm down, Hannah. You're being hysterical."*

His words sound in my ears with a clarity that make it feel like it was only yesterday. They sit on my tongue, fizzing and potent. The temptation to whisper them to him fills me with a delicious satisfaction. See how you like being told to calm down when you're at your lowest, when you need someone to be there for you.

"I'm so sorry, Hannah." He gulps. His mouth is twisted into a silent scream behind his hands, and he sounds like he's choking on the effort to hold back his anguish.

I study the gnarled joints of his fingers, the hair on the back of his hands, the liver spot just visible beneath his shirt sleeve. I could do it – I could hurt him, so easily, right now. He probably deserves it.

But I don't want to, I realize. Whatever has happened in the four years since I last saw him has clearly been punishment enough. He screwed up, and he lost his only child because of it.

With a great trembling breath, he finally re-appears from behind his hands. His sunken cheeks are wet and blotchy. "I failed you," he says. "I

was a terrible father."

*Yes.* I want to say. *Yes, you were.*

Only … that isn't true. I squeeze my eyes shut, powerless against the memories that clamour to be heard. Good memories. Memories of having the biggest, strongest father in the world. Of being lifted onto his shoulders. Of a booming laugh and the certainty that I would always, always be safe.

Until I wasn't.

I wish he *had* been a bad father. Then his betrayal wouldn't have cut so deep.

"It doesn't matter," I tell him, opening my eyes to see him peering at me anxiously. "It's done. It's over. I have a new life now."

"That's good." He smiles tentatively. "You look like you've done well for yourself. That's great, really great."

I nod, fiercely, and hope he can't see behind this mask of success – behind the wedding dress and the smiles are anxiety, chronic pain, and the certainty that it's only a matter of time before my perfect new life is ripped apart and I return to the existence I deserve.

"I just wish I—"

"No," I say, stopping him. I don't want to hear it. Whatever he has to say, I needed to hear it then, not now. His regret doesn't help me – it just wrenches me back to a time that still wakes me at night, drenched in sweat and wondering if I'll ever truly escape. His apologies are something he needs to do to absolve himself, not something I need to listen to. And I'm certainly not ready to forgive him, if that's what he's after. "I don't want to talk about it. Not now, maybe not ever."

His eyebrows raise with hope, and I curse myself for using the word *maybe*. Now he thinks there's a chance we can reconcile.

I'm filled with anger again – his presence here is selfish … cruel even. Did he think how this would impact me? Did he—

"I don't expect your forgiveness," he says, softly. His hand twitches as though he's fighting the instinct to touch me. "I shouldn't have come today, I know that. I wasn't even going to, but I just thought, maybe if I could catch a glimpse of you from a distance…" His sigh is full of regret.

"You were standing behind me in the group photo," I say, sharply. "That's hardly keeping your distance."

He shifts sheepishly on his feet. "I'm sorry about that – one of your bridesmaid's collared me and told me off for being too far out of the shot."

I almost laugh. Emily. I'd heard her barking orders at everyone as we struggled to get into position for the photo. She must have seen my father lurking on the peripheral and bossed him into place.

A burst of laughter reaches us from the house, and I'm dully reminded that I'm at a wedding. My *own* wedding.

I'm suddenly exhausted. For so long, I'd agonized over all that had happened, how it had all gone so wrong. I searched for ways I could have fixed it, ways I could have got out before it had got so bad that my own parents couldn't even bear to look at me. But I don't want to know the details anymore, don't want to question the how and the why. There's too much to unpack – it would take hours of therapy to understand how we'd arrived at this point, and how we could possibly move forwards.

I study my father and try to see him as he is now. Not as the huge, loving man I grew up with, nor the man who turned his back on me when I needed him the most. Once again, I wonder what the last four years have been like for him, to make him change so drastically. His beer gut has shrunk – has he stopped going to the pub? The thought fills me with hope. I know it's far more complicated, but I can't help seeing the pub as the reason behind some of what happened. If he hadn't been there, if he hadn't—

*Stop*. Can't go back. Can't change it. There is only forwards.

My father is here, and he's hurting, that much is clear. Perhaps I have the power to put a stop to the pain, for both of us.

I reach out and tentatively touch his arm. The resolve he'd managed to cling to after his last sobbing fit dissolves, and his bottom lip shakes like that of an overwhelmed toddler. "Oh, Hannah." He bawls, bowing his head. He keeps his distance, and I'm glad – I'm not ready to hug.

But I was right – this moment has made me feel lighter, somehow. Perhaps it's letting go of some of the baggage I lug around with me, despite my constant pretence that I've left it behind.

I keep my hand on his arm and let him cry. I don't want to know how he's finally reached the conclusion that he was wrong and he should have listened to me. Because then I'd have to think about things that are real, things that I don't know if I'll ever be able to face, let alone on my wedding day.

But there's one thing I have to know.

"Mum?" I ask, sure I already know the answer.

The crying stops, and I almost feel guilty for asking.

Mum was a stereotypical housewife – mousy and a terrible gossip. Reader of the *Daily Mail* and quick to agree with whoever had the loudest voice in the room, which was usually my father.

"I'm sorry, love," he rasps. "She … she decided not to come."

I close my eyes, the pain of her absence hitting me harder than I'd expected.

But I'm not surprised.

No, it doesn't surprise me that my mother still can't forgive me – she held my wayward teenage years over me long after I left them behind, using them as an excuse to abandon me. My mother's betrayal hadn't wounded me in the same way my father's had, but still, her absence sends a sickening jolt of realization through me.

My father wasn't here because the truth had finally come out. Otherwise, my mother would be here too, grovelling. He was here because he missed me and wanted to make things right between us.

I study him, searching for clues that reveal his true feelings. Is he really sorry for not listening to me? Or is he sorry that his poor, hysterical daughter reacted the way she did?

"I should go," he says regretfully.

And before I've had the chance to consider what I'm saying, the words tumble stupidly out of my mouth. "No, stay. Please."

We widen our eyes at each other, both unsure if I really just invited him to be a guest at my wedding. All I know is that the idea of him leaving makes me want to cling to him like I'm a little girl again, insisting there are monsters under my bed and waiting for him to make it all better.

"If you're sure," he says, hesitantly, as though barely believing his luck.

I swallow and wonder how I'm going to explain this to Daniel when I can't even explain it to myself.

"But, Dad," I say, the word feeling strange on my tongue. "You can't call me Hannah, OK? Please don't forget. I'm Louise now."

*OceanofPDF.com*

## CHAPTER 28

# The Groom

4 June

**4.35 p.m.**

J recoils as though I've just smashed him around the head with my bottle. "All right, chill out—"

"Nah," I snap, the tension of the morning transforming into anger. "Nah, I've had enough of it – all of you, making comments, laughing – I know what you're doing."

J blinks innocently, but his feigned ignorance just pisses me off more. I take another swig of my beer – empty. Great.

Most the wedding guests seem to be in the entrance hall with us now, endlessly returning to the bar behind us. Occasionally someone locks eyes with me, but they quickly scurry away when they see the look on my face. They must be wondering what J and I are talking about. Those who don't already know, anyway.

"You've never seemed bothered about it before," J says, sounding like a petulant child. "You laughed along with us."

"That was then." I hold my hand up to his face and gesture at the ring. "This is now."

I look at the thick band of gold and wish it didn't feel like a manacle. I have to get over this feeling of being trapped by it, by *her*. I'm married, and I'm going to be happy if it kills me.

J snorts, the bewilderment gone from his face and replaced by contempt. It's not a look I've ever seen from him, not directed at me, at least. "It's you who's fucking doing it, mate. Don't blame me for your mistakes."

I gawp at him. In all the years we've known each other, he's never spoken to me like this. He's always been a suck-up – the one you could dare

to do something ridiculous and he'd leap to do it, to make you laugh, to be one of the boys.

"You what?" I snap. I wait for him to realize he's pissed me off and cower, but he just stares back at me, defiant.

"You heard me." There's challenge in his eyes, and I have no idea how to respond to it. Five minutes ago, I was ready to smack him, to remind him how our friendship works. But now … I don't know this version of my best mate, and his transformation has put me on the back foot.

"You have no idea what you're talking about," I growl, wanting him back where he belongs, looking up to me.

"You shouldn't have done it," he says, shaking his head. There's something almost sad about the gesture.

I laugh at the audacity. "What the fuck would you know? You've never had a bird like that throw themselves at you – you have no idea how hard it is to say no to—"

He sighs and shakes his head. The fight is gone, and this strange despondency is worse. "No, I don't mean that. You should have never got *married*."

I can only stare at him. The chatter of guests in the hall behind us fills my head like a swarm of flies.

"You don't love her," he continues. "You don't even *like* her, do you? We've all known it, since the start – you're much more suited to—"

"Don't fucking say it," I whisper, sure the mention of her name will cause her to appear and summon me to some dark corner, where I'll be powerless to resist.

J sighs and shakes his head again, pityingly. "I was sure you wouldn't go through with the wedding, that you'd back out."

I have to clench my teeth together to contain the rage that is building in my chest. First my mother, now J. "Why," I breathe. "*Why* are you only just telling me this *now*?"

He shrugs and takes a swig of his beer. "It didn't seem to be a problem for you, having both of them. Until now, that is."

My hands are still trembling with anger, but I can't deny the truth of his words. He's right – it wasn't a problem. It was the opposite of a problem, in fact. I had the best of both worlds. I was playing the system, getting all my needs met. I was the *fucking man*.

So what's changed?

I close my eyes. I can't deny it anymore. It's only been an hour since I decided to knuckle down and commit to being a good husband, and the effort of pretending is already exhausting me.

I know exactly what the problem is, as much as I've tried to convince myself that I'm confused, that I can't explain the way I'm feeling. It isn't the fear of getting caught, the scandal, the pain I could cause my wife, though I do feel bad about that, of course I do – I'm not a monster.

But even bigger than that, is the pain of realizing that I've married the wrong woman. That I *love* the wrong woman.

I've loved her since we met as kids, since we got together as teenagers, and since she cheated on me when we left school. God, I hated her for that – she broke my damn heart, and I swore I'd never fall in love again.

But when the whole group of us friends went on a night out, I didn't even attempt to resist her as she pressed her entire body against me on the dancefloor. The lads warned me not to go back there – she'd just hurt me again.

It was different that time though – we were older, we were mature enough to enjoy what we had – a no-strings, friends-with-benefits relationship. She didn't even object when I got a girlfriend.

And for years, I'd played the role of doting boyfriend but was always ready to drop everything the second she wanted me.

It just took me getting married to make me realize that she was the *only* thing I wanted.

# Transcript of interview

5 June

**In attendance – Inspector Chandra (IC), Samantha Higgins, bridesmaid (SH)**

IC – You mentioned Louise being instantly affected by the medication she takes. I'd like to go into that in more detail.
SH – Um, OK. I mean, I don't know if I should—
IC – How exactly does she act when the drugs affect her?
SH – Um, well … She's nodded off at her desk a couple of times.
IC – At work, in the estate agents?
SH – Yeah, but me and Nina cover for her – distract the boss and get Louise to down a load of coffee.
IC – Anything else – any changes to her behaviour?
SH – She, um, seems kind of out of it, sometimes. Like, I wonder if it affects her memory?
IC – How so?
SH – Well, she goes kind of blank, you know? Like, she has no expression, and her eyes go all glassy. Then it's like she's waking up, but seems confused, and clearly hasn't been following the conversation.
IC – Does she ever get upset by these episodes? Or angry?
SH – Kind of. I mean, not angry, exactly. But like, frustrated. You can tell she's tense because she bunches her fists and, um …
IC – Yes?
SH – When she opens her hands, it's like she's been picking at herself.
IC – Picking?
SH – Scratching her palms with her fingernails. Hurting herself.
IC – Do you know why she might do that?
SH – Maybe to try and bring herself back to the present, make herself focus? Or …
IC – Go on?
SH – Or maybe she's feeling a lot more than she seems to be, on the surface. Maybe that's how she makes herself keep it all in.

IC – Keep what in?
SH – The pain? The emotion? I don't know … Whatever's going on inside her head. I've seen her before, when she thinks she's alone, doing this like, fast breathing thing where her whole body is tense. She smashed a glass with her bare hands once, because she was gripping it so hard. Cut her up pretty badly, but she laughed it off like it was nothing.
IC – And how did that make you feel?
SH – Um … Kind of scared? Like, you've gotta be pretty furious to crush a glass, right? But, like, that's not how she is usually. She's usually really sweet – she's the quiet one of the group. Never a bad word to say about anyone. It must just be a side effect of the pills that make her go a bit funny sometimes.
IC – And yesterday, did you notice any episodes similar to what you've just described?
SH – No, not really. Only …
IC – Yes?
SH – [pause] The speeches.
IC – What was significant about the speeches?
SH – [pause] It was when Louise finally cracked.

*OceanofPDF.com*

## CHAPTER 29

# The Bride

4 June

**7 p.m.**

The ceremony room has been transformed and is now unrecognisable. Where previously there were rows upon rows of chairs facing the altar, now lavishly adorned circular tables are crammed into the space. The noise of voices merging together into a continuous drone makes me feel like I'm trapped inside a beehive.

When I eventually left my father and found Daniel, he proudly handed me the espresso martini I'd requested. It was a terrible choice, and the caffeine, alcohol, pills and simmering anxiety collided, making my heartbeat palpable in my throat. Despite all that, I somehow managed to smile as we entered the ceremony room to the applause of our guests.

Our first meal as husband and wife.

Not that I've been managing to eat. My complicated relationship with food has been made more straightforward since meeting Daniel, thanks to his lack of commentary on what I ate, and the quantities of it. Food had become something I was allowed to do, allowed to enjoy even. It was a freedom I wasn't used to, after a childhood of being made to clear my plate, followed by endless scrutiny of what I put into my mouth.

But today, all those old feelings and fears have returned, and I poke anxiously at my wilted spinach. Daniel's plate has barely been touched either, but that's due to the endless stream of people who have been appearing at the top table to chat to him throughout the meal. His cheeks have a pink tint to them and his voice is louder than usual.

My attention is repeatedly pulled back to my father.

How am I going to explain to Daniel that my father, who I've refused to acknowledge is even alive, is now a guest at our wedding? What if this is a secret too many, and Daniel finally realizes he doesn't know the woman he's married?

I had to convince the furious-looking events manager that an extra seat was required, and she's reluctantly squeezed him in at an already overcrowded table. He looks uncomfortable crammed between Daniel's distant relatives. I try to convince myself that it's the best place for him – I've not even met this arm of Daniel's family myself, so perhaps there won't be too many questions directed at him?

But once word gets out about his identity, there will certainly be whispers about why the bride's father is sat as far away from the top table as possible …

Oh god, how could I have been so stupid? I should have told him to pretend to be someone else, some random work colleague that no one would bother to ask questions about.

I glance nervously at Daniel, who is deep in conversation with his mother. The traditional layout of the top table dictates that my father should be sat beside me, but we'd quickly realized we could hardly follow any kind of formal seating plan when I didn't have a single family member invited. I squirm at the thought of introducing Shirley and Daniel's practically mute father to my own.

Emily touches my hand, bringing me back to myself. I sigh, her steady, strong presence stopping me from spiralling into oblivion for the umpteenth time today.

"You OK, hun?"

I nod, smiling gratefully at her.

"Any reason you haven't been able to take your eye off table thirteen?" she asks, taking a casual sip of her wine.

I mirror her action to buy myself time and try not to grimace at the rotten-fruit taste of the red wine. I can feel it sloshing in my stomach with the few mouthfuls of food I've managed to force down – not enough to soak up the booze and pills I've consumed today.

The combination of drink and medication must have relaxed my inhibitions though, as I find myself entertaining the idea of telling her about my father.

What harm can it do? I'm the one who invited him to stay, and I can hardly keep his identity hidden for the rest of the day. Someone is bound to ask him how he knows the bride or groom, and once the secret is out, it will spread like wildfire among the guests.

And I want to tell Emily the truth, I realize. All she does is help me, and all I do is lie to her.

"My father is sitting there," I say, surprised by how level my voice is. "He turned up, uninvited. And I decided to let him stay."

Emily abruptly swallows the mouthful of wine she'd been savouring but quickly regains composure and makes her face passive. "Oh, that's …"

"Bonkers?" I finish for her, and she sags with relief that I've been the one to say it rather than her.

"A bit, yeah," she says tentatively.

I brace myself, waiting for her reaction, trying to guess what she must be thinking. She frowns as she stares across the ceremony room, towards my father. "Are you happy to see him?"

The question throws me. How *do* I feel about my dad being here? I watch him awkwardly smiling at a joke he's clearly not a part of, and answer Emily truthfully.

"Yes," I say. "Yes, I'm glad he's here."

Emily's eyes are dewy as she reaches towards me, squeezing my hand in hers. "Then I'm glad too."

The clinking sound of metal on glass shatters the moment, and I turn to see John, Daniel's best man, signalling the start of the speeches.

Daniel and I had agreed to keep it short and sweet. Daniel insisted he didn't want the guests getting bored, but I was sure it was to save me the embarrassment of having no one on my side of the family to speak. Emily had offered to say something, but the idea of someone talking about me to a room full of people made my skin crawl with horror.

So it will just be John. I gnaw on my lip as I watch him smiling around the room, waiting for the chatter to die down. I wonder if he'll bother pretending to like me.

"Thank you, thank you!" he begins, as though the guests are already applauding his speech. "It's an honour to be here today as Daniel's best friend."

John proceeds to give a fairly typical best-man's speech, referring to me not once, but twice, as the "old ball and chain". I smile good naturedly and

hide my guffaw behind my wine glass when Emily murmurs, “Prick,” into my ear at the second reference.

Yet again, my attention wanders back to my father, who is watching with an intensity I don’t remember seeing on his face four years ago. Perhaps, if he had been paying as much attention then as he clearly is now, things would have been different.

I shake my head and force my focus back to John. I can’t let my father’s presence keep sucking me back to the past – that wasn’t what I’d wanted when I’d decided to let him stay.

John is showing no signs of wrapping his speech up. Thank god we agreed not to have more after this – I’m suddenly desperate for the toilet and the prospect of gathering my dress up out of the way isn’t something I’d considered the practicalities of until now.

“*Get on with it,*” Emily whispers, and I smile out of the corner of my mouth. Even Daniel’s mother, who dotes on John and probably wishes it was him getting married to her son rather than me, looks bored.

Mick creeps into the room and scurries around, getting close-ups of strained smiles and glazed expressions – yet more photos that won’t make it into the wedding album. The waiting staff have come in and are quietly tidying dessert plates away. I glance back up at John, but the heavy hint seems to have been lost on him, and he simply talks louder over the gentle sounds of cutlery clinking. Something about a football match they played as teenagers where Daniel “properly embarrassed the opposition”.

I stifle a yawn. I hadn’t realized our wedding would become an episode of *This Is Your Life* for Daniel.

I jolt with the thought of what a montage of my life would look like if the focus were to shift to me. The guests wouldn’t be bored, that much is certain.

Daniel shifts in his seat and gives me a sympathetic smile as he squeezes my hand. Affection brings guilt with it – I shouldn’t be sitting here, grumbling about someone who clearly loves Daniel very dearly.

I straighten in my chair, looking up at John with renewed interest and nodding along to his words. A server moves behind me, and I tilt to give him space to collect my untouched dessert.

And then it hits me – the scent of Dior Sauvage, rich and spicy. I try to cling to rationality, try to tell myself that it’s just perfume, probably worn

by numerous men in this room. But the rush of terror that surges through my gut is so potent that, before I know what I’m doing, I’m on my feet.

*OceanofPDF.com*

## CHAPTER 30

# The Groom

4 June

**7 p.m.**

I can’t do this.

The speeches full of lies, the fake smiles, and the utter bullshit of the day.

I can’t do it. I’m going to fucking explode if I hear another soppy story about how perfect we are for each other, told through the sneering, lying mouths of people who probably know exactly what I’ve been doing.

I reach for my drink – I don’t even know if it’s mine, but I down it anyway.

Bile lingers at the back of my throat, my body warning me I’ve had enough.

I curl my fingers around another glass. Tip it down to quieten the noise.

I need to be numb.

# Transcript of interview

5 June

**In attendance – Inspector Chandra (IC), Samantha Higgins, bridesmaid (SH)**

SH – I don't want to say anything bad about Louise – like, you're only getting one side of her from the questions you've asked me. You haven't asked about how kind and generous and lovely she is. She's not always completely out of it or smashing glasses in her hands – she's great, really great, I don't want—

IC – It's OK, Sammi. Why don't you tell me more about your friendship with Louise? Like how it all started?

SH – OK, yeah, sure. Well, like I said, it was Emily who introduced us. She gave us a little speech beforehand, about how she had a friend living with her – she'd been through a lot and had moved away from her hometown and was looking to make a fresh start. Emily told us to be, um …

IC – Yes?

SH – To be gentle with her.

IC – What did you take that to mean? Being gentle?

SH – Well, Emily said we shouldn't ask questions about her past. And we shouldn't be too … much.

IC – Much?

SH – [laughter] I think that was more an instruction for Nina than me. She can be a lot.

IC – Have you been friends with Nina for a long time?

SH – Oh god, yeah. Our mums are besties, so we grew up together.

IC – When you describe Nina as being "a lot—"

SH – Nothing bad, like. She's just loud, and doesn't think before she speaks, so she rubs some people up the wrong way. I'm forever having to explain that she didn't mean any offence – she's a big joker. She just wants to have fun.

IC – But she offends people, sometimes?

SH – I mean, she can put her foot in it, you know? Like, she found it hard not to probe into Louise's past, like Emily told her. Nina loves a gossip, and Louise was clearly sitting on something interesting. So sometimes she'd slip up, and ask Louise how she hurt her back, or why she's so jumpy, or make a comment about her family – or lack of family.

IC – And how would Louise react, when Nina said something that was off limits?

SH – She'd, um … freeze, I guess.

IC – Did she seem frustrated, like when you mentioned she smashed a glass that time?

SH – Um, no. More like she was detached. She had this way of going kind of blank and limp like she'd just, I dunno, turned her brain off when faced with something she didn't want to talk about. But she'd always smile and say it was OK when Nina apologized – she knew Nina never meant any harm. Like I said, Nina is a lot, but she's a good friend. She's just intense.

IC – Is Nina intense in other ways?

SH – In every way. [laughter] I'm the people pleaser, Nina's the people pisser-offer. She doesn't care what people think of her, but once she's your friend, she'll defend you to the death. But she's not immune to getting hurt herself, you know?

IC – And has she been hurt, before?

SH – [sigh] God, yeah. She's being hurt right now.

IC – How so?

SH – By that prick, John. The best man. Honestly, I have no idea how a nice guy like Daniel has ended up with him as a best mate. He's awful. But hopefully, after today, he won't be a problem anymore.

*OceanofPDF.com*

## CHAPTER 31

# The Bride

4 June

**7.15 p.m.**

The attention of the entire room is on me now that I've jumped to my feet. Fear has subsided, replaced by hot, agonizing embarrassment. What am I doing? How can I play this? Can I just sit back down again and pretend it never happened?

John stares at me, unable to hide his distaste. Daniel is looking up at me, confusion and concern on his handsome face.

I scan the crowd, willing something witty to pop into my head to explain why I've just interrupted John's speech. How exactly do I explain that certain things – roses and the oh-too-popular scent of Dior Sauvage being two of them – turn me into an irrational, trembling mess? The sea of faces staring up at me has blurred into a mass of indistinguishable features. I'm aware of the apprehensive hush that has settled over the room, but the thudding of my heart in my ears is so loud that I'm sure the guests must hear it too.

Someone clears their throat, and my mortification inflates. I can't even imagine what I look like.

*Deranged. Insane. Hysterical.*

I feel Emily's hand tentatively touch mine. "You OK?" she mouths.

I force myself to keep my gaze away from my father. I can't bear the thought of my actions reinforcing everything he and my mother think about me.

I can save this.

Can't I?

“Sorry!” I gasp, my voice sounding pained rather than flippant, as I’d intended. “Great speech, John. But I’m desperate for the loo!”

I catch raised eyebrows, smirks, and the scowls of both Daniel’s mother and John. Oh god, they think I’m taking the piss – that I’m saying what everyone else is thinking and John’s speech has gone on for so long that we’re all losing the will to live.

I even notice one of the distant cousins at my father’s table give me a silent round of applause.

*Shit.*

I feel the colour rising up my body and try not to think about how horribly it must be clashing with the off-white of my dress. I sway slightly, as though the headrush from standing up suddenly has only just caught up with me. I need to get out of here.

“I’ll be back in a mo!” I gush.

Emily makes a startled movement to follow, but I shake my head. I need a moment. Christ, I need more than a moment, I need an entirely new personality.

I resist the urge to run out of the hall, as falling on my face would be the icing on the awful cake right now. I hitch my dress up and attempt a jovial smile as I squeeze through the tightly packed tables.

I’m nearly out when I hear John say into his microphone, “Careful, mate, if her bladder’s that weak now, imagine how bad it’ll be when she’s popped out a few sprogs!”

My step falters as his words hit home. I try to laugh for the benefit of the guests on the table by the door. But I can’t force it, not this time.

It shouldn’t hurt as much as it does – it was just a joke, after all. And maybe, on a different day, I’d have been able to shrug it off. But John doesn’t like me – there’s no denying the fact. His comment on my body isn’t a joke, not really – it’s designed to humiliate me, and it makes me feel like … like *Hannah* again.

The laughter of the guests is strained – perhaps they didn’t think it an appropriate comment either. Emily certainly wouldn’t have, and I picture her shooting a poisonous glare at John.

That’s what makes it different, I realize. Now that I’m Louise, not Hannah, I have people on my side.

I resolutely avoid the eye contact of the table closest to the door, holding my head high as I make my escape. I stride past a few curious servers

lurking outside the ceremony room and march down a corridor at random, hoping to stumble upon a toilet. I pass a huge pair of ornate wooden doors and hear the buzzing of voices from inside. This must be the other ceremony room. The sign outside welcomes guests to Cara and Matthew's wedding, and I realize the couple we met at the flash mob must be getting married on the same day as us.

I raise my eyebrows at the coincidence, then hurry away – the last thing I want right now is to get pulled into a catch-up with the lovely but overfriendly woman who I stood next to on the sunken lawn a year ago.

I've forgotten how disorientating this place is and find myself down a narrow passageway with low ceilings. Surely this can't be the way? There are none of the huge paintings or decorative embellishments adorning the walls, and the air feels colder.

I notice something familiar in a side-corridor and breathe a sigh of relief. It's the huge, gnarled trapdoors that lead to the cellar which we'd been warned not to approach when we were shown around by the events manager. I try to remember which way she'd taken us after this point, but decide it's probably safer to simply retrace my steps and choose a different corridor.

My plan works, and I find a toilet, though part of me wonders if it might have been better if I'd stayed lost. I take my time washing my hands and stare at my reflection, willing myself to pull it together. A surge of pain throbs across my back and down my left leg, just as it always seems to when I'm feeling vulnerable. I think of the pills on my dressing table upstairs. I've already had more than I should today, but a couple more can't hurt, can they? No more diazepam – I know how badly too many of them can make me unravel at the seams. But the painkillers … they might be just what I need to get through the rest of the evening.

No. I can't – I've felt light-headed and strange all day. I can't risk being completely out of it. I have to do this myself. I brace myself on the old-fashioned ceramic sink and growl into the mirror, "*Louise*."

Louise. Not Hannah. Never again.

It helps, and I take yet another steadying breath, trying not to wonder how long I'll last until I inevitably freak out yet again.

When I leave the toilets, the entrance hall and surrounding corridors are still empty. The guests must still be in the ceremony room, and although I

hope they're not still enduring John's never-ending speech, I'm glad for a few more moments of solitude.

The entrance hall is peaceful and ornately decorated – every inch of wall seems to be covered in some kind of embellishment or artwork. I find Grantham Hall imposing and disconcerting, but I realize now that I'd like to explore the house alone, get lost in its passages, and stumble upon pockets of hidden history. I slowly look around, trying to get my bearings. I recognise the darker corridor that I'd first tried to find a toilet down. I picture the entrance to the cellar and imagine the damp, stuffy air, the light being extinguished as the trapdoor closed on top of me.

I wouldn't explore down there.

There are flowers arranged on every surface, but no more red roses, thank god. There's something on a side table – a guest book has been placed on it next to a Polaroid camera. I step closer and recognise Emily's writing – *Snap it, Stick it, Sign it!* I smile – it's a cute touch.

There's something on the far wall too, and I approach it curiously. There are photos. Dozens of them covering a wooden panel at the base of the wide, ornate stairwell. Photos of Daniel and me.

I peer at them, memories of happiness rushing in to drown the painful ones that had been growing louder throughout the day. Daniel and I with our arms wrapped around Buddy on Barmouth beach, freezing and barely visible beneath all our layers of clothing. A ridiculous photo of us on a roller coaster that Daniel had insisted on buying, where I'd screamed so loudly that he'd pretended to be deaf in one ear for the rest of the day.

None of these photos exist on social media, at my insistence. *I* don't exist on social media. So I've barely even seen them myself, and I feel like I'm viewing someone else's existence rather than my own. I can't believe this happy, loving life belongs to me.

I move to the right, taking my time to study each captured moment. There are photos of me that I didn't know had been taken – chopping vegetables wearing nothing but Daniel's scruffy old T-shirt, napping on the sofa, my arms curled around Buddy.

I smile and run my thumb over the image.

I've never left him before – he's my protector, so he comes everywhere with me. It had been Emily who suggested getting him when she realized how much of an anxious mess I was whenever she left me alone in her home. And it had worked – Buddy's presence made me feel stronger, and he

was always happy to let me cling to him and cry into his huge, soft head when it all got too much. I'd met the dog-sitter four times before finally agreeing that Buddy would be OK with her for the two nights we would be away.

My smile widens as I'm reminded of why we're doing this. Not for the wedding, but for the marriage. In less than twenty-four hours, we'll be returning home, to our cosy life and—

The bubble of happiness that had been floating upwards in my chest bursts with a ferocity that makes me gasp.

There's a photo so low down that I nearly missed it. It's smaller than the rest and practically touching the skirting board. I squat, wobbling on my heels and nearly falling as I sink to the floor. I tear the photo off the wall and stare at the image.

An ugly, gulping noise escapes my mouth as I try to contain my scream.

*OceanofPDF.com*

## CHAPTER 32

# The Groom

4 June

**7.30 p.m.**

I sit at the top table, drunk, finally. The booze has numbed the sick feeling of regret that's sat heavily in my stomach since I opened the door this morning to the woman I'm hopelessly in love with.

The seat next to me is empty, and I try to remember where my wife has gone. We barely had a conversation over the meal, but that's not abnormal for us. I frown at the chair, trying to remember when she left. Christ, I'm more drunk than I realized.

I take a deep swig of wine and look to my left. More empty seats. Where the hell is everyone? The other tables are bustling with movement and laughter, but it's just me and my mother left at the top table. The slimy photographer has gone too – hopefully he's fucked off for good.

I burp into my hand and try to ignore the threat of the unsettled, anxious feeling returning now that there's nothing to distract me. My mother takes my eye contact as a signal for her to move down the table to sit beside me.

"Son," she says, with a sympathetic smile. Her voice is laced with hidden meaning that I can't be arsed to decipher right now.

"Mum."

I gaze sullenly into the depths of my wine glass, knowing I look like a teenager waiting to be lectured.

"You went through with it then," she says. Her face is etched with concern, no, *pity*. I can't bear it – it's the same way she'd look at me when I scraped my knee as a kid or lost a football game. It makes me want to lean against her and sob into her hideous dress.

But I can't break down, can't reveal what I've been doing and how I'm feeling. Because if I do, how will I ever return to the lie that is my marriage?

I groan. "Mum—"

"No, no," she says, holding up her hands defensively. "If you're happy with your decision, then I'm happy."

I snort. She doesn't look happy.

"I am happy," I say, and when she raises her eyebrows I repeat myself, more forcefully. "I *am*."

She eyes me patiently, just like the time she listened to my bullshit about the reek of weed coming from my room being an incense stick. "If you say so."

"Oh, for fu—" the sharp look she gives me shuts me up. I may be a grown man, I may be drunk out of my mind, but I still have the good sense not to swear at my mother.

"Sorry," I mumble, sheepishly. "I just …" I sigh and rub my hand over my jaw, unused to the smooth feeling of being clean shaven. "I thought this is what you wanted – for me to settle down with a nice girl and put my partying ways behind me. I dunno why you don't like her."

She raises her eyebrows and sniffs, and I know why. Ultimately, I'm the one who's hurting my wife the most, betraying her in the worst possible way. So to challenge my mother for being a bit off with her, when I'm doing what I'm doing … well, it's a bit rich, to say the least.

"I don't dislike her," she insists, squirming in her seat and making the peach monstrosity she's wearing bunch up over her legs. "I just … I don't think *you* like her."

It's my turn to squirm. And instead of answering her, denying it, and telling her she's being ridiculous, I take another long sip of my wine.

She's right, of course. Just as J is right, just as all of my groomsmen are also right, apparently. Everyone closest to me knows that I married the wrong woman. So how long am I going to keep lying to myself and pretending that we can still make it work?

It's too late now though, isn't it?

But what if … what if it isn't? I can't keep cheating, I know that – if the guilt doesn't kill me, the stress will. It's hard work, not getting caught.

But the marriage … the marriage doesn't have to continue.

I’ll get through this day, and then, there are options, aren’t there? Surely, if I act fast, I can stop the marriage before it even becomes official? It’ll be rough, at first, but in the long run, it’ll be better for all of us.

And then I can be with her. She’ll want this – I’m sure of it. Why else has she stayed single and kept so close to me all these years, even when I’m technically off the market?

The thought of putting this mess behind me and being with the woman I really want makes the first genuine smile I’ve had all day spread over my face.

# Transcript of interview

5 June

**In attendance – Inspector Chandra (IC), Samantha Higgins, bridesmaid (SH)**

IC – You seem to really dislike the best man.
SH – Yeah, I do. There aren't many people I don't like – did I mention I'm a people pleaser? But yeah, I make an exception for John.
IC – What is it you don't like about him?
SH – The way he treats my friends.
IC – Nina, or …?
SH – Yeah. He led her on, basically love-bombed her until she felt like he was besotted with her. But then he ghosted her, like she was nothing. It broke her – it's still breaking her. I told you Nina is intense, but she doesn't give her heart lightly.
IC – Has the tension between Nina and John impacted your friendship group?
SH – Not really. We were never really a group – it was just Emily, being the glue.
IC – The glue?
SH – Yeah. She brings people together. Us and Louise, Louise and Daniel. She's a fixer, you know? She wants everyone to be happy and safe and together, so connects them. She would never have connected Nina with John, but she's been so busy with her new job lately that she's not had time to socialise much.
IC – What about Louise? How is her relationship with John?
SH – Awful. He's been weird with her since the day Daniel introduced her to his friends. She told us about it at work the day after meeting John – she was trying to be all casual about it, but you can tell it really rattled her.
IC – What did he do to upset her?
SH – Well, at the start, she just said that one of Daniel's friends was a bit of a starer – you know, when eye contact starts to feel threatening? And

he made some weird comments.

IC – Such as?

SH – Like, flirty stuff mixed with spiteful stuff. Saying something inappropriate or weirdly sexual to make her feel uncomfortable, then cutting her down with a sly dig in the next breath. And it got worse over time – he just started being downright hostile towards her. The way he looks at her gives me the shivers, like he truly loathes her. Although Emily says she thinks he might actually love her, not hate her. And Emily is usually really good at reading people.

IC – You mentioned earlier that you hoped John wouldn't be a problem anymore, after today?

SH – Well, yeah. I can't see him being part of the picture, after the shit he and Shirley pulled?

IC – Shirley – Daniel's mother?

SH – Yeah, the witch herself. Honestly, how a lovely guy like Daniel came out of that nasty, cruel old bag, I have no idea.

IC – And what exactly did she and John do?

SH – They've both hated Louise since the start. I think Shirley was off with her because she was a bit different, and she didn't know where she'd come from or why she has no family. But yesterday, it was like they finally teamed up to combine their hatred.

IC – To do what?

SH – To ruin everything.

*OceanofPDF.com*

## CHAPTER 33

# The Bride

4 June

**7.30 p.m.**

I blink, willing the photo to transform into something else, *anything* else.

Please, please let this just be another thing my messed-up head has created in a moment of stress.

*Please.*

But the image remains, and I bring a quivering hand to my mouth. It's Buddy. My dog. My beloved, massive, loyal, and fiercely protective dog.

And he's dead.

"Buddy?" I whisper, barely able to see the photo through the water in my eyes.

It's a low-quality image, around the size of a Polaroid, printed on paper and then crudely cut to size. Buddy is sprawled on the floor, his legs at odd angles to his body. I can't see any injuries, but I've never seen him lie like that – he looks broken and wrong and—

The anguished noise I make is drowned out by the sudden bang of the ceremony room doors flying open and hitting the wall behind them, followed by the jumbled sound of a hundred people chattering at once. Bodies spill out into the entrance hall and the cramped space is filled with the impatient energy of people who have spent hours drinking and were then made to sit through John's tedious speech.

I look up, searching for a friendly face. But everyone who catches my eye as they pass is a stranger. I receive awkward smiles and mumbled well wishes, but no one lingers. As guest after guest scurries past me, I get the sense they're afraid to engage with me, this unstable, unpredictable bride

who is lurking on the periphery of her own wedding as though she doesn't know herself what she's doing there.

I can't bring myself to return their uneasy smiles, and I frantically scan over the tops of heads. I need Daniel. I need—

John is suddenly in front of me and my presence must have startled him because, for a moment, I see a glimpse of that raw, vulnerable expression I'd seen as I'd walked down the aisle. My hand twitches, desperate to reach for and cling to this version of John – the version Daniel must know, but I have never been allowed to. But he carefully hides behind his trademark sneer, reminding me that we are not, and never will be, friends.

"You make it to the bog, then?" he asks, his voice loud and cutting.

He would usually at least pretend to be civil, but the drink, and my perceived rudeness when I interrupted his speech, seems to have emboldened him. If I wasn't so utterly focused on the photo in my hand, I'd have been intimidated by the way he looms over me and the antagonistic energy coming off him in waves.

But right now, I don't care.

"Where's Daniel?" I ask.

John blinks, startled by my abruptness. He's used to me simpering and stuttering, desperate for him to like me.

But he recovers and spins another one-liner at me. "Lost him already, have you?"

I narrow my eyes. I'm done with him – with both the subtle and not-so-subtle jabs and this bullshit mask he puts on his smug face whenever we meet. I don't even look at him as I barge past him, away from the photo wall and into the crowd, but I hear the indignant noise he makes. I can imagine what he'll say to Daniel's mother – "Not only is she mental, she's *rude*, Shirley!"

The guests are oblivious to my presence as I push through – I've become so accustomed to disappearing into the background that even the white dress doesn't seem to earn me any kind of acknowledgement. Which I wouldn't have a problem with usually, but right now, I need them to move so I can find Daniel.

I start crashing into people, not caring about the surprised looks of annoyance I receive as I force my way through the crowd. I spot three blush-coloured dresses and nearly cry with relief. My bridesmaids.

“There you are!” Emily says when she spots me, looking as relieved to see me as I feel to find her. “You’re supposed to be having your first dance in a minute – the events manager is going to have a coronary if you don’t get on the dancefloor sharpish!”

“Have you seen Daniel?” I blurt. She shakes her head slowly, and I stamp my foot in frustration. “Where *is* he?”

“Louise, what’s wrong?” Emily asks.

I thrust the photo into her hand in response. I’ve crumpled the paper in my fist, and someone must have spilt red wine on it as I pushed my way through the guests. A spot of dark red seeps across the white background.

Emily, Nina and Sammi crowd around the photo, and I watch their faces transform as they register what they’re looking at. But their expressions don’t mirror the panic pulsing in my chest.

“Aww, Buddy,” Sammi croons, smiling at the photo.

They love Buddy. He’s been a firm part of my life ever since they met me, knowing I could never come out for a lunchbreak without first popping home to sort him. Sammi had been terrified of him at first, which was fair enough – he was almost the same size as her. But once I’d assured her that he was a big teddy bear, and as long as she never attacked me, she’d be safe, she became his biggest fan.

I nod, not trusting myself to speak in case I can no longer keep my horrified reaction to the photo contained.

Nina narrows her eyes at the picture, then looks up at me. “Um … bit of context?”

“It was on the photo wall,” I say, my voice tight. “There are loads of photos of me and Daniel, I didn’t know they were there—”

“Daniel asked us to share any photos we had of you two together,” Emily says, brightly.

I blink, touched by the gesture despite the pain twisting my gut.

“I saw that one, right at the bottom,” I continue. “It didn’t look like the rest – it looks like it’s been printed.”

The three women look at the photo again.

“Aaaand …” Nina says slowly, her voice thick with wine, “you’re annoyed because this one is worse quality than the rest?”

“No!” I snap, instantly regretting my tone as Nina flinches. I try to control my agitation when I continue. “No, I’m not upset by the picture quality. I’m upset because he’s *dead*.”

Their eyebrows shoot up in surprise before their gazes return to the photo in unison, each of them frowning now.

"He doesn't *look* dead," Sammi says tentatively. "He looks asleep."

Nina and Emily nod in agreement and I resist the urge to rip the photo out of their hands. "I know my own dog – he never lies like this! There's something wrong," I say, pleading. "I need to go home – I need to check—"

I can't bring myself to finish the sentence.

Emily nods slowly, and for the first time in our friendship, I feel a flash of annoyance towards her. Why is she being so calm? Why isn't she helping me find Daniel? Every second we waste, standing here being bumped by drunk strangers, could be a moment we spend trying to save Buddy.

He could still be alive, and that's just about all I can cling to to keep me going right now.

"Are you sure it's even him?" Emily finally says, her tone level in a way I recognise. It's the same way she speaks to me when I've freaked out about hearing imaginary noises outside the house, or when I've reacted in an extreme way to being sent a single red rose …

But this is different, and I stare at her in disbelief.

She clocks my reaction, and quickly says, "I just mean, even if it *is* a photo of a dead dog … this could be any dog, couldn't it?"

She tentatively passes the photo back to me. I don't want to look at it again but force myself to. There's Buddy, lying flat on his side, horribly still.

"Is there anything that makes you certain it's him?" Emily asks, gently.

I squint at the photo, searching for clues. The carpet beneath him is a dull, muted shade, just like ours at home. But, with the terrible quality of the photo, it's difficult to say exactly what colour it is. And the dog looks exactly like Buddy, but… again, it's hard to tell, with him lying there, eyes closed, lifeless.

"Rottweilers all look pretty much the same, don't they?" Nina ventures, hopefully.

I want to tell her that she's wrong, that I'd recognise Buddy no matter what. But she's right – I can't be certain this is my dog.

But if it isn't Buddy…

"Why the hell would someone stick a photo of a dead dog to the wall?" I say, sounding angrier than I mean to.

“I’m still not convinced it’s dead,” Nina slurs, still scrutinizing the photo, then adds, “sorry.”

“Could it be something to do with the other wedding?” Sammi asks hopefully. “Some kind of in-joke that got stuck to your photo wall by accident?”

I look towards the doors that lead to Cara and Matthew’s ceremony room and shake my head. They don’t even seem to have a photo wall.

But I wish I could believe Sammi’s suggestion – it would be a nicer explanation than someone sticking this awful-quality photo of a possibly dead dog to the wall that’s supposed to contain only happy memories of Daniel and me.

“I don’t understand who would have put it there,” I say, imploringly. “Or why?”

Emily’s eyes flit around, as though she’s suddenly aware that we’re standing in the middle of hordes of people. “Come here,” she mutters, guiding me away from the crowd. Nina and Sammi follow anxiously.

“Look,” Emily begins, brisk and businesslike. “I’ve tried to keep it to myself, because I don’t want to shit on your relationship or ruin your happy day, but—”

She takes a steadying breath, and Nina, Sammi and I all lean closer, ready to hear what she’s got to say.

“Frankly, Louise, some of Daniel’s friends and family are, well—”

“Complete wankers,” Nina says, not bothering to keep her voice down. I wonder if she’s including John, the man she’s pined after for over a year, in that count.

Sammi widens her eyes and glances around the room to check if anyone has overheard.

“Not the word I was going to use, but yes, I suppose it fits,” Emily says.

I squirm. “They’re not *that* bad,” I insist, but my defence sounds weak even to my own ears.

“Mate,” Emily says abruptly. “His witch of a mother looked like she was plotting ways to murder you throughout the entire ceremony. And don’t even get me started on his best man – what was that shit he pulled in the speech? Some sly comment about you having a weak pelvic floor, what the fuck?” She turns her attention to Nina and says, “Sorry, Nina, but you’re not going anywhere near that dickhead again – you can do better.”

A flicker of annoyance passes over Nina's face, and I pray she isn't about to argue that John has hidden virtues, despite them being buried so deep no one has ever actually witnessed them. But she catches my eye and must see the pain he's caused me written all over my face, because she nods and backs off.

"It was just—" I begin, ready to dismiss John's joke as "banter". But I don't bother finishing the lie – clearly, it's plain to see that the people closest to Daniel loathe me.

I try to digest what Emily is saying. Does she really think they dislike me enough to find a picture of a dead rottweiler and sneak it into the photo wall, just to, what … mess with me? Make me cry? Make me pull out of the wedding?

I touch my new ring with my thumb. Too late.

Sammi cranes her neck to look at the photo again. "Are we *sure* it isn't a photo of Buddy sleeping? Someone could have innocently added it, thinking it was a nice shot. We can phone the dog-sitter though, just to put your mind at rest?"

I smile tearily and nod, grateful for the solution that will stop the awful thoughts about Buddy being hurt. I want to share her naivety – Buddy being asleep would be the nicest way to explain the photo. But now that I've been reminded of John and Shirley's viciousness towards me, I'm struggling to convince myself that the photo is anything other than them playing cruel games.

"They hate me," I murmur, wretchedness making my limbs feel heavy. "They've hated me since the start, but this is—"

"Fuck them," Emily whispers, her hand darting out to squeeze my forearm in a way that's almost painful. "You're married now, Louise. *Married*. They don't matter anymore. It's you and Daniel – that's all that matters."

I reluctantly look up to meet her gaze and see such a certainty in her eyes that it's contagious. She's right. I've tried to convince myself of the fact many times today, but it helps to hear it from my best friend. They don't matter, not really.

Fuck them.

OceanofPDF.com

## CHAPTER 34

# The Groom

4 June

**8.30 p.m.**

The dancefloor is already heaving. We're all here – all the lads. Arms wrapped around each other, shouting the lyrics, any tension from earlier in the day forgotten.

Booze is dribbling down my face out of my top hat – we mixed a dirty pint in it that I managed to down in one. As I was doing it, there was a faint voice in the back of my mind reminding me we'd lose the deposit if it wasn't returned to the suit-hire place in perfect condition, but it wasn't difficult to ignore it.

You only live once, after all.

And those are the words going round and round my head as I dance – the same words that I've been telling myself since J and my mother both made me confront my true feelings.

I'm dancing between Lee and J, but when Lee squirms out from beneath my arm I realize I can barely stand up. I have no clue what time it is, how much I've drunk, or where my wife is.

Lee slides across the dancefloor on his knees and crashes into one of my cousins. We roar with laughter as she falls, landing heavily on top of him.

J is shouting in my ear – some slurring, blagging bollocks that I can't catch a word of over the deafening music. No doubt he's trying to continue our conversation from earlier – he's always been a boring bastard when he's hammered, desperate to have deep conversations that no one can be arsed with.

He doesn't know I've already decided what I'm going to do. I shrug him off – I'd rather fall on my arse than listen to him drone on.

I stagger, but there's plenty of people to keep me upright. One of my uncles catches me, grinning and slapping me on the back.

His wife, my mum's mousier sister, beckons me towards her. "Where's your beautiful bride?" she screams in my ear, her shrill voice easier to make out over the thumping bass than J's mumbling.

I grin and shrug – I haven't seen her since our first dance, which I can't remember much of, other than her wincing every time I stamped on her feet. I put my hand to my brow to search for her, like a sailor looking for land.

And then I spot her, standing against the wall of the ceremony room in that silky blue dress, watching me.

But it's not my wife.

No, it's her maid of honour. The woman who is supposed to be her best friend. The first woman I fell in love with – her mischievousness and unpredictability making me putty in her hands.

Hell, I'm still putty in her hands.

I always will be.

Lisa Boden, the first and only woman I've ever truly loved.

Blonde and curvy and oozing with confidence, she's broken my heart more times than I can count, but I continue to run to her the second she raises a painted eyebrow in my direction. I stagger towards her now, bumping into chairs as I rush towards her suggestive smirk.

"Matty, we need to talk," she shouts in my ear. "I've got something to show you."

She pats the small bag clasped in her hand and turns away, nodding at me to follow.

I don't hesitate. In fact, I'm practically running after her, falling over my own feet in my eagerness. I let her lead me out of the ceremony room and into the entrance hall, and we nearly collide with a woman in white – shit, a woman in a *wedding dress*.

My heart stalls in my chest, and I let go of Lisa's hand like it's on fire. But it isn't Cara. It must be the other bride. She looks familiar, and upset – maybe her husband is cheating too?

A stupid giggle escapes my mouth at the thought of it, but it fades quickly. I'm sure I'm the only arsehole who would even entertain the idea of doing this to their new wife on their wedding day. No, her husband will surely be by her side any moment now, wiping her tears and placing a kiss

on her forehead, while I'm huddled in the cab with my hand between Lisa's thighs.

"Where are we going?" I ask as we leave the entrance hall and dash down a random corridor I don't recognise. Despite the rush of exhilaration being in her presence brings me, I must not have managed to completely drown my conscience with booze, as I hesitate. "What about Cara?"

Lisa stops and turns to me. Her mouth twists like she's trying to stop herself from laughing. "Your *wife*?"

"Your best mate," I counteract.

Lisa stops and cocks her head to once side, looking at me as though I'm some poor, confused puppy. "Matthew, I couldn't give a shit about Cara. I'm only friends with her because of you – you do know that, right? I'd never have made friends with her normally, but if I didn't welcome her into the group, I risked losing you."

I frown as my brain foggily tries to connect the dots, trying to understand if I should be flattered by Lisa's fear of losing me, or chilled by just how easily she lies. How had she managed to become Cara's maid of honour when she doesn't even like her?

"Cara is boring as fuck." Lisa laughs when I don't respond. "You don't need me to tell you that. You've been bored ever since you got with her. Unless you're fucking me, that is."

She flashes me that evil grin that has always terrified me and turned me on in equal measure. But still, I can't help but be thrown by the callousness of her words.

"Don't look so shocked," she says, rolling her eyes and glancing up the empty corridor, as though I'm just as boring as my wife. "Cara will be fine – she'll run home to her fancy house and her loving parents and find some stuffy old accountant to marry. But now she'll have a story to tell that'll make her slightly less dull. We'll have done her a favour, really."

*Will* Cara be fine? She's dreamt about this day for years. She went full bridezilla – obsessing over centrepieces and buttonholes and random shit I couldn't care less about. She even dragged me along to that godawful flash-mob thing and insisted I dance like a chump with a load of other couples in a promotional video for the venue.

I feel myself sway as I remember that day – her giddiness, her exhausting energy, the way she'd befriended another couple and tried to gush about wedding plans with the, frankly, terrified-looking bride.

Shit – that's why the woman Lisa just shoulder barged looks familiar. I shake my head at the coincidence of it. I wonder how her day is going – not great, if her worried expression was anything to go by.

Her fella won't have fucked things up as royally as I have though. No, as far as Cara was concerned, the sun shone out of his arse – *Daniel is sooo charming. And did you see how attentive he was to Louise? He just adores her.*

Her wistful sighs made it perfectly clear that she wished I could be more like Daniel.

"Hello, earth to Matty?" Lisa says, snapping her fingers in front of my face.

I blink, my mind sluggishly scrambling to recall the last thing she'd said before I'd taken a trip down memory lane.

"Do you want to see your wedding present from me, or what?" Lisa says, her mouth tightening in a way that tells me I'm testing her patience.

I nod silently.

She opens her tiny handbag for me to peer inside.

I frown at the unmistakable dark blue booklets.

Passports.

Lisa's impish grin has returned. "Our flight leaves at midnight."

# Transcript of interview

5 June

**In attendance – Inspector Chandra (IC), Róisín Murphy, Chief Events Coordinator (RM)**

IC – Is it often the case that there is more than one wedding a day at Grantham Hall?
RM – Yes, as I've already explained, we are set up to run up to three at a time. We have multiple ceremony rooms, and our tight schedule means there is very little crossover – the guests will still feel as though they have sole use of the venue.
IC – How does that work with the staff? Are they assigned to a specific wedding?
RM – The staff are trained to cover the events in a way that means the couples feel as though they're the centre of attention. There is some crossover, based on timings – the staff serve canapés at one wedding then serve dinner at the other, for example. We've found this enables a seamless transition between those two elements of the event. And of course, there's only one of me.
IC – And only one photographer?
RM – Yes, but Mick knows his routine so well that neither couple is kept waiting for long – he always ensures every iconic shot is captured.
IC – And the two weddings yesterday, they—

[typing noises]

RM – Cara Phillips and Matthew Morris in Ceremony Room A. Louise Jones and Daniel Green in Ceremony Room B.
IC – Indeed – thank you for getting your laptop, it should help. Was there anything that stood out about either wedding? Anything that didn't go to schedule?
RM – No. Everything ran like clockwork, as it always does.
IC – There was no overlap? No accidental crossover of the two events?

RM – Well, nothing that was Grantham Hall's fault.
IC – We're not trying to establish fault at the moment, Ms Murphy. Just the facts.
RM – [sigh] Fine, but I don't know why you need me to tell you this – I'm sure you must know already.
IC – Know what, exactly?
RM – That Matthew Morris eloped mid-wedding.
IC – Eloped?
RM – Ran away, absconded, whatever you want to call it. He made it down the aisle and made Miss Cara Phillips his wife and the event continued without a hitch. But then, right in the middle of the evening, one of the waiting staff cornered me and told me we had a hysterical bride on our hands.
IC – Did you speak to Cara?
RM – Yes. She was distraught. She believed her groom had run off with her maid of honour, what was her name … [typing noises] Ah, yes – Lisa Boden.
IC – And how did you respond?
RM – [laughter] How exactly would you expect me to respond in a situation like that? I'm the Chief Events Coordinator, not an agony aunt. I ensure the right people are in the right place at the right time. I'm not Cupid. I can't mend marriages that are broken before they've even begun.
IC – So you did nothing?
RM – I comforted the woman as best as I could, and suggested she enjoy the rest of the evening with what remained of her wedding guests – there is no broken-heart refund clause, after all.
IC – And did you see the groom, Matthew Morris, or the maid of honour, Lisa Boden, after that?
RM – No, I assumed they'd already left. The best man, his name was … J, something. Ah, yes, here it is – Jason Hughes. He approached Cara when she was sobbing onto my shoulder and informed her that she was correct in her assumptions, and her husband had likely accepted the plane tickets her maid of honour had bought the pair of them. [pause] Mallorca, I believe it was.
IC – And after that, there was nothing untoward, nothing that caught your attention for the rest of the evening?

RM – About their wedding? No.
IC – And what about Louise and Daniel's wedding?
RM – Nothing.

[pause]

IC – Ms Murphy, I don't think you're being entirely honest with us.
RM – Excuse me?
IC – As you've repeatedly told us, weddings at Grantham Hall run like clockwork, all under your supervision. So either that's not true, and you were completely unaware of the events unfolding beneath your nose, or you know something more than you're letting on.

*OceanofPDF.com*

## CHAPTER 35

# The Bride

4 June

**8.30 p.m.**

I'm on the dancefloor with Nina and Sammi, who begged me to come with them. It would distract me while Emily found Daniel, they insisted.

They have a point – I accosted poor Emily multiple times as she passed back and forth through the entrance hall, only to inform me she hadn't found him yet, but not to worry, he must just be busy keeping the guests happy. Before Emily had set off to find Daniel, the four of us had gone to the bridal suite to get my phone and call the dog-sitter. But the terrible signal at Grantham Hall had made it impossible to get through.

My feet are already aching and I dance stiffly, glad for the distraction of Nina and Sammi's extravagant moves and shrill laughter. It helps that they're having fun, but, god, I wish I could have spoken to the dog-sitter so she could reassure me that Buddy was OK. I may have managed to convince myself that my response to the dog photo was just another overreaction – just like the rose, and the scent of Dior Sauvage – but anxiety still gnaws at the edges of my empty stomach.

I just need Daniel to add his calm voice of reason to my bridesmaids'. If he can also assure me that Buddy is fine, then I can finally fully believe it.

The dancefloor is busy, mainly full of older people hobbling back and forth to Eighties cheese. Probably Shirley's friends. Daniel had groaned about the number of random pensioners from the golf club that she'd insisted we'd invite, but then conceded that it was probably safer just to keep his mother happy.

Our wedding seems a world apart from the other wedding happening today. I'd poked my head into their ceremony room before entering my

own, just in case Daniel had somehow ended up at Cara and Matthew's event instead of ours. It was carnage – what looked like about thirty shouting men swinging their ties around and flinging their pints into the air.

Their cake had been cut messily, great chunks of it smeared across the table. Ours remains untouched – Nina had to assure the frazzled events manager that no one gave a shit about Daniel and me missing the cake-cutting time slot.

I suppose I should be grateful that our wedding is a little more civilized, even if it's feeling more like a golf-club social than anything to do with my and Daniel's love for each other.

A sour-faced woman glares at me as she stamps on my foot. I apologize and shrink back, feeling like a stranger at my own party. I ache for the private wedding ceremony I'd first dreamt of when Daniel had proposed.

My heel hits a slippery spot on the floor. I nearly go flying, but Nina and Sammi swoop in to support me before I go down.

"Whoops!" Nina shrieks, over the deafeningly loud music. She's hit the floor multiple times herself, but each time she pops back up with a grin on her face while I wince thinking about the bruises she'll have tomorrow.

I decide to take my near-fall as a sign. I'm tired, I don't like this music, nor the majority of people I'm sharing the dancefloor with. I only agreed to come with Nina and Sammi because they'd been so desperate to see me enjoying the evening.

But I can't fake it any longer. I need to look for Daniel myself – two people searching for him will make it a quicker job.

"You OK?" Sammi shouts, standing on tiptoes to reach my ear. I've stopped dancing, I realize. I'm motionless in the middle of the dancefloor, staring into space. I'm just glad none of the other guests seem to be paying any attention to me whatsoever.

"Yes," I lie. "Just tired. I'm going to go and get some water." Sammi opens her mouth, but I quickly beat her to it. "You stay – keep dancing!"

But Sammi isn't going to let me escape that easily, and her fingers gently press into my forearm as she says, "Talk to us, Louise. Let us help!"

I hesitate. Even if I decide to tell them what's bothering me, where would I start?

"Are you still thinking about the photo?" Nina bellows, her head bobbing to the beat of the deafening music.

I nod, wishing I could just let go of the niggling worry that something isn't right.

"I'm sure it's not Buddy," Nina shouts into my ear, making me wince. "But I can ask the hotel reception if we can use their phone to call the dog-sitter?"

I blink at Nina, stunned that I've somehow forgotten that landlines exist. "Yes," I agree. "That would be great, actually."

"Yes!" Nina punches the air as though I've made her day. "I'm finally going to be useful and earn my bridesmaid badge!"

My smile is genuine. I am so, so lucky to have these girls.

I left my phone upstairs in the bridal suite, so I tell Nina how to unlock it and find the dog-sitter's details. Now I just need to locate Daniel … and Emily … and …

God, where is my father?

In the turmoil caused by the photo, I've barely spared a thought for him in the last hour or so. I'd seen him during John's speech, looking as uncomfortable and as out of place as I had felt. So where has he been since then?

I repeat my desire for water, and this time Nina and Sammi let me leave without question, assuring me they'll call the dog-sitter as soon as the song finishes. I squeeze through clusters of drunk guests, scanning their faces for the man I vowed I'd never see again, but am now desperate to.

Perhaps he saw me dancing and assumed I was busy, that I was happy? And he would have been right, if I had actually been enjoying myself – a heart-to-heart about our broken relationship was hardly appropriate on my wedding night.

But I wasn't having a good time, and actually, despite all the awfulness of the past, the presence of my father could be just what I need right now. He was always the one who listened patiently to my troubles, the one who made things better. Though when I'd told him a truth too hard for him to handle, he'd failed in his role of understanding saviour.

I reach the doorway to the ceremony room and sigh heavily as I escape the worst of the DJ's attempt to burst everyone's eardrums. As I rest for a moment, trying to decide where to start looking for Daniel, a woman shoulder-barges me so violently that I have to grip the wall to avoid falling.

I gasp, scrutinizing her face. Pretty, blonde, curves in all the right places. And a sneering smile that makes me feel small and like I should yet again

be apologizing for my existence.

She doesn't acknowledge me, and my gaze moves towards the man on her arm. He looks haggard – the kind of greying, drooping skin caused by too much alcohol and not enough sleep. I recognise him from the day we filmed that stupid flash mob. Cara's fiancé – Matthew.

What is he doing, rushing down an empty corridor with a pretty woman – a woman who isn't his wife?

But my curiosity is dampened by the appearance of Shirley.

She catches sight of me and sniffs. I have to resist the urge to check if she's reacting to me – I don't smell, that's just Shirley's face. Emily once described her as looking like she had a particularly splintery stick shoved up her arse and I had to agree. She's tetanus-level of rigid – never a hair out of place, never a smudge of misplaced makeup. Never a smile on her tight old face.

Even now, she looks prim, proper … and disapproving. I try to picture the bride she'd had in mind for Daniel. Someone with a background, I imagine, instead of a mystery that no one wanted to unravel. Would she have got on with my mother? My mother would have wanted to impress Shirley, I know that much for sure. She would have wanted her to like her, would have wanted Hannah not to show her up in front of *Shirley*.

I have the distinct impression that Shirley is someone who was used to their opinion mattering greatly. God knows I'd tried to make her think better of me in the early days of my and Daniel's relationship. Eventually, I'd accepted that she would never like me, but I could possibly persuade her to *tolerate* me.

The wrinkle in her top lip as she stares at me makes it clear that she can barely even do that now.

"Shirley," I say, flatly. I'm too exhausted to simper and charm – it's never got me anywhere before now, so why bother anymore?

"Louise," she says slowly, as though my name tastes rotten in her mouth.

It's the first time I've spoken to her today, I realize. I should compliment her on her dress, or something. But perhaps it's her who should be forcing herself to say something pleasant to me? A simple, "Congratulations," would suffice, but Shirley looks as though she's too busy chewing a mouthful of ants to speak.

So I bypass the pleasantries. "Have you seen Daniel?" I ask.

“Lost him already?” she asks, quick as a whip. I see her savouring the words as I try not to roll my eyes.

“Yes. Have you seen him?”

Her eyes narrow. She isn’t used to this version of me, the one who couldn’t care less about her approval. I have a sudden urge to shove my wedding band into her face and scream, *Fuck you, Shirley – I won!*

“I haven’t seen him since the speeches finished,” Shirley says dryly.

“Right, thanks,” I reply, certain that she wouldn’t tell me even if she had seen him.

I turn to leave and resume my search, when she adds, “But I did see that bridesmaid of yours.”

I stiffen, irritated that she hasn’t bothered learning, or is pretending not to know, Emily’s name.

“Oh yeah?” I ask, raising my eyebrows. Shirley doesn’t elaborate, and I force a smile as I have no choice but to agree to play her ridiculous power game. “Can you tell me where you saw her please?”

She sniffs disapprovingly again and turns to look towards the entrance doors. “She was out there,” she nods. “She was heading in the direction of the woods.”

I frown and look past her and through the doors, which are wide open, with people coming and going, enjoying the balmy evening.

“She seemed in an awful hurry,” Shirley continues, and I get the feeling she’s relishing my confusion. “Almost as though she were running away from the wedding as fast as she could!”

*OceanofPDF.com*

## CHAPTER 36

# The Bride

4 June

**9 p.m.**

I hesitate, sure that Shirley is toying with me. There's no plausible explanation for Emily leaving the wedding reception to go exploring the vast grounds.

Unless …

There's still no sign of Daniel. Could Emily have seen him in the woods and followed him? I had asked her to find him for me after all, and if I know anything about Emily, it's that she wouldn't have wanted to let me down and return without him.

Shirley is still watching me, amusement twisting her thin lips. The urge to smack her nasty, sallow face is so strong that my hand twitches before I can regain control. The rage startles me and I dig my fingernails into my palm, banishing the thought. It scares me, the idea that I could be capable of —

I can't look her in the eye anymore and drop my gaze. I sense her swelling with the victory of whatever spiteful game she's playing with me, but don't care. I won't rise to it – I'm not the angry, aggressive person who nearly made an appearance just then. The idea that I even fantasized about hurting someone fills my stomach with self-loathing.

"Thank you, Shirley," I say, flashing her a beaming smile. I won't hit the woman, but perhaps I could kill her with kindness instead. "That's really helpful."

I reach out to her and take her cold, bony fingers in mine. Her eyes bulge, and I realize we've never actually touched before. I almost laugh

with the absurdity of it – I've just married her son, and she's never once opened her arms to me, in any sense.

"You've done so much for us, Shirley," I murmur, not blinking so that my eyes fill with water. "Daniel and I are so grateful."

I keep hold of her hand, daring her to wrench it away from me, as I know she must be desperate to. I continue to smile and don't break our gaze despite the sting in my eyes.

Finally, she's forced to return my smile. "Yes, well. It's what *family* are for."

I don't miss the sly dig about my lack of family, but the exchange has been more satisfying than if I'd slapped her – especially the way her cheek twitched when I said "Daniel and I". I forced her to acknowledge us as a couple, a unit – both in love and, now, in law.

I let go of her hand and walk away, feeling a foot taller than when I first came across her. A new confidence fills me as I push through the guests mingling in the entrance hall and out of the main doors. If I can handle Shirley, then I can handle anything.

I'm engulfed in a cloud of cigarette smoke the second I step outside. I try not to cough as the smokers eye me, as though challenging me to say something – I've stepped into their territory, after all.

I smile briefly and consider asking if any of them have seen Emily or Daniel. But I don't see friendly faces, or even faces that I recognise. They must be from Cara and Matthew's wedding, and by the dishevelled look of them, the alcohol has been flowing even more freely than at my wedding.

There's a bucket of sand at their feet. It was supposed to be for the sparklers Daniel and I were planning on lighting later, but they've used it as an ashtray.

The sight of the bent fag ends poking out of the sand makes me want to burst into floods of disproportionate tears, so I tear myself away and walk away from the hotel and into the grounds where Daniel and I spent hours posing for Mick's ridiculous photos. The sun is setting, and it's colder since I was last out here, talking to my father. That conversation feels like an age ago now.

I hitch my dress up and try to keep my pace steady and certain, aware how strange it must seem for the bride to be striding off into the extensive gardens in the middle of her own reception, alone. I can almost feel the eyes

of the smokers on the back of my head, and picture the amused glances being exchanged as they wonder what on earth I'm doing.

What *am* I doing? Even if Emily is out here, which I'm finding harder to believe by the second, what are the chances I'll be able to find her? Shirley was almost certainly messing with me – I wouldn't put it past her to be that vindictive. But what's the alternative to searching for my maid of honour? I don't want to return to the sticky, slippery dancefloor and carry on waiting. No, I want to *do* something.

If I'd thought the interior of Grantham Hall was a maze, nothing had prepared me for the labyrinth effect of the gardens. I hadn't paid attention when we were following Mick around, but it seems to have been designed to trap visitors in twisty pathways snaking through dense foliage. My heels crunch over the gravel and two ten-foot-high hedges flank me, making me shrink in on myself. I've passed the flat, manicured lawn where we had the photoshoot now, and am entering the older, wilder section – the woods.

Ancient oak trees cut out the rest of the fading sun, and I'm suddenly aware that I'm in an unfamiliar woodland, in the near dark. Alone.

I sneak a glance over my shoulder, back towards the hotel. The smokers have disappeared from view – the path had led me down a slope without me realizing, and I can barely even see the roof of Grantham Hall.

Which means no one can see me either.

I can't decide if the thought brings me comfort, or dread.

The path forks. Both options are muddy, narrow tracks – no longer the carefully groomed neatness of the sunken lawn and rose beds. I turn my gaze from left to right, wondering if this is the moment I should admit defeat and return to the hotel and Shirley's smug smile.

Then I spot a footprint. It's deep in the mulch of the track leading to the left. I try to remember what Emily's shoes were like, and if they fit the print. It doesn't look like a high heel, but perhaps it belongs to Daniel?

But why would he be out here?

I hesitate for only a moment before following the left path.

The track twists through the woods and my dress trails across the wet mud despite my efforts to hold it up. A branch whips against my bare upper arm, and I'm sure it's drawn blood.

I push forwards. Despite feeling embarrassment about this ridiculous endeavour, I realize that I might actually prefer it out here, shoving past

brambles in the dusk, compared to the claustrophobia and barely concealed disdain inside the house.

But I should have brought some kind of light source, and sigh as I think of my phone, abandoned in the bridal suite. The residual light from the sun is disappearing rapidly, and soon, I realize with concern … soon it will be completely dark in here.

A bark of laughter escapes my mouth. Shirley will be delighted to discover that her words have sent me struggling through the woods, tearing the delicate hem of my dress and scratching the goose-bumped skin of my arms.

My foot disappears into a particularly muddy section of the path with a thick squelch. Stagnant water seeps into my shoe.

I close my eyes, cursing my stupidity. At least, I muse, I'll have a genuine excuse not to re-join the party now – I can hardly hit the dancefloor with splatters of mud across my dress and smelling of fetid water. Surely it's late enough for me to make my excuses and retreat to the bridal suite, where I could wait for Daniel to join me?

Yes. That's what I'll do. He'll probably be back from wherever he's been by now. Maybe he's even on the dancefloor, asking Nina and Sammi where I've gone. We've probably been missing each other by moments all evening.

My lower back spasms as my ankle twists in the mulch. I think of the painkillers – I don't care if I've already had more than my recommended dose, the second I get back to the bridal suite, I'm taking more. And more diazepam – it won't matter if it makes things a little woozy, not once I no longer have to pretend to be enjoying myself. And god knows I deserve it, after today.

I try to wrench my sunken foot out of the mud and realize with dismay that it's stuck. I try again, debating whether it would be better to just abandon the shoe – it's not like I'll be wearing it again in future. As I heave, I lose my balance and windmill my arms, reaching out for something to hold onto that will stop me from landing face first in the bog.

My hand finds the rough bark of a tree trunk, and I steady myself on it, then twist my foot free, my shoe included. My leg feels twice as heavy now that it's weighed down with thick, sticky mud. I try to ignore the stench of the stagnant bog mulch that is now soaking into the train of my dress and shoes.

Still clinging to the tree, I take a tentative step around the edge of the swampy patch. I can barely see the path anymore, so have to rely on tapping my feet to test the footing before putting my weight on it – I don't want to have pulled myself free only to plunge straight back into the quagmire.

My toe finds something lumpy, and I pull my foot back, leaving it hovering in mid-air. I frown at the ground, but it's too dark to make out what I'd almost trodden on. Was it a tree root, poking out of the path? I try to recall the sensation of it beneath my foot. It was … squishy.

Tree roots aren't squishy.

I bend forwards at the waist and peer through the gloom. There it is – a dark shape covered in the same sticky mud I'd struggled to escape from. I can barely see it in the murky woods, but …

There's something next to it. Something that glimmers in the last of the evening light filtering through the trees. The round, shiny surface is unmistakable – it's a watch. My mind sluggishly processes what the watch is attached to. That mud-covered, lumpy, misshapen object that I'd squashed beneath my shoe is … a hand.

# Transcript of interview

5 June

**In attendance – Inspector Chandra (IC), Jason Hughes, best man for Matthew and Cara's wedding (JH)**

IC – Good morning, Jason.
JH – Call me J – no one calls me Jason.
IC – OK, J. I'm going to ask some questions about Cara and Matthew's wedding yesterday. You were close with the groom?
JH – Of course, yeah. Matty's my best mate – has been since we were kids. We were all a group, you know? We had our ups and downs, like, but we always came back together.
IC – Even Matthew and Lisa, who dated when they were teenagers, I believe?
JH – [laughter] They more than dated. They were on and off for so many years that we all lost track of whether they were a thing or not – sometimes they'd break up and make up multiple times in one night. They were pretty exhausting to be honest. I was actually kind of glad when he met Cara.
IC – And why was that?
JH – Thought he'd settle down and leave the whole Lisa drama behind.
IC – But he didn't?
JH – Nah. He wanted to, I think. But Lisa wouldn't let him. She made herself part of Cara's life, as well as his, so no matter where he turned, she'd be there.
IC – And their relationship continued, even when he got engaged?
JH – Yeah.
IC – Do you think Cara was aware of Matthew's infidelity?
JH – Nah. I dunno. I mean, maybe. She had to know – everyone else did. I dunno how she wouldn't have known. But then why would she have ignored it if she had?
IC – Did you notice anything during the wedding yesterday? Anything untoward?

JH – Aside from Matty sweating like a pig the entire time and flipflopping between staying loyal to Cara and being with Lisa? Nah, it was just a typical wedding – a glorified piss-up really.
IC – Were you aware of Matthew and Lisa's plans to leave together?
JH – [laughter] I doubt the plan was anything to do with Matty.
IC – No?
JH – Matty isn't a plan-making kind of guy, you know? And he definitely hadn't made any that day – he didn't even know if he was going to go through with the wedding, until he did. But Lisa, nah – Lisa is different.
IC – How so?
JH – Lisa is a bit … wild, you know?
IC – In what way?
JH – [pause] She's … fiery. She likes attention. Likes breaking the rules. I think that's why Matty's always been so obsessed with her – she's unpredictable, always searching for a thrill, you know? But yeah, she must have planned them leaving together, 'cause she bought plane tickets, didn't she?
IC – Did she tell you about the tickets?
JH – Yeah, but not until after the food and the speeches and all that. She pulled me aside, asked if I could keep a secret. I nearly told her no, to be honest – I'd been dealing with Matty being on the brink of crashing out all day, I couldn't be arsed with any more drama. But Lisa is … Well, she's hard to say no to. So yeah, she showed me the tickets, all pleased with herself, like. I thought it was pretty shitty – to wait until he was actually married then pull him away from Cara like that. But I kept my mouth shut, just laughed along with her.
IC – Matthew could have refused to go with her, could he not?
JH – Yeah, you're right. That's exactly what he should have done. But there was no chance of that, not if you knew their history. And now he's left Cara and buggered off to Mallorca. Is that why you're here – because Cara reported him missing? I dunno why she'd do that – I told her where he's gone. Poor woman was already upset when I found her, so she must have had an idea of what was going on. Then I had to break the news that she was right to be worried, and he'd fucked off with Lisa. I told her to move on with her life – to forget him. There was no need to get you guys involved.

IC – [pause] I’m afraid there’s more to this case than a wife reporting her husband missing.

*OceanofPDF.com*

## CHAPTER 37

# The Bride

4 June

**9.30 p.m.**

I flinch backwards, straightening and bringing a hand to my mouth, catching my gasp before it can make a sound. My instincts scream at me to run, but I can't – the mud holds my feet and stops me fleeing from the body that lies on the path just inches away from me.

My gaze travels over the grime-streaked hand, to the metallic gleam of the watch, across the dark object that I'd assumed was a tree root, but I now see is a human arm, and, finally … to the head.

But I can't see the head. I can barely see my own hands in front of my face anymore. There's just a patch of darkness my eyes refuse to focus on.

"Jesus." The low, pleading moan escapes my lips and I squeeze my eyes shut, praying that when I open them, the body lying on the forest floor will be gone.

But it's still there. Of course it is.

I wrench my shoes out of the mulch and lurch forwards, squinting through the gloom. The body has been partially covered by branches and leaves. If I hadn't trodden on the hand, I'd have never noticed it.

I realize why I couldn't make out the head – the brown branch of a fir tree is covering it, giving the body the appearance of being headless.

Maybe it is.

I grit my teeth. I can't be squeamish, can't be scared. I don't even know if they're *dead*, for god's sake – they could need my help.

I lean forwards, teetering in the mud. For an awful moment, I wonder if I'm going to fall and sprawl on top of the body. But I manage to save

myself, my weak back jolting with the strain of it. The branch is rough beneath my fingers. I fling it away, across the path.

It's a man, dressed in a dark suit. He lies face down, his bald head and the white of his collar just visible in the gloom. The collar is splashed with mud and … I suck air over my teeth as I realize what I'm looking at – blood. Even in the fading light it's bright red. Still fresh.

He must be one of the many guests I'm unfamiliar with. A distant uncle, perhaps. I pray he's not someone Daniel cared greatly about. Or maybe he's a guest from Cara and Matthew's wedding – that feels more likely. Their event was certainly livelier than ours, judging by the carnage on their dancefloor and the number of drunk people I'd seen getting a breath of fresh air on my way out here.

Perhaps he came for a walk, tripped, hit his head. I wonder if he died as soon as he landed on the ground, or if he suffocated on rotten leaves and—

I shake my head violently, scared by the morbid thoughts swamping my brain. What is *wrong* with me? I should at least check the poor man's pulse.

Once again, I hinge at the hips, and a bolt of pain shoots down my left leg as my nerves grate against my spine. I don't want to be here; I don't want to touch whoever this poor soul is. I struggle to fight the temptation to turn away and pretend I never saw him.

But I think of the time it had been me who'd fallen, me who was lying face down on the pavement, needing help. If Emily hadn't picked me up, then I'd still be back there. And if I had somehow managed to survive until now, I'd be wishing I hadn't.

Whoever this man is, I won't leave him.

My hand trembles in the air as it hovers above his neck. I don't know where to touch him, afraid to plunge my hand into whatever has caused the splash of blood on the back of his collar. Will he be cold by now? Will he be decomposing already, becoming one with the rotting mulch on the forest floor?

"Stop it," I hiss in disgust. *Just do it, Louise.*

My fingers are nearly on him, and I brace myself. Then the realization dawns on me, and I struggle to understand how I've been so stupid, so blind.

Daniel and Emily aren't the only people who I can't find tonight.

My father.

All hesitancy gone, I let go of the hem of my dress and let the train fall heavily into the bog. I dive forwards and grasp the man's head between my hands. His neck is still warm, but I can't turn him to reveal his face – his body is too heavy, his profile is caked with mud, and the rapidly fading light means he's impossible to distinguish.

My legs shake as I squat and use all my strength to push his shoulder in an attempt to heave his dead weight away from me. Pain flares up my back in a rush of heat and I lose my balance, my hand flying out to catch myself.

My fingers brush something on the ground next to the body, something made of coarse material. I hurry to grab it, fumbling and nearly losing it into the swampy muck I'm crouched in.

A camera case.

The pieces slot into place. My father isn't the only bald-headed man I haven't seen for a while. It isn't him lying dead in the woods. It's the photographer – Mick.

*OceanofPDF.com*

## CHAPTER 38

# The Bride

4 June

**9.45 p.m.**

Now that I've put a name to the body, it all makes sense – this is Mick's camera, Mick's badly fitting suit, Mick's hairless head.

But I have to be sure. I have to see him.

The case is light, and I realize the camera must be around Mick's neck, where it's been all day. I reach back down to follow the strap with my fingers, wincing as I tug it over his head. Luckily, Mick didn't land on top of the camera, so it's relatively clean despite the lens cap not being on. My fingers move over its unfamiliar angles until I find a large, smooth button. I point the camera towards the body, which is becoming more invisible by the moment as the woods descend into darkness, and click.

A blinding light erupts out of the camera and I flinch, my eyes stinging. When I open them again, warped shapes and patterns float in front of me, and I'm momentarily blind. I blink, willing my vision to return to normal so I can see the photo I've captured.

I find a button that feels slightly more raised than the others and click it. Sure enough, it takes me to the gallery.

And there he is.

I didn't have the strength to roll him onto his back, but I can see his diamond earring, somehow still twinkling through the grime. There's a viscous, bloody wound on the back of his head, dribbling gore onto his collar.

Our photographer is dead.

And as much as I want to convince myself that this is yet another rose, hint of perfume, or my fragile mind turning innocent photos of dogs into

something they aren't … I can't explain this away. The hole in his skull makes it perfectly clear that this wasn't a heart attack or a tragic accident.

No, someone killed him.

I rush to my feet, gritting my teeth through the pain, and scan the forest around me. Mick's body is still warm, which means it must have been recently. So recently that—

A twig snaps in the undergrowth behind me. I snap my head towards the sound, forcing my eyes to open so wide they ache, but the woods have truly been plunged into darkness now and I can't see a thing.

Whoever killed Mick is probably still out here, with me.

I gasp, and adrenaline swamps my tired, aching limbs. I need to go, *now*.

I heave my feet out of the sticky mud and power away from Mick, his camera still clasped in my hand. The mulch clings to my shoes, as though reluctant to let me get to safety.

I can't see a thing. I can't even make out the outline of the trees against the sky anymore.

A branch hits my cheek and I yelp as I feel my skin split beneath it. But I can't stop. I curse my stupidity for being here in the first place as I battle onwards, waving my free hand in front of me to ward off any other obstacles in my way.

My foot hits something solid and I fall heavily to my knees with a cry of pain. It's a tree stump, I realize, as I blindly run my fingers over the rough bark and flat, circular top.

My back screams in protest, but I can't dither – whoever killed Mick could be behind me right now, watching with amusement as I struggle through the undergrowth.

I stagger to my feet, only to hit yet another hard object when I take another step. My toes throb with the pain of the impact, but I manage to stay standing this time.

But for how much longer?

I can't keep going like this. I'll end up finishing myself off before Mick's killer can even reach me. But what choice do I have? I have no way of lighting the path so I can avoid the obstacles I keep colliding with.

Wait … the camera. How could I have not thought of it? I raise it in front of me, and click.

Once again the flash blinds me, and I shy away from its light. When my vision finally returns to normal, I check the image I've captured.

Jesus. I'm not even on the path anymore – I've somehow staggered into the undergrowth. The photo reveals that the ground beneath my feet is rocky and covered in twisted tree roots just waiting to break my ankles. The path has bent around to the right.

I orientate myself, staring towards where the camera has told me the path leads and trying to visualise it, instead of the black nothingness I can actually see. I start walking again.

The ground beneath my feet feels smoother, firmer now. Thank god I'm not squelching through the mud anymore, or worse, thrashing through the dense woodland at the side of the path.

There's a noise behind me, but I don't turn, knowing I won't be able to see a thing. It was just an animal, rustling in the leaves. That's all. Just an animal.

I raise the camera in front of me and take another photo. *Click.*

I'm still on the path. The trees loom above me on all sides, blocking out the sky. I try not to think about the fact that anyone could be out here with me, completely hidden, but only metres away.

A few more steps. Another photo.

*Click.*

I've drifted slightly to the left and turn a little before setting off again.

*Click.*

I've learnt to close my eyes when I take the photos now, so the flash doesn't leave me blinded and more vulnerable than I already am, if that's possible.

*Click.*

The path is about to start leading slightly downwards, and I make a mental note to brace my legs in preparation, so I don't stumble down the slope.

*Click.*

The muddy track is starting to look less wild – I can see flecks of gravel. Which means—

*Click.*

Yes! The fork – the place I was given the choice of turning left or right. What would have happened if I'd taken the right path, instead of the left? Would I have returned to the hotel by now, slightly breathless and mucky from my evening exploration, but free from the burden of discovering a murder victim?

Would Mick have been left lying out here until morning? Or longer – how often did people visit the woods? Not often, if the overgrown thickets lining the path were anything to go by.

I refocus on getting back to Grantham Hall without spraining an ankle, or worse.

I can remember the shape the path took now, curving between the huge hedges. Once I'm through them, I'll be able to see the hotel, and its lights will guide me back to safety. I almost don't bother taking another photo, so buoyed by the relief of making it back in one piece.

*Click.*

The image reveals a person, their eyes huge black circles, standing inches in front of me.

# Transcript of interview

5 June

**In attendance – Inspector Chandra (IC), Róisín Murphy, Chief Events Coordinator (RM)**

IC – I'd like to talk about the woods now.
RM – I'm sorry – you accuse me of some kind of crime, and now you want to chat about the woods?
IC – You weren't accused of anything, Ms Murphy. We're just gathering the facts.
RM – And you want facts about the woods?
IC – Yes, at the back of the gardens.
RM – What have the woods got to do with the two weddings you're interested in?
IC – If you can just bear with me and answer the questions as I ask them—
RM – [laughter] Fine, but the way you're going about this feels like you're trying your hardest to confuse me, to trip me up.
IC – The woods are somewhat unkempt, compared to the rest of the formal gardens.
RM – [sigh] Yes. They're woods. It's kind of in their nature.
IC – Are they as infrequently visited as, say, the cellar?
RM – Oh, for god's sake, this again. Are you concerned that the tree trunks haven't been dusted?
IC – No, Ms Murphy, we're concerned about what was found in the woods during last night's wedding. Something serious enough to warrant the dozens of officers currently combing every inch of the estate for evidence, something— [pause] I'm sorry, it's been a long night.
RM – You're telling me.
IC – I'm afraid I have some upsetting news to share with you. Your photographer, Michael Evans, was found deceased in the woods last night.

[pause]

RM – Mick … Mick’s dead?
IC – I’m sorry to have to break it to you this way.
RM – What happened? Did he fall? Heart attack?
IC – We haven’t determined the cause of death yet. We’re trying to determine if he’s somehow linked to what happened, or if it was a case of wrong place, wrong time.
RM – Linked to *what* exactly, inspector? He was linked to the weddings, of course he was. He’s linked to every damn wedding we hold here.
IC – Specifically, whether he has any connections to the *guests* at last night’s weddings. Anything other than being responsible for taking their photographs.
RM – I’m not aware of him knowing them beforehand, if that’s what you mean.
IC – But what about on the day? Does he ever strike up friendships with the guests? Or become, I don’t know, overfamiliar with them?

[pause]

RC – Look, inspector, I don’t see how I’m supposed to help you answer any more questions when you still won’t tell me what happened at my own venue. You tell me one of my oldest colleagues is dead, but not how, or why. You drop vague hints about the cellar and my staff. But without the facts, I simply can’t help you! What, exactly, is going on?

*OceanofPDF.com*

## CHAPTER 39

# The Bride

4 June

**10 p.m.**

I scream, and in my panic, the camera falls from my hands and crashes to the ground.

But it's not the image on the screen I should be afraid of. The person I captured is *right here*, in front of me.

I can feel them breathing.

I stagger backwards and bite back a terrified whimper. The person's features were blurred in the photo. But I saw pale, white skin and huge black eyes. Like something out of a nightmare.

I hold my breath, my eyes wide in the pitch black, ready to catch any movement. I should run, but fear paralyzes me, rooting my feet to the gravel path. With the exception of the gentle rustling of leaves in the breeze, and an owl hooting in the distance, the night is silent.

Why aren't they doing anything? Do they even know I'm here?

I think of the blinding flash that must have illuminated the entire area for a moment, followed by me staring stupidly at the screen, then screaming.

Of course they know.

Nothing happens. I can't even hear them breathing anymore.

I consider reaching forwards to feel the air in front of me, but the prospect of my fingers grazing the chest of Mick's murderer sends a shiver of terror up my spine.

Perhaps the only reason they haven't already attacked was because they were momentarily stunned by the flash?

Then what the hell am I doing here, standing still and waiting for them to recover?

My body tenses, ready to move. But where can I go? There's no way I'm returning to the woods, and I can't go sideways – the hedges that flank the path are huge, impenetrable things. I look up, but even the stars are invisible, obscured by vegetation and thick cloud cover. My only option is forwards, but the killer is standing directly in front of me, blocking my way back to the hotel.

I'll have to go straight through them. If I run … if I don't hesitate … maybe I can take them by surprise.

I don't have time to consider the madness of what I'm about to do, and hitch my dress up. But just as I'm about to launch myself forwards into the darkness, I hear something.

A sniff, followed by a soft sob.

I freeze, and as I concentrate, I notice something else, something strong and sweet that I'd recognise anywhere. Perfume.

"*Emily?*"

The sob is louder this time, thick with relief.

"Emily, is that you?" I repeat, barely able to believe it.

"Louise?" she replies in a scared voice that I would have never imagined could come from the mouth of my brave best friend.

My fear extinguished, I reach towards her voice and find her arms, running my fingers down her bare skin until I reach her hands. I grasp them in mine. They're icy cold.

"Oh, my god." I gasp. "Emily, what are you doing here? What *happened*?"

I feel her hands tremble as she starts to cry, and I squeeze her fingers harder.

"I don't know. I don't even know where I am. It's so dark!"

I nod, not that she'll be able to see the gesture. The dark is horrible and oppressive, and I realize I'm still forcing my eyes open as wide as they'll go, hopelessly trying to see. We need to get out of here and into the light.

"We're not far from the hotel," I say, remembering the momentary relief I'd felt when I'd realized how close to the formal gardens I was, before I took the photo that revealed Emily standing in front of me.

I take a tentative step forwards and around Emily so we're side by side. She clutches my hand with both of hers as I move, as though she's scared of losing me in the dark. As inappropriate as it is, I feel a flutter of pride that for once, it's her who needs me instead of the other way around.

I tread carefully, not wanting to trip over the camera that I dropped. But my feet don't make contact with it – it must have gone further than I'd thought when I flung it away when confronted with that awful image.

The awful image that turned out to be my maid of honour, alone and distressed in the woods.

*What was she doing out here?*

I think about what she said to explain her presence as we shuffle forwards, one tiny step at a time. She claimed not to know why she was here, or even where she was. How is that possible?

My shoulder brushes a dense clump of hedge and I refocus – I can worry about the why later. First, I need to get us out of here.

Keeping my left arm down so Emily can cling to me, I throw my right out in front of me to make sure I don't walk us into the hedgerow again. We keep moving, and I try to hush Emily's whimpering – whoever killed Mick could still be out here.

Then finally, *finally*, there is light. It's faint – just a tasteful lamp set low in the border of the sunken lawn. But I can finally see, and the relief spreads a smile across my face.

Emily's pace quickens and we eagerly leave the woods, moving towards the light on the lawn. We pause when we reach it, huddling like travellers around a campfire, and I finally look at her.

I gasp.

Emily, usually so perfectly made up, poised, and in control, looks dreadful. The huge black eye circles I'd seen in the photo are from her smudged makeup, I realize, which has run so badly it's left dark tracks of grime down her cheeks. Her hair is wild and tangled with leaves, and what looks like a bramble is caught up in the elegant pearl clip she'd fastened into her curls this morning.

And just like Mick, there's blood on her temple.

"Emily," I choke, pulling her closer. "What happened?"

She blinks at the lamp, and I notice one of her fake eyelashes is barely hanging on.

"Emily?" I repeat, gently squeezing her arms when she doesn't respond.

She turns her gaze to me, as though startled by my presence. Fear stirs in my gut. There's something very wrong with her.

"I don't remember," she finally rasps. She frowns and stares into the light again, before repeating in a fainter voice, "I don't remember."

I swallow painfully, wanting to shake the truth out of her, but certain it won't help. Besides, I think I can guess what happened.

The state she's in … the confusion … the head wound.

It's clear that whoever murdered Mick very nearly got Emily too.

The thought makes my entire body convulse, as though I'm physically repelling the prospect that Emily could have been …

I can't bear to think about it.

If I'd lost her—

There's a noise in the woods behind us. It sounds like twigs breaking under the weight of a foot. I snap my head around but the path lies empty, leading into the gaping dark tunnel between the hedgerows. There's no one there.

But that doesn't mean they're not nearby, lurking, waiting.

"Let's go," I say, tugging Emily away from the woods. We've lingered too long.

But she resists and sets her lips like a pouting child. "No!" she cries, too loud. "No, I want to stay by the light!"

My heart aches with sympathy. How long has she been lost among the trees, staggering around in the dark, disorientated and alone? At least I'd had the camera flash to light my way.

"I know," I murmur, rubbing the gooseflesh on her upper arms. "We won't go back to the dark. I promise."

I look around desperately, and spot another lamp set in the lawn around ten metres away, towards the hotel. "But look," I say, pointing it out to Emily. "That one's even brighter! Let's go over there."

I wait, unsure whether this tactic will work. If I'd tried it with Emily on a normal day, she'd have been completely unimpressed by me treating her like a small child. But this isn't normal Emily – this is an injured, confused woman who needs me to be the strong one, for a change.

She frowns at the lamp, then back at the one we're standing by, as though weighing up the intensity of the beams they emit. I sigh with relief as she nods and starts towards the other light.

I almost can't keep up with her and try not to panic when I notice the strange, lurching way she's walking. I think of the pain I've had to battle with every day for the last four years, the medication, the way it forces me to remember. Please, *please* don't let Emily's head injury have done anything lasting. Please.

I glance behind me every few steps, but the path leading into the darkness of the woods is still empty. When I return my gaze to face forwards, I realize with surprise that Emily has arrived at the light without me.

I hurry to keep up. And then I see it. Grantham Hall. Huge, imposing, and lit from every angle.

A sob of relief bursts out of my mouth. I'd never felt attached to the venue – it had felt too big, too daunting. But now … now I've never seen anything so beautiful in my life.

"Look!" I say, touching Emily's arm to make her look up from the light, which she is again transfixed by. "We're safe now," I tell her, rubbing her cold arm with my hand. "We're safe."

Her fearful expression doesn't change as she stares up at the hotel, but fresh tears run down the mascara tracks on her cheeks.

"Let's get inside," I say, taking her hand.

She follows without resisting this time, and as we walk, I try to figure out what will come next.

Light. Warmth. Safety. Staring guests. Police.

*Daniel.*

Oh god, the thought of him makes me stumble, and Emily supports me as though on autopilot, ready to hold me up even when she can barely stand herself.

*Please, please let Daniel be safe.*

I picture him as we walk, inside, drinking with his friends. Maybe even on the dancefloor. I don't care where he is, or what he's doing. I just want him to be OK.

My heart continues to judder urgently in my chest, refusing to let me believe he'll be safe. I need to pull myself together, or I'll be no use at all when we finally make it up the steps and into the hotel. Christ, I'll be such a jabbering mess that the police will wonder if it was *me* who killed Mick and attacked Emily.

The thought of the police brings the questions rushing back. Mick could have been in the woods taking photos, perhaps. But why was Emily out there?

Shirley hadn't been lying about seeing her after all, I realize, not that the thought makes me feel any warmer towards my mother-in-law.

“Emily …” I hesitate. I should probably avoid asking her difficult questions in case they traumatise her even more, but I have to know – I have to understand what happened tonight. “What were you doing in the woods?”

I wait for her inevitable response. *I don’t remember.*

But she frowns, and for a moment, the bewildered fog lifts from her expression and I glimpse my sharp, strong friend again.

“I came out to find Daniel,” she says, her voice steady and certain. “Shirley told me he was out here, so I followed him.”

*OceanofPDF.com*

## CHAPTER 40

# The Bride

4 June

**10.15 p.m.**

I stop walking and blink at Emily, trying to process what she'd said.

Shirley told Emily that Daniel was out here? But … Shirley told me that *Emily* was out here. She never mentioned Daniel. In fact, she explicitly told me she hadn't seen her son since the speech.

So why did she lie?

Confusion swamps my brain and spirals, making me feel so dizzy that the strength goes out of my legs and I only just manage to save myself before hitting the floor. What is *happening*?

I have no idea. But I can't shake the feeling that Shirley planned this – that she wanted Emily and me out of the hotel, wandering around the woods in the dark.

I gaze wearily up at Grantham Hall as my vision starts to solidify. Earlier, the sight of it had filled me with relief and hope – we would be safe inside its walls. But now …

Now I'm wondering if we'd be better off staying out here.

Yet again, I glance warily over my shoulder into the vast darkness of the grounds. Staying here isn't an option – we may be alone for now, but whoever killed Mick can't be far away. If only either of us had a phone so we could call the police and wait here until they came, but handbags and pockets don't tend to feature in bridal wear.

"OK," I say, wishing I could be sure I was making the right decision. "Let's go inside and call the police."

Emily's eyes widen at the mention of the police and my heart aches with sympathy. She still has no idea what has happened tonight, not that I'm

much better informed myself. But now she knows that it's serious enough to need to call 999 in the middle of a wedding party.

Arms linked, we start up the empty steps towards the entrance hall – the smokers have gone back inside. My filthy, shredded train drapes across the ground behind me, and I try not to think about the expressions on the guests' faces when they see us. I hope the first person we come across is one of the few I can call a friend.

The entrance doors have been shut, and I frown, trying to figure out why. The night is still fairly warm, and surely the smokers will want easy access to outdoors?

My attention is drawn towards the bucket of sand – it had been full of cigarette butts before, but now—

My heart leaps with hope as I realize what the thin black sticks are. Burnt sparklers. Has Daniel been out here, trying to keep the wedding on track by waving the sparklers in the air, wondering where I am?

I start as a figure appears from the vegetation flanking the huge wooden doors. My fear quickly morphs into dismay.

It's John.

He hasn't seen us – he's preoccupied by disposing of his cigarette stub, which he stamps into the gravel with unnecessary force.

I glare at his sharp profile, dislike heating my face. He's the last person I want to speak to. If we stand here silently, will he enter the hall without noticing us?

But then Emily lets out a low groan and he snaps his head around, his eyes widening with alarm as he takes in our bedraggled state. I try to guess what's going through his head, but can't – I have no idea who John is, not really. All I know of him is that he clearly hates me. He's probably glad to see me filthy and desperate.

The breath leaves my chest as the thought hits – John is out here, near the scene of the crimes, and he hates me …

"What are you doing here?" I bark at the same time as he says, "What the hell happened?"

I glare, waiting for him to answer first.

He motions at the cigarette butt still beneath his perfectly polished shoe. "I was having a smoke," he says in that slow tone he uses whenever he speaks to me, as though he suspects I'm a complete moron.

But I was done with his disdain even before the horror in the woods. I'm done playing his games, and I'm done being treated like a parasite, sucking the life out of his best friend.

"Were you in the woods?" I say quickly. I try to gauge his reaction, but it's difficult to see his expression in the dim light.

He doesn't reply, and I'm suddenly aware that we're out here with him, alone. Maybe I shouldn't be so brazen.

Maybe I should be running, dragging Emily behind me, away from the man who I wouldn't trust to spit on me if I was on fire.

"Louise," he says, taking a sudden step towards me.

I stiffen and recoil, keeping my arm steady around Emily's waist, who's becoming heavier by the second.

I can see his face now that he's closer. His trademark sneer has gone.

"What's going on?" he asks, his voice small and frightened. "Are you OK?"

I can't stop the scoff that escapes my mouth. As if he cares.

He takes another step. "Loui—"

"Don't," I say tugging Emily back with me and nearly losing my balance on the steps. "Don't come any closer."

Hurt and confusion register on his face, but I don't have time to unpack what it could mean. He's either a damn good actor, or he's genuinely clueless, and neither possibility helps me get Emily to safety, or find Daniel.

"You're hurt," he says, his eyes flitting between me and Emily. "You need hel—"

"Not from you, we don't," I snap, relishing the shock my response causes. Despite the circumstances, I can't deny that standing up to this man, who has gone out of his way to make me feel uncomfortable ever since I came into Daniel's life, makes me feel powerful.

"Louise," he tries again, reaching out towards me.

The gesture sends a ripple of recognition and anger over the grimy skin on my bare arms. He's trying to placate me, hysterical woman that I am.

"Don't," I say, my head shaking. "Don't pretend you give a shit. Don't pretend you want to help me." I'm trembling now, emotion overpowering the anger. "You *hate* me. You've always hated me."

John's mouth parts, as though astonished by my words. I fight the urge to laugh at his absurd reaction, knowing it will just add fuel to his notion that I'm unstable.

He’s silent for so long that I consider barging past him and through the doors behind him. But I can’t, because what if he’s more than an arsehole I should have confronted long before now?

What if he’s the reason Emily can’t stand up by herself?

Finally, he speaks. “I don’t hate you.”

This time, I can’t bite back the bark of disbelief.

John is still holding his hand out towards me, a gesture so at odds with the cold, cruel way he’s always treated me before that it makes me want to slap it out of the air.

“I don’t hate you, Louise,” he repeats, slowly. “I think you’ve had a scare – you need to come inside and tell me what’s happened. You need to calm down.”

Calm down.

*Calm down?*

I’m shaking so violently now that I’m afraid I’ll drop Emily. My abdomen aches with the strain of keeping her upright.

John’s words and awful, fake concern make me want to scream. But if I scream, if I cry, if I even make a sound, all that will do is prove to him that he was right about me. That I’m unhinged, that I can’t be trusted. That I need to *calm down*.

*OceanofPDF.com*

## CHAPTER 41

# Hannah

Twelve Years Ago

“It’s going to be fine.”

Steven gently places his hands over mine to stop my frantic fingernail gnawing. I nod and offer him a brave smile that feels weak even to me.

We’re outside the restaurant where we’re meeting my parents for lunch. But Steven has stopped me, picking up on the anxiety that’s making my body contort in on itself. The thought of the awkward small talk, the pained silences, the judgement … it makes me feel like I’m going to empty my stomach before I’ve put anything in it.

“Seriously, Han,” Steven says, his fingers now stroking my cheek. I nuzzle into the scratchy roughness of his workman’s hands. “You’re worrying about nothing. It’s going to be fine, better than fine – parents love me!”

I keep nodding, wishing I could absorb his easy self-confidence. But now I’ve got a new anxiety added to the cacophony in my head – how many parents has Steven met? How many girlfriends?

I try to do the maths. I’m eighteen. We’ve been together since I was fourteen, and Steven was twenty. Our relationship was a secret – Steven insisted my parents wouldn’t understand that our love surpassed our six-year age gap, and I’d agreed – there was no way they’d have let me continue seeing him. So we waited, and now it’s my eighteenth birthday and I can finally introduce them.

Because, as Steven explained, if it all goes to shit and they don’t accept our relationship, there’s nothing they can do, is there?

I’m an adult.

I’m free.

But what if our relationship being secret meant Steven hadn't seen it as real – official? What if he'd been seeing other girls, meeting their parents, getting them to love him?

My chest tightens with panic at the thought of Steven having other girls in his life, girls more exciting, more experienced, more beautiful than me. What if he gets bored of me? What if he finally gets sick of my neediness, my instability. What will I have left, if he leaves me?

"Hannah, you're freaking out," he tells me, giving my upper arms a squeeze. I stare up at his strong jawline, bright blue eyes, dimpling smile. Yes, my parents will find it impossible not to love him, just as I do.

"Sorry," I murmur, cursing myself for being the clingy, anxious girlfriend I promised myself I would stop being. Who would want to be with a nervous wreck who couldn't even face the idea of lunch with her parents?

"Don't be sorry, you daft bugger," Steven insists, planting a gentle kiss on the top of my head, his hands still holding my arms. "Although maybe you should be sorry for choosing this place – you know I hate fish."

I follow his gaze towards the sign hanging above our heads, declaring the Seaview to be Whitstable's finest fish restaurant. My eyes widen in panic as I look back to Steven.

"I thought—" my mind scrambles, trying to understand how I could have got this wrong.

"Hannah!" he laughs, noticing my expression. "Honestly, it's not a problem – I'm sure they'll have something else I can eat." He gives me another loving shake. "Come on, babe, you look like someone's died. Everything is going to be fine."

I swallow, something scratching in my throat. Like fish bones.

"Say it with me," Steven insists, tilting my chin up to focus on him. I look deep into his eyes and wish we could go back to his flat, where the only thing that matters is that he loves me.

"Everything is going to be fine," I parrot, dutifully.

And it is, for a little while, at least. My mother is overjoyed to meet the man who has finally tamed her 'wayward' daughter. Her gushing over Steven is so excessive, in fact, that I suspect she had been expecting my first proper boyfriend to be a drug dealer, an axe murderer, or worse, an unwashed hippy. But Steven is well groomed, confident, witty – everything you'd want from the first man you introduce to your parents.

My father is a little more cautious, expressing his concerns about me moving into Steven's flat before they'd even met him. But he agrees with my mother when she shrilly insists that, "At least she didn't end up living under a bush in the park with a bottle of vodka!"

Steven keeps his hand curled around my knee under the table, gently squeezing whenever he senses me tense at one of my mother's references to what a hopeless waster I'd been, pre-Steven.

I have the sense to keep quiet about the fact that we'd been seeing each other through the waster years, too. That Steven isn't a new addition to my life, as he is to theirs.

My parents had already ordered a bottle of prosecco before we'd arrived, and the bubbles fizz in my empty stomach and make me feel giddy, hopeful even. Maybe Steven was right – maybe this is the start of me mending the strained relationship with my parents.

"Let's get the seafood platter," my mother declares as the server comes to take our order. "It's the perfect size for four, and the prawns are delicious, aren't they, Roy?"

But I don't look at my father, I'm focused on Steven, glancing sideways to see his reaction. His face is impassive and his hand continues to rest lightly on my knee. He isn't going to say anything, I realize. He's going to let my mother order something he hates, so he won't upset her.

My eyes prickle with affection. That's so Steven – always thinking of others, always doing the thing that will make people feel good even if he suffers because of it. But he shouldn't have to – he's got me. I need to be the one who speaks up for him and save him the awkwardness of having to disagree with my parents the first time he's met them.

"Steven doesn't like seafood, Mum – we'll get our own thing."

I smile at Steven, wanting him to see that I've got his back, just as he's had mine for the four years we've been together.

But the look he gives me isn't one of gratitude, it's bewilderment.

"Ay?" he asks, a confused smile dancing on his lips. "What are you talking about – I love fish."

I stare, my confusion matching his. I sense the server squirm awkwardly as the colour rises up my neck and into my cheeks. I lean forward, wishing I could speak to Steven without an audience. "But you said—"

"I think the poor boy knows what he likes or doesn't like, Hannah!" My mum laughs, her voice heavy with exasperation.

Steven's laugh joins hers and he gives my hand a tender squeeze as he says, "Maybe she's getting me mixed up with one of her exes!"

They continue laughing, and I wish I could join them, wish I could see the humour in this, but my eyes are filling with water and I'm doing all I can to fight the urge to burst into tears.

Steven knows I've never had other boyfriends – he knows he's the only one, and has always been the only one. He knows he'll always *be* the only one.

And I know, I *know*, that he said he didn't like fish.

Didn't he?

I can see my dad watching me through the moisture in my eyes. He isn't laughing, and I'm grateful for that. But the expression on his face might be worse – he's looking at me in the same way as when I used to get upset over a broken toy as a child, or stumble into the house drunk and confused as a teenager. It's a look of sadness laced with pity.

"Hannah—" he says softly, but that's all he has, all he can offer.

I can't bear it.

"You did say it!" I say, twitching Steven's hand off my own. "You did say you didn't like fish – you told me. You *said* … that you don't like fish!"

They're not laughing anymore. They're all staring – my parents, Steven, the server, the neighbouring tables … everyone.

Oh god, what have I done?

"*Hannah*," my mum whispers, scolding. Embarrassed.

Steven's expression is now mirroring my father's, and it's a look I've been seeing more frequently lately. It's a look that makes me feel small and stupid and like I can't trust myself. Which, given my past behaviour of drinking far too much, getting in states I've needed rescuing from and generally struggling to function as the adult I'm now supposed to be … is probably well deserved.

"I'll come back," the server says, seizing her opportunity to flee the cloud of tension around our table.

I'm still looking at Steven, still wishing it could be just the two of us. "You *said*," I insist, and – *shit* – the tears that had been brimming threateningly spill over, rushing down my cheeks.

"Han," Steven says, his face creasing in concern. "Darling, please don't cry – please, I'm sorry, maybe you're right. I don't remember, but maybe I did say it. Please don't cry."

He wipes my tears away with his rough fingers, and I bite down on my bottom lip as I try to pull myself together. He hates seeing me cry – it breaks his heart. And god knows I've cried enough since we got together, usually over nothing, just like now.

Crying over *fish*, for god's sake.

Mortification creeps in to replace my tragic, pathetic weeping. I've ruined it. It was going so well, and I've ruined it by crying over what? Getting confused about whether my boyfriend likes fish?

Oh god … Steven probably said it to save face – he didn't speak up when my mum suggested the fish platter because he didn't want to be awkward. And I dropped him right in it. I should have told them it was *me* who didn't like fish, or said something, *anything*, that didn't involve making Steven feel self-conscious and difficult in front of my parents.

Stupid, *stupid* Hannah—

"Take a deep breath, darling," Steven says, his hand stroking mine rhythmically, bringing me back to myself. "Calm down, you can do it."

My mum snorts, her patience for my dramatics worn thin after years of tolerating it. I focus on Steven, my gratitude for his unwavering support threatening to bring a fresh bout of tears spilling down my cheeks.

He does so much, *so much* for me. Not only do I depend on him financially due to dropping out of college and being unable to keep a job because of my pattern of unreliable behaviour, he's put a roof over my head, and, most importantly, he's my emotional anchor in times like this, times when I don't trust my own mind to behave and react in a normal, human way.

This isn't the first time – our entire relationship has survived because of Steven's patience. All the lost keys, forgotten dates, misheard information. He jokes that I'd forget where we lived if I went anywhere without him, and he's not wrong – I live in a constant state of confusion, endlessly messing up. Thank god I don't have any responsibilities.

I need to be better. I need to show him that I'm worth the effort, worth the sacrifice. I need to—

"Have you calmed down now?" my mum asks, her embarrassment palpable.

I swallow, eyes glued to Steven, and nod. Steven smiles at me, and I can see the pride in his eyes. I wish I could feel it too, that raw affection I see

whenever he looks at me. I wish I could feel something other than self-loathing.

"Sorry," I mouth, and squeeze his hand to stop my own from shaking. Maybe one day, I'll be able to feel something good, something positive about myself. But for now, I have Steven to love me.

And I'm the luckiest girl in the world.

*OceanofPDF.com*

## CHAPTER 42

# The Bride

4 June

**10.30 p.m.**

Being told to calm down by a man who has made it his sole purpose to make me feel as unwelcome as possible since the day I met his best friend does something to me. It doesn't make me cry, or make me want to grovel at his feet and convince him to take a chance on me, to like me …

No. It makes me furious.

"Get out of our way, John," I snarl. He stands between us and the entrance hall, his usually cold expression replaced by one of concern.

I don't believe it's genuine for a second.

"Louise!" he says, irritation finally breaking his act. "Look, I don't know where you've got this idea from that I don't like you, but you need to be reasonable and let me hel—"

I cut him off with a laugh of disbelief. No, I won't let him do this. I won't let him question my interpretation of the way he's treated me since we met. I won't let him make me question my own sanity.

"I don't *want* your help, John. You've made it clear that you don't like me, that you don't want me around. I don't trust you, and I need you to move out of my way so I can help my friend, OK?"

John's mouth dangles open, and I realize I should have done this a long, long time ago.

I don't wait for him to move, and march up the steps towards him, lugging Emily with me as gently as I can. As we draw level with him, I pray I haven't horribly misjudged this, and that John isn't in fact responsible for Emily's injuries after all.

But he doesn't try to stop us, and instead follows us towards Grantham Hall, spluttering at my back, "Wait, Louise, just wait. I didn't mean to make you feel like I didn't like you – I just … I wanted to make sure you were right for Daniel, that's all. I was being a good friend – none of us knew anything about you, and you wouldn't even tell Daniel where you'd come from, I was just—"

He trails off as I refuse to respond. I don't have *time* for this right now.

"Look," he tries. His fingers brush my arm, and I glare at him. He removes them sharpish, but the look of desperation remains on his face. "Look, Louise, just … just don't tell Daniel I've upset you, OK? Let's just move on, and all be friends now, yeah?"

I stop walking and stare at him, dumbstruck. I was right – he doesn't care about Emily, he doesn't care about me – he cares that I've finally found the bravery to stand up to him and his shitty treatment of me. And he's scared I'll report him to Daniel and ruin their friendship.

I take a breath, not wanting to waste a second longer on this pathetic bully. "Go away, John," I say levelly.

He blinks, stunned by this new, fearless version of me. I stare, daring him to say more, but he finally gives up, and steps back, before slinking away to where we'd first spotted him, standing at the bottom of the steps. He pulls another cigarette out of his pocket and bows his head as he smokes, his body slumped with self-pity.

I turn away, disgusted and irritated that he's wasted my time – time I could have spent getting help for Emily. I reach for the old-fashioned iron door handle, but pause, hesitant to enter, feeling like an imposter at a party I'm not welcome at.

Emily suddenly grips my arm tighter, and I fearfully follow her gaze, back towards the woods. But John is still smoking, and the grounds are still empty. I need to get her somewhere safe. I breathe deeply as I return my attention to the dark, mottled wood of the door. I shouldn't be wary of entering, afraid of the looks and the whispers. This is *my* party.

The latch lifts with a loud clunk, and I heave the door towards me, braced for the curious stares of the guests as they look up to see who is coming in, and realize it's Frankenstein's bride herself.

But there's no one there. No one at all.

I frown, bewildered and struggling to believe the sight of the empty hallway. It was so crowded and claustrophobic when I'd left following my

strained conversation with Shirley. Now, it seems huge. There are mementos of both weddings dotted around – champagne flutes stained with lipstick marks, a dark puddle of what must be red wine on one of the side tables, a tie draped over the arm of a settee. But no sign of the actual *guests*.

Just how long was I in the woods?

I take solace in Emily's presence by my side – if she wasn't here, I'd start wondering if I were the only person left. There's a huge, ancient-looking grandfather clock against the far wall, and I squint to make out the time. Half past ten.

The party should still be in full swing.

We dither in the doorway, and for a ridiculous moment, I'm sure that if we step over the threshold, we too will vanish, just like the other guests. But then a noise brings me back to my senses.

A deep, rumbling bass so low I can feel it, rather than hear it.

Music.

The guests haven't left, they haven't vanished, they haven't been abducted by aliens. They're dancing.

I shake my head at my foolishness and stride forwards, forgetting Emily's weakened state and tugging her with me forcefully. She staggers and I stop to steady her. "Sorry," I say, and peer anxiously into her eyes, which can't seem to focus properly.

I shouldn't be dragging her around like this. She needs to sit down, possibly even lie down. She needs a doctor.

I look around the empty entrance hall. There are plenty of sofas – I could get her comfortable, then go and get help? I think of the pulpy hole in the back of Mick's skull. No – I can't leave Emily here alone.

I grind my teeth in frustration. Why did it have to be *John* we came across outside? If it had been just about anyone else, I could have asked them to go for help while I stayed with Emily.

But there's no sense dwelling on what I can't change. I'm the only one I can rely upon now.

"We just need to pop into the ceremony room," I tell Emily, gently. "So we can grab someone with a phone, and call for help, OK?"

She nods slowly, but I get the sense she has no idea what she's agreeing to, nor where she is, nor why.

I start forwards again, slower this time, past the photo wall. The music is louder now, and I wonder how I managed to miss it when we first entered

the entrance hall – perhaps a slow song was playing? Were couples dancing, their arms entwined as they gazed into each other's eyes?

Was Daniel looking for me?

We reach the door, and this time I don't hesitate to throw it open.

*OceanofPDF.com*

## CHAPTER 43

# The Bride

4 June

**10.35 p.m.**

The music hits us and we both flinch backwards. The heavy wooden doors must have been seriously effective at keeping the sound contained, as the DJ seems to be on a mission to give the entire wedding congregation tinnitus. Not that anyone seems to mind …

Despite the average age of our guests being over sixty, the dancefloor is heaving. The husbands have joined their wives now, and they all bob haphazardly to the cheesy wedding classics. Having the time of their lives.

I clearly haven't been missed.

I scan the crowd, trying to supress the anger that's rushing through my body. How have these people been partying with wild abandon while Emily and I have been struggling through the woods, while Mick was being *murdered*?

Emily winces and clutches her head. The music must be splitting her concussed brain in two. I need to find someone, get their phone, and get out of here.

But that's easier said than done. The booze has evidently been flowing freely, and I can't see a single person who looks sober enough to help. The dinner tables have been pushed back from the dancefloor to make room, and there are pensioners slumped over chairs – either passed out or napping in preparation for re-joining the party, it's impossible to tell.

I stare around the room, struggling to believe that this is our wedding. My gaze lands on our wedding cake – it's been cut. And not neatly, either – it looks as though someone has plunged the knife into it, over and over again, leaving a gaping hole in its side.

Did Daniel cut it without me?

Tears prickle my eyes at the thought. I'd known since day one that it would be a big wedding, a wedding that I didn't feel reflected us or our relationship. But Daniel had assured me that it would be just one day, that it would keep his mother off his back, and afterwards we would be free to live our lives however we wished.

He'd promised me he would be by my side the entire day.

I feel betrayed, and … yes … *angry*. I didn't want this, didn't want this huge, false celebration full of people who I at first thought didn't think much of me, but I now think might wish me actual harm.

I glare across the room at Shirley. I don't understand how yet, but I know she's somehow connected to all of this.

But as I step towards her, hellbent on confronting her, I spot Nina and Sammi.

They're sat at one of the tables in the far corner, furthest away from the dancefloor. I can barely make them out as the disco lights from the DJ don't reach them, but I can see that their heads are pressed together and they're in deep conversation.

As though sensing my eyes on them, Sammi snaps her head around. She opens her mouth wide, overjoyed to see us, but her expression changes from happiness to horror as she takes in our appearances. Nina leaps up from her chair so quickly that it topples to the ground, but she doesn't pause to pick it up, and they dash across the room towards us. I notice that Nina is a lot steadier on her feet than when I last saw her – they must have stopped drinking when neither Emily nor I returned. At least someone here cares.

"Jesus," Nina gasps as they reach us.

Sammi stands with her hands over her mouth and nose as she scans us up and down.

"Jesus," Nina repeats. "Jesus – what the fuck? What happened?"

I barely catch her words over the deafening music and shake my head – there's no point trying to explain in here. I tighten my grip around Emily's waist, aware that we're starting to attract curious stares from other guests.

"Have you got your phone?" I bellow, making a gesture with my hand to signal what I need.

Nina frowns but catches my drift and pats the tiny clutch bag looped around her shoulder. The action reminds me of something that feels like it happened an age ago.

“Did you get hold of the dog-sitter?” I ask.

“I tried!” Nina exclaims. “But this horrible woman was manning the front desk and she said I couldn’t use the phone unless it was an emergency. I *begged* her, I swear. But she wouldn’t budge.”

I picture the events manager – the tight-faced woman who had a startling resemblance to Shirley. It would have been her getting some kind of vindictive kick out of denying Nina access to the phone, I’m sure of it.

“Let’s get out of here!” I shout, carefully manoeuvring Emily away from the ceremony room and gesturing for Nina and Sammi to follow.

Out in the entrance lobby, with the door firmly closed behind us and the music muffled, I gently lower Emily onto a sofa, unable to ignore the screams of protest from my back any longer.

When I rise, Nina and Sammi face me, their eyes filled with terror and tears. Thank god they were the ones to come to our aid – if there’s anyone here today who I can trust, it’s them.

But first I’ll have to calm them down, and by the way Sammi is repeating, “Oh, my god,” on a continuous loop as her gaze flits between Emily and me, I’m worried it might not be so easy.

“It’s OK,” I say, though it clearly isn’t. “We’re OK. We—”

How was I supposed to explain what happened? *I* didn’t even understand what had happened, and Emily certainly didn’t.

I shake my head helplessly. “Someone attacked Emily,” I finally settle on. “She was out in the woods, and someone hit her around the head.”

Sammi makes an anguished noise and both bridesmaids peer into Emily’s troubled, yet vacant face.

“And I found the photographer, Mick,” I continue, the words tumbling out now I’ve started. “He’s dead. And I think … I think whoever hit Emily killed him.”

Nina and Sammi tear their gazes away from Emily to look at me, their faces paralyzed with shock.

The silence stretches on, and I try to guess what they must be thinking.

“Jesus Christ,” Nina finally settles on.

“We need to phone the police,” I say, gesturing at Nina’s clutch bag.

The call to action seems to snap her out of her horrified trance, and she hurries to fish her phone out of her bag.

“Have you seen Daniel?” I ask as Nina struggles to unlock her phone with her trembling fingers.

“No,” Sammi says. “No, we haven’t seen him since John’s speech finished! We were dancing for a bit after you went to find him, then we thought it was weird that neither you nor Emily had come back, so we went to look for you. But we couldn’t find any of you, so we were sitting by the dancefloor, trying to figure out where you could have gone and what we should do.”

I reach my hand out and gratefully squeeze Sammi’s soft forearm. At least some of the guests cared that neither the bride nor groom seemed to be present at their own wedding.

But the fact they hadn’t seen Daniel either sends an icy jolt of fear down my spine.

*Where is he?*

“Fuck, fuck, fuck,” Nina says, glaring at her phone.

“What?” I ask, dread landing heavily in my stomach.

“Fucking signal!” she screeches, sticking her phone into the air. “I can’t find it anywhere in this place!”

“Reception,” I say, sure that the events manager will accept this as an emergency.

I turn to set off, but a wave of dizziness swoops over me, and I blink heavily, trying to focus on something solid. I don’t know how much longer I can keep going with nothing but booze and pills and terror sloshing around in my stomach.

“I’m OK,” I finally manage to say, my hand braced against the wall so I don’t fall to the floor. “Sorry. I’m OK.”

After a moment, the light-headedness recedes enough for me to try again. “Can you help Emily?” I ask, and Nina and Sammi rush to gently bring her to her feet. She groans in protest but complies as I usher my bridesmaids towards the stairs, and the corridor that leads to reception.

And that’s when I see it. I stagger to a stop, blinking, once again hoping for a hallucination, but knowing that I’m looking at something very, very real.

There’s been an addition to the photo wall.

It’s been stuck to the bottom of the display, in the empty space left by the dog photo I’d ripped off the wall. I feel Nina and Sammi’s gaze on me as I slowly approach it, drawn to it as though hypnotized.

I can see from a metre or so away what it is. But still, I need to get closer, need to see, need to hold it in my hands.

It’s a Polaroid. It must have been taken with the camera Emily left out for guests to stick photos of themselves into the guestbook. And now it had been used to take a photo of—

I bend and pluck the photo off the wall, leaving a sticky blob of Blu-Tack behind.

It’s Daniel. He’s looking straight at the camera. His eyes are full of fear, and there’s a gag around his mouth.

# Transcript of interview

5 June

**In attendance – Inspector Chandra (IC), Jason Hughes, Best Man for Matthew and Cara's wedding (JH)**

IC – You've mentioned that Lisa Boden is a bit … wild.
JH – Yeah.
IC – Can you give me any examples of the kind of behaviour that led you to think that?
JH – Just … you know, always pushing people to do more.
IC – Such as?
JH – Downing drinks, dumb dares – climbing onto the top of bus shelters at three in the morning, that kind of stupid shit.
IC – And your friend group, they'd do as she said?
JH – Well, yeah. It's a bit embarrassing to admit it now, like, but when we were teenagers, she was the puppet-master of the group.
IC – How did she hold so much power over you all?
JH – [laughter] I guess it didn't hurt that she was a bombshell, you know? Group of teenage lads and one gorgeous girl – of course we're gonna jump if she says so. But as we got older, I dunno, it's just how the group worked. Lisa calls the shots.
IC – And she had particular control over Matthew?
JH – Oh god, yeah. He turned straight back into a thirteen-year-old begging for scraps of her attention whenever she entered a room. Never got past it. But why are you asking me all this anyway? Has Lisa done something? Other than steal the groom from his own wedding, I mean.
IC – I'm just trying to determine what kind of relationship Matthew and Lisa had.
JH – Oh. OK.
IC – Did Matthew and Lisa ever have a tendency to, let's say, go exploring?
JH – Exploring?
IC – Yes, as in, going to places they perhaps shouldn't have.

[pause]

IC – I can assure you that no one will get into any trouble – I'm just trying to paint a picture.

JH – Right, OK, well, yeah – god knows we explored our fair share of random places when we were younger, breaking into abandoned buildings and shit. And I swear it was always Lisa's idea. Matty told me that she liked to, um …

IC – Yes?

JH – She liked to have sex in weird places. Places they might get caught, you know?

IC – And that happened often?

JH – Well, yeah. Especially once Matty got with Cara. They had to sneak off to be together. Lisa seemed to get a thrill from being with him in places Cara could catch them – nightclub toilets, that kind of thing.

IC – So it wouldn't be unusual to assume that Lisa might have found the idea of sleeping with Matty in an unusual location, on his wedding night, exciting?

JH – [laughter] Yeah. Yeah, that wouldn't be unusual at all. That would be exactly the kind of thing she'd do. Wait, is that what you're trying to find out – if they snuck off somewhere to shag before getting a taxi to the airport? Why does it matter if they did? Or is there something else, did something else hap—

*OceanofPDF.com*

## CHAPTER 44

# The Bride

4 June

**10.45 p.m.**

I stare into Daniel's eyes. The photo is grainy and difficult to make out, but I can see the terror in them. His face is filling most of the frame, and behind him is only darkness. I have no idea where it could have been taken.

What I do know, is that someone has tied him up, probably hurt him, then left the evidence here for me to find.

"Louise?" Sammi says tentatively.

I whip my head around to look at her. The three bridesmaids stand where I'd left them, Nina still clutching her useless phone. They haven't seen the photo. They don't know just how serious things are.

I don't trust myself to speak and silently hold the Polaroid towards Sammi. She squints and takes a step closer, then her face transforms as she realizes what she's looking at.

"Oh, my god," she squeaks.

There's no way this can be explained away like the photo of the dog. As much as I wish it wasn't, this is real.

I dully wonder why I'm not screaming. Whoever killed Mick and attacked Emily has my husband, tied up somewhere. God knows what they're going to do to him … what they might already have done. What if—

*No. Don't think it.*

Nina swears loudly as she cranes over Sammi's shoulder and sees the photo. Emily gazes vacantly towards the front doors, as though purposely looking the other way.

"Louise," Nina says, almost shouting. "What is happening?"

I shake my head helplessly. I have no idea. And I have no idea why I can't feel anything, why I'm not dissolving into a heap of despair on the floor at the thought of Daniel, *my Daniel*, being in danger.

"I don't know," I whisper, reaching out my hand to take the Polaroid back from Sammi, wanting to keep Daniel close.

I frown at his image as I try to force the events of the evening into some kind of logical order, try to make sense of them. If I can do that, then maybe I can find Daniel before—

*Don't think about it.*

I have to keep calm, have to figure this out. How did it all begin?

"The photo of the dog …" I start. Was that where it had started? Yes – despite being filled with anxiety throughout the entire day, the dog was the first time I'd felt like something was really wrong, like someone was targeting me.

I take a juddering breath in. The possibility of Buddy being hurt, as I'd feared, suddenly feels much more likely. This isn't just Shirley and John trying to upset me by displaying random pictures they know will rattle me. Now, someone is trying to hurt me by hurting those closest to me.

And as much of a poisonous old witch Shirley is, I can't believe she'd gag her own son just to get to me.

What came next? I stare at Sammi and Nina, searching for clues in their faces, but I only see fear.

"Shirley told me she'd seen Emily go to the woods, so I followed her," I recount. "Then I found the photographer, dead – murdered. Then Emily, also attacked. And now …"

I raise the photo as my voice cracks, unable to say it.

*Keep it together, Louise. You can't fall apart now, not when Daniel needs you.*

Daniel needs me. Daniel is in danger.

"I don't understand," Sammi squeaks. "I mean, his family come across as kind of rude and like they don't like you. But who would do this? Who would *do* this?"

I close my eyes and wish I could give her an answer. Recounting the events of the evening hasn't helped. If anything, it's made things more confusing.

I snap my eyes open as I remember something major I've missed out – something that happened before the dog photo and the woods.

“My father turned up.”

Nina and Sammi’s eyes widen in unison. They don’t know any specifics about my past, but even they understand the significance of me suddenly having a family, when I’d been so alone the whole time they’d known me.

“Could he have something to do with—” Nina begins, cautiously.

I shake my head automatically, but the feeling that there has to be some kind of connection creeps in and settles in my stomach. My father tracks me down, turns up uninvited, and we talk for the first time in four years. Then he disappears.

How can it *not* be connected?

But he wouldn’t have done this. He wouldn’t have hurt Emily … wouldn’t have *killed* someone.

He’s my *dad*.

But I recall the way he would groan as he sank into his armchair after a shift as a policeman, his eyes clouding over as he went somewhere dark to process everything he’d dealt with that day. I remember his need for time alone before he could make casual chit-chat over dinner, and his temper if you interrupted it.

Perhaps I don’t know my father as well as I thought I did.

“Wait,” Sammi says, pulling me out of my thoughts. “That photo – it doesn’t look like the rest either.” She wriggles out from Emily’s arm, leaving Nina to support her, then marches past me and rips another Polaroid off the display. She glances at it before hurriedly handing it to me.

It’s a black hole.

I frown, tilting it, trying to understand what I’m looking at.

Darkness fills most of the frame. But there’s something wooden at the side of the hole, something like … a door.

I gasp. “I know where this is.”

“Where?” Nina and Sammi ask, simultaneously.

I think back to the day Daniel, Shirley and I visited Grantham Hall before we agreed to choose it as our venue, though I suspect Shirley had already selected it long before we set foot into the grand entrance hall. I’d seen this door just hours ago, when I’d dashed away from John’s speech and down a side corridor, in search of a toilet.

And now I’m staring at a photo of it, left just for me. A breadcrumb leading me to my fate.

“It’s the cellar,” I explain to Nina and Sammi, who are frozen, waiting for me to speak. My chest tightens with the memory of the warped wooden doors and the events manager snapping at me not to step on them in case the ancient wood gave way beneath my weight. “And I think that must be where Daniel is.”

I turn the photo in my hand and see that there’s a message on the back. My heart lurches, sending a scream to my throat that gets lodged behind my teeth. It’s a message for me. A message that I’d known for the last five years would come eventually.

It consists of a single word, but it’s enough to make my feet start moving without my permission, obeying its call.

*Hannah x*

Sammi steps in front of me, her eyes wide as she says, “Louise – you can’t. You can’t be thinking of going down there.”

I blink as Sammi’s face warps, magnifying then fading as I try to focus on it. My heart seems to have gone from racing to barely beating at all.

“I have to,” I whisper, in a voice that sounds like it’s coming from far, far away. From the mouth of a terrified girl who should have known she’d never be able to escape.

Because I know who is responsible for this now, as much as I’ve tried to hide from the truth of it. I know that there’s only one person in my life who is capable of such things, and that my moments of illogical fear have not been hysterical reactions to innocent coincidences. They’ve been real, and I was right to be scared. Because he’s here. He’s found me.

*OceanofPDF.com*

## CHAPTER 45

# Hannah

Four Years Ago

My eyes flutter open. I'm in the flat, alone. Sunlight filters through the blinds and catches the dust lazily drifting to the floor to settle on my body.

I don't need to wiggle my fingers to know that they're tied behind my back.

He'll have gone out to get roses. To him, the deep red blooms mean I'm sorry. I love you. You're mine.

To me, they mean blood and pain and pretending I'm not living my life consumed by terror.

There are four vases on the kitchen table already. The eldest, only a week or so old, has started to wilt. The water is full of slime, the leaves yellowing around the edges.

"He's so romantic!" my mother croons whenever she visits and sees the floral tributes. "I only get flowers from your father on Valentine's Day, if I'm lucky!"

Because that's what I am, to have a boyfriend like Steven.

*Lucky, lucky, lucky.*

*Too* lucky, as my mother has repeatedly told me when she's been irritated by my lack of enthusiasm when he compliments me, and my lack of affection towards him. "You don't deserve him, Hannah."

I press my cheek into the scratchy carpet. It feels tender. He usually tries not to mark me where anyone can see. But this time, as I'm sure he'll tell me when he returns, this time, I just pushed him that bit too far.

See what I do to him?

Poor Steven.

I shift my weight and yelp as a bolt of pain shoots across my lower back. Memories of the morning return to me. I hadn't responded when he'd asked

me a question – I've been zoning out more often lately, my mind taking me somewhere other than the flat I barely leave, *anywhere* else. So he shouted, and I jumped, dropping the cup of tea I was bringing him.

He'd kicked me when I'd bent to clean up the mess. The unbearable ache in my coccyx suggests he's done some serious damage this time – maybe I'll get admitted to hospital. The thought fills me with hope – I could spend a few nights there, away from this place.

But no, Steven would never allow it. He wouldn't leave my side – even if hospital policy mandated guests only visit between certain hours, Steven would persuade them to bend the rules for him. He'd somehow convince them that I fell down some non-existent stairs in our one-floor flat. And who could resist the handsome, smiling man who was so, so worried about his clumsy, emotionally unstable girlfriend?

He really is wonderful for putting up with me.

Poor Steven.

My back spasms with pain again and a wave of rage rushes through my broken body with such force that I gasp. Poor Steven. Poor fucking Steven having to put up with me, and the way I looked at the actor on the television in a way he didn't like, the way I spent too long opening the curtains this morning and was surely making eyes at the man walking down the road, the way I dare to *exist*.

I don't know what it is about this time that feels different. Usually, I lie here, quiet, unmoving, patient as an old dog tied up outside a shop waiting for its master. Perhaps it's the surge of pain that seems to set my nerve endings on fire every time I breathe that's forcing me to finally listen to my body – I can't take any more of this.

I sob through gritted teeth. I don't really cry anymore – I barely have the energy. But these tears feel different. They're hot and furious and they're *giving* me energy.

My mother was right.

I *don't* fucking deserve him.

I groan as I prise myself off the floor. The pain spasms down my left leg – it feels like it's being bitten by a thousand fire ants and I stare at it, sure there's something terribly wrong. But it looks perfectly normal, beneath a pair of Steven's baggy tracksuit bottoms.

The agonizing tingling fills me with terror – what if I can't walk? The prospect of being even more paralyzed than I already am is so unbearable

that I push through the discomfort and shake my legs, thumping my heels on the carpet. I cry out from the pain of it, but I can move.

I can *move*.

I flex my spine, finding the parameters of my pain. I scream through my teeth and desperately cling to my anger. I know that without it, I'll lose my nerve. Turning to the left is too sore to bear, but I can move enough get out of this, to get away.

My hands twist and flex behind my back. I know how to untie his knots – he's not the master criminal he seems to think he is. I untie myself when I need the toilet – I wet myself once and am in no hurry to witness Steven's reaction to it again. But I always make sure I'm back in position when I hear his key in the door. I've had a lot of practice – the ropes come out pretty much every time he leaves the house nowadays.

"It's because I can't trust you, Hannah. How do I know you won't leave me again?"

The only mistake I'd made the first time I'd tried to leave was not running far enough.

I won't make the same mistake twice.

I'm free, but I resist the urge to run, knowing my hands and feet need a moment before they'll be useful. I gently curl and uncurl my fingers, coaxing the blood back into them and massaging the cramp away.

I rotate onto all fours and cling to the windowsill, gingerly pulling myself up to standing. My left leg judders beneath me, but it holds. I know I can bear the pain – god knows I've had enough practice. I've learnt not to complain, not to wince. It seems to excite him, seeing the impact of what he's done. Especially in our bed, when he's on top of me, murmuring into my ear that it's all my doing, all my fault, see what I made him do?

I scan the flat. It's minimalist, to say the least. You wouldn't even know I lived here.

What do I take with me? What do I even have anymore?

Nothing.

I have nothing. It's just been Steven, for so, so long now.

I obsess over the stages of our relationship now – searching for the first time I should have seen the man I was besotted with for what he really was.

He used to call me his little princess. At fourteen, I thought it was the sweetest, most romantic thing in the world. Even when I was picking sticks out of my matted hair after sneaking out to meet him in the park.

Now I’m twenty-four, and I’ve lived here, in Steven’s flat, for six years. *Six years*.

I have no job, no friends, no passport. He’s taken it all.

But it’s over now. I’m leaving. I’m actually *leaving*, I realize, giddy with the thrill of it as I fling the front door open. He doesn’t double lock it anymore – he’s that sure I won’t go anywhere. But I’m proving him wrong as my bare feet stumble down the corridor, away from the flat. I can *do* this.

I jab the button to call the lift, willing the doors to open faster, picturing him standing inside, waiting for me. Oh god, what would he do—

No. I can’t get scared. Have to stay angry.

Have to keep running.

I step into the lift and press the button over and over again until the doors finally shut. I keep jabbing it until it arrives on the ground floor and the doors slide open, revealing the small lobby, the glass door, freedom.

I run.

Every time my left foot lands on the ground, pain reverberates up my leg then back again. But I can’t slow to a walk – what if he catches me? Or worse, what if I lose my nerve and return to the flat, meekly accepting that this is my life and always will be?

My eyes scan the faces I pass, my feet slapping on the uneven paving slabs. It’s hot, hotter than I can ever remember it being. Much too hot for Steven’s old tracksuit bottoms and jumper – the only clothes I can wear without him calling me a slut. And although he calls me lazy and sloppy instead, that’s preferable to accusations of flaunting myself.

*Keep running, Hannah.*

I’m here, and the relief saps the anger out of me. I stare up at my parents’ house and try to focus on happy childhood memories rather than the more recent ones of sitting silently while Steven chats pleasantly with my parents over Sunday lunch, his fingers wrapped around my knee under the table.

I hesitate. I haven’t been here without Steven for years. I can’t remember what normal is – do I knock, or do I walk straight in?

I knock.

My mother’s eyes widen when she opens the door to find me, sweating and shaking on her doorstep. I clench my fists and try to keep it together, when all I want to do is fall into her arms and have her stroke my hair and tell me that it’s OK, that I’m safe now.

“Come inside,” she hisses, pulling me into the house by my sleeve. She peers past me, beady eyes darting back and forth.

Checking if anyone’s seen me, I realize with dismay.

Seemingly satisfied that none of the neighbours are watching, she closes the door, puts her hands on her hips, and studies me.

“Oh, Hannah.” She purses her lips. There’s no concern there, only disappointment. Disappointment that her wayward daughter is making a scene yet again.

I’ll never not be a fourteen-year-old girl to her. A troubled girl, a girl who stayed out too late drinking on the streets. Until I met Steven, that is. Steven sorted me out, got me on the straight and narrow. Steven looked after me.

They never knew that I was sneaking out to meet Steven, that it had been Steven who gave me the alcohol. And I couldn’t tell them, because they’d stop me seeing him.

And I didn’t want that, did I?

“Mum,” I say, my voice wobbling. I don’t want to tell her, don’t want to break her heart. She sees Steven as a son – when she finds out what living with him has really been like, what he does to me—

But she has to know. I can’t keep living like this.

“Steven hit me,” I say, starting gently. Maybe I won’t have to go into the detail, not today, at least.

“Where?” my mother says without missing a beat.

I frown, trying to understand why that’s the most important thing to be thinking about right now. I point at my cheek.

“Oh Hannah,” she says, twisting her head to look. “There’s nothing there!”

I touch my face. The skin hasn’t split this time, but he’d hit me hard enough to knock me out. I know I don’t bruise easily, but how can I not even have a mark? I frown, suddenly unsure if he *had* hit me this time, or if that had been another day. I wasn’t even sure I’d been unconscious – I seem to wake up on the floor like that after every incident lately, as though I subconsciously play dead.

I swallow, seeing myself through my mother’s eyes. If I can’t even be sure of the truth myself, then is it any wonder she doesn’t trust me? She breathes a deep, troubled sigh that makes me feel horribly sorry for her, having a daughter like me.

“I was scared this would happen again,” she says with a despondent shake of her head. “After that row you had last month, when you threw the lamp at him—”

“No.”

She raises her eyebrows and makes me feel like a child being scolded for interrupting.

But it’s not true. I didn’t throw a lamp at him – I wouldn’t *dare*.

“That didn’t happen,” I insist.

“I saw the cut on his head, Hannah!” her eyes dart to my cheek, and the lack of evidence I have to back up my claim. *I* don’t have a cut.

I try to remember. Steven *did* have a cut – he’d backhanded me across the face when I’d not been gentle enough cleaning it. But it hadn’t been caused by me …

Had it?

I hesitate. *Had* I hurt him? I was a slut, I was hard work, I was fucking mental. I could have thrown a lamp at him. I could be imagining all of this.

My feet twitch, as though urging me to return to the flat. The movement sends my lower back into a spasm, but this time I’m grateful for the pain – I didn’t imagine *that*.

Our entire relationship, I’ve felt like I’m barely clinging to sanity. I’ve been sure that without Steven, I’d be a mess, unable to function, unable to trust my own memory. I’d clung to him, so grateful to have him looking out for me.

But this morning’s abuse, because that’s what it is, I finally realize, has shattered the rose-tinted glasses I’ve been wearing since I was a teenager. A *child*.

I’m *not* crazy. I’m not any of the things Steven says I am.

I shift my weight and refocus on my mother. Forget breaking her in gently, let her see the state of my spine, where there is surely a physical indication of the agony I’m in. Let her try to explain that away. But as I gather the heavy material of Steven’s jumper up, the door opens behind me.

“Hannah!”

My eyes widen in fear, but it’s my father, not Steven, filling the doorframe. He doesn’t hesitate before pulling me towards him and enveloping me in his huge arms. I wince, but lean in to him and finally let the tears come. Even if my mother is Team Steven till she dies, Dad will be here for me.

“I’ve just bumped into Steven outside the Nag’s Head,” he murmurs into my hair. “Says he’s worried about you, love. Says you’ve had another episode.”

I stop crying, dread creeping through my veins.

My episodes. My mental health concerns that Steven, a fully qualified bricklayer, has expertly diagnosed me with. A diagnosis that has been accepted by my entire family without question.

It’s amazing how convincing a *nice guy* can be.

I pull away, searching my father’s face for a clue of what he’s thinking. He’s worried, I had got that much right. But he isn’t worried *for* me, he’s worried *about* me.

“No, Dad,” I whisper as his forehead furrows with pity. “No, that’s not __”

“I’ll put the kettle on,” my mother sighs from behind me and scurries off into the kitchen.

My father reaches out to me, welcoming me back into his arms.

But I shy away. It’s not a hug I need. I need to be *believed*.

“Steven isn’t who you think he is,” I say. I can’t give up now. I have to make them *see*.

My father rubs his chin with his massive hand, a pained look in his eyes. I stare, willing him to listen to me, his daughter. Willing him to believe the woman he raised, not her boyfriend who he’s become chummy with over the years in all the evenings spent together in the local pub.

“Hannah …” He sighs, and I can’t control it anymore. I turn and scream towards the stairs, the sound echoing around the hallway. I despise that name, I realize. I despise the way it’s said to me, the patronising tone, the disappointed tone, the threatening tone. I never want to fucking hear it again.

There’s a crash in the kitchen, and I hear my mother mutter, “For god’s sake.”

She’ll be checking for signs that the neighbours have heard.

“I know you’ve had your issues, love,” Dad tries. His hand is raised in front of him as though he’s trying to calm a wild horse. “But I’m sure you can wor—”

“No, Dad.” I sob. “This isn’t something we can *work out*. Steven is—”

I close my mouth, the enormity of the words scaring me. My eyes flit around as though I’m my mother, searching for eavesdroppers. But I’m just

searching for Steven, sure he'll somehow be able to hear me if I say what I'm thinking.

"Steven isn't a good man," I say, the revelation sounding weak despite the enormity of me finally being brave enough to say it.

"Well, why have you been with him all this time, love? If he's so bad?"

I swallow. Good question, Dad.

Because I was a literal *child* when we met? Because he was such a *nice guy*. Because you and Mum fucking adored him and convinced me to make amends every time we had a tiff, that nothing could be worth letting a guy like Steven get away.

That I was lucky to have him.

My strength is returning as I finally acknowledge these things myself. I take a steadying breath, ready to tell my father exactly what my life has been for the last ten years. The words sit on my tongue as I test them – words like *hit* and *kick* and *burn* and *prisoner*. Words like *terror*. But they taste rotten, dirty. Shameful. My parents already look at me with such disappointment. How will they see me once they know the things that have been done to me?

"Dad—" I start.

But my father drops his bombshell first. "We'll have tea, love – Steven's on his way now, he was just popping to the shop to get you those roses you love. And we'll talk, all of us, as a family …"

He continues his speech with a kindly, hopeful expression on his face, but I've stopped listening. I stopped listening at the words *Steven's on his way now*.

I have to go.

I don't hesitate, fresh terror flooding my body. I have to barge past my father to get to the front door and can barely squeeze past his huge frame. I wrench the door towards me and hear it bang off the wall behind me.

My mother will be furious.

But I'm running. I grit my teeth together, groaning through the agony in my back. I'm running I'm running I'm running and I'm sure that Steven is too, that he's after me, that his breath is on my neck, his fingers wrapping around my hair.

*You'll never leave me, Hannah.*

I keep running. People dive out of my way, and I wonder if they see what my parents see – a crazy woman who doesn't deserve her doting boyfriend.

I keep running until my bare feet leave bloody marks on the pavement and my lungs burn and my muscles scream.

But I can’t run forever, and my fragile, weak body eventually collapses beneath me, sending me crashing to the ground. I curl into a ball, shivering despite the heat of the tarmac on my face. I cover my head and wait for the first blow to land.

But the touch that comes is gentle, and the voice that accompanies it is full of compassion.

“Hey,” it says. “Are you OK? My name is Emily.”

*OceanofPDF.com*

## CHAPTER 46

# The Bride

4 June

**10.50 p.m.**

*He's found me he's found me he's found me*.

I dig my nails into my palms, reminding myself of the pain that had finally made me find the strength to leave. I can't spiral, can't fall apart, can't anything but get to Daniel.

I take the terror and push it away, hard. My mind goes blank and I'm just a shell. A shell who needs to get to her husband before—

*Stop.*

No thoughts. Just action.

I move.

"No!" Sammi gasps, her hand closing around my arm. "It's way too dangerous! What about Emily? What about the police?"

I pause and blink slowly as Sammi's tear-streaked face slowly comes back into focus. I've forgotten all these things, all the logic I'd clung to with the tips of my fingers just minutes ago. Now, all that fills my head is Daniel. Getting to Daniel. Saving Daniel.

And, if it comes to it, dying with Daniel.

The thought surprises me and brings my focus back to my three friends who are watching me, wide-eyed and scared, begging me not to go.

"Go to reception," I say, firmly. "Drag the events manager away from her desk and wrestle the phone from her if you have to – just get the police here, now."

"Nina, you take Emily with you, I'm going with Louise," Sammi says, equally firmly. Her jaw is set in a way I've never seen before, daring me to refuse her company. "None of us should be alone, so—"

“No!” I scream, making Sammi recoil, her eyes wide with shock.

There’s no way, *no way*, anyone else I love is going into that cellar.

“You stick together,” I insist. “Go and get help. Do *not* come near the cellar.”

Sammi swallows and blinks rapidly against the tears threatening to spill out of her eyes.

“When the police get here, tell them everything,” I say, amazed that I’m managing to keep my voice steady. “Then send them to the cellar, OK?”

“OK,” Sammi squeaks. “But take my phone, OK? For the torch.” She presses the phone into my hand then scurries away and resumes her position beneath Emily’s arm.

“Be careful,” Nina says faintly from Emily’s other side. I’ve never seen her this quiet and hope her usual fieriness will return if we need it.

Emily is looking increasingly unwell by the moment. Her skin has gone deathly pale behind her ruined makeup, and she sways as she stands. Her pupils are tiny, despite the dim light of the entrance lobby, and I try not to panic about what that could mean.

I take a step towards her – I can’t waste any more time, but I can’t leave her, not without saying goodbye. “I’ll see you soon,” I say. I want to hug her and breathe in the familiar sweet scent of her perfume, but she looks so fragile that I’m scared I’ll hurt her. So I make do with giving her shoulder a gentle squeeze.

She makes a low murmuring sound in her throat, as though too exhausted to reply.

I turn away, clinging to the adrenaline that had made me move without hesitation when I first realized Daniel was in danger.

Despite the confusing, twisty layout of Grantham Hall, the way my head is still swimming woozily, and the mayhem of the last few hours, I find that I can remember exactly where the cellar is. I don’t come across a single guest roaming as I pace down the corridors.

And there it is. Exactly how I remember it when we’d been shown around, all those months ago, and when I stumbled upon it earlier today.

Except this time, just as in the photo, it’s open.

The two wooden doors lie on the floor either side of the opening, which is a large, rectangle of darkness leading into the ground, filling the entire corridor. There’s a faint, musty smell coming from within.

I only hesitate for a moment, knowing that if I linger too long, the fear of stepping down into the cellar's depths will paralyze me. I hitch up my filthy dress and begin my descent.

The steps are uneven beneath my muddy heels and feel as though they could crumble and send me plummeting down into the darkness. I can't see the bottom – the stairs just disappear into the gloom. The walls are made from a rough stone that scrapes against my fingertips as I steady myself.

I turn on Sammi's phone torch. The light reaches the bottom of the steps, but all it reveals is a sandy-looking floor. The rest of the cellar is hidden by the low, arched ceiling.

I swallow and try to imagine what I might face down there. I want to call out to Daniel. I want to hear his voice, assuring me that he's OK.

But I don't dare make a sound.

I take another shaky step, one hand holding the phone torch out in front of me, the other on the wall for support. My heel wobbles as I tread on the next sloping step, and I gasp as I slip downwards. My heart lurches in my chest as my hands drag over the walls and I bite back a cry of pain as the rough stone stings my palms. But I find my balance and manage to avoid falling any further.

I reach the ground and turn to look upwards at where I've come from. The stairway is dark, and the entrance is obscured by the sloping ceiling. I can no longer see the gaping mouth of the trapdoor.

I quash the temptation to dash back up the stairs, back into the light.

Have to keep going.

Daniel is down here, he has to be. Once again, I fight the urge to call out to him. I might need the element of surprise on my side. It's all I really have.

The cellar turns right, away from the steps. I slowly edge around the corner and find myself looking down a short corridor. The ceiling is so low that I have to duck my head to avoid cracking it on the rough, rounded stone above. I creep forwards, shining the torch back and forth. There are multiple openings carved into the stone on either side of the corridor.

There are no doorframes on the openings, and I peer nervously into the first room I reach, which is more of a hole really, a burrow. It's piled high to the ceiling – full of ancient-looking wooden crates, an old bedframe, some kind of spinning wheel. No Daniel.

I keep going and wrinkle my nose at the worsening stench the deeper I travel into the cellars. It's not just the damp, earthy smell you'd expect from being underground – there's something rank there too. Something rotten.

Perhaps an animal has crawled down here to die.

I think of Buddy, and for a moment, my resolve comes close to shattering. But I can't fall apart, not when Daniel needs me.

The next room is blocked by what looks like a large piece of wooden furniture, and I can't even see into it. I keep going, moving the beam of my torch around the third doorway.

A strangled yelp of fright escapes my mouth and my lungs contract painfully as I register what's in the room.

There's a man slumped against the far wall, dressed in a navy suit and pink bowtie. He could be sleeping, if it weren't for the awkward way his neck is bent against the mould-stained bricks.

The torch beam dances wildly in the air as I stifle a scream with my hand – *No.*

But as my mind prepares to send me spiralling into a pit of grief and despair, I realize …

It isn't Daniel. Thank god. But I recognise him – it's Matthew, the groom we met at the flash mob, who'd stared moodily at the ground the entire time we were stood beside him and his fiancée, Cara. I'd seen him in the entrance hall, what, an hour or two ago?

And he isn't alone.

*OceanofPDF.com*

## CHAPTER 47

# The Groom – Matthew

Twelve Hours Earlier

**8.40 p.m.**

"Down *there*?"

I eye the trapdoor, sure this must be a joke. The journey from the dancefloor into the depths of the hotel has sobered me somewhat, and my certainty that I'm doing the right thing has abandoned me.

But then I look at Lisa, and once again, I'm eleven years old, seeing her on our first day of school. Ever since that moment, I've been powerless to the quirk of her eyebrow, the suggestive smirk on her full lips. I know I'll follow her blindly, wherever she leads me.

Lisa Boden. The love of my life. The woman my friends, and even my mother, think I should have married.

"I thought we were getting out of here?" I murmur, gesturing at the bag containing our passports and tickets to Mallorca.

"The taxi will be here in half an hour." She grins, fizzing with excitement.

The levels she must have gone to in planning this whole thing suddenly register. Pre-emptively swiping my passport, booking the late-night flight, arranging the taxi …

Why did she book the car this late, after the wedding?

I search for clues in her face but find nothing other than giddy glee and underlying smugness. Was the wedding some kind of test – did she want to see if I'd go through with it?

If so, I'd failed spectacularly. So why was she still here, inviting me to Mallorca with her?

Because it was never about my loyalty to her, I realize. She *knows* I'm besotted, knows how much power she holds over me. She doesn't care if I went through with the wedding. In fact, it's probably more of a thrill for her that I *did* and will still follow her when she clicks her fingers, even with a ring on my finger.

"I thought we could pass the time in a way that's enjoyable for both of us," she says raising her eyebrows then glancing down at the trapdoor.

Why *here* though, for god's sake? My head is reeling, torn between feeling like Lisa's brainless plaything and really, really wanting to rip the silky bridesmaid's dress off her body.

She squeezes my hand and raises her eyebrows, a flicker of irritation passing over her face as I hesitate. "Don't be a pussy, Matty."

I snort, but even as my head forms the words to tell her to sod off, that I'm not going down there, my mouth answers for me, "How do we open it?"

She shrugs, the action making the thin strap of her dress slip off her shoulder. "Don't you think you're strong enough?"

And I'm crouching, desperate to prove to her how strong I am, still the same loud-mouth kid who would climb to the top of trees and dangle off the branches to impress her. I tug at the metal latch, torn between hoping for enough strength to heave it open, and praying it's locked.

The rusted hinges groan as I pull the wooden door towards me.

Shit.

She giggles, still as addicted to the thrill of being "naughty" as she was aged sixteen, luring me into the bushes surrounding our school playing fields. I hesitate … is this just another game? Do I really mean anything to her?

I'm suddenly hit with the realization that I may have drunkenly made the decision to leave my wife for her best friend, but that doesn't mean Lisa wants to be with me. If she did, then why aren't we together? And why did she cheat on me when we were?

J and my mum may insist we were destined to be together, but there had never actually been anything stopping that from happening before now … except Lisa.

If I leave Cara, there's no guarantee Lisa will be there for me.

I'd be throwing all this away … for nothing.

I take a shaky breath. Despite the cold air seeping out of the open cellar doors, I'm sweating. I could say no. I could tell her that I'm done being her plaything. I could finally be a decent boyfriend – *husband*. Cara, my *wife*, is back there somewhere, probably on the dancefloor, wondering where I've gone.

Guilt churns the beer in my gut.

Cara doesn't deserve this. She's never done anything to hurt me, to hurt *anyone*. I think of her smile, her giddy excitement when planning every last detail of this day. It's all she's talked about for nearly two years now, from the obsessive scrutiny of floral arrangements, to insisting we learn the choreography for that stupid promotional video the venue made us do.

She'd been almost beside herself with joy that day, putting an embarrassing amount of energy into the routine and trying to befriend every couple we came across.

Now that I look back on it, I can't remember why I'd been so negative, so miserable, refusing to make conversation and generally making the day as shit as possible for her.

I close my eyes but open them quickly when the corridor sways alarmingly.

Lisa's fingers loop around my wrist, tracing the tattoo that feels more like her brand of ownership on my skin than ever.

"Come on, Matty," she purrs.

But my feet stay glued to the ground, guilt paralyzing me.

Lisa must sense it and presses her curves against my body. Her breath tickles my ear. "Come on," she repeats. "It'll be fun! You remember fun, don't you? It'll be the perfect way to start our new life together."

A warm joy spreads across my chest as I look at her. *Our new life*. She *is* serious about this, about us. She wouldn't have booked the tickets if she didn't have genuine feelings for me. This is real. This is happening. I can finally have my cake and eat it, every fucking day, without the lurch of fear and guilt that dominates our rushed encounters now.

I drown out the last ebbs of self-loathing as I start down the steps, one hand clutching Lisa's, the other grappling for support on the crumbling stone wall as Lisa lights our way with her phone torch.

We stagger into one of the dark side rooms in the cellar, and I don't have time to think about anything other than her lips and hands as they urgently

roam my body. I allow myself to feel the emotion I'd fended off with a stick whenever we'd been together in the last few years. I *love* her.

I need her.

I prop her up on some old furniture at the back of the room and hike her dress up, eager for the empty-headed bliss being with her will bring. But as my teeth find her earlobe, her moans shift and her gasps morph into something that isn't desire.

I pull my face away from where it had been pressed against her neck.

Her eyes are wide with fear as they look over my shoulder, at something behind me.

Something hits me in the back like a punch to the kidneys. My mind blurrily registers the panic – we've been *caught*.

But the fear of my betrayal being revealed suddenly feels distant as the power seeps out of my legs and I slump against Lisa. I don't understand. I don't understand what's happening, why I can't move, why the room is getting darker and cold is creeping through my veins.

My cheek is pressed against the stone floor. Lisa is screaming.

# Transcript of interview

5 June

**In attendance – Inspector Chandra (IC), Roisin Murphy, Chief Events Coordinator (RM)**

RM – So, let me recap everything I understand has happened, so we can stop dancing around with these vague questions. Once I know the full story, we might have a chance of getting somewhere, don't you think, Inspector Chandra?

IC – As you wish.

RM – Yesterday, two weddings were held at Grantham Hall. Matthew Morris and Cara Phillips, and Louise Jones and Daniel Green.

IC – Correct.

RM – Let's talk about Matthew and Cara's wedding first, shall we – just so we don't get our wires crossed. They had a perfectly normal ceremony, followed by a perfectly normal day that followed the tried-and-tested structure we've been using at Grantham Hall for years.

IC – It depends what you see as norm—

RM – However, through no fault of the venue, Matthew Morris decided to leave his own wedding during the evening DJ set. As reported by his best man, Jason Hughes, Matthew had run off to Mallorca with the maid of honour, Lisa Boden.

IC – Yes, that's our understa—

RM – We then have Louise Jones and Daniel Green's wedding. Again, in a perfectly normal ceremony, followed by a perfectly normal day that followed the tried-and-tested structure we've been using at Grantham Hall for years.

IC – Well, not ex—

RM – However, during the DJ set, the bride, for some reason, decided to take a stroll in the pitch-black woods, and stumbled across the body of my photographer.

IC – Correct.

RM – Now then, I think it's time you clarify why you keep alluding to the fact that there is something else going on here and why you've been asking me random, irrelevant questions all morning.

IC – The questions I've been asking you, Ms Murphy, are relevant because Mick's body wasn't the only one found last night.

RM – [pause] Excuse me?

IC – Matthew Morris and Lisa Boden never made it to Mallorca. They never made it out of Grantham Hall, in fact. They made it as far as your cellar.

*OceanofPDF.com*

## CHAPTER 48

# The Bride

4 June

**11 p.m.**

The woman draped across Matthew's lap is blonde and dressed in a gown that looks horribly similar to the one worn by my bridesmaids. She'd sneered at me in the entrance hall, daring me to challenge her for barging into me.

She'd seemed haughty and confident then, and is almost unrecognisable now she's so still, so lifeless.

Her false eyelashes have become unstuck and cling to her cheeks like a pair of horrible, hairy spiders. Matthew's arm is draped around her in an uncomfortable-looking way that has tugged the sleeve of his suit jacket up, exposing a chunky, gold bracelet encircling the tattoo that's branded onto his wrist.

And there's something off about the way the woman is positioned – her limbs are skewed in an uncomfortable fashion, and—

I gasp and recoil as I realize – her left forearm is wrapped around Matthew's lap, but it shouldn't be able to bend that way. The limb has been snapped backwards at the elbow – pearly white bone protrudes from bloody flesh.

Despite my heart, which had been stunned and still in my chest, lurching with warning, I step forwards, my torch exploring further. Her silky hair spills over Matthew's dark trousers. But there's a section that's matted with thick, red gore. I follow the blood, mesmerized by the steady drip from the tips of her hair onto the dusty floor beneath them. A puddle has formed – it's creeping across the ground towards me, growing bigger by the second.

I swallow the saliva that's been pooling in my mouth, sure it tastes metallic, bloody. My brain insists on playing out possible scenarios that involve the cracking of bones and splitting of skulls and I stagger backwards, pulling away.

I've wasted time, lingering in the dark.

I need to find Daniel.

Daniel could still be alive.

And there's only one place left for me to check.

The adrenaline that sent me down here without hesitation has abandoned me. My feet are sluggish, and my brain sends pulses of warning through my body.

*Go back.*

I try to ignore it, try to convince myself that back is not an option, not until I've found Daniel. But I feel like I'm struggling through thick tar that pulls at my limbs and it saps the little energy I have left.

*Go back.*

But he's never given up on me before, so I won't give up on him now. I won't leave him.

I step forwards, towards the final doorway. Just like the others, it's a simple archway carved into the sandy stone of the cellar. I try to banish the twisted, broken image of the bodies in the previous room from my head.

I try to stop believing that I'm about to discover the same thing in this one.

My bottom lip starts trembling so violently I have to bring my hand to my mouth to still it. I try to take a steadying breath, but I notice something as the stale air fills my lungs.

There's something beneath the musty, underground smell. Something sweet, something fragrant. Something familiar.

Roses.

Adrenaline returns with such force that I feel my heart thump heavily against my ribcage. But it sends me in the wrong direction, and before I've even processed what I'm doing, I've dropped the phone and bolted down the tunnel and back towards the stairs, my feet scrabbling across the sandy stone and my hands scraping along the walls. My heart pounds an urgent message through every nerve fibre in my body.

*Run. Run. Run. Run.*

I was stupid to think I could do this. I'm a coward – I can't face it, not *this*.

I'm not strong enough. I never was, and I never will be.

But then I hear it. Somehow, the sound penetrates my panic and stops me dead. A low, pained moan.

It's Daniel – I'm sure of it.

My husband is in the room at the end of the cellar. He's in danger. He *needs* me, and I'm running as fast as I can in the opposite direction.

I clench my teeth together and bend forwards, one hand leaning on the wall for support. My breath is ragged, and I can feel my pulse pounding in my throat, despite only having run a few metres. Pain flares across my back, reminding me why I should be running, not fighting. *I can't fight this*.

But I've beaten it before – this paralyzing, all-consuming terror. I wouldn't be here today if I hadn't. I probably wouldn't be alive.

The sound comes again – a groggy groan that is distorted by the twisting cellar corridor. I curl my fingers and scrape sandy residue off the wall with my fingernails. My injured spine pinches my nerves as I straighten, but I don't shy from it this time. Yes, the pain reminds me that I've been hurt, but also that I survived.

I take a deep, steadying breath and turn, hitch up the heavy material of my tattered wedding dress, and walk back down the tunnel, towards Daniel.

My heart is still pounding, my breathing is still shaky and shallow, but I've managed to still the panicked churning of fear in my head. I force my limbs to obey – one foot in front of the other. I leave the phone on the floor – the torch lights the corridor enough for me to see by, and I want to have my hands free. I don't hesitate outside the door that leads to the bodies of Matthew and the mystery woman. I don't think about the events that led to them dying down here alone.

I just think about the final room. About Daniel.

I step straight through the doorframe, bowing my head to avoid the low archway.

And there he is – slumped against the back wall, a gag tight around his mouth. There's a plastic camping lamp on the ground, casting eerie shadows across the dank room. His hands are bound behind him, and a dark circle of blood is drying on his hairline. He looks at me, and his eyes widen as though I'm the most beautiful thing he's ever seen.

He's here. I've found him. My Daniel.

Surrounding him, scattered across the dirt floor, are hundreds of red roses.

*OceanofPDF.com*

## CHAPTER 49

# The Groom – Daniel

4 June

**11.10 p.m.**

Louise is here.

The sight of her, mud-smeared and dishevelled, but somehow still radiant in her wedding dress, makes me choke a strangled sob out from behind my gag.

I've never been more relieved to see someone, nor more desperate that they'd never come.

I try to say her name, but the word comes out as a groan. My tie has been knotted so tightly around my face that I can feel it cutting into the corners of my mouth.

She rushes to me, breathing my name. "*Daniel*."

She crouches and her fingers touch my hair, my cheeks, my neck, as though she's searching for injuries. Her face contorts with repulsion as she bats a red rose off my lap. She's always had a deep aversion to them.

The cloying, sweet smell of the flowers that fill the room suggest that her past – the dark, awful thing she's been running from for the last four years, has finally caught up with her.

With *us*.

"Daniel," she repeats, her eyes roaming my body as though she can't believe she's found me. I search her too, looking for hints of what she's been through today.

I should have gone after her when she left during John's speech. I should never have left her side.

"Hey," she whispers, and I realize she's brushing tears off my cheeks. "It's OK. You're going to be OK."

Her hands violently shake as they fumble with the knot at the back of my head, betraying just how scared she really is. “Shit,” she hisses. “Shit, I can’t get it undone. Stupid fucking nails!”

She stops trying, and I turn my head as she brings a finger to her mouth. She bites.

My eyes widen as I watch her tear the false nails away from her real ones. The acrylic crunches and splinters between her teeth and I shake my head for her to stop – I know how well stuck on those things are. She’d wrenched one just a few days before the wedding – I’d been amazed by her stoicism as she’d rinsed the blood away. She’d never been one to complain about pain.

It must hurt like hell, but she keeps biting and tearing, spitting fragments of the bejewelled nails onto the floor. She doesn’t even seem to notice the blood trickling down her fingers, splashing onto the once-white satin of her dress.

But I hear her sharp gasp of pain as she returns to the knot, working it loose with her ripped, bloody fingernails.

I feel the gag slacken, and relief floods my body. I want to speak, to tell Louise that I love her, that we’re going to get out of this, together, but she’s already working on the rope around my hands, and I have to push the tie away from my mouth using my lips and jaw.

And then my hands are free too, and hope surges through me. I’m free.

“Louise,” I rasp.

I wince at the dry grating sensation in my throat as I try to speak. It’s like waking up after a heavy night out, not that I’m much of a drinker. I never have been – I can’t bear the grogginess the next day and the stale taste that lingers in my mouth. I’m sure I’d nursed the same glass of champagne all afternoon, wanting to make sure I was alert and sober in case Louise needed me – her nerves have always been frayed, but they were particularly bad today.

And apparently for good reason.

I want her to stop pulling the rest of the rope away from me so I can look at her, hold her, and reassure her that everything is going to be OK, as I’ve tried to ever since we met.

But Louise has changed. Whatever has happened since I last saw her has banished the scared, uncertain woman I thought I knew. Now, my wife is the kind of person who rips her nails off her hands to save *me*.

“Where is he?” she says, and although her breath is warm on my ear, it sends a shiver of ice down my spine.

I shake my head helplessly, trying to remember. A flash of pain across the back of my skull offers a clue, and I remember the sickening crack I’d heard before darkness fell. I’d woken up, my head pounding as a flash of blinding light had stunned me. Then darkness again, and now …

“It’s OK,” she whispers, and I realize she’s rubbing my hands, massaging the pads of my fingers, as though trying to get the circulation going again. How does she know to do that? “We’re going to get out – before he gets here.”

*He*, again.

My wife has secrets. And whatever Louise’s past was, it has refused to remain *in* the past.

It’s right here, and it’s cracked my skull and tied me up in a dark room.

“Louise … who did this?”

She stops rubbing my hands, stops moving. I can’t even feel her breathing.

“My ex, Steven,” she whispers. “I ran from him, but he found me.”

I nod, not needing to know more, not now. I eye the empty doorway nervously. Now is not the time for anything, other than getting out of here.

I lean forward and try to push myself off the floor to standing. But the room lurches and I’ve somehow tipped myself onto my side. My vision swims as I struggle to comprehend how I’m lying down instead of standing up. Rose petals brush against my forehead.

“Daniel.” Louise gasps, and I vaguely feel her hands around my shoulders, coaxing me back up to sitting.

“I don’t feel so good,” I mumble.

“You’ve been hit around the head,” Louise reminds me.

I can feel her agitation rising as she waits for me.

“OK,” I say, once I’m feeling a little steadier. “Let’s try again, but slower this time. And I might need you to help me.”

I catch the pain that tightens her face as she rises to her feet – her back is not going to cope well with helping me stand. But I don’t think I can do this alone. I concentrate on transferring the weight to my feet, preparing to stand, and hold my arm open so I can use Louise for support.

But she doesn’t come to my aid. She’s not looking at me; she’s looking at the doorway. And her expression sends a bolt of terror through my heart.

OceanofPDF.com

## CHAPTER 50

# The Bride

4 June

**11.20 p.m.**

Steven.

He's here. And he's not changed one bit.

He appeared in the doorway slowly, like he'd been in the corridor … listening. He's probably been down here all along, waiting for me in one of the furniture-filled rooms.

His mouth is relaxed, his eyes bright and friendly. The way he leans against the crumbling stone, his head cocked slightly to one side, suggests nothing other than a mild curiosity. He's wearing black trousers and a white shirt, unfastened at the collar. He could be one of the wedding guests who's loosened their formal clothes after a busy day.

White skin, average height, average build, brown eyes, short brown hair. Ordinary looking. *Boring*, in fact. You wouldn't look twice at him in the street, wouldn't pick him out of a line-up, wouldn't cross the road to avoid him at night-time. Certainly not the kind of person who is capable of violence.

But there must be *something* about him. Something special enough to make people accept his bullshit without question, to make my parents believe him over their own daughter.

I look for it now – that thing that got me addicted in the first place, aged fourteen. That thing that kept me there, even when the subtle red flags started appearing, and when the not-so-subtle signs were being smashed into my face.

But there's no flutter, no rush of emotion reminding me how besotted I'd been, how utterly reliant on him for everything.

I just feel a deep, stomach-churning repulsion.

But then he says my name, and I'm like Pavlov's fucking dog, shaking and shitting myself at the sound of the bell ringing.

"Hello, Hannah."

I'd wanted to be strong. I'd wanted to *show* him. But a terrified whimper escapes my lips and I nearly buckle to the floor to join Daniel. I can't do this. I'm not strong enough to face him.

He's going to kill us.

Steven takes a slow step into the room, and I recoil as though he's charged towards me. "I can't believe it's been four years," he says, mildly, as though we've bumped into each other in the pub after an amicable breakup.

His expression is so soft, his eyes so gentle and earnest, that for a moment I doubt my own story, my own recollection of events. What if my parents were right all along? What if I really was a damaged, erratic teenager who couldn't be trusted?

What if I was running from the wrong thing? What if it's *me* I should be afraid of?

But then Steven takes another step towards me, and the smell of his aftershave hits me.

Flashing images, no, not images – *memories*, fly one after another past my eyes. The way his nostrils would flare ever so slightly when I'd done something to upset him. The roses and tender kisses. The dull thump of his shoe connecting with my spine the last time I'd seen him.

The way he'd say my name – not in an adoring way that I'd first mistaken it for. But as a sign of ownership, a master reminding his dog who it belongs to.

I didn't make it up. Any of it.

*I'm not crazy.*

"Why are you doing this?" I rasp.

Steven frowns. "Because I love you."

He follows the statement with a perplexed laugh, the same laugh as when I'd confront him about his behaviour, in the early days – "What do you mean, Hannah? I never *pinched* you. What am I, a nine-year-old girl?"

Then he'd laugh. And I would laugh too, relieved that I'd imagined it, that he hadn't really hurt me on purpose.

Hearing the laugh now brings the doubt creeping back, but I fight to keep hold of what I know – Steven does not love me. Steven hurt me, and he won't hesitate to hurt me again, and anyone who gets in his way.

I must make some kind of movement towards Daniel, because Steven turns his attention to him. I stiffen and try to predict what he'll do next.

But I'd never managed to read him, not really. Even after ten years of studying his every move, watching his reactions and learning his moods, he always managed to take me by surprise. And today is no exception.

"This must all be a bit awkward for you, mate," he says to Daniel, his tone light as he rubs the back of his neck, embarrassed.

*Awkward?*

I look at Daniel, and for a moment, his expression mirrors Steven's. I'm sure he's about to shrug, shake his head and smile – *Don't worry about it, mate!*

That's Steven's magic, I realize. He somehow manages to make people think and feel the way he wants them to. We're all clay for him to mould into the shapes he likes.

But Daniel snaps out of it, and a cold stare settles on his face. "I wouldn't exactly call it awkward, *mate*."

I've never seen Daniel angry. I've never even seen him frustrated, or irritated, in fact. I suspect he does feel that way sometimes, but makes an effort to keep those emotions hidden, knowing how it would impact me. It can't be fun for him, seeing me flinch every time he makes a sudden movement. But right now, the dark expression on his usually mild face is the most beautiful thing I've ever seen.

Because he believes me.

He believes *me*.

Steven's jaw twitches ever so slightly before he controls his features and says pleasantly, "I hope there's no hard feelings, but Hannah and I have history, you know?" He turns his gaze to me now, and although his tone doesn't change, his words are terrifying. "She's mine."

And god, he's right. I freed myself from his restraints, sprinted barefoot away from my home on bloody feet, changed my name and started a new life but still, *still*, he's here to claim me.

*I'll never get away.*

I should have stayed. I should have just accepted my fate. At least then, no one else would have had to get dragged into it. Daniel would have found

a nice girl, a normal girl, a girl whose murderous ex wouldn't turn up at her wedding.

I could have ended my own pain – god knows I'd thought about it often enough before I escaped. And then Steven could have told everyone that I'd finally snapped. Everyone could have gone on believing that poor, unstable Hannah just couldn't cope.

I stare at Steven – I've never been able to break his gaze. It was one of the things, one of the *many* things, that he demanded. *Look at me while I'm talking to you, Hannah!*

A satisfied smile tugs at the corner of his mouth. He knows. He knows he still has me exactly where he wants me, even after all this time. He knows I'm afraid to look away, that I'll come running the moment he tells me it's time to go home.

"She isn't yours."

God, I'd almost forgotten Daniel, sat slumped on the dusty cellar floor among the pungent roses. How quickly I'd returned to being Hannah, abandoning Louise and everything that matters to her.

Steven's eyes harden as he looks back to Daniel.

"She doesn't *belong* to anyone," Daniel continues, and I twist my head to look down at him. My sweet, soft-spoken husband has never looked so fierce. "She's a human being, you fucking psychopath."

I gasp and snatch my head around to watch for Steven's reaction. How dare Daniel speak to him like that? What if he doesn't understand the evil Steven is capable of?

He doesn't know what else has happened tonight. He doesn't know about Emily or the photographer. He doesn't know that Cara's fiancé lies dead in a room just metres away from us, slumped against a pile of furniture with a bridesmaid across his lap.

The mildness has gone from Steven's face, revealing the rot beneath. He's looking at Daniel in the same way he used to look at me, right before —

There's a hammer in his hand. I widen my eyes – how had I missed it? Had it been in his back pocket all along? I think of Mick's head wound, Emily's bloody temple, the blood dripping down the bridesmaid's hair, and Daniel's dizziness as he tried to stand.

I can feel Steven's energy vibrating and the familiarity of it makes me want to scream. He was waiting for this – for the moment he could remove

his nice-guy disguise. It must be exhausting, pretending all the time.

He’s not changed one bit.

But *I* have.

*OceanofPDF.com*

## CHAPTER 51

# The Groom – Daniel

4 June

**11.30 p.m.**

Steven lunges towards me, his arm raised, a hammer tight in his fist. I remember the sickening crack from the first time he'd hit me, and know my reactions are too dulled to defend myself.

But then a wall of white appears in front of me. It's Louise, stepping between us.

*No, please god, no.*

The hammer that I'd imagined cracking my own skull is now hitting Louise's face in my mind. I lurch forwards across the ground, ready to catch her as she falls.

But she stays upright, and I peer past the heavy folds of fabric that make up her train. Steven's hammer is still raised, but he hasn't hit her … yet.

"How did you find me?" she asks softly.

I blink in astonishment. She's making conversation with him? What the hell is she thinking?

But it seems to be working – Steven lowers his hand and the hammer returns to his side. His focus is on Louise now, instead of me.

She's acting as a human shield.

I want to grab her, to pull her out of the way, to save her. What if he loses it, and decides to use his weapon after all? The thought of it makes my hands tremble violently, and I curl my fingers into fists to stop the shaking.

I have to trust her. Her distracting him has quite likely saved my life. She knows him, knows how he works. Maybe she can get us out of this.

So I stay quiet, stay still, and try to fade into the cold stone beneath me.

“It was fate,” Steven says simply. His eyes are locked on Louise. He barely blinks, and I try to imagine how terrified she must feel, back under the scrutiny of the man who abused her.

“Fate?” she asks. I’m amazed by how steady her voice is. But then I notice the hem of her dress vibrating on the floor in front of me – her knees are literally knocking together under all that material. I want to tell her that she’s doing amazingly, that she’s strong. But I daren’t breathe, daren’t remind Steven that I’m here, and that he had been about to smash my head in.

“I never stopped searching for you, Hannah,” he says, and his voice is so tender, so full of what sounds like genuine emotion that for a stupid second, I feel sorry for him. “But you didn’t make it easy.”

Louise is quiet but shifts her weight in her feet – a mannerism I’ve become accustomed to and now understand. She’s trying to figure out what the right answer is.

She must decide that silence is the safest option, as Steven continues, “Your parents were worried sick too, you know. It was cruel, what you did. Selfish and cruel.”

He says this in a quietly disappointed way that I imagine makes Louise feel like a child being scolded. I sense the breath pause in her chest, and itch to defend her. I scan the cellar, searching for something, *anything* I could use as a weapon. But there’s nothing apart from fucking *roses* covering every square inch of floor.

“Your poor mum,” Steven says, shaking his head.

*Be strong, Louise.*

“I never gave up,” he says, his voice a mixture of pride and threat. “And I almost found you – people saw you running down the high street without shoes on, screaming like an absolute lunatic. They said some woman helped you, but when I tracked her down, she insisted she had no idea what I was talking about and had never met you.”

Steven pauses to repeat the infectious laugh that made me want to return his smile when he’d first addressed me, made me want to be his friend.

“Imagine my surprise when I saw the lying bitch here tonight!”

Louise’s hands bunch into fists so suddenly that I’m sure she’s about to punch Steven in the face. She manages to keep her cool, though her whole body is rigid with the effort.

He must be talking about Emily. I hadn't realized just how deep Louise's gratitude ran.

"But the trail went cold," Steven continues. "I knocked on doors, put up flyers, even reported you missing to the police. But they didn't want to know – you were an adult capable of your own decisions, apparently. They wouldn't listen to us when we insisted that you weren't in your right mind."

The rage that I'd been keeping pushed down inside me threatens to bubble over. Could I tackle him – take his legs out from underneath him and wrestle the hammer off him? I shift my weight, but even without rising to my feet, a sickening wave of nausea makes the room tilt.

"The years went by, and I almost gave up hope." Steven sighs, and I notice Louise's fingers twitch, as though following an ingrained instinct to comfort him. "But then, like I said …" His expression lifts, his eyes bright with glee. "… fate intervened."

I want to tell him to get on with his story – it's getting as dry as John's awful speech. But he's calm, for now. What if I do something that enrages him again?

"I saw some video – some stupid flash mob thing that popped up when I was mindlessly scrolling, trying to fill the time now that you were gone from my life. I was about to close it, when who did I see?"

I groan inwardly and know Louise must be doing the same. The video. The stupid, embarrassing video we'd been roped into – all the betrothed couples who had booked their wedding at the venue doing a cringeworthy dance in front of the house.

The guilt crawls up my throat and threatens to choke me. Louise hadn't wanted to do it. She'd been very clear that no photos of her should ever appear online.

"I didn't tell your parents – I didn't want to get their hopes up just to have you break their hearts again. I paid the venue a visit, and had a chat with one of the servers, who was happy to leave his role and recommend me as a replacement."

Louise can't keep quiet anymore, and gasps, "You were there, during the speech, weren't you?"

Steven nods smugly. "I was so close I could have kissed your neck when I leant over to collect your plate." He pauses to study her reaction, clearly enjoying demonstrating how much power he still has over her. "And it took

a lot of effort not to reveal myself when you leapt to your feet. I knew then that you still felt it – still sensed our connection."

"I smelt your aftershave," Louise says.

I hold my breath as Steven's expression darkens. He glares at Louise, trying to figure out if there's anything in her tone he doesn't like. Please, *please* don't let him find anything.

But he continues his explanation. "I'd been working here for months, bored out of my mind serving drinks and waiting tables. Do you have any idea how similar these things are? Every couple seemed to think they were spending thousands to create their special day, unique to them. But they're all the same – the schedule, the photos, the food, the speeches. I feel like I've been trapped in a fucking time loop, reliving the same day over and over as I waited for you." Steven laughs, but this time I notice a tremble in his voice. "I'd been beginning to wonder if you would ever come. And then last night, you finally arrived."

"You've worked here for months?" Louise asks softly, and I wonder if her tactic of keeping him engaged in the less interesting elements of his plan will work for much longer.

Steven nods.

"And you planned this …" She glances at the rose petals scattered around us. "But what about the people—"

She swallows heavily, and for a second, I'm scared it's all too much, and she's going to pass out. But she manages to finish, her voice faded away to almost nothing. "The people in the other room – was that you?"

I frown. What people? What is she talking about? I suddenly realize that I still don't know what's happened here, not really. And I'm starting to understand that Steven has done a lot worse than hitting me around the head.

Steven's gaze doesn't leave Louise as a sinister sneer spreads over his mouth. "Yes, that was me. You know how I feel about cheats, Hannah. So I fucking killed them."

*OceanofPDF.com*

## CHAPTER 52

# The Bride

4 June

**11.40 p.m.**

I knew he was capable of it. I've always known. But to hear the truth from his own mouth – that he's *killed* people – makes it difficult to keep my body steady, my expression blank. But I do, and my eye contact doesn't waver as I stare him down.

I search for the right words, not that I've ever been able to find them in the past. No matter how I responded – defending myself, placating him, flattery, silence – all options ultimately led down the same path and ended in Steven hurting me.

"Why?" I finally settle on, not because it will help our situation, but because I *need* to know.

The question could apply to any number of things – why did he keep me alone and hurting all those years? Why did he pursue me when I finally escaped? Why is he here now, on my wedding day?

"Because they deserved it," he snarls. A fleck of spit leaps across the gap between us, landing on my cheek, but I don't dare wipe it off. This is a bad sign. He's starting to lose his cool, and, if history is anything to go by, it won't be long until he finds a way to blame me for the rage that's churning around his body.

"Do you know who he is, that man?" He doesn't wait for me to reply, and continues, his eyes bright. "He was the groom at today's other wedding."

I say nothing.

"And do you know who the woman is, that *slut* on the floor with him?" Steven spits. The laughter has vanished, and his face is contorted with

disgust. “She was the maid of honour. The *maid of honour*, Hannah.”

I nod mutely as I try not to react. I’d known Matthew was up to no good when I’d seen him hand in hand with the pretty blonde woman who now lies lifeless across his lap.

“Can you imagine it? Finding out that your husband was fucking your best friend?” Steven barks, but thankfully doesn’t wait for me to answer. “Because that’s what I caught those two doing. I was making Daniel comfortable and down they came – creeping like naughty little children looking for somewhere to hide.”

I’m still nodding, despite the horror that’s creeping over my skin and making it itch. How quickly they return – the tactics I’d used to try and stay alive. Keep agreeing with him, no matter what. Keep him thinking he’s right, that I’ll do whatever he says. That I love him.

Steven starts speaking rapidly, the hammer in his hand twitching. “It was obvious to everyone at their wedding that something was off – he looked like a man with a noose around his neck, not someone who had just got married to the woman he loved. Not like I would have looked on our wedding day, Hannah.” His romantic words clash horribly with the potent expression on his face, and I fight to stop myself from dropping my eye contact.

“It’s amazing how much you see when no one is looking at you. I served him a drink when he was outside, sweating and shaking after saying I do.” Steven is still staring at me, but his eyes are blank as he murmurs, “I served your husband a drink too.”

The idea of him handing my husband a glass of champagne makes me shudder. Steven had been there, all day, so close. I’d been right to react the way I did when the rose was delivered to the bridal suite that morning.

I should have known he’d find me.

“I had to get rid of them—” Steven pauses again, a slight frown wrinkling his forehead. And for the first time since he revealed himself, he releases me from his cold stare and looks blankly at the floor. I almost sag to the ground with relief. “I would have had to get rid of anyone who found me down here – I couldn’t have anyone get in the way of what I’d been planning for months, no, I had to, I couldn’t—”

I keep still. Am I imagining it, or has Steven lost some of the self-control he used to possess? He used to be so steady, so measured and aware of

everything he did. Now, there's a new flightiness about him – the way he keeps breaking off mid-thought is very un-Steven.

Maybe I'll be able to use it to my advantage.

He shakes his head and frowns, as though struggling to remember what he was talking about. "But I'm glad it was them. God, when I saw them at it like filthy *animals*, all I could think of was you, you with other men, you *engaged* to another man." Steven's free hand trembles violently as he runs it over his smooth jaw. His expression is haunted, but I know it's not because of regret for what he's done. "He had her pressed against the wall. She was moaning so loud that they didn't even hear me come in."

His eyes return to me, and I stand to attention. "On his *wedding day*, Hannah."

The pause continues this time, and I panic – he wants a response. What do I say? What are the right words?

Too late.

"You can't imagine it, can you?" he says his voice full of warning of what's about to happen. "You have no idea what it's like to be cheated on."

He stares at me with an expression of unfiltered loathing, and I fight the urge to groan. This old chestnut. These accusations of infidelity were how it usually started … or ended.

"I never cheated on you," I say before I've had the sense to check my words.

Steven laughs. The *you're fucking deluded* laugh I know so well. The laugh that made me believe that maybe I *had* cheated on him and then somehow forgotten about it. That maybe I absolutely deserved the fist ploughing into my stomach because I really am a *dirty, cheating bitch*.

"You think I'm such an idiot, don't you?" he snaps, pressing his face closer to mine. "You think I never noticed it – the sexy outfits you wore for other men, the flirting with anyone who had a pulse, all the eyes you made at people through the window?"

I gasp. But not through fear, for once. But through the sheer ridiculousness of his accusations.

This time, it's me who laughs.

Steven's eyes widen and he moves backwards slightly as my laughter continues. I thought I'd tried every reaction to him, with none of them working, none of them stopping his power over me. But I don't think I've

ever laughed in his face before, and his startled reaction makes me laugh harder.

It's like a fog has lifted, one I've carried with me ever since I met him. I'd thought I'd left it behind when I'd escaped him, but I hadn't, not really. He's always been there, a presence in my life, dictating everything I did, every thought I had.

But it isn't me who's crazy, deluded, unstable.

It's *him*.

"I never cheated on you, Steven," I say, once I can finally speak. "And do you know how I can be sure of that?" I pause to take a breath, before letting the emotion I'd kept trapped inside me for half of my life explode out of my mouth. "Because I was never allowed to leave the *fucking house*! I was making *eyes* at people out of the window because I was trying to signal for help!"

I hear Daniel shift behind me as Steven tenses, his eyes glinting malevolently.

But I'm not finished.

"And what about the photographer – I assume that was you, who killed him in the woods? What's your excuse for that, and for nearly killing my best friend? Did you catch them cheating too, huh?" I can hear the shrillness in my voice, the emotion I'd trained myself to keep tightly bound within me for most of my life, finally being expressed.

"I followed her," Steven spits, my audacity making his entire body tremble with rage. "After I dragged Daniel down here and tied him up, I came back upstairs to keep an eye on you and leave you a clue where to find him – I knew I'd have some time before you'd start looking for him properly. Then I saw that *bitch* walking into the woods, and I followed her. I wanted her to pay for what she did, for taking you from me, then lying to my face. But I was interrupted by that fucking oaf of a photographer, and by the time I'd dealt with him, she'd disappeared."

The realization of just how close Emily had come to dying makes bile seep into my mouth. If Mick hadn't been out there …

He saved her life, I realize. The irritating, obnoxious photographer, who had been my biggest concern at some points of the day, had saved my best friend's life.

And he'd died for it.

“When I couldn’t find her, I came back here to wait for you. That’s when those two appeared.” He jerks his head towards the wall, where Matthew and the maid of honour’s battered bodies lie.

I think of the bone jutting out of the woman’s arm. I think of the bright fascination in Steven’s eyes when he’d taken my limbs in his hands, bending them as I screamed, seeing just how far he could push me until—

Until I snapped.

But I didn’t snap, did I?

I escaped.

And I can do it again.

“You’re a sick bastard, Steven,” I say, slowly, savouring the words on my tongue. “There’s no way, *no way* you can convince yourself that any of the evil shit you’ve done is justified.”

Steven blinks as though I’ve slapped him. But he recovers quickly, and his face clouds with anger as he raises the hammer to point at me. He opens his mouth to tell me to watch myself, but I don’t let him speak.

“You’re a loser, Steven.” I laugh, amazed that my courage still hasn’t deserted me. “You’re a pathetic little man who couldn’t deal with the fact his girlfriend left him the second she had the chance.” A flicker of uncertainty passes over his eyes, and I whisper, “You’re *nothing*.”

I wait for his reaction – whatever he’s going to do, I’m ready for it. I won’t cower, I won’t beg, I won’t apologize. If he comes at me, I’ll fight him tooth and nail.

*OceanofPDF.com*

## CHAPTER 53

# The Groom – Daniel

4 June

**11.50 p.m.**

Louise is shaking. But it's not terror – it's something I've never seen in her before. It's fury.

She's not going to cower or beg or tell him what he wants to hear, just to get us out of here. She's going to fight, and god knows I'll be at her side when the time comes.

But just as Steven's face contorts into a furious grimace, something moves in the doorway behind him. A figure fills the frame, huge and imposing, but somehow managing to appear without alerting any of us to his presence.

"Dad," Louise breathes.

*What?* I stare at the back of her head, wishing I could see her face and trying to understand. Her *father*?

Steven looks just as surprised as I feel – he'd said he hadn't told her parents that he'd tracked her down, hadn't he?

"Roy," he says, his forehead wrinkling with confusion.

"Steven," Louise's father replies curtly.

I study him from where I'm still knelt on the rough stone floor. He's so big he fills the entire doorway and he stands like a bouncer guarding a particularly exclusive nightclub – hands loose and relaxed by his sides but holding himself with a tension that makes it clear he won't hesitate to use his size if pushed.

"How did you know …?" Steven asks, his question lingering in the air. After the amazing, brave way Louise spoke to him, he's lost his cool, lost

his control of the situation. The bewildered look on his face brings me a deep feeling of satisfaction. I could watch him squirm all night.

"I bumped into a couple of bridesmaids upstairs," Roy replies, his tone still flat and professional. "They were quite … upset."

Steven's Adam's apple bobs in his throat as he swallows repeatedly. I have to bite my tongue against the urge to gloat, to tell him it's over. He's *fucking lost*.

Louise hasn't moved an inch from where she stands in front of me, still shielding me from her murderous ex. The bravery it took for her to do that is something I'll never let her forget – she quite likely saved my life tonight. I wish I could join her and stand by her side, but every time I try to rise my head feels like it's going to split down the middle, and I can't tell which way is up.

"Why didn't you tell me, Roy?" Steven finally says, ignoring the comment about the bridesmaids. "Why didn't you tell me you were coming here, that you found her?"

Jesus, there are tears in his eyes – he genuinely believes he's been hard done by. He feels *betrayed*. This time, I can't control the bark of laughter that escapes my mouth. Steven's head snaps around to look at me, his features contorting as he remembers my presence.

I stare back, unflinching.

"I could ask the same of you, son," Roy replies.

Steven's attention is back on the man in the doorway, but something troubles me.

*Son?*

Louise must pick up on it too, as I see her inhale and hold the breath in her chest, her body stiff as she watches the exchange between the two men who were once such a big part of her life. The two men who must have been close, extremely close, if Louise had to flee her family, as well as her abusive ex.

I suddenly don't feel so confident that the arrival of Louise's father means we're safe.

"I didn't want to upset you," Steven explains. "Or Leslie – I know how much you'd been through. I wanted to speak to Louise first and convince her to come home, without you having to be involved."

I'm astonished to hear the tremor in his voice. Is this genuine? Does he really care about Louise's parents? Or has he realized he has to keep his

little act going until the bitter end?

My attention flits back to Roy's face, but there is no hint of what he's thinking, nor what he's feeling.

Now would be a good time for Louise to speak up, to tell her father the truth, *again*. But the courage that had enabled her to scream in Steven's face seems to have deserted her – she's paralyzed, with fear, with despair … with defeat?

She needs me. I swallow down the threat of vomit at the back of my throat, clench my fists, and push myself off the floor. But – shit – my legs buckle again, and I land on one knee, the room seeming to twist and lurch around me as pain shoots through my battered skull.

"And all this?" Roy says, clasping his hands loosely in front of his body and gesturing with his eyes around the cellar, at the roses, at me.

My nostrils flare as I try to stop myself from falling fully to the floor. Yes, Steven, try to explain yourself out of this one.

But I've underestimated just how good an actor Steven is, how good a liar. He shakes his head despairingly and runs a hand through his hair. The hammer isn't in it anymore, I realize. I scan the floor desperately, searching in the darkness, but it's nowhere to be seen.

Steven sighs. "I didn't mean for it to happen like this. I just came here to speak to Hannah, that's all. But I shouldn't have done it like this – I lost my temper."

I hear Louise gasp at the same time as I do. Is he finally going to confess?

"When I saw her in her dress, looking just how I imagined her on our wedding day, I wasn't sure if I was doing the right thing after all. She's moved on … she's forgotten us." He raises his head to look at Louise, shaking a single tear loose. His face is filled with such anguish, such love, that I'm once again having to battle the urge to believe every word he says.

"So I decided to speak to her husband first, to Daniel." He gestures at me, but his expression is regretful this time. "I explained who I was, and that we'd been looking for Hannah all these years and just wanted to know she was safe."

She is safe, I want to say. She's safe now she's married to someone who doesn't hurt her.

Steven sighs heavily through his nose and drops his gaze to the floor again. "I hadn't meant to suggest that I was here to *claim* her – she was

already married by that point anyway. I just wanted to know that she was happy."

I close my eyes, the endless bullshit spewing out of Steven's mouth exhausting me. If only Louise's father had seen the corpses of the people from the other wedding that Steven had killed, then he'd know exactly what Steven was capable of, without his daughter having to convince him. But he must have come straight to this room without looking in the others, following the sound of voices.

"Daniel suggested we talk in private, and led me down here," Steven continues, and I startle so much at the lie that a jolt of pain shoots down the back of my neck.

*I* led him down here? I open my mouth to object but realize I still can't remember exactly how I did end up in the cellar. I'd been looking for Louise after John's speech … I think. I'd been alone, checking down corridors, worried. And then a deafening crack inside my head followed by a flash of blinding white pain. I woke up, what seemed to be hours later, with Louise bursting into the room, my hands tied behind my back.

I shake my head in disbelief. He'd nearly had me believing his lie – that I'd suggested a man-to-man with Louise's ex to draw a line in the sand in a fucking *cellar*. The sophistication of his powers of persuasion are starting to scare me, and I feel like I'm getting a glimpse into the gaslighting Louise must have experienced, and just how strong she would have had to be to believe herself over him.

"I shouldn't have done it," Steven says, his own head shaking. I snort softly, intrigued now to see how he's going to attempt to make knocking me out and tying me up look good for him. "But when Daniel attacked me, I defended myself. I hit him too hard." He turns slowly to look at me. "I'm sorry, mate."

I stare at him in stunned silence. Sorry, mate? *Sorry, mate?*

I open my mouth to speak the truth but a strangled sound that is made up of garbled words, laughter and disbelief comes out, making me sound completely unhinged.

Holy shit … this is how he does it. His lies are so barefaced, so outrageous, that the person telling the truth is rendered into a jabbering mess as they try to defend themselves, while he remains cool and collected and the easier one to believe.

And it’s working. Dear god, it’s working – Louise’s father is nodding thoughtfully, as though seeing the sense in Steven’s story.

Louise finally breaks her silence. “No. No – Dad. No! That’s not what happened. That’s not … it’s not – it’s a lie!”

Her words are choked with sobs, and I make another attempt to stand, to be with her, but once again dizziness keeps me rooted to the ground.

Louise’s dad finally shows some emotion when he looks at her. But it isn’t regret, or guilt, or even anger at what Steven has done.

It’s pity.

*OceanofPDF.com*

## CHAPTER 54

# The Bride

5 June

**12.00 a.m.**

“Oh, Hannah.” He sighs.

I want to scream. This can’t be happening. Not again. He can’t be taking Steven’s side, *again*.

I stare at my father, unable to process it, unable to act. What’s the point? No matter what I do, what I say … it never makes any difference.

I notice Steven shift and stand a little taller, inflated by the knowledge that the situation is tipping in his favour. He’s winning. He always wins.

“When Hannah saw me, she flew into a rage,” he continues, sounding like a child trying to impress their hero. And my father is lapping every word of it up. “You know how she gets, Roy. I tried to calm her down, but she was beyond reason. You heard her – you must have heard her, screaming at me?”

Steven widens his eyes and nods at my father, willing him to keep blindly accepting everything that comes out of his mouth.

Tears run down my cheeks, cooling rapidly in the frigid cellar air. For once, Steven isn’t lying – I *was* screaming at him. I’d finally found my voice, finally found the courage to stand up to him. I shake my head, despair overwhelming me. I can’t remember what I said now, but I remember Steven’s stunned silence as I rounded on him.

I can imagine how it would have sounded to anyone listening in.

I take a shuddering breath, the tears spilling over and falling in earnest now. I’ve played right into his hands, fulfilling his portrayal of me as the hysterical, unhinged drama queen perfectly. I’ve demonstrated everything my parents thought about me since the day I met Steven.

I'll never be anything but that girl to them.

"This is bullshit!"

I gasp and turn to see Daniel still kneeling on the ground behind me. His face is grey, his lips completely bloodless. He's leaning to the left, but holding his head straight, and the awkward angles of his body make me worry about the impact of his head injury.

I turn back to my father and scrub the tears off my cheeks with the heel of my bloodied hand. "I'm not going to bother telling you what really happened today," I tell him, for once not fighting the tremor in my voice. I've been through hell – of course I should sound scared. That doesn't make me a liar. "The police will be able to figure it out, once they see the evidence." I pause, and can't resist adding, "Those in the police force who haven't been completely fooled by *him*, anyway."

I jab my finger in Steven's direction, and he jerks slightly in response, whether from anger, or a continued act of innocent hurt, I can't tell. But I don't look at him. I'm never going to look at him again.

"Hannah," my father starts, but I hold my hand up to silence him.

I don't want to hear it. Don't want to hear his pained attempts to make me see reason, to excuse Steven's behaviour and convince me that it's *me* with the problem.

Out of the corner of my eye, I see Steven raise his hands helplessly as he sighs. "You see what I mean, Roy? I'm sorry, mate – I really tri—"

My father explodes into the room so suddenly that I scream and stumble backwards. Daniel's hands reach up to support me as I tread on him, and I manage to remain standing as Steven is smashed into the wall behind him. My father's hands are around his throat.

Steven is winded, gulping for air that he can't find because my father is relentlessly squeezing, his face pressed so close to his that they must be sharing air. He's staring into Steven's eyes, his own face reddening with effort and a pure, terrifying hatred.

He's going to kill him.

*Good.*

I bunch my fists at my sides and relish the horrified expression on Steven's face. See how he likes being physically overpowered by someone much bigger than him. See how he likes being vulnerable and scared. See how he likes wondering if this will be his last moment on earth.

He deserves it.

But then I look at my dad. My dad, who is huge, intimidating, and could easily choke a man to death with his bare hands. But he's also the man who let me give those same hands a manicure, complete with pink glitter nail polish. He's the man who managed to shield me and mum from the stress of his job, even when the horror of what he'd seen was etched into the wrinkles on his face. He's my dad – he's not a killer.

I can't let him do this.

"Dad, don't!" I gasp, pushing away the sick enjoyment I was getting from seeing Steven suffer. I clutch his forearm, but he doesn't even acknowledge my presence – his focus is completely on Steven.

"You hurt my little girl," he snarls, pressing even closer to Steven.

"Dad," I plead. "I'm OK now. Look at me – he's not hurting me anymore. I'm OK – I'm *happy*."

My father turns his head to look at me, slowly, as though he can't bear to. And then his face crumples, folding in on itself with such pain that I feel my own features mirror his. This man, who has seen such awful things throughout his career, is howling as tears flood down his face.

But his grip on Steven's throat doesn't falter – if anything, the sobbing makes it stronger, his fingers tightening with every shudder of anguish.

"I'm so sorry, Hannah. I'm so sorry for not listening to you."

And despite the horror of the situation, a feeling of elation surges through me. He believes me. *My father believes me.*

Steven's lips have gone blue.

"Dad, stop!" I scream again, tugging on my father's huge forearm. Because, despite the overwhelming urge to let Steven suffer, to let him die … I don't want his blood on my father's hands. "Please – you'll go to prison and I can't lose you again!"

My words finally penetrate, and he blinks through the tears. The rage fades to deep sorrow, and then gratitude – that he's getting another chance, that I want him in my life. My hand is still on his arm, my own tears returning. I nod as his grip around Steven's neck loosens.

And although I've promised myself that I won't look at Steven ever again, I can't resist glancing at him as I coax my father's fingers away from his neck. He sags down the wall but manages to remain standing. His colour is returning – he's going to survive this, and the thought sends a confusing jumble of emotion through my heart. He stares back at me, and makes a sudden, twitching movement, as though he's having some kind of seizure.

Then he does it again – a jabbing motion with his right hand, into my father's flank. Again, and again, and again.

And then Steven smiles.

I look down. My dress is splattered with blood. More is falling from my father's side, beneath his suit jacket, and what started as a steady drip has now turned into an incessant gushing. Even as I watch, paralyzed with horror, Steven's hand jerks again.

"No," I breathe, too late. My father's eyes are glazed and unfocused, staring blankly at the wall above Steven's head. He sags downwards in slow motion as my hand uselessly plucks his sleeve, and crashes to the floor, landing with a heaviness that I feel vibrating up my legs.

He lies face-down on the dirt floor, unmoving. Blood seeps across the dusty stones beneath him.

"What have you done?" I whisper, my eyes back on Steven now, cursing myself for ever taking them off him. "*What have you done!?*"

I stare at his hand, trying to understand. A thin, dull piece of metal protrudes from his fist – a screwdriver? Had he had it in his pocket the whole time?

Of course he had. And my insistence that my father release his grip on his neck, my distraction of his focus from the threat – it gave Steven the perfect moment to act.

This was my fault.

Steven is leaning against the wall, and I notice him wince as he swallows. He's lucky to be alive, lucky my father didn't crush the life out of him. I doubt he can talk after being choked like that. But it doesn't stop him from smiling as he watches me.

My father lets out a deep, agonized groan from where he lies and I inhale sharply. He's still alive. Maybe he can survive this, maybe—

Steven lunges, the screwdriver held high and aimed at my face. I scream and twist away from him, but my legs tangle in the heavy material of my wedding dress and I fall. Pain shoots up my elbow as I land, but I don't have time to register it, as Steven is on top of me, his teeth bared as he presses the screwdriver to my cheek, just below my eye. A strangled, feral noise is coming from his mouth, his voice box damaged by my father's hands.

I can hear myself whimpering, sobbing, and pleading as I struggle to push his hands away. Steven has always been such an expert at

manipulating people with his smooth words that this snarling, voiceless man feels almost a stranger to me. But he doesn't have to speak for me to know what he's thinking.

He's going to kill me. And he's going to make it hurt.

And despite all the strength I thought I had found tonight, I'm once again nothing more than a scared little girl. I was a fool to think I could ever escape him. I'll never be anything but a victim. I close my eyes and feel the cold metal of the screwdriver press harder into my cheekbone. The scent of his aftershave fills my nostrils.

But then Steven's body spasms above me, and he grunts. I open my eyes to see Daniel standing above us. He must have managed to stagger to his feet and kick Steven in the side, but not hard enough – Steven is still on top of me, still pressing the screwdriver to my face, ready to make his mark on my skin. I watch Daniel pull his leg back to do it again, but he loses his balance, toppling weakly back to the ground.

Steven returns his attention to me.

But seeing Daniel has reminded me again that there are people who care about me – people who love me in a way that makes me feel safe and fulfilled, not scared and alone. I'm not the frightened, cowering girl I was, not anymore. I have a new life now; I deserve to be happy; I've fucking *earned* it.

I won't let Steven take it away from me.

I don't hesitate. I don't think. I just act. And from where I am, trapped beneath him, the only thing I can do is sink my teeth into the wrist of the hand that holds the screwdriver to my face. I feel the skin puncture beneath my canines. Steven's eyes open in alarm, and a rasping scream of pain escapes his damaged throat. I fight through the repulsion of what I'm doing and bite harder, until my incisors are only stopped from touching by the rubbery sinew of flesh and tendons.

I pray that the pain prevents him from thinking logically and plunging the screwdriver up into my eye.

My mouth fills with blood and I try not to gag as his screams grow louder. He tries to pull his hand away from me, but I clamp down. Images of my beloved dog refusing to let go of a chew toy burst unbidden into my brain. I shake my head, tearing at his veins and screaming to drown out the horrified voice in the back of my head.

I have to do this. This is how I survive.

Steven’s screams reach a new pitch and sound like they’re ripping his injured throat to shreds, just like I’m ripping into his wrist. But there must be a moment, where he can think through the pain, as his red, bloodshot eyes refocus on me. I try to hold his arm still in my mouth, but he rotates the screwdriver, angles it towards my eye, and braces himself, ready to plunge it downwards.

This is it.

But suddenly the cellar is full of noise and movement. Feet surround me, scrabbling in the dirt, and Steven’s attention is drawn away from what he was about to do to me. But I don’t lose focus. I don’t hesitate for a second, because I know that if I do, Steven will take his chance, and he’ll finally kill me.

Even as the screwdriver is prised from his hand by a police officer, I don’t let go of his wrist. They try to wrestle his body away from me, but I keep my teeth clamped firmly shut, resisting their attempts to take him away. His blood continues to gush over my face, down my neck and onto the ground beneath me.

I won’t let go.

But a voice penetrates the chaos. Somehow, underneath all the shouted instructions bouncing off the low ceiling, I can make out his words. They’re calm, soothing, safe. Daniel is lying next to me, his cheek pressed against the dusty floor. “It’s OK, Louise,” he promises. “It’s over – you can let go now.”

*OceanofPDF.com*

## Epilogue

# Louise

**Six months later**

I can still taste his blood.

It's hot on my tongue every night when I wake screaming, sure I can feel his weight pressing down on me, the cool metal of the screwdriver beneath my eye. The smell of his aftershave burns the back of my throat and I feel the thick, metallic liquid in my mouth and I can't breathe. I can't breathe, because I'll never escape, never be free of him, never—

But then a voice tells me I'm OK, I'm safe. And a hand strokes my temple as I thrash and sob. But he doesn't hold me down because he knows I hate that. He just waits. And he says my name.

"You're safe, Louise. You're safe."

And when I can see that I'm not in the cellar anymore, or in the flat, I can breathe again. I'm home.

I'm safe.

Daniel coaxes my lips apart with a glass and tips a little water into my mouth. He knows I need to wash away the blood, even now, six months after it happened.

"I'm sorry," I gasp as he wraps his arms around me and lets me weep into his chest. And as always, he tells me that I have nothing to apologize for. That we're both safe, that it's over now.

But I *am* sorry. I'll never stop being sorry. Because although I know it's not my fault, I still brought it to Daniel's door. If he'd found a nice, normal girl, as his mother wanted, he would never have had to meet Steven.

My therapist can repeat it until she's blue in the face, but I'm not sure she'll ever convince me that none of the fault lies with me. I could have been better at hiding from him. I could have listened to my instincts when I saw the red rose on my breakfast tray. I could have done *something* to stop that monster hurting the people I love.

Daniel makes soothing hushing noises as he rocks me back and forth, and I concentrate on the beating of his heart, trying to regulate mine with its steady rhythm.

There's a noise outside the closed bedroom door – an urgent scrabbling followed by a high-pitched, mournful cry.

"Time to get up," Daniel says softly, and I can hear the smile in his voice.

He gently slides out of bed and pads over to the door. Bonnie bounds into the room – a ball of wriggling fluff and puppy fat. She tries to leap onto the bed, misses, and bounces back onto the floor.

Daniel scoops her up and places her on my lap so I can hold her to my chest and soak the rest of my tears up with her fur.

I love her. I love her perfect round rottweiler face, her oversized paws, and her desperation to be close to us. But I can't look at her without thinking about Buddy. Yet another reason to feel guilty.

I close my eyes as I snuggle her close.

I should have called the police the second I saw the photograph. I'd known it was my dog – *I'd known*. But I'd been so desperate to believe that I'd escaped my past. The alternative was too awful, too terrifying.

When Steven had seen me arrive at the hotel the night before the wedding, he'd found our details in the office, which included my new name and address. As I'd lain awake in the bridal suite, tossing and turning and fretting about the big day, he'd broken in through the back, smashing the window to the utility room. He would have discovered that Buddy, huge and intimidating as he looked, was actually a big softie.

And he'd killed him, just to hurt me.

The dog-sitter hadn't stayed overnight. At first, I'd been furious – she was supposed to be looking after Buddy the whole time, not just visiting to feed and walk him. But the anger had been followed by relief. If she'd been here, if she'd been home when Steven had come calling … there would be another body to add to the count.

The woman was traumatized by the scene she arrived at the next morning – the morning of our wedding. She'd panicked, sure she'd somehow be blamed because she'd failed to stay overnight as she was supposed to. So she hadn't tried to get hold of me or phone the police. She'd just run, and hidden, and pretended it hadn't happened.

As angry as her inaction had made me, I could understand it, in a way.

I wriggle back down beneath Daniel's arm as he returns to the bed, and Bonnie clumsily slides beneath the duvet with us.

I drift back to sleep, and when I next open my eyes, there's a cup of coffee on my bedside table. Bonnie and Daniel have both gone.

I blink groggily and try to remember what plans we have for today. It's a Sunday, so no estate agents for me, which makes me feel surprisingly sad. I've come to rely on those frivolous days with Sammi and Nina, exchanging chit-chat about the quality of the Boots meal deals versus Tesco's. Without them, it's harder to avoid sinking back into the dark of the hotel's cellars.

It's Sunday … and when I remember what we're doing today, dread settles in the pit of my stomach. It will be impossible to avoid the cellars today – we're meeting with someone who has a lot of questions I'm not sure I have the answers for.

I drink my coffee, shower, and get dressed. The doorbell rings.

As I listen to Daniel hurrying to answer it, I sigh deeply and will myself to keep it together, to be strong.

I go downstairs. My back no longer screams with pain – it's more a dull ache that reminds me of what Steven did to me. But the surgery helped coax the ruptured discs back into place, and I've been told that one day, I'll even be able to live without painkillers. Weaning myself off the diazepam was a long and horrible process, and now anti-anxiety tablets keep the panic attacks at bay, and sleeping pills allow me some rest, even if it is short-lived.

But ultimately, my therapist says that talking, processing, and understanding what happened to me is the way to truly repair my frayed mental health.

Today is a part of that journey, and I slowly open the door to our living room.

She's here. I blink, taking her in. She's changed since I last saw her – she's no longer the bubbly bride-to-be, fizzing with excitement.

"Hi," she says timidly, and I return the greeting in an equally small voice.

I study her in more detail now that I'm not squirming away from her attempt to befriend me. She's around my age and looks similar too – white, average build, brown hair, brown eyes – something I'd been immensely glad of when I went on the run. I was plain. I could be invisible. She's

shaking, and once again I remind myself that this is more difficult for her than it is for me.

Daniel ushers her in, offers her a seat, tea, coffee, water. He's even made cookies, and I'm so touched by the effort he's gone to that I feel my eyes growing wet.

A choking sob from the corner of my room snatches my attention away from Daniel. Cara is crying, covering her face with her hand. She isn't wearing any rings, but there's a dent on her wedding finger where an engagement ring might have once sat.

"I'm sorry," she gasps, as Daniel and I exchange a startled look.

How could we have been so insensitive? She's lost her husband, and mine is offering her homemade cookies.

"You must miss him very much," I offer, weakly.

But astonishingly, Cara's tears morph into laughter, and she emerges from behind her hand. "No. No, I don't, actually. He was a prick."

I can sense Daniel beside me, frozen with the plate of cookies suspended in mid-air. Cara reaches up, takes one, and bites down. "Wow, these are delicious." She nods appreciatively at Daniel. "Matthew couldn't even make a cup of tea for himself." She laughs again as she chews. "I know it's poor taste to be unkind about the dead, but he really was an awful shit. I just wish it hadn't taken him being murdered for me to wake up and see it."

I flinch. The words I'd prepared sit heavily on my tongue. I was going to apologize for her getting tangled up in this mess, for Steven's poison infecting the lives of people he didn't even know. But the way she's speaking about her dead husband … I have no idea what to say in response.

Cara's face suddenly drops, and she struggles to swallow her mouthful of cookie. "God, that sounds terrible, doesn't it?" She shakes her head and her gaze drops to the floor. "I guess it's how I've been dealing with it – being angry, pretending I don't care … It's been a lot, you know?"

I nod, and Daniel lowers himself onto the sofa next to me.

"I mean, when he disappeared in the middle of our wedding, I was hysterical. I tried to convince myself that he'd passed out drunk in the grounds somewhere." She laughs, but her face is contorted with bitterness. "But I could tell by the way everyone was looking at me that something else had happened – that he'd finally chosen Lisa over me. Then his best man, J, spilled his guts and confirmed it all."

Cara shakes her head, in awe. “She’d planned it all along. She’d helped me into my dress, held my bouquet, posed for photos with me … with my husband’s passport in her handbag.”

She takes another bite of the cookie, but her eyes are glazed and she chews mechanically, clearly not tasting it.

“I knew he was cheating on me – I’d always known.” A strange, pained smile stretches her lips thin. “Matty was many things, but smart enough to hide his infidelity was not one of them. I guess I’d made my peace with it though. He was the kind of bloke you’d expect it from, you know? His whole group of mates were the same – proper lads, thinking with what’s between their trousers and all that.”

She shrugs again and Daniel twitches. I’m sure he hates the suggestion that men should be allowed to get away with such disgusting behaviour, that it should be accepted as in their nature. But I’ve seen what the worst of them is capable of, and I’m not surprised that Cara had taught herself to accept it, to look the other way. Sometimes it’s just easier to pretend it’s not happening.

“And as for Lisa, there had always been something a bit off about her.” Cara sniffs. “I don’t think she ever really cared about me. We hadn’t known each other for long, not like she and Matty had. But she always had to get one up on me, to be the one with the power. And what’s more powerful than being able to take your best mate’s husband?”

Cara reaches out to take the glass of water Daniel poured for her, and I notice her hand is still trembling despite the flippancy of her words.

“I kept quiet,” she continues after taking a sip. “I decided not to rock the boat – I’m not a fan of confrontation, you see.” She laughs bitterly. “And I thought, stupidly, that going ahead with the wedding would be the ultimate way of getting back at Lisa. Sure, she could shag Matty, but I was the one marrying him. I was the one with the ring on my finger.”

She holds her hand up and points at the white band where her rings would have once sat. But the fierceness melts from her face and she returns her hand back to her lap. “But I didn’t have time to process him leaving the country with my best friend, because …” She looks up and into my eyes. “That’s not what happened, is it?”

I take a shaky breath. Part of me had been hoping that Cara would do all the talking, that somehow, I would be excused. But it’s my turn to finish the story.

“No,” I agree. “No, that’s not what happened.”

So I fill in the blanks. I tell her who Steven was but spare her the details – she doesn’t need to hear that, not on top of everything else. I tell her that he’d been waiting for me to find Daniel when Matty and Lisa had snuck into the cellar. I tell her that he’d caught them in the act, crept up behind them, and killed them.

Cara laughs dryly. “I suppose I should thank him then.”

I stiffen, and Daniel’s hand darts out to clutch mine.

Cara’s face twists into horror when she realizes what she’s said. “Shit – I didn’t mean that. I told you I’ve been using unfunny jokes as a way to deal with all this. I wouldn’t really thank that psychopath for anything, for what he put me through … for what he put you through.”

I tentatively return her smile, but it feels more like a grimace.

“I’m just glad they died quickly,” she sighs. “Despite everything, I wouldn’t have wanted them to suffer, not really.”

Daniel’s hand tightens around mine, and I know he’s thinking about what I told him – that Matty’s body had seemed relatively unscathed but Lisa’s …

I press my teeth together. It won’t help Cara to know that it was very unlikely her former best friend died quickly, or painlessly.

“It’s just mad,” Cara says, shaking her head. “All that stuff your ex did … he must have been really obsessed with you.”

I suddenly want her to leave. I don’t want to talk about this, I don’t want to even think about it. But it was me who agreed to meet her, me who promised to answer her questions, knowing how much secrets could eat away at you from the inside out.

She deserves to know the truth – all of it.

“He was obsessed with controlling me,” I correct. “He didn’t love me, not really. He loved the kick he got from having complete power over someone. And when I took that away from him … he felt so betrayed that all he cared about was hurting me, in the same way he’d convinced himself I’d hurt him.”

I can feel Daniel’s gaze on my cheek and draw strength from it. “I’m sorry you got caught up in it,” I say softly. “I’m so sorry.”

Cara’s face contorts in confusion. “Christ, I don’t blame you – that would be nuts! That would be like … blaming me for getting cheated on. *It’s not our fault.*”

I've heard those words so many times now, from so many different people. But somehow, hearing them from this stranger, said with such ferocity, somehow it penetrates more.

"It's not our fault," I mimic, and she nods.

It's not my fault that Steven broke into my house and killed Buddy. It's not my fault that Steven kidnapped my husband, then saw Emily going into the woods, followed her and attacked her because he was furious with her for taking me away from him. It's not my fault that Mick was out there too, capturing sunset photos of the house but inadvertently witnessing the attack and getting killed for being in the wrong place at the wrong time. It's not my fault that Steven killed Cara's husband and best friend.

And it certainly isn't my fault that Daniel's mother and best man were hostile towards me from the very start of our relationship, going out of their way to make me feel unwelcome, even on our wedding day. Shirley had sent Emily into the woods looking for Daniel purely out of spite – to mess with me and the people she knew I was close to. She couldn't have known she was sending Emily to what was very nearly her death, but Daniel told her that he'll never forgive her for her vindictiveness.

Now we both have mothers who aren't part of our lives anymore.

He's cut all ties with John too – something he's apologized for not doing earlier. I felt guilty for driving a wedge between them, but Daniel insists that he doesn't want to be around him anymore, that he wasn't a true friend, and the way he treated me was inexcusable.

And that none of it is my fault.

Nina, Sammi, and Emily don't believe any of the blame lies with me either, and Emily has threatened to shave my hair to match hers next time I apologize. She collapsed after I went down into the cellar – her brain had swollen, and she's been told she's lucky not to have serious, irreparable damage. But surgery and a few weeks in hospital have done wonders, and she's back to being my blunt, slightly scary, and fiercely loyal best friend.

It's time for Cara to leave, and I surprise myself by opening my arms as we say our goodbyes. I feel her relax into me as we hug and I realize I'm doing the same. She wants to meet again, and so do I – from the cringeworthy dance video we were both part of, to the awful way our weddings ended, there's something that connects us now.

"I'll come to the trial," she says as we eventually pull away from each other. "I want to see the bastard go down."

Usually, no matter how supportive Inspector Chandra has been throughout the whole investigation, the thought of the impending trial makes the contents of my stomach come rushing up my oesophagus. But this time, staring into Cara's eyes, with Daniel standing behind me … this time, I feel strong. I'm going to go to court, and I'm going to stand in the witness box and tell the world what he did to me.

The door closes behind Cara, and Daniel laces his arms around me from behind. "Are you sure you want to go ahead with lunch?" he murmurs gently. "It's been a full-on morning."

I hesitate and wonder if I'll ever get used to being able to make a decision on my own, without fear of reprisal.

"Yes," I say eventually. "Yes, it will be good to see him."

Daniel kisses the top of my head, and I smile at him before reaching up to grab my coat off the hook. It's cold outside, and my dad always likes to take a walk after we meet for lunch.

*OceanofPDF.com*

# Acknowledgements

I like to take people and places I know and twist them into characters and settings in my books, which I've done a huge amount in *The Perfect Wedding*.

Some characters have quirks based on dear friends (Leigh, with his cool box), but that's where the similarities end. And Grantham Hall was inspired by the place I got married. But the staff in the book are the polar opposite of the friendly, fun and relaxed people we had the pleasure of dealing with!

But Emily, my wonderful, beautiful and generous friend, is exactly as she appears in this story. She took me under her wing when we were teenagers and did so much for us on our wedding day. And just like Emily in the book, she is absolutely not having an affair with my husband.

This book challenged me from the very start, when I had the idea to write alternating bride and groom POVs from different weddings. I was sure it would be painfully obvious that the two main characters were nothing to do with each other, but as it turned out, the opposite was the case and most of my early readers missed the twist entirely. It required a lot of rethinking, rewriting, and the persuasion of others not to give up entirely.

Francesca Riccardi – my brilliant, funny, refreshing agent – thank you for having my back and making me feel empowered to stamp the imposter syndrome into the dirt! And my editor, Anna Nightingale – thank you for believing in my writing and helping me kick the manuscript into shape. I also couldn't have done it without Nicola Doherty, who provided some excellent editorial notes and encouragement right when I needed it. Thank you also to everyone at Avon who worked on the book – Jess Zahra, Emily Hall, Jessie Whitehead, Sara Eusebi, Hannah Lismore, and the rest of the team.

And as always, thank you to my friends, family, and writing pals. This was a book that I especially needed your support for – whether that be brainstorming or just allowing me to pull my hair out in your company. You all know who you are, my lovely people.

*OceanofPDF.com*

## Keep Reading

**She’s run as far as she can. But danger is closer than ever…**




Don’t miss Tess Mackey’s jaw-dropping next book, *The Highland Retreat.*

Click here to pre-order now.

*OceanofPDF.com*

## About the Author

**Tess Mackey** is an author based in Shrewsbury who loves writing characters into terrifying situations inspired by her lived experiences. When she's not allowing her mind to wander to dark and twisty places, she pursues more wholesome activities, like growing mediocre vegetables in her garden, camping with her daughter, and the odd bit of horse riding when she's feeling brave enough.

Her Young Adult debut *Someone is Watching You* published in 2023, followed by *You Wouldn't Catch Me Dead* in 2024 – both published by Hachette. A further two YA thrillers with horror elements will be published by Rock The Boat (Oneworld) in 2026 (*Better Off Dead*) and 2027 (*Dying To Be Here*). Tess's YA novels have been shortlisted and highly commended for numerous awards.

*OceanofPDF.com*

# If you're into it, read into it.

Reading expands worlds, sharpens minds, and fuels creativity. But fewer of us are making time for it.

The National Year of Reading is a campaign designed to inspire more people to make reading a regular part of their lives.

Find out how HarperCollins is supporting the campaign and get free resources at **harpercollins.co.uk/go-all-in**

Proud to support



Harper Collins

GO ALL IN.

OceanofPDF.com



# About the Publisher


**Australia**
HarperCollins Publishers Australia Pty. Ltd.
Level 13, 201 Elizabeth Street
Sydney, NSW 2000, Australia
www.harpercollins.com.au

**Canada**
HarperCollins Canada
Bay Adelaide Centre, East Tower
22 Adelaide Street West, 41st Floor
Toronto, Ontario M5H 4E3, Canada
www.harpercollins.ca

**India**
HarperCollins India
4th Floor, Tower A, Building No. 10, DLF Cyber City,
DLF Phase II, Gurugram, Haryana - 122002
www.harpercollins.co.in

**New Zealand**
HarperCollins Publishers New Zealand
Unit D1, 63 Apollo Drive
Rosedale 0632
Auckland, New Zealand
www.harpercollins.co.nz

**United Kingdom**
HarperCollins Publishers Ltd.
1 London Bridge Street
London SE1 9GF, UK

www.harpercollins.co.uk

**United States**
HarperCollins Publishers Inc.
195 Broadway
New York, NY 10007
www.harpercollins.com

**Dublin**
HarperCollinsPublishers
Macken House, 39/40 Mayor Street Upper
Dublin 1
D01 C9W8, Ireland
www.harpercollins.co.uk

*OceanofPDF.com*